2 Deconstructing the 'National' Body

The previous chapter provided an overview of the preceding decades when the artists in this study began their practices, demonstrating how the nation was very much in the forefront when contemporary mediums arrived in India. This chapter will directly engage with the first of the two sets of works that underlie the argument that I make to signpost a shift towards post-national perceptions in this study. Through a close reading of the themes and concerns foregrounding this first set of works, I will demonstrate how they cohere around the nation via a performative critique of the 'national' body. This material, sensory and corporeal body[197] closely aligns with national discourses around gender, sexuality and colonial histories which come to play in these art works. The use of new mediums lends this critique a sharper edge, right from the c-digital collages created by Chitra Ganesh's *Tales of Amnesia* (2003–2007) to video installations in Tejal Shah's works *Chingari Chumma* (2000), *What are you?* (2006), a photographic archive in *Women like us/I AM* (2009), and live performance with Nikhil Chopra as *Yog Raj Chitrakar* (2007–2011). I begin with a short discussion of the performative body and align the performative body with the notion of masquerade in art. Performativity and masquerade work closely together in the set of works that I am analyzing. In the following sections I examine firstly some frames from Ganesh's *Tales of Amnesia*, emphasizing their connect with the role play of femininity and masquerade of womanliness and what they translate into within the Indian context. This is an especially critical translation because of Ganesh's appropriation of frames from an existing popular resource in India, the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic. Next, with Shah's works in video and photography I locate the discussion within lived transgendered and queer lives in India and the marginalization of their status within the Indian nation state. With the third artist,

197 Amelia Jones, "Body Art: A Survey," in *The Artists' Body (Themes and Movements),* ed. Tracy Warr (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), 29.

Published in: Bindu Bhadana: Postnational Perceptions in Contemporary Art Practice. Heidelberg: Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing, 2023 (Media and Cultural Studies, vol. 3). DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/hasp.985

Nikhil Chopra, I analyze some aspects of his live performances to demonstrate how India's colonial history provides Chopra with a fertile resource to critique national histories as *Yog Raj Chitrakar*.

2.1 The Performative Body

The decades of the 1980s and 1990s were underpinned by 'liberation' movements in the west—feminism, black and civil rights, queer rights movements resulted in new perspectives on sexuality, and gender, race and ethnicity that were also closely associated with the postcolonial (Spivak 1988; Bhabha 1994), postmodern (Lyotard 1984; Jameson 1989), and poststructuralist (Foucault 1976; Butler 1990) writings. When in 1989 Spivak asserted that "The body as such cannot be thought," it implied that there was no one universal category of the body. This discursive shift away from a universal category of the body implied that the conventional binaries of gender, sexuality, race or class that had been marking and situating positionalities were no longer as central and that the dispersal of the normative body was a given, indicating a fluid and open embodiment.

Haraway (1985) had already claimed that this was the time to confront the dominations of 'race,' 'gender,' 'sexuality' and 'class,' and argued for a politics rooted in bringing about fundamental changes in the world order and the need for a cyborg theory.[198] The performativity of the body became a central concern of queer theory as, emerging in the 1990s, it built upon the concerns being raised by feminism on the challenges of gender being an essential part of the self, and of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities. Butler's critique of feminism argued that feminism should analyze how the category "woman" is produced and restrained by power structures, rather than looking at those power structures themselves for emancipation. Contesting categories such as gender and sexuality, queer theory put into question the stability and fixedness of the categories. Butler argued that gender is not something one 'is,' it is something one 'does,' an act or sequence of acts, a 'doing' rather than a 'being' and that in understanding the construction of the gendered subject, performativity becomes the key analytical perspective. She stated that gender is an act that brings into being what it names: in this case, a 'masculine' man or a 'feminine' woman.[199]

198 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–181.

199 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990.

This notion of performativity, as also Butler's subsequent work on processes of materialization and the ontological creation of the material self resonates with the work of the three artists in the study as they actively resist dominant national discourses around gender and sexuality and masquerade in their multiple performative selves.

2.1.1 From Performativity to Performance in Art

The performative body as such had been at the center of works for many artists in the west since the 1960s. As early as 1963, much before the establishment of feminism as a coherent movement in the visual arts, artist Carolee Schneemann performed her eroticized body in *Eye Body,* establishing her body as a 'visual territory' as she pitted it against masculinist assumptions. Performing *Interior Scroll* in 1965, in an outrageously bold act, Schneemann challenged the fetishist and scopophilic male gaze. Jones argued that it was through these exaggerated performances of the sexual, gendered particularities of the body / self by body artists such as Carolee Schneeman, Yayoi Kusama and Hannah Wilke that "explode[s] the myths of dis-interestedness and universality that authorize these conventional modes of evaluation." Reading the works of artists such as Ana Mendieta, Jackson Pollock, Vito Acconci, Hannah Wilke, Laura Aguilar, Lyle Ashton Harris, Orlan and Bob Flanagan, Jones demonstrated that the decentering, dislocation and fragmentation of the self is played out through body-oriented practices, and that specially where it engages with phenomenologically informed feminism, it can encourage the development of a new reading praxis acknowledging the masculinist, racist, homophobic and classist assumptions that underlie the disciplines of art history and criticism.[200] Jones' view and analysis of these pioneering performances of body artists is extremely useful to understand the ways in which they confronted issues of particularized identities in the decades marked by identity politics.

Already by the 1970s the feminine body had been deeply imbricated in performance, with Yoko Ono performing *Cutpiece* (1964), while Marina Abramovic, foregrounding the body's corporeal aesthetic experience, stated: '*it is real, I can feel it, I can touch it, I can cut it…*' in *Rhythm O* (1974). The performativity of gender highlighted disciplinary regimes and its accompanying discourse through some iconic performative pieces, however it was Cindy Sherman's work

200 Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 10–13 & 199.

that traversed many roles and personas in the 1970s with a series of black and white photographs in *Untitled Film Stills* as both actor and producer that deeply engaged with Joan Riviere's concept of 'womanliness as masquerade,' challenging the presence of femininity as the marker of a 'real' woman. Joan Riviere's famous and widely discussed essay of 1929 draws attention to the fictive nature of femininity, arguing that there is no difference between masquerade and womanliness, as she says,

> Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it [...]. the reader may ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.[201]

Mary Ann Doane's engagement with this psychoanalytic reading in an essay on the female film spectator (1991) further emphasizes its effectiveness as a powerful tool to create "a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible and readable by woman." Riviere's essay has been productively engaged with since the early part of the last century, especially by women seeing femininity as a construct apart from themselves and how it can be employed to their advantage in multiple ways as a veiled mechanism in their struggle for survival against misogynistic perceptions of their position by patriarchal men. The notion of masquerade as role play allocates it a performative aspect and can be closely aligned with the work of the artists in this study as they engage with the constitutive aspects of the body and its identity. It is via the constructed-ness of gender performativity itself that masquerade serves as a performative tactic in the work of these artists as their bodies become the quintessential tool to destabilize categories and problematize the certainties of established meanings and categories such as the national 'Indian' body.[202]

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201 Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *The International Journal of Psycho Analysis*, 1929, Vol. 9, 306.

202 Indian artist Sonia Khurana's *Body Series* can be cited as a fairly contemporary example of the performative 'Indian' body with her performances such as *lying down on the ground* (2006–2018), and *Logic of Birds* in Barcelona in 2006. Khurana's prone body occupying public spaces in the act of negotiating the presence of self in the world also occupied a space of gendered resistance through her symbolic act, especially in cultures where women's access to public spaces is restricted. Accessed December 20, 2018. https://www.knma.in/bird-and-other-body-events-sonia-khurana-supported-kiran-nadar-museum-art.

2.1.2 The 'Indian' / Indic Body

But is there even an 'Indian' body? Does it have a specific gender, a specific set of signifiers that indicate an Indic appearance? The forms of an 'Indian' national body in existence are multiple and masquerade in many guises, but they have one common and important feature that is directly relevant to this work—they function within the bounds of sexual orthodoxy and hetero-normativity. In the case of India this feature is further emphasised in the discourses that are laid out, enumerating a certain set of behaviors and the presence of certain stereotypes. While the modern Indian nation during its founding delineated its values—secular, liberal, in keeping within an ethos of modernity—and focused on equality for all—the gaps and discrepancies clearly in existence such as women and queer, among others remained at the periphery. These are the discrepancies that all three artists appropriate as they uproot national visual stereotypes from their original contexts and proscribe them with new meanings through their work, the critique of the body is articulated performatively at the level of the formal iconography employed by them.

Of the three artists it is Ganesh who travels the furthest backwards into Indian narrative religious traditions as she foregrounds the 'Indic' body,[203] and invokes the larger civilizational discourse stemming from Brahmanical texts representing the essence of Hinduism. The scantily clad spouses of the gods and consorts of Gods *Shiva/Parvati* and *Satyavan/Savitri* from the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics formulate one example of the visualization of this Indic body. With *Tales of Amnesia* Ganesh critiques these bodies by fleshing out erased moments in Indian history and mythology, re-imagining them as masquerading queer bodies. Shah's work with video appropriates and frames yet another body from mass popular culture—the quintessential Bollywood heroine, demure, shy and alluring. In *Chingari Chumma*, the masquerade not only overturns the body residing in the national cinematic imagination but positions it further into post-porn territory. And Chopra in the persona of *Yog Raj Chitrakar*, masquerading as explorer, draughtsman and Victorian queen frames an androgynous post-colonial body as it entangles with and critiques the nation's past.

All three artists have a diasporic (Ganesh) and almost diaspora-like experience (Shah and Chopra) with the nation through living and studying in the west as they operate within transnational spaces. Theories of diaspora by Gilroy and Hall turn away from its conventional understanding of homeland / exile towards

203 With the term 'Indic' I understand that there are different knowledge traditions within the Indian traditions to include among others, Hindu, Buddhist and Jain from which the Amar Chitra Katha narratives are drawn.

living with, and through difference and this is the direction claimed by both Puar and Gopinath. Puar claims that the genealogies of "queer" and "diaspora" share a complicit absence with the concepts of the nation state.[204] Gayatri Gopinath argues that employing the queer diaspora as a critical framework can challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring their "impure, inauthentic, non-reproductive potential," the suturing of queer with diaspora thus "recuperates those desires, practices and subjectivities that are rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic and nationalist imaginaries,"[205] and Ganesh's positioning of the queer body as an "impossible"[206] female subject following Gopinath's diasporic queer lens provides this study with the resistant potential to confront the hegemony of masculinist diasporic subjects and their complicit power. Further, defining the nation through a media shift highlights the effectiveness and quality of masquerade via the digital play they employ in their works perhaps resonating with McLuhan's contention that "the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change [...] it introduces into human affairs..."[207] and this first set of works by Ganesh demonstrates a similar engagement.

2.2 Chitra Ganesh

Ganesh's work across medias and genres closely aligns with pop art, taking forward a genre that connects her with her land of birth rather than the land of her ancestral origin. The central trope in Ganesh's work centers on the female figure—indexical, signifier, signified—sometimes it becomes a metaphor for the feminine through the material she engages with, which includes fishnet stockings, beads, plastic eyes, glitter and hair she uses to construct her works that itself denotes the feminine. Sometimes the coding is apparent within her selection of certain tropes that provide a point of reference and signify a particular quality or state. Her use of coded signifiers indicates the complex inter-relationships between the gendered feminine and society. She draws heavily from street and pop culture,

204 Jasbir K. Puar, "Transnational Sexualities South Asian (Trans)nation (alism)s and Queer Diasporas," in *Q & A Queer in Asian America*, eds. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 406.

205 Gopinath, 2005, 11.

206 I draw the term from Gopinath (2005) who uses the term "impossibility" to highlight the unthinkability of the concept of queer female subjectivity within the mappings of nation and diaspora, 15.

207 Marshall McLuhan, "The medium is the message," in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964).

from mythical histories spanning the globe, from narratives of Salome, Judith and Holofernes, to Scheherazade and the Arabian nights and to the Iliad and the Odyssey, Rāmāyaṇa, the Mahāsiddhas and the Yoruba pantheon, all of which come into her work. Ganesh's engagement with the comic genre is the focus of this study.

2.2.1 The Comic Genre

The comic is commonly defined as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer, comics are considered to be a blend of word and picture—not a simple coupling of the verbal and the visual, but a blend, a true mixture,"[208] and this definition by Harvey offers a useful direction as a starting point to understand Ganesh's engagement with the genre. In terms of some general aspects of the genre it is clear that various constitutive aspects such as style, mise-en-scène, the combination of verbal and visual elements, the breakdown of the story into distinct panels, the interaction between panels, page layout and the plot structure—all play a key role in creating the work. Mise-en-scène in the comics is organized through a specific organization of its figurative elements—the décor, props and characters. The positioning of the characters, the way that they are dressed, their facial expressions—all of these can strongly influence how the scene is perceived.

The genre of the comic entered the contemporary art scene in America with Roy Lichtenstein's appropriation of the Mickey Mouse and has, since then, received a fair amount of attention in the west. Contemporary artists such as Ida Applebroog and Oyvind Fahlstrom have worked with the comic form in multiple ways, while Applebroog effectively pared down the images in her comic strip works, Fahlstrom's 'poetic visual' arrangements incorporated pop imagery with poetic vocabulary in a radical way. Some of the artists working directly with existing comics include Sue Williams' improvisations from MAD comics, Gary Simmons' use of racially loaded Disney characters as he draws then smudges them and Rivane Neuenschwander's edited panels from a Brazilian Disney comic book.[209] The appropriation of the comic format allows an artist to exercise

208 Robert C Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississipi, 1996), 14.

209 Amy Peltz, "A Visual Turn: Comics and Art After the Graphic Novel," *Art in Print*, Vol. 2, No. 6. Accessed on June 1, 2018. https://artinprint.org/article/a-visual-turn-comics-and-art-after-the-graphic-novel/.

an almost complete control over the verbal and image track and to play with the juxtaposition of seemingly interconnected words and pictures.

Living and working in a multicultural society like the US, Ganesh's inspiration stems from a plethora of resources. Yet, for creating the *Tales of Amnesia* she chose the popular *Amar Chitra Katha* comic as resource—a visual inspiration that itself came through the nationalist period, through Raja Ravi Varma's lithographs, popular calendar art and from the "bazaar artists." The transgression effected by Ganesh therefore, appears even more violent as she creates queer polymorphic bodies that erase all signs of national identity in the disjunctive frames of *Tales of Amnesia*. Ganesh's own interest in the comic genre stemmed from the narrative commonalities between the Grimms' fairy tales, Greek myths and many other stories where women were introduced as wife, mother, sister or daughter, more often in need of completion and rescue by a heroic male character (*Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella* for example). She was particularly drawn to the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics that were widely believed to be keepers of national values and to how their ubiquity added to the collective memory bank of images that were imprinted early in childhood minds both in India and in the diaspora.[210] Mitchell terms the comic as transmediatic "because it is translatable and transitional, mutating before our eyes into unexpected new forms." As the artist draws and walks a familiar style, the possibilities for multiple temporalities and alternate pathways open up through sequences of words and images.[211] Ganesh, by taking up a recognizable coded object such as the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic pays close attention to the recoding of the icon and indexicality, deconstructing the relationship between image and text, and allowing for multiple readings of alternative realities. She builds up an alternate narrative through many complex layers inspired by surrealist writing and experimental fiction.

Before discussing Ganesh's collages in *Tales of Amnesia,* it would be useful to gain an overview of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics and understand the ethos and context that underlay their creation so that the changes wrought by Ganesh in her critique of this highly popular series and its exalted status can become clearer.

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210 Her interest in the comics is echoed in the work of another Indian artist, Dhruvi Acharya, who erases the text bubbles in each image, playing with its textual normative aspect.

211 W. J. T. Mitchell, "Comics as Media: Afterword," *Critical Inquiry*, 40 (3) 2014, 255–265.

2.2.2 The Amar Chitra Katha

Structurally similar to the American comic form inspired by *Tarzan, Phantom* and *Mandrake* series popular in India at the time, the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics began publication in 1967. The decade of the 1960s was significant, it had seen some major upheavals in Indian politics marked by a rapidly urbanizing and modernizing state, resulting in the weakening of the social structure of the joint family system that had formed the backbone of the Indian social structure.

The publication of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics focusing on the strength and heritage of 'Indian' values such as spirituality and moral righteousness, offered a pedagogical tool replete with inspirational tales from Indian mythology and filled a void that was increasingly being felt as links between the generational relationships of children and their grandparents began to loosen, leading to an absence in the passing on of such stories.[212] Especially for a child growing up in the diaspora, the comics became a significant gateway to India's cultural heritage—functioning "both as a transmitter of cultural values and a mnemonic device,"[213] with messages from religious texts like Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata translated into an easy picture format for the young reader. The comics followed established story lines in a definitive manner wherein each mythological character was portrayed as morally upright and kind, using their power for the good of all. The pedagogic message in them was clear—the defeat of evil and the triumph of the good and the right. These messages became part of the construction of the modern national narrative, providing markers of proper behaviors for the nation's citizens. Published in more than 400 titles (out of which approximately a 100 were based on the epics and the *purāṇas*), this collection played a role not only in creating a visual history for a fledgling nation but also contributing towards establishing the nation state as a modern institution, seeking to unify its citizens through a sense of shared heritage by including titles on freedom fighters like *Bhagat Singh* and *Subhash Chandra Bose*. The *Amar Chitra Katha* creators diligently drew from the history of the early nationalist movement to support and emphasize an inspirational nationalist ideology necessary in the formation of a young nation.

That the publication of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics was a project stemming from the nation's elite middle class whose aspirations it represented is

212 Nandini Chandra, *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha 1967–2007*, (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2008), 53.

213 Frances Prichett, "The World of Amar Chitra Katha," in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, eds. Babb & Wadley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 96.

borne out by its affirmation in the studies of scholars such as Prichett (1995), Mclain (2009), and Chandra (2008), on the comics. There were many reasons why the *Amar Chitra Katha* became such a popular genre, the familiar iconography played an important role. Sourcing their images from bazaar and calendar art, the drawing artists tied them in with the popular bazar aesthetic and created the gods to look much like those from the popular calendar art ubiquitously displayed in mass media. These factors played a key role in connecting the comic's visual iconography easily in the mind of the reader. 'Political correctness' guided the portrayals of gods and goddesses. In popular Indian imagination Gods such as *Rama*, *Shiva* and *Vishnu*, served as models of courage and heroism, with their devoted consorts, *Sita*, *Parvati* and *Lakshmi* by their side. The *Amar Chitra Katha* scriptwriters referencing Moti Chandra's manual, *Costumes, Textiles, Cosmetics and Coiffure in Ancient and Medieval India* (1973), went back to the classical period for the dress of the women, portraying a modified costume for women which draped down from the hips, with a covering on the top was dressed with ornaments such as the *antariya* and *uttariya*, a waist chain called *prapata*, the same costume coming through from the Vedic to the medieval period. The portrayal of the female body centered around visibility and careful costuming, citing ostensibly that there was no concept of stitching in those times, therefore tying the clothes above the waist, above the breasts, "to enhance the importance of covering those regions and thus uncover them."[214]

Ganesh noticed how the women were quite "scantily clad but pious at the same time. The *rakshasis* were portrayed as dark and the *devis* were super fair." Women were often defined relationally to men, as someone's mother, wife, sister, but not as actors in their own right.[215] Observations made by post-colonial scholars on pre-independent India had also pinpointed this narrow portrayal of women, Partha Chatterjee in his discussion of the nation and its women, attributes this ideological construct of the modern Indian woman to the colonial period, when the "woman" standing as a sign for "nation" was imbued with the spiritual qualities of "self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion and religiosity," and the protector of the inner domain against the civilizing mission of the colonial administration.[216] This resonated with the ethos that the *Amar Chitra Katha*

214 Both Mclain and Chandra's studies on the comics address the portrayal of the female body fairly comprehensively.

215 Accessed on May 17, 2017. http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/stoi/all-that-matters/I-dont-believe-in-using-LGBT-themes-for-shock-value-Chitra-Ganesh/articleshow/24070715.cms?referral=PM.

216 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 119 & 131.

creators picked up and tried to re-create in a 'sanitized' version of the feminine 'Indian' body that continued to uphold virtues such as spirituality and sacrifice.

In a comic, both narratives and cultural codes are employed to make sense of the action. The genre of the comic strip cannot work without a code. A character is fairly recognizable as it is coded through the panels and a visual code works by convention and analogy, stressing the similar, banning the difference. Characters are often easily recognized because of their coded repetition.[217] Ganesh while creating *Tales of Amnesia* (2002–2007) draws from these recognizable cultural codes as she critiques prevailing specific social practices against women in India through a process of semantic deconstruction. The narrative in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics capitalizes on the parodic form of the genre visible in the extremely stylized lavish cinematic frames of opulent palaces, and lush forests, visuals that are imminently detachable and open to re-codification and re-configuration—a feature that Ganesh utilizes productively in the creation of the collages that work as prototypical examples of her surrealist portrayal.

2.2.3 *Tales of Amnesia*—the Collage Process and the Panels

For the digital collage creation, Ganesh takes part of the background from the original comic, makes a brush and ink drawing on it and then scans it onto the computer. She erases the white space and adds color to the whole to create a seamless-ness between the characters and the background. This in-distinguishability between the source material and her alterations gives the images their powerful ability towards a deconstructive dissonance.[218] The technological manipulation of the visual imagery not only serves as an aesthetic strategy to re-tell the stories but also molds it into another virtual reality even as it retains its original connections with costuming and physiogonomy. The collage process allows Ganesh to bring different references, different kinds of visual languages formally together. A key part of her intervention is the addition of surreal texts that are introduced as thoughts or as actual speech which sometimes support the recoded images, sometimes not. The image-text relation rather than being duo specific, additive or intersecting, follows parallel combinations as

217 Tom Lambeens and Kris Pint, "The Interaction of Image and Text in Modern Comics," in *Texts, Transmissions, Receptions: Modern Approaches to Narratives*, eds. Andre Lardinois, Sophie Levie et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 246.

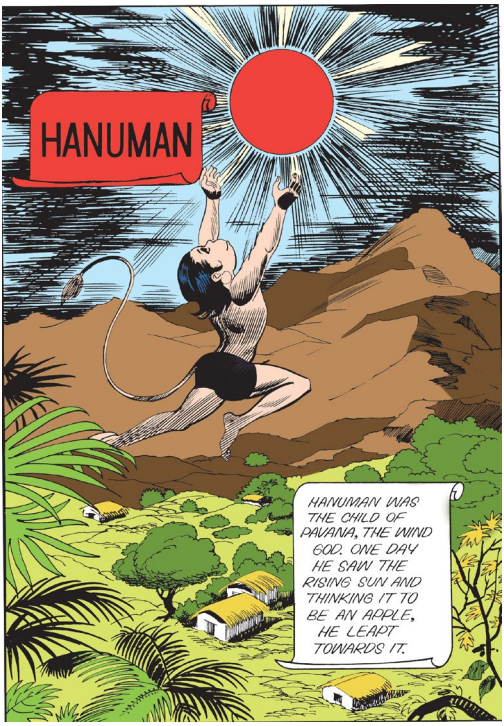
218 Saisha Grayson, "Breathing Between the Lines: Re-Deconstruction in Chitra Ganesh's Tales of Amnesia," *n.paradoxa: International Journal of Feminist Art*, Vol. 29, January 2012.

inter-dependent, mysterious sentences reminiscent of écriture féminine spout forth subconscious and anxious thoughts that defy a logic of relationality. The general definition of the comic genre as an effective blend of word and picture would imply an inter-dependent relationship between the two, but with *Tales of Amnesia* this complex image-text relationality metamorphosizes the original narrative not only into another parallel story but also deliberately plays with this relationality. In the reading of some of the panels from Ganesh's *Tales of Amnesia* therefore, I will revert to the original panels in order to understand and contextualize this play.

The cover panel for the C-digital prints sets the tone of performativity and frames the direction that the deconstruction of the entire narrative adopts. Ganesh takes the splash page from *the Amar Chitra Katha* issue of the *Hanuman* comic where the monkey-god *Hanuman* is leaping towards the sun in child-like faith (Fig. 19). This image directly references the original *Puranic* legend according to which the baby *Hanuman,* mistaking the sun for a fruit, leapt towards it and was wounded, landing up with a disfigured jaw. In her cover page, Ganesh transforms *Hanuman* into *Amnesia*, a half-human, half-monkey *junglee* (barbarian) girl child, replicating visual elements from the original panel, substituting brighter colors, the sun in psychedelic pink for example (Fig. 20). However, in this almost faithful replication of the image there is a marked difference in the stance, while in the original image little *Hanuman* throws his head back, reaching out arrogantly to the sun, in the recreated image Amnesia does not display that arrogance, rather she looks towards the sun, very demure and feminine.

In the comic medium, the splash page is designed to grab the viewer's attention with a strong visual appeal and the text often introduces the main character of a story. As Will Eisner explains, "The first page of the story serves as an introduction […] it is a launching pad for the narrative and for most stories, it establishes a frame of reference."[219] And on this splash page as well, issues of staging and framing come into question right away with its anchor text, *"How to stage her story? Her name was Amnesia and it fit her like a brand new boxing glove. From a lineage of monkey girls"* The phrases establish certain markers for the ensuing narrative—the foregrounding of Amnesia as the heroine focuses not only on the meaning of the word but simultaneously works as a feminist assault on normative behavior for young girls with its reference to the boxing glove. This demure surreal *Amnesia* represents women who as the succeeding panels show, transgress their established societal roles, masquerade as queer

219 Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* (Florida: Poorhouse Press, 2008), 62.



19

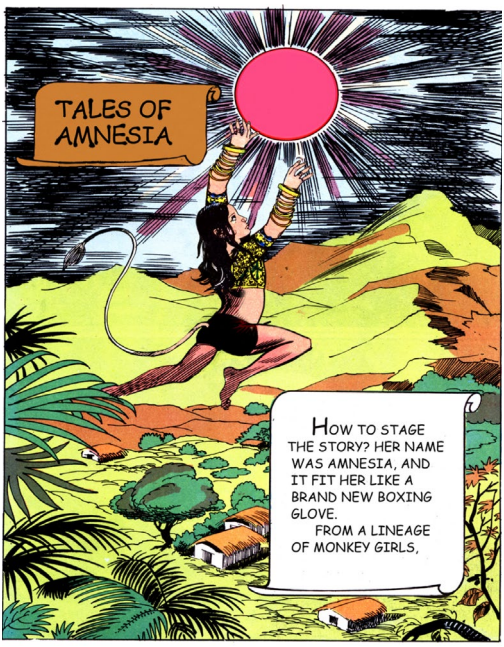


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Fig. 19. Amar Chitra Katha, *Hanuman*, 1981. Courtesy India Book House.
Fig. 20. Ganesh, *Tales of Amnesia*, 2002. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris.

subjects and function as agents of their own stories (rather than being relationally defined as mother, wife or sister). Ganesh, re-framing the narrative through palimpsest rarely, if ever, invokes the original erased narrative— *'Hanuman was the child of Pavana the wind, so one day he saw the rising sun and thinking it be an apple, he leapt towards it'*—but it does depend upon it for its resonance. As Amnesia reaches out towards a psychedelic sun, touching it, the *Hanuman* myth retains a loose connection with the "monkey lineage," and an empowered Amnesia's challenging tale begins. The reference to the monkey lineage could also loosely connect with the well-known feminist group Guerilla Girls, an anonymous group of women artists founded in 1985 a highly vocal group that fights against discrimination of all sorts, staging protests against institutionalized racism and sexism.[220]

By foregrounding the concept of amnesia, Ganesh reminds us with Halberstam that the trope of forgetfulness can serve as a useful strategy to interrupt and challenge the traditional route taken by memorialization as a disciplinary mechanism. Halberstam presents forgetting, lack of discipline and losing as strategies of resistance against constraints of success—she argues that forgetfulness challenges the traditional route of disseminating knowledge that relies on positivism and its reliance on memory. "Forgetting allows for a release from the weight of the past and the menace of the future." Through an extensive analysis of examples from animated cinema, Halberstam states that heteronormative society demonstrates its constructed-ness through laying down elaborate teaching mechanisms and says that " if we were all already heterosexual to begin with, we would not need such strict parental guidance to deliver us to all to our common destinies of marriage, child-rearing and hetero-reproduction."[221] A similar approach can be applied to the role played by the comic genre and Halberstam's argument of taking recourse to the power of forgetfulness in creating new futures is perhaps a useful trope to apply to Ganesh's work in *Tales of Amnesia*, as it attempts to break with the 'constructed-ness' of a self-authorizing national past as represented by the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics.

Continuing with *Tales of Amnesia,* references to the originary Hanuman myth surface now and again as Amnesia in the next panel appears as a young teenager with a burning tail framed against the sea. In the original myth—when his tail was set afire by demon warriors in the city of Lanka, the monkey god.

220 For a larger discussion around feminism and art, please see Helena Reckitt, *Art and Feminism*, eds. Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 153.

221 Judith Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 15 & 83.

Hanuman used his extraordinarily powerful, ever lengthening burning tail, to set fire to the city in rage before taking back news of the kidnapped Sita (wife of Lord Rama) who had been kidnapped by the demon king of Lanka. In the *Tales of Amnesia* panel, Amnesia walks into the sea, framed against a burning city—the panel text voices an anxious resonant thought. *"But she was prompted by anxiety to chew her tail off at an early age,"* as yet another reference to a lack of empowerment for the young girl child in India. The violence continues in the frames that follow, a young and blissful *Amnesia/Parvati* engages in a game of frisbee with a blood-spattered feminine hand that wears bangles in another coded signifier of marital status. A subtle lurid line of red blood drips down from the corner of her mouth (Fig. 21), as she confidently proclaims, *"Godzilla, you don't stand a chance."* Through this textual reference Ganesh brings in contemporary narratives as well. Here Godzilla could very well be a reference to a New York-based Asian American arts collective of the same name established in 1990 in order to facilitate inter-generational and interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration for Asian American artists and art professionals. The collective provided visibility in local and national exhibitions, developed press outreach strategies, published newsletters, and sponsored symposia on Asian American art but was disbanded in 2001.[222] With Ganesh's reference, the context broadens beyond social issues in India to include art practices and the reception of Asian American artworks that continue to be marginalized in the Euro-American context. While in the original textual narrative, young *Parvati* reinforces the stereotype of a tame and demure femininity as she says, *'I have had enough of this game. Come let us go home and play with our dolls,'* (Fig. 22) in the panel recreated by Ganesh—the violence and the text combine to make a larger comment about the masquerade of femininity and importance of role play. The surreal pastiche continues in the ensuing panels with headless figures, flesh-devouring vultures resting on carcasses, sacrificial heads in ritual fires and battling horses smashing against armored heads.

In the next image (Fig. 23), *Parvati* standing in a pond of cold water, devotedly concentrates on God Shiva, with a masochistic devotion mouthing the following words, *'your image fixed in my heart will warm me.'* Two hermits furtively observing her from the bushes, describe her thus, *'truly she is the ascetic of ascetics'* the anchor text reads, *'many years passed but Parvati never once gave up hope,'* reinforcing the story of patient devotion. In popular discourse in India, the goddess *Parvati*, having failed to seduce the unruly and wild Shiva with her

222 Accessed on September 5, 2017. https://apa.nyu.edu/the-godzilla-asian-american-art-network-records-mss-166/.

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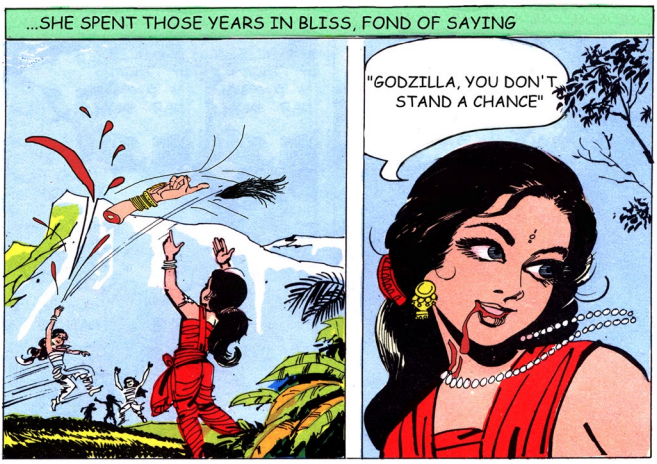

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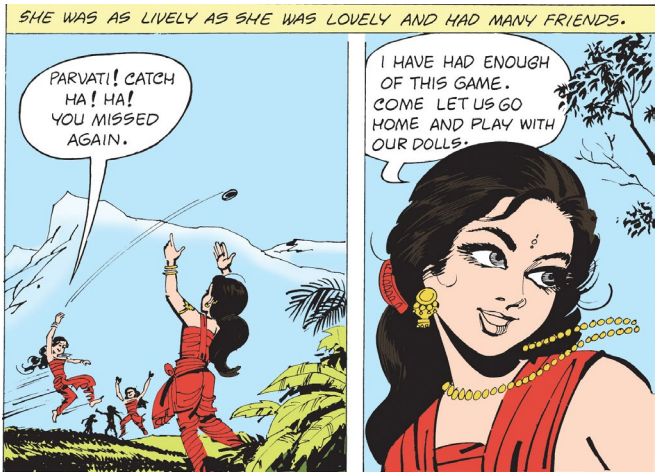
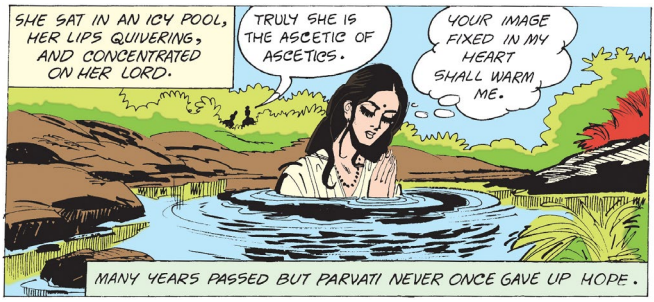


Fig. 21. Ganesh, *Godzilla*, 2002. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris.
Fig. 22. Amar Chitra Katha, *Shiva Parvati*, 1972. Courtesy India Book House.

beauty, resorted to prolonged *tapas* or prayer. She is considered a *pativrata* or dutiful wife par excellence, and the penance performed by *Parvati* is emulated even today in India to reinforce the desirability of the institution of marriage. Young unmarried women undertake various ritual fasts or *vratas* individually and collectively to obtain a good husband, clearly myths do not simply reflect dominant values but play a role in codifying those values.

Uma Chakravarti, discussing Brahmanical Patriarchy in early India, states that in Hindu society the caste-class structure laid out by the Brahmanas exercised its mechanism of control and subordination over women firstly through ideology and the *pativratadharma* (the dedication and duty of a wife towards her husband) was internalized by women who then attempted to live up to the



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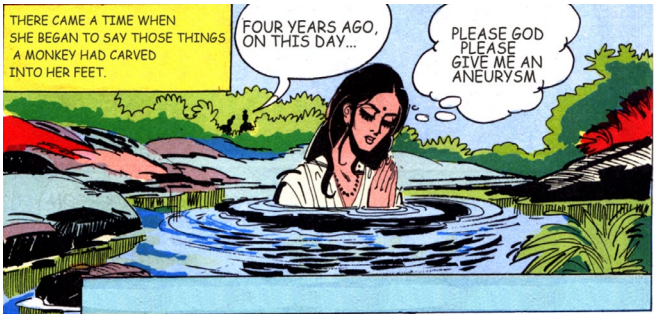

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Fig. 23. Amar Chitra Katha, *Shiva Parvati,* 1972. Courtesy India Book house.
Fig. 24. Ganesh, *Aneurysm,* 2002. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris.

ideal notion of woman hood constructed by these ideologues representing society. Chakravarti terms the *pativrata* concept as a master stroke of Hindu-Aryan genius and one through which women themselves controlled their own sexuality,[223] and this form of indoctrination is quite apparent in the panel from the original comic. In the panel created by Ganesh *Amnesia/Parvati,* wishes instead for an aneurysm (Fig. 24). Despite the familiarity of the true-to-the-original visual presentation, the discordant words betray this masquerade of femininity as *Amnesia* prefers to move away from being viewed as an epitome of womanliness. Once again, as in the previous panel the mysteriously worded anchor text creates deliberate gaps and dissonances that allow multiple subjective readings of the frame and an extrapolation of other possible narratives. In this particular frame it is the subversiveness of the text alone that serves as the harshest critique of a form of indoctrination running through centuries.

Often the images that Ganesh employs are visibly erased and photoshopped, in the original frame drawn from the *Mirabai* comic, young Mira's mother leads her to an image of Krishna, telling her, *'There is your husband Gopala. Love him*

223 Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in India: Gender, Class, Caste and State," *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 28 No. 14, 1993, 579–585.

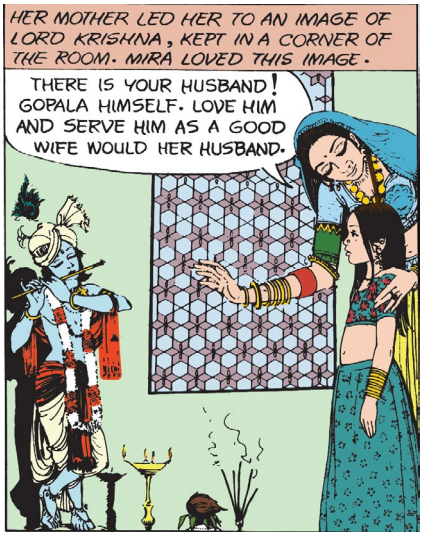

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Fig. 25. Amar Chitra Katha, *Mirabai,* 1972. Courtesy India Book House.
Fig. 26. Ganesh, *Mother Always Told Me,* 2002. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris.

and serve him as a good wife would her husband' (Fig. 25). Once again, as with the young *Parvati*, there is an emphasis on stereotypical feminine role-play, not only in reinforcing the importance of wifely duties of service and love for the husband (with a phrase like *'love him and serve him as a good wife would'*) but also highlighting the role of the mother herself in her supportive stance, guiding the daughter in performing her duties correctly towards her husband. Ganesh's re-configured image displays twin *Miras* as mirror images, the *Krishna* idol has been erased, all that remains is a trail of peacock feathers as a signifier of the God's presence (Fig. 26). The representation of the lesbian couple as mirror images of each other constructs the body as a reflection or an echo. Such an image is dangerous to society and culture because it suggests there is no way forward—only regression and circularity are possible. This image threatens because it suggests a perfectly sealed world of female desire from which man is excluded.[224]

The queer dual image created by Ganesh forms the graphic center of the narrative focus, accompanied by a surreal phrase, *"Mother always told me: Never waste your words, always remember your other half,"* the 'other half' in

224 Barbara Creed, "Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys and Tarts," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, eds. Janet Rice and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999), 99.

heterosexual terms could imply the spouse, it is commonly inferred in popular understanding that a wife is considered to be the 'better half.' Ganesh draws attention once again to this form of indoctrination that often forms an indelible part of a young girl's adolescent years in a tradition bound society. With a phrase *"never waste your words,"* the connect can be made with Mirabai's devotional songs for Lord Krishna which are part of Indian popular culture even today. Mirabai, a young princess in Rajasthan spent her whole life singing praises of Lord Krishna, she defied the conventional role assigned to women in history by remaining single and worshipping a God legendary for his flirtatious behavior with women. It is worth noting that the mother continues to be a reference point even as the *pativrata* ideals remain as a sacred prescriptive textual model for girls to be schooled in as they grow into adolescence and later become wives, these ideals are internalized by them so that they can live up to the idealized notions of wifehood.

However, perhaps no other mythological narrative from India exemplifies the power of the conflicted nature of the feminine as clearly as that of the creation of the Goddess Durga. The narrative is of great complexity and impinges on the belief systems built around dominant male deities of the Hindu pantheon such as Shiva and Vishnu. The next panel in *Tales of Amnesia* I will discuss is based on this narrative.

2.2.4 The Creation of Goddess Durga

The original comic on this subject was titled the *Tales of Durga* in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series and the narrative referenced by the writers of the script was believed to have referenced *Devi Mahatmya*, the text that established the goddesses's supremacy in the pantheon of gods. The *Devi Mahatmya* is part of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa,* one of the early Sanskrit Puranas composed probably in the 5th or 6th century. Its pre-eminent feature was understanding the Goddess to be the Ultimate reality. Structured within a narrative of three episodes, the *Mahatmya* first establishes her primacy in the cosmic context, the second as a more comprehensive account of her origin on the earth culminates with her conquest of the buffalo-demon *Mahisha*, while the third celebrates her various forms and their victory over demons *Shumbh, Nishumbh.*[225] However, rather than on the goddess, the frames in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic often focus

225 Thomas Coburn, *Devi: The Great Goddess* in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, eds. John S. Hawley and Donna M. Wulff (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1998), 31–32.

instead on the villain *Mahisha* as the dominant figure, emphasizing his size and fearless charge in battle—yet another example of the bourgeois patriarchal project coming through to the modern period that has been so clearly visible in some of the narratives.

This particular frame from *Tales of Durga* (Fig. 27), displays the creation of the goddess *Durga* by the gods of the Hindu trinity – *Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva*—who are seated on the left side of the panel. Powerful rays emanate from the male gods and create the form of *Durga*, who, bejeweled and calm, stands in the center of the cloud, armed with the weapons bestowed upon her by the gods. The accompanying text states, *'It was joined by similar rays of light from Indra and other Devas and Lo! The next moment, out of that light a female form with a thousand arms came into being! It was Devi Durga.'*

The *Mahatmya* text describes it thus,

> … from the face of Vishnu filled with rage came forth a great fiery splendor *(tejas)* [and also from the faces] of Brahma and Shiva. And from the bodies of Indra and the other gods came forth a great fiery splendor, and it became unified in one place. An exceedingly fiery mass like a flaming mountain did the gods see there, filling the firmament with flames. That fearless splendor, born of the bodies of all the gods, unified and pervading the three worlds with her splendor, became a woman. *(2.8–12)* (Coburn Great Goddess, 36)

This narrative account with its clear patriarchal bias recorded in religious history has been critiqued by Shivaji Pannikker for its incompleteness and the fact that its origin itself is constructed and willed into existence for the purpose of coercive action against the *asura*, so that the power-status of patriarchy can be restored.[226] Panniker's Marxist reading is closer to Ganesh's subversive visualization of the overshadowing patriarchal presence in this narrative. Ganesh's representation instead is a self-generated, self-pleasuring, self-empowered, and headless vision (Fig. 28). Ganesh further erases the images of the three gods, who are represented by white beams of energy that seem to feed into the goddess's multiple-armed body. Though the images of the gods have been erased, their weapons remain, perhaps indicating empowerment to the headless goddess. Her wrists are free from any feminine adornments, and garments are in a state of disarray. The Goddess's hand touches herself (in a gesture of autoeroticism) while a disembodied male hand accusingly points towards her from the left side of the panel. The mysterious anchor text gestures towards the possibility of the body

226 Shivaji Pannikker, *Saptamatrika Worship and Sculptures: An Iconographical Interpretation of Conflicts and Resolutions in the Storied Brahmanical Icons* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1997), 171.

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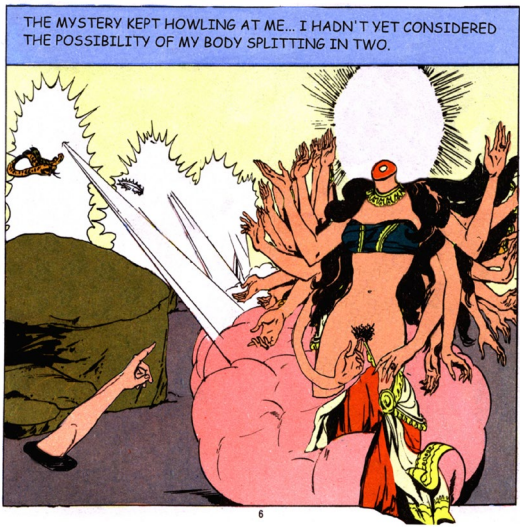

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Fig. 27. Amar Chitra Katha, *Tales of Durga*, 1978. Courtesy India Book House.
Fig. 28. Ganesh, *Kali Howling*, 2002. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris.

splitting in two, to multiplicity. The splitting could also refer to the double 'othering' of queer sexuality in a hetero-normative society.

The total queering of a mythical narrative that lies at the center of Hindu religious belief acts as a powerful and severe critique of Hindu orthodoxy as also of a nation in which the goddess tradition finds its echo in temple worship and celebration of festivals such as *Durga Ashtami*. With the rise of Hindutva in the 1990s the adoption of traditional icons like Kali and Shakti have played an important role in the parochial agendas of political parties like the BJP and Shiv Sena. During the demolition of the Babri Masjid Mosque in 1992, women participation was quite high, the *Durga Vahini*, the Women's wing of the Vishwa

Hindu Parishad urged women to fight in the name of their religion, to become *viraganas* or warrior women and the *Mahila Aghadi*, self-styled incarnates of Shakti vociferously participated in the riots in Bombay following the demolition of Babri Masjid.

Tanika Sarkar's study of the women in the Hindutva brigade looks at the positioning of women at the intersection of politics, violence, the new middle class and religion. She argues that in moments of mass violence, the participating women have been from certain vulnerable communities, looking to empower and heal their community lives and that their participation has brought them a certain amount of confidence and larger solidarities while at the same time leading them to being complicit with fascist intolerance and an anti-democratic political order,[227] as an example of the aspirational caste class divide that often polarizes Indian politics. Nevertheless, as has been demonstrated by various examples, the scriptural articulations of women's ontological value through history have been brought into existence through male interpretations and this is the belief that Ganesh challenges.

The head is a particularly rich and important site in the symbolization of gender and is that part of the woman's body that gives her a voice and her identity. Decapitation is one way of relieving the woman of both identity and a voice, reducing her to a mere sexual and reproductive body,[228] and in this panel Ganesh already deprives the Goddess of her constructed persona, a problematic construct with its patriarchal bias.

Kinsley describes the Goddess as one who "violates the model of the Hindu woman. She is not submissive, she is not subordinated to a male deity, she does not fulfill household duties and she exceeds at what is traditionally a male function, fighting in battle…she reverses the normal role for females and therefore stands outside normal society."[229] Ganesh's choice of the Goddess as the subject for this panel resonates with Kinsley's view and gestures towards the hidden presence of the extraordinary power that often remains repressed in women as they are constrained within socially demeaning roles.

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227 Tanika Sarkar, "Heroic Women, Mother Goddesses – Family & Organisation in Hindutva Politics," in *Handbook on Gender*, 337–363.

228 Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "Introduction: The Spectacle of the Female Head," in *Off with her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, eds. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1.

229 David Kinsley, 97.

2.2.5 The Practice of Sati

The subordination of women features strongly in all the panels discussed, whether they are drawn from the mythological narratives of *Parvati, Mira* or *Durga.* In the concluding panels in *Tales of Amnesia*, Ganesh highlights yet another significant evil of the patriarchal system handed down through history—*sati* and its valorization through practices such as bride-burning.

The practice of *sati* was outlawed under British rule in 1829, it was not a straightforward reform as Lata Mani explains, the discourse of sati had very little to do with the women who burned and more to do with the implicit privileging of high caste Brahmin scripture as constituting authentic traditions, women merely served as the site where contestations took place,[230] but remnants of the practice continue in the present taking the form of heinous dowry deaths, bride-burning and occasionally the ritual of *sati* itself.

When Roop Kanwar died on her husband's funeral pyre at Deorala in Rajasthan in 1984 it sparked off a nation-wide controversy, it was found that there had been nearly 40 more cases of widow self-immolation in Rajasthan.[231] In the follow-up discussions after Roop Kanwar's self-immolation, four differing positions could be discerned, the first a liberal position, criticizing the custom as traditional and barbaric, the second a more conservative, pro-sati one that valorized the practice, the third position adopted by Ashis Nandy not only critiqued the modern liberal stance but also reaffirmed the presence of the dichotomy between tradition / modernity in the analysis of the practice, simultaneously referring to the colonial position of authentic / inauthentic sati—the former as a sign of women's sacred powers as against the contemporary widow burning as a "product of a dehumanized market morality"—the last position was the one adopted by feminists for whom the central point of discussion was the concern for women's lives and in the larger context, the subordination of women. Discussing these positions in detail, Mani adds that after Roop Kanwar's burning, widow burning is no longer a historical problem but has itself become "a charged and explosive contemporary issue."[232] Ganesh exposes its gruesome, misogynistic character in another panel (Fig. 29), the torso of an anonymous male figure, gestures at the

230 Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 1998), 152–153.

231 Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism* (London and New York: Routledge 1997), 69.

232 Lata Mani, "Multiple Mediations: Feminist Scholarship in the Age of Multinational Reception," *Inscriptions* 1989, Vol. 5, 18–32.

Fig. 29. Ganesh, *Waterfall*, 2002. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris.

veiled maiden who gazes down at a disembodied female pelvis, saying, *"Or—Forget that waterfall for a moment, come see how the skin catches on fire."* The tactile and ironic text gestures not only towards the practice of a young woman shedding copious tears as she leaves her parental home but also on the heinous practice of dowry deaths which offer a source of their annihilation or release from a violent brutal existence. The element of dystopic imagery is further reinforced by the heavy coding in this panel in the dress of the widows as they observe the decaying corpses on the battlefield, one of the two women holds a mutilated and headless male child's arm in a stringent critique of female feticide and the powerlessness of the widow's will itself—a disturbing reality in contemporary India. In this panel, the image-text relationship is contiguous and interdependent. One of the two panels is from the *Ashoka* comic displaying ravaged battlefields from emperor Ashoka's bloody war in *Kalinga* (present day Orissa) after which the emperor embraced Buddhism. The original text reads *'As he proceeded, he saw horrible sights, heads of dead men'*—Ganesh's addition of the widowed figures to the original panel juxtaposes two dissimilar but extreme forms of violence.

2.2.6 *Tales of Amnesia*—Key Aspects

The set of collages focus on a thematic connect rather than follow the classic comic genre structure, there is no breakdown or mixing of the panels, the gutter space does not usually serve to connect images and many of the panels tell a single story – there is no sequential narration and they appear to be episodes of Amnesia's life. The connection between the panels, rather than being narrative, is thematic. As already mentioned, the total erasure of the male figure is

the primary and key aspect of Ganesh's work and the nonchalance exhibited in these frames exhibits a strong critique of patriarchal dominance. Ganesh is arguing with Butler against the heterosexual matrix within which the category of woman finds stability "one is a woman to the extent that one functions as one within a heterosexual frame." Along with questioning the continuous reproduction of these norms, Ganesh goes further with Butler's argument, as she points to the patriarchal structures of power that restrain women. Ganesh connects this process of reproducing of the norms with Riviere's definition of womanliness as masquerade, unmasking this masquerade, and questioning the assigned behavior of the 'ideal' woman as a construct.

Johnson and Johnson (1997) argue that it is in the societies that are heavily patriarchal, male-dominated and male-centered, that the lives of women are the most harsh and oppressed. Patriarchal forms of violence manifest themselves through various modes of oppression including *sati* or in current terms, dowry deaths. In the case of India, it is a well-known fact that patriarchy lies at the root of violence against women in India, it is men who hold the power over feticide and decisions in most circumstances. In the patriarchal ideal it is the woman's duty to serve her father, husband and sons for the entirety of her life as delineated in ancient Indian texts like the Laws of Manu.

Nivedita Menon comments on how feminists in India do not critique the heterosexual monogamous patriarchal institution of marriage rather the practices around it, polygamy, dowry, domestic violence, reinforcing the family structures around it. She points out that patriarchy needs the institutions of compulsory heterosexuality to survive, caste, race and community identity are all produced through birth and therefore this purity of identities and social formations that are so strictly policed via family and community norms all work towards the control of women's sexuality and maintaining the heterosexual patriarchal family system in place.[233] Mary John and Janaki Nair contend that for long women have been the bearers of elaborate codes of honor on their bodies and carry the violent marks of caste, ethnic and national imaginations on their bodies. Only recently have spaces opened up for talking about female desire and sexualities and since the 1990s the media has played a role in representing gay and lesbian issues and yet in their essentialist portrayals, they seem to have created lesbians as a breed apart.[234] All of these opinions serve to reinforce the patriarchal and

233 Nivedita Menon, "How Natural is Normal?" in *Because I Have a Voice; Queer Politics in India*, eds. Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005), 34–36.

234 Mary E. John and Janaki Nair, *A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 8–34.

heterosexual structures that define Indian society and position Ganesh's critique in a direct confrontation with the nation's traditional values and beliefs.

The iconography mines a specific heritage from Hindu mythology as it draws from the tales of *Durga, Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva, Parvati, Ashoka, Padmini and Ratnavali* among others, even as Ganesh surreally brings in Greek and Roman myths and histories ranging from Sappho and Pandora, *("Dear X, They say Sappho jumped off a cliff for love. Do you get it? (Rather throw up or think of) I spilled my guts in the toilet, then sat down at the computer to write").* This transcultural referencing perhaps facilitates their intelligibility for an international audience. For Ganesh, whose work shows more frequently in the US than in South Asia or in other parts of the world, this broadening of the narrative is an important aspect for its success among diverse multicultural audiences.[235] The contexts under which she has displayed this particular work are diverse and varied with many aspects that would entail more detailed study, however *Tales of Amnesia* continues to be the one work that directly connects with her diasporic roots. Gopinath states that Ganesh negotiates "the alleys and byways of diasporic memory to excavate the past not as a locus of originary culture or identity but as a site of unpredictable desires and embodiments providing [us] with a kind of shadow archive to the dominant archive of nationalist and diasporic modernity,"[236] this shadow archive created by Ganesh not only critiques the bastion of India's cultural heritage textually but also negates its visual portrayal through foregrounding queer desires.

The influence of kitsch, camp and lesbian pulp novels is apparent in some of the frames as they explicitly display erotic gestures such as self-pleasuring. The adoption of Camp and aspects of surrealism come together in the panels through Ganesh's appropriations of portions from the original work, creating an 'offness,' with the narrative through the formal quality of the work itself. As Ganesh

235 Ganesh showed *Tales of Amnesia* for the first time internationally with Gallery Haas & Fischer in 2007 (August–October) in their Project Space 1+2: Loukia Alavanu, she went on to participate in FIAC Paris, with it in a solo presentation with the same gallery. She showed *Tales of Amnesia* in another solo show at Nature Morte in Berlin in 2011 and also at a solo at the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh in the same year. In 2012, next she showed *Tales of Amnesia* in another solo at Gotenburg Sweden and added some more digital collages such as *Melencolia* and others. *The Tales of Amnesia* collages were part of another international show *Female Power* at Arnhem in 2013. During her solo *Eyes of Time,* at Brooklyn Museum at the Sackler Galleries in New York in 2014–15 where her immense mural of the goddess Kali attracted much discussion and comment she displayed the *Tales of Amnesia* collages in the exhibition as well.

236 Gayatri Gopinath, "Chitra Ganesh's Queer Re-visions," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies.* Vol. 15, No. 3, 2009, 470.

plays with the formal iconography of the comics, surreally emphasising their violent and primordial aspect through a display of multiple arms, limbs, spattering of blood and headless figures, she completely and deliberately destroys the social order that the original comic had been so painstakingly created to uphold. In a patriarchal male-centred, male-identified system, heterosexuality plays a key role in the continued subordination of women.

The performative body is the site of enunciation and battleground, it becomes the locus of transformation, displacement and transfiguration at all levels, visually and textually—psychic, social, sexual and conceptual. The dismembered, impaired bodies surpass their own frontiers as they negotiate cracks in the heterosexual world system, presenting a threat to society by subverting their traditional roles. These are bodies that are masquerading as selves other than what they are prescribed to be, the national body in a narrative from the Indian comic genre has been displaced.

The next artist in this study, Tejal Shah, also employs queer sexuality as a lens but rather than focusing on the feminine, they focus on the artificiality of gender constructs.

2.3 Tejal Shah

Shah's practice centers around the queer, colored, variously gendered body. Shah defines 'queer' as whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant, referring to nothing in particular, rather an identity without an essence, for Shah queerness is more about a certain criticality that visibilizes heteronormativity or compulsory heterosexuality, patriarchy and binary gender, also extending it to other aspects of life.[237] And Shah applies this criticality in their entire art practice that includes photography, video and multi-media installations. In the works being analysed in this study, the medium of video takes precedence.

2.3.1 The Video Genre

Technology and art first came together in the 1960s when artists working with conceptual art, experimental film and performance began working with new genres internationally. With the development of the Sony Portapak camera in

237 Tejal Shah at their talk at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, 2014.

1965, Nam June Paik's early experiments with video coopted it into contemporary art practice in the US, while in Germany Wolf Vostell's early works established its presence. In the beginning artists used the genre to critique the insidious presence of television through advertising and television programmes. It was also used as 'guerilla television' against the domination of network television. Early examples in the genre included its use to document live performance with artists performing with few or no props in front of the camera eg. Bruce Nauman's *Stamping in the Studio* (1968), or Baldessari's *Baldessari sings Lewitt* (1972), the medium was also used to explore social and power relations between individuals for example, Vito Acconci's *Pryings* (1971). The medium's flexible positionality would be employed to reveal layers of meanings, contradictions and paradoxes especially to deconstruct issues of political difference in gender and the sexual self, by women artists such as, for example Joan Jonas in *Vertical Roll* (1972), that used the technical aspect of the medium to critique how women were presented on TV, or Martha Rosler in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1976), that aggressively engaged with the televisual aspect to masquerade the relationship of women with domesticity. Post-modern critique appropriated images from their original contexts, proscribing new meanings in works such as Dara Birnbaum's *Kiss the Girls: Make them Cry* (1979), that took clips from game show Hollywood Squares to analyze coded gestures on gender. There is no gainsaying the fact that "Video is a default medium of the twenty first century, it is everywhere, trapped on monitors and computer screens and projected, cinema style onto pristine gallery walls."[238] The fluidity of the genre of video allows for a fair amount of flexibility, the video installation with its wide screens, high definition DVD recordings becomes a persuasive space that absorbs the viewer totally to a cinematic experience which includes the viewer's embodied experience in that space. What differentiates it from TV is the simulation of the feeling of a body moving through a particular space, surrounded by video projections or work that have weight, fragrance, vibration and temperature.[239] Video is a medium of real time i.e., it transmits the temporal quality of the process being recorded which alters our own memory of history and of daily life. One of the early champions of video art, Kurtz, commenting on the *present-ness* of the medium as its most consequential feature stated that "The most powerful aspect of the medium is its ability to transform even the events of ancient history into the flowing present, whether or not what is being telecast, is what appears on the monitor,

238 Catherine Ewles, Introduction in *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co, 2006), 1.

239 Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated*, 26.

is actually live, taped or filmed."[240] Bill Viola—the master of the genre,—began working with the medium in the 70s and he makes a fairly compelling case for the genre's openness and flexibility as he says,

> There was this sense back then of all these big green pastures filled with different things: painting and sculpture, film, photography. And then we came along with our videos, which everyone else thought were toys and we found a pasture that didn't have a lock on the gate and we just walked in. It was empty as far as the eye could see and you could stay for as long as you liked, do whatever you liked. That was our new field and that was my new career.[241]

The medium of video has thrust everyone up much closer than ever before. The viewer can both imagine and enter the bodily predicament of the artist, the genre uniquely possesses the potential to create a utopian virtual world and travel to far away spaces, allowing artists to document fleeting performances and share their distant experiences in real time.

Unlike its presence from the 1960s in the West, the medium of video arrived in India only in the late 1990's, with Nalani Malani's *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* (1998–99), Navjot Altaf's *Memory/Record/Erase* (1996), Vivan Sundaram's *Couples and House/Boat* (1994 Canada), and Rumanna Hussain's *Is it what you think?* (1998), being some early examples. In India some of the initial performative videos were often created by artists to analyze and critique the construction of identity and in the exploration of taboo subjects such as gender and sexuality, for example in works such as Sonia Khurana's *Bird* (1999), and Subodh Gupta's *Pure* (1999). (Refer Chapter 1 of this study) Shah's early engagements with the genre included *Untitled II* (2000), which was based on excerpts of telephonic conversations with their mother while studying at Melbourne, the genre offered them a way to articulate a transoceanic longing across the expanse of the sea. In the same year Shah performed their first video work *Chingari Chumma* collaboratively with fellow artist and cultural practitioner Anuj Vaidya in Chicago, turning the camera upon themself for the first time.

240 Bruce Kurtz, "The Present Tense," in *Video Art: An Anthology*, eds. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 234–235.

241 Bill Viola, "People thought I was an idiot and that video would never last," *The Guardian* May 23, 2014.

2.3.2 *Chingari Chumma*

Chingari Chumma/Stinging Kiss (2000), an eight-and-a-half-minute video is a spoof on the typical storyline from Indian cinema with the artists dragging genders and emphatically distancing themself from the heterosexual national body. The title resonates closely with colloquial Hindi language, where the word *'chumma'* pejoratively implies a kiss taken, rather than given. This linguistic usage resonates with the campy masquerade in the work.

The work refers a stereotypical Hindi film climax from the 1980s, often featuring the abduction of the heroine by the villainous bandit, the hero arrives usually on time to rescue his beloved, often with the police in tow, but in *Chingari Chumma/Stinging Kiss*, neither the hero nor the police arrive on time. Instead clips of popular Bollywood film star Amitabh Bachchan rushing to the scene to confront the villain are interspersed in the narrative, but he never arrives. Shah's collaborator Anuj Vaidya enacts the role of the heroine, who, instead of looking helpless and distressed, casts lascivious glances at Shah performing the role of the bandit (Fig. 30). Desire diverges from the familiar path and establishes a new trajectory between the 'good' (heroine), and the 'bad' (dacoit / villain). The work is accompanied by a musical soundtrack derived from 1970s Bollywood songs often featuring Helen, an Anglo-Burmese actress.[242] These songs were usually woven into movie plots as elements of fantasy, to titillate the male gaze and prolong the storyline through a lavish spectacle of song and dance. But in this high-spirited campy, ill-lit and furtively shot video, Shah and Vaidya's performance moves towards Sontag's ideas on Camp sensibility and its love for artifice and exaggeration (Sontag 1964). Shah's version of South Asian queer (post) porn employs the sexually explicit language of mainstream pornography, much in the style of Preciado's genderless dildo in a parody of the heterosexual sex act. Shah, discussing Preciado's philosophy of dildonics refers to the dildo both as a body part and as a prosthetic device, states that it is replaceable in many respects,[243] implying a very deliberate separation between phallic power and sexuality.

An important aspect of the work in *Chingari Chumma* is its cinematic content. The cinematic medium as a means of fantasy and entertainment occupies a critical space of cultural dominion in a nation's culture. It is the largest, most visible and dominant field that plays a key role in the process of social taste formation. In this work the combining of the medium with Camp creates a fringe

242 Please see Jerry Pinto, *Helen: The Life and Times of a Bollywood H-Bomb* 2006, for the significance of Helen's role in Indian cinema.

243 Shah, Kiran Nadar Museum, 2014.

Fig. 30. Shah, Video Still, *Chingari Chumma,* Single Channel Video, 2000. Courtesy the artist, Project 88 Mumbai and Barbara Gross Galerie Munich.

off aesthetics—the *off*-ness stands for its artistic character and the manner in which it uses aesthetics. The camp aesthetic is over-the-top, playful and parodic, and transgresses the norms imposed by the symbolic order. Camp "demonstrates the essence of what is hidden behind the pose in an attempt to familiarize and describe the queerness and weirdness of the natural." In cinema and popular culture, heroes as well as heroines with their slender bodies and symmetrical shapes are constructed and are almost totally unreal.[244] And *Chingari Chumma* with its parodic take on mainstream cinema demonstrates the contrived artificiality of the medium and gender, rejigging familiar codes and clichés, bringing to light unsanctioned meanings and identities.

With its deliberate setting, music and lack of costuming, the campy work also ties in with Butler's observation on drag, and how it can create a dissonance between sex, gender and performance, as she states, "if the anatomy of the performer is distinct from the gender of the performer and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance but sex and gender and gender and performance […] in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself."[245] In drag performances as costuming, make up, props,

244 Anna Manilowska, "Bad Romance: Pop and Camp in Light of Evolutionary Confusion," in *Redefining Kitsch and Camp in Literature and Culture* ed. Justyna Stepien (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 14–20.

245 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 175.

posed scenes and the staging of narratives, connected to 'appearances,' critique stereotypes, they not only re-trace processes of construction on the body but also produce distance to these norms.[246] The theatricality of *Chingari Chumma* not only deconstructs the apparent solidity of gender-identity positions through a re-interpretation of cliched cinematic characters such as the cabaret dancer, heroine, hero and bandit, but also questions the hold of the stereotype in the cinematic image, overturning the masquerade of established symbol codes. In fact, Shah, by switching genders, adopting the sexuality of the Other, distances themself also from the masquerade of femininity that Ganesh has so closely aligned with. This weaving away of the divide between the offensive and the appealing, the exaggerated movement of the performers and the ill-lit secret furtiveness of the video, reinforces the uncanniness and artificiality of the construct. The work challenges not only the national imaginary of hetero-normativity but also takes a humorously confrontational stance combining kitsch with camp, demonstrating the inappropriateness of the performance, the affectation of extremes that exceeds taste and decorum and the taboos surrounding its representation. While *Chingari Chumma* brings in the performance of drag and the discourse around Camp—Shah's next work, *What are you?* focuses on the visual and discursive framework that surrounds the Indian transgendered body. *What are you?* (2006) combines multiple mediums including staged performance and documentary and emerged as a result of the time Shah spent with the LGBTQ community during the *Sakhi Re* project in Bangalore 2004/5.

2.3.3 *What are you?*

Shah's use of the phrase *'What are you,'* in the title as opposed to *'who are you,'* immediately foregrounds the objectification of transgender *hijra* community in India. This community may include female or non-male identified male individuals, transgender, transsexual or androgynous people, people born with ambiguous genitalia or hormonal differences (intersex) and also individuals who have undergone sex reassignment surgery / castration. The names used by the transgender community in India would include *Hijras, Kothis, Aravanis, Jogappas, Shiv-Shakthis, Kinnaur* etc., references to them can be found in Vedic and Puranic literatures as *"tritiyaprakriti,"* or the third gender also as *"napunsaka."* The word *hijra* appears to have been derived from the Persian word *hiz*, meaning someone who is effeminate

246 Renate Lorenz, "Drag – Radical, Transtemporal, Abstract //2012," in *Queer: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. David Getsy (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2016), 154.

and/or ineffective or incompetent. Though they can often be seen in Indian cities begging at traffic signals or dancing in weddings, they have a special status and were a respected community during medieval India and were placed in charge of harems due to their emasculation. During the British rule, they were denied civil rights and were considered a separate caste or tribe who kidnapped and castrated children. The Indian census did not, till fairly recently, recognize the third gender while collecting census data, therefore there is no clear data on their numbers.

If *hijras* are not men by virtue of anatomy and appearance, they are also not women, but they are 'like' women. Serena Nanda, discussing the intricate paradoxes and relationships that exist within the community, explains that they may be born as men or hermaphrodites, as men, they may feel themselves impotent with women as they mature, if hermaphrodites, they may be raised as women and their identity as *hijras* discovered only when they prove to be incapable of menstruating. However born or raised, they typically undergo a surgical 'emasculation' as she terms it, after joining the hijra community and they mostly dress as women.[247] *What are you?* was first exhibited at the Thomas Erben Gallery in New York in 2006. The installation comprised of a twin channel video projection, a room with two large mirrors that reflected the writing on the wall and a soundscape that could be heard on the headphones. The installation also included realistic replicas of crude brothel cabins pointing towards the grim reality of sex work that constitutes the main source of livelihood for *hijras*. The mirror image of the text on the wall read, *"I am often seen by people as a 'What's that? To which I usually respond, 'Isn't beautiful enough?'"* This text framed the ambivalence of the work as the viewer was confronted with his/her own image while simultaneously listening to the *hijras*' opinion on identity, community, family, love, belonging and the violence of alienation on the accompanying audio.[248]

Simultaneously projected on two screens, the work begins with a series of rapid shots of sea breakers, the massive boulders that line the seashore along the Marine drive promenade in the city of Mumbai. These shots are immediately replaced by rapid successive close-ups of human skin followed by a sequence of several *hijra* women who come towards the viewer with their faces gradually filling the screen. The following sequence shows six *hijra* women appearing one after another, walking very deliberately (Fig. 31). Four are dressed in sarees and sashay, resembling fashion models on catwalk This sequence is accompanied by

247 Serena Nanda, *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1998).

248 Maya Kovskaya, "A Cry from the Narrow Between: Eros and Thanatos in the works of Tejal Shah and Han Bing," Gallery Espace 2010, 4. Exhibition Catalogue.

an impersonal soundtrack of a voice humming a strange, slightly disquieting tune. In the following longer sequence framed against a dark void, five of the formally dressed transgendered queer persons monotonously read out excerpts from Articles 14, 16 and 19 of the Indian Constitution, excerpts that protect certain fundamental rights of the individual. But this solemn recitation quickly disintegrates into a show of merriment, mockery and masquerade. The figures appear, disappear and get superimposed in quick mechanical succession, this masquerade of costumed femininity further subverts codes of feminine behavior as one of the figures lights up a cigarette. They engage in various antics and comical dances, pose for photographic portraits and finally the black screen is filled up with huge kitschy red roses.[249] (Fig. 32) With this campy staged performance Shah is foregrounding a stringent critique of the nation and citizens' right to equality and freedom. The right to freedom and equality have been of major concern to the transgender community who have often found that the only employment opportunities available for them have been begging, prostitution and performing religious ceremonies.

The transgender community has had a chequered legal history in India. In April 2014 the Supreme Court of India ruled that transgender people should be treated as a third category of gender and they be treated consistently with other minorities under the law, allowing access to jobs, healthcare and education. The Rajya Sabha passed the Rights of Transgender Bill in 2014, however, the government then passed the Rights for Transgender Persons Bill in 2015, modifying the earlier bill and removing the provisions relating to Transgender Rights Court. The 2015 Bill underwent further changes and another bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha in 2016—the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights Bill), which invited criticism from the transgender and activists on the defining terms plus on areas such as certain criminal and personal laws which are currently in existence and only recognize the genders of "man" and "woman."[250] The Transgender Person (Protection of Rights) Bill passed in 2020 mandates for legal gender recognition—this is a process by which trans people can change their documents to reflect their identity through a two-step process. First, an individual has to apply for a "transgender certificate" from the District Magistrate where they live. Then, the certificate holder can apply for a "change in gender certificate." However, this

249 Livia Monnet, "'Queerness in/as the Strange, Prismatic Worlds of Art': Fantasy, Utopia and Perversion in Tejal Shah's Video Installation 'What are You?'" *Tejal Shah in conversation with Johan Pijnappel, Mumbai*, Galerie Mirchandani and Steinruecke 2006. Exhibition Catalogue.

250 Sawant, "Transgender: Status in India," *Annals of Indian Psychiatry* 2017, Vol. 1 Issue 2, 59–61.

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Fig. 31 & 32. Shah, Video Still, *"What are You?"* Dual Channel Video Installation, 2006. Courtesy the artist, Project 88 Mumbai and Barbara Gross Galerie Munich.

second step requires the person to provide the proof of surgery which has been issued by a hospital official, perhaps coercing people into medical procedures that they may not want, for a second evaluation. Further the official must be "satisfied with the correctness of such certificate." The extraordinary amount of power with the government to arbitrate which trans people "qualify" to be recognized as who they are—is in itself a fundamental rights violation.[251]

In their everyday contemporary life, the exaggerated performance of female behavior, such as donning of female hairstyles, wearing female dress and accessories, imitating women's walk, gestures, voice, facial expressions and language

251 Kyle Knight, "India's Transgender Law Isn't Worth Celebrating," *The Advocate* December 5, 2019. Accessed on January 20, 2020. https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/05/indias-transgender-rights-law-isnt-worth-celebrating.

Fig. 33. Shah, Video Still, *"What are You?"* Dual Channel Video Installation, 2006. Courtesy the artist, Project 88 and Barbara Gross Gallery Munich.

functions more in the nature of burlesque. The very act of dancing in public places coupled with acting in sexually suggestive ways violates norms of feminine behavior and functions almost like another form of drag, but in an un-humorous way. The masquerade of femininity publicly adopted by the community is a deliberate, almost internalized attempt to gain social acceptance emerging from a space of failed utopias. In the same year, Shah had also created another form of utopia in the *Hijra Fantasy* series (2006), working closely with three protagonists from the *hijra* community to create staged tableaus where they had enacted their own personal fantasies for themselves. The works were titled, '*The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne/burned on the water,*' '*You too can touch the moon – Yashoda with Krishna'* and '*Southern Siren – Maheshwari.*' That all three fantasies focused on enacting a feminine role was a telling marker of the resonance with feminine role play gesturing towards its aspirational and utopian features.

The next segment in *What are You?* turns towards a documentary account of a sex reassignment surgery. The split screen shows Sneha's account of the painful process of her transformation into a transsexual mtf (male to female) and the clinical account of the surgeon who has performed the surgery (Fig. 33). At one point within the narrative, the focus shifts to a single shot of Sneha as she speaks about her life experience and shows photographs of the surgery to the camera.[252] Currently, these surgeries are exorbitantly priced and out of reach for many who want to opt for them. In the absence of legislation, not many government

252 This intervention of Sneha's voice is a very important counterpoint to the Doctors clinical/medical narrative. I am grateful to Shah for providing me with this additional piece of information.

hospitals offer the option, the result is often treatments at private clinics at exorbitant prices, therefore this option is available to a limited number of the transgender community. The juxtaposing of a factual account of painful surgery brings forth the reality of an indeterminate gender and the concerns and desires driven by a desire to conform. The entire work surreally plays with the slippage between fiction and documentary, the comic and the carnivalesque, as Shah creates an extremely complex performative campy space, employing techniques of cut-up and collage, dissolving and superimposition, image manipulation and special effects. The uncanniness in this work comes through the ambiguity i.e., there is an overlap between man and woman and this half-ness is visible to the spectator who cannot decide which is which.

2.3.4 *Untitled (-On Violence* 2010*)*

Transgendered lives lived in extreme precarity featured in yet another multimedia installation work by Shah, *Untitled (-On Violence)* created by Shah in 2010, it was first exhibited at Centre Pompidou during *Paris-Delhi-Bombay* in 2011. The dominating visual in this work is the photograph of what appears to be a woman dressed in a saree lying on the ground, badly bruised, a uniformed policeman, with just his legs and torso visible stands towering over the figure, flashing his torch. The first impression is that he is the rescuer, then one notices that his pants are unzipped and his squirt of urine is aimed at the face and the body of the prone figure (Fig. 34). The wall to the right of the screen displays the face of a transgender person disfigured by blows, the face remains poignantly silent while being filmed (Fig. 35). On the opposite wall, scrolling across a LED panel in red letters, a testimony relates the violence and degradation the transgender has been subjected to, the scrolling text and the explicit language serve as a harsh reminder of the brutality that a transgendered person has to undergo in everyday life.

The staging of this particular work almost resonates with a real-life account of a night in the life of a *hijra* sex worker—a night which gifted a trauma of multiple rapes including that by a policeman.[253] Violence against *hijras* as sex workers is often brutal and occurs in public spaces, police stations, prisons and homes. It is paradoxical that in traditional belief the power of the *hijra* role lies in their renunciation of their sexuality and the transformation of sexual desire into

253 Human Rights Violations Against the Transgender Community. September 1, 2003. Accessed on May 30, 2016. http://www.pucl.org/reports/human-rights-violations-against-transgender-community.

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Fig. 34 & 35. Shah, *Untitled (-On Violence)*, Multimedia Triptych, 2010. Courtesy the artist, Project 88 Mumbai and Barbara Gross Gallerie Munich.

sacred power, however many *hijras* are forced to engage in sexual activities in the receptor role with men and work frequently as prostitutes to earn their living.

Both works by Shah on the transgender community forcefully bring forth the role played by the nation itself as the perpetrator of injustices on the transgender body, instead of as a guarantor of citizens' rights in a secular democratic state—a right that functions rather ambiguously in practice. The infamous Section 377, instead of being used in higher courts to prosecute consensual same-sex activity, was being used as a weapon in daily life against sexual minorities. This symbol of legal and social homophobia was widely wielded by the police and other figures of authority as a weapon against *kothis, hijras* and other disenfranchised minorities to harass, extort and assault rather than as an official complaint charge.[254] Shah's work draws attention to the fissures that exist in a deeply polarized and norm driven society where bodies that transgress the norms of gender difference pay a heavy price. Capturing a sub-culture fighting for bodily recognition and for their very lives, Shah takes on the role of a politically aware, socially responsible activist artist head on, as they draws attention towards the failure of the nation to sustain its imagined inclusive diversity. The genre of video proves an effective medium for both works, in the emphasis on the half-ness of identity, the exaggeratedly orange-hued aesthetics and the campy music of *Chingari Chumma*, the mix of documentary and fiction, the black void in the frames in *What are you?* and the dramatic and stark violence apparent in *Untitled (-On Violence)*, all works in video foreground an uncanny mix of reality and fiction.

2.3.5 *I AM/Women Like Us*

I AM (2010–ongoing) and *Women Like Us* (2010), Shah's next work is in the form of a photographic archive and focuses on yet another sub-culture existing socially on the margins of Indian society, that of women who embody female masculinity, in this specific example these are the artist's photographs of female wrestlers. Wrestling in India has been considered as a strictly male terrain, this assumption was built upon the pretext that women in India were not physically strong enough to take on the rigors of the training required to excel in such a sport. The sport of wrestling opened up to women in India only since 2000. Shah began creating this photo archive work in 2009. By this time, a few women wrestlers from India had already made a name for themselves, for example, Alka Tomar, (Doha Asian Games 2006, Guanghzou, China 2006) and Geeta Phogat, (Commonwealth

254 Jyoti Puri, "Decriminalization as Deregulation?" *Sexuality Studies*, 154 & 157.

Fig. 36. Shah, *Women Like Us*, Digital photograph on archival paper, 2010. Courtesy the artist, Project 88 Mumbai and Barbara Gross Galerie Munich.

Games 2009, 2010), Babita Phogat (Commonwealth Games 2010, 2012), Anita Tomar (2010). A Bollywood film released in 2018 on the Phogat sisters in fact recounts their narrative and the mixed family support and less than congenial environment that spurred the Phogat sisters to excel at the sport. In this work, Shah combines photography and documentary techniques to expand notions of female-ness towards female masculinity, androgyny, gender ambiguity and self-hood. The interlocking questions of representation, power and the social gaze are reconfigured around a group of women who do not fit into the dominant notions of how a "woman" is defined in India. These women are doubly removed from this definition through the embodying of certain features associated with masculinity.

Shah describes this group of individuals as "unregistered and rejected individuals," who are still part of society.[255] The erasure of femaleness in Shah's work becomes evident in their style of dressing both livelihood and dress impinge on conventional male terrain (Fig. 36), conveying ideas of a 'deviant' femininity that threatens the natural stability of a dominant gender ideology.

The notion of female masculinity becomes a particularly fruitful site of investigation because it codifies a unique form of social rebellion, there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self and does so successfully. Halberstam asserts

255 Accessed on March 12, 2016. http://tejalshah.in/wp-content/