In 1983, Sunil Gupta graduated from the Royal College of Art with an M.A. in photography and joined a wave of young artists that put black in front of British and changed the face of contemporary Western art. In a symbiotic relationship with critics like Kobena Mercer and Homi K. Bhabha, visual artists and filmmakers such as Isaac Julien, Pratibha Parmar, Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Sunil Gupta forced a confrontation between the truisms of racial and sexual politics and broke down borders between theory and practice, formal experimentation and activism. With their art school training, they drew from a wide vocabulary, and with their postcolonial savvy went right to the heart, challenging the reigning notions of the nation.

Sunil Gupta is Indian by birth, Canadian by citizenship and British by residency. As an artist, his photographs have been exhibited and published worldwide. As a curator, his touring shows include "Disputed Borders," "Fabled Territories" and "Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology" (co-curated with Tessa Boffin). This past summer, Sunil Gupta toured Canada to research "The New Republics: Contemporary Art from Australia, Canada and South Africa." Visual artist Sarindar Dhaliwal spoke with him in Toronto where a show of his own photographs, "Trespass III," was on exhibition at YYZ Artists' Outlet (July 3 – 27, 1996).
SARINDAR DHALIWAL: You have travelled extensively in Australia, South Africa, and now Canada, researching "The New Republics." The methodology that you are using to meet artists in order to look at their work is still rooted in that old world order and system of connections. Is this inadequate?

SUNIL GUPTA: It could be if we professed anything different with the end product, but we're not doing survey shows, we're not doing "best of" shows. We're more interested in this process of networking, of meeting real people and then seeing which of these people might work together and what they might get out of it from each other. From a previous show, I could see Shiba Chachi, of Delhi, would work well with Millie Wilson from California. That became my role and my job, in a sense, to match artists with one another. The two of them together in one show created a third thing that was more than each of them separately. In Shiba's case it was her first opportunity to show outside of an Asian, feminist or racial context. These women in California, because of regional problems of their own, appeared not to have met any smart, articulate, competent women from India who made art. It was an eye-opener for them so of course they invited Shiba to come to Cal Arts and talk about her practice. This was an important opportunity for Shiba who had been struggling in her own context with labels and language. The thing that ties all of what we're doing together, for better or worse, is language. We pretty much all work in the English language. It's a slightly indefinable slippery quality, and I always hasten to preface everything with the fact that we are not traditional curators. I don't have a degree in art history, I'm not researching in that sense. I'm trying to take my own practice, which is slightly self referential, and with a loose association of imagery create a similar pattern with these projects.

Our primary interest is in making as many studio visits as possible, seeing as many artists as we can because of the ahistorical way we're conducting the research. Our methodology is to try to meet the artists because it's very unlikely we will show anyone we haven't met. It's partly because we want to present twelve or thirteen artists in a group show where there is some sympathy between the works, and not as regional groupings. We feel quite strongly that meeting the person gives you so many clues about the work. Our academic interests don't lie in the area of precisely made, conceptual artworks which could function without much human interface. It's been a matter of luck also as to who's around when we're there. It's all very ad hoc and we also end up with five times as much material as we could possibly use.

In each country we have a collaborator who has been feeding us information and we will work with that person to make the final selection. Bruce Grenville from Edmonton is our Canadian curatorial partner. We're also looking for writers of different kinds, pieces of art criticism, fiction, short stories of about 5000 words.

DHALIWAL: How is this project being funded?

GUPTA: The funding is a bit complicated. We've been able to come this far on research funds from the British Arts Council and we will return to them at the end of the year for production and presentation monies. The Australians are applying to their arts councils for their production funds. In Canada we will be approaching the Canada Council. We're hoping the Department of External Affairs in Ottawa will be able to help us with shipping costs. South Africa presents a huge problem. It doesn't have an arts council in place so we'll have to go directly to some ministry. There's altogether less money there so we'll be investigating sources of private sponsorship or splitting the budget between the three other arts councils and they won't like that. I've become interested in working with artists from different places and then trying to downgrade the place. I'm not interested in helping to forge some new Canadian or Australian art because I'm not concerned with nationalist impulses. But the way the funding works is nationalistic, everyone wants to look after their own. I would like to exhibit the work and then remove the name of the country of origin. I had a disaster in Johannesburg when I had taken British artists' works there and created a show by adding a fourth local artist, a South African. The Australians wanted to take the show to Australia and the British Arts Council would only fund the British artists and nobody would fund the South African. I failed to find any other money. Although there is an interest in the art works now, this re-arranging, moving art around is problematic.

What is important in this project is that it is multicultural in each locality. In outlook it is not about simply what the black artists are trying to say. It seems like nationalism and nationhood has become a black area of practice. If there are
white artists working in this vein they're doing so very obliquely and sometimes very academically so it's quite hidden.

Gupta: One of the ways in which I have attempted to create the educational programming around some of these shows is to invite speakers, mostly non-Asian academics whose area of knowledge is primarily South Asian or non-European. This is partly a reflection on discussions I had in India. I have been sensing a change in India recently. For a long time there was this blanket anti-ness, anti-the West, anti-the Brits. Modern India's database of its own culture is British and imperial in origin. There are, for example, annals recorded by army officers that list the tribal groups in the North-west and in Rajasthan. Often this information has to be a starting point, or you would have to begin from scratch. One can't say let's disregard these records because they were compiled by the forces of colonialism. There is a stronger feeling now, in younger people anyway, that the process is one of give and take. There are useful aspects of this information and knowledge and it's more to do with interpretation. One can have interesting panels inviting people from universities and anthropology departments because often the facts and figures are buried in the records. There's been a kind of looseness, or rather the picture has been painted with a very broad brush and colour without reference to more specific detail.

One thing I found interesting in South Africa is that there is this phenomenon of white Africans. Black Americans find this completely difficult to deal with. There's this whole thing around going back to something and that ideal is a black one. But then the Afrikaners have been there for a long time, it's their home. When I spoke to the American curator for Johannesburg, who was an African American, she was very impressed that with our kind of black arts background we can now deal with having white artists...
in the shows. She said there was no way that she could do that; she has to have African American artists all of the time. I'm getting the feeling that in the States everything is still very ethnocentric; it's much more apartheid-like than in South Africa. So changing this kind of thinking is definitely the plan with "New Republics" and all the aboriginal artists we've met on these trips are saying if this is another black show I don't want to be in it.

DHALIWAL: Do you find that you are more useful to the art community as a curator and writer than as an artist?

GUPTA: That's a difficult question but basically, yes. It's not just me but also my contemporaries who came out of art school expecting to be practitioners but not finding administrators and curators who were willing to deal with us. So we eventually had to do our own organizing and create our own little institutions and that, in a sense, became useful in a co-opting kind of way to the larger art world.

It has created a complication in my own artistic career in that I've now met and come to know, as a curator, a number of other curators and people from museums and galleries. Wearing that hat has brought an added access that isn't available to all artists, but at the same time it's made it more difficult to approach those people as an artist. I feel as if I'm taking advantage of my position as a curator if I bring up my own practice. I used to think that my primary creative function was my work because I was trained in a very classical way, in a very English art school way that instills the notion of being a career artist as paramount. But then I got sidetracked into community politics. Essentially I started out defining myself as an artist, then we began to define ourselves collectively more as cultural activists than artists. Then that definition could mean a lot of different activities, not just creating the work but organizing around the work. So, I have occasionally argued for more status for organizing, although these people who control the movement of the artworks are quite faceless and don't have cultural value in quite the same way because they're not artists. The aims changed from being my own individual desire to be an artist of some repute or marketability to some broader cultural aim. I guess because of the time that I arrived in England I was quite a good candidate for this kind of thinking and it's stayed with me and been quite a powerful motivational force. I experienced complete cultural deprivation arriving here in Canada at the age of fifteen, into an environment where no one knew anything nor did there seem any way that they would know anything about where I'd come from. Compare this to the position I found in England, an institutional obsession with all things European, and anything outside that was a pale reflection, at best, of what the Europeans did in terms of cultural production. So to rectify this situation is to create lots of work and bombard them with everything that is happening out there. Thus, my focus has shifted and has stayed shifted, so although I like to produce art work it's no longer my main ambition.

DHALIWAL: What's the relationship between artists of your generation and younger artists?

GUPTA: I'm slowly becoming aware that my generation seems to have been a unique phenomenon. The people who came before were completely invisible. It's taken historical survey shows (like the "Other Story") to reveal who they were and sometimes recognition has come too late for their careers or artistic opportunities because they were nearing the end of their working lives. My generation is fortunate, and it's all to do with timing, because postmodernity, fixed identities, colour, the body became fashionable. We were overeducated, we went through as many years of studying as was possible and ended up with at least an M.A. from somewhere and thus tended to be articulate. We immediately figured out how the funding worked. So we've been quite successful in organizing ourselves. After us, even though there are more and more people coming out of the system they seem less and less interested in organizing. It's a combination, I suspect, of the general political atmosphere, because in England we've had the Tories in power for a long time. Especially during the eighties when Margaret Thatcher emphasized the individual and the individual's success, so that has to have some impact on the way artists are thinking now. They are focusing on themselves and their careers and are less interested in networking in some communal situation. They're viewing the demise of black arts in England as a natural end. It doesn't seem to serve anyone's purpose any longer. But there are catalogues, and there is reference to ten years' worth of work and shows, which may not be a lot but, there's a hell of a lot more than when we were in school, when there was nothing.
When you're younger, and I'll make a comparison to gay politics, a commonality is this idea of coming out, it's a phase and we all go through it. Culturally specific groups are very useful for precisely these artists who are still formulating themselves. To go through and gain information and a confidence can lead to maturing as an artist.

DHALIWAL: What are some specific differences in the dissemination and reception of exhibitions in Britain and Canada?

GUPTA: Britain is advantaged by the fact it has a lot more people so there's a bigger market where this cultural stuff is played out. And although its non-white population is a small proportion of the total population of the country, it does live in concentrated communities, very visible concentrated areas. The other thing is that academically England is still a great storehouse of information. They went out there and brought all this information back from the Empire. They catalogued, they labelled plants, people, places. Photographed it, wrote about it and it's all there in the archives, everything. Even a white audience would know, you could expect them to know, quite a lot of general information about other cultures. The consequences of travel and family connections has led to more people gaining specialist information. Broadly speaking, you could make larger assumptions about your audience's knowledge when they come and view something. The other thing is that England is a very urban society so people tend to live quite close together. Like France, like Paris. There's a huge concentration of people in Paris and there's not much outside those centres. London is a unique city in terms of multicultural production and has created a situation like that which might exist here in Toronto, where there are people working in different artforms who supply a core large enough for audiences and critics and also people one can speak to as a support network.

DHALIWAL: Is there anything that you would consider has had negative impact on artists and their work within the context of identity politics?

GUPTA: It can be very limiting and also one of the main factors that affects all of this is the way it's been funded. Mainstream artists are funded through a dealer network of selling works. Identity politics, black arts or making art around racial identity has been funded through the state either through grants directly to the artists or the process of commissioning works for exhibitions. That's had very serious consequences. It's overlooked the market place completely so they've had no other means of survival. They are dependent on the state and its policies, which are liable to change with every new government, and everywhere the support from the public sector is continuously being eroded. So what's happened to my generation is that after ten or fifteen years of working we are worse off. Nobody's buying the work, there are fewer and fewer grants and this has had serious implications. The arts councils are not sure what to do with you. They can't keep funding you endlessly but they do recognize that they have, in a sense, created you and now don't know what to do with you. That's the feeling I'm getting and we've done nothing collectively to replace that system with any other kind of economic support. Maybe it's better here,
in terms of sponsorship from your own communities. It's hopeless in England. The Indian businessmen and their associations won't sponsor this kind of art because they see it themselves as a being a very minority interest, a marginalized audience. They will support it if it's in a mainstream context and they get the normal payback in terms of advertising. Or they'll sponsor charities, which get them into luncheons with Princess Anne. We don't offer that so it's been very awkward. We've had no community based funding strategies in place other than local government or town halls.

DHALIWAL: Are there destructive ways that we work against ourselves especially in lobbying situations?

GUPTA: It's a contradictory situation. Individuals can exploit situations for their own career ends. Communication between institutions and protesting groups usually breaks down, so coalitions can be very short lived. Collectives can form around specific events and then disintegrate before any real progress can be made. Institutions say “Well, we didn't know these artists existed before but now that we do know we see that some of these artists are good political organizers and some will make good work and we should be watching their careers with interest.” One has to balance all these views and say something intelligent in the midst of this. What the institutions need to do is to follow this up through their infrastructures. It's been more than a decade of organizing now. There used to be a standing joke that the only black faces one would find in institutions belonged to the cleaners or security guards. As one met people higher and higher up the ladder it gets whiter and whiter and this sends a message to the public simply by the colour of the hierarchy of the staff or the board. It breaks down by gender. The support and curatorial staff are often women, the directors are invariably men. I've not come across too many non-white people who have programming power, who are members of the staff in the big institutions. I've come across many people who are volunteers, who have been co-opted as consultants or in an advisory capacity for these projects. Therein lies evidence to me of some failure, that one hasn't broken through, that mean most black artists, especially after the eighties, have M.F.A.'s so why is there nobody? What happens to people who organize festivals such as Desh Pardesh year after year? They are gaining experience in arts management and are trained as part of those jobs to be able to move into the larger museums.

DHALIWAL: People here will sometimes criticize their own artists and political instigators for weak ideological reasons.

GUPTA: This is a natural response and it's happening all over the place. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, which is similar to the Power Plant but on the scale of the Art Gallery of Ontario, has a large curatorial staff. There is an aboriginal curator there. He feels he's doing a good job but the aboriginal art centres in the community complain that he's become one of them (the establishment); he makes so much money he now travels all over the world. It seems to be human nature but it is misplaced envy. It's the way these structures absorb the change and the energy. One can make a political argument that maybe our original focus was misplaced, which was simply to get the works into the mainstream. I realize now that simply to get the work seen in a mainstream space doesn't have an impact on how the power structures operate. In that case it doesn't matter what the colour of the artist is because the nature of the process is the same. What you want to do is affect how the mainstream operate. So I have shifted my focus away from the curators and directors who are the visible focus. The rules have been put into place by the trustees; they decide the policy. I've become much more interested in policy and who makes the decisions. The Tate Gallery is hugely influential in terms of what is collected simply by what it collects. It reflects NATO; it collects Western European and North American art. It's to do with the cold war, what else could it be? And when you talk to their staff, who are youngish, articulate people, they say for them to change the collecting policy it will take ten years. Because that's how slowly trustees operate. How do we change these power structures and the boards? Do the boards reflect a national view, an inclusive view and the wider changes in society? One has to get the evidence of demographics into play. One of the problems with contemporary curators is they're too busy and very rarely leave their offices to look at work on their own doorsteps.

Sarindar Dhalival is a Toronto-based visual artist, who has previously published short, fictionalized texts. She is presently organizing her second curatorial project entitled “Of Mudlarkers & Measurers” (opening January 10, 1997 at Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario).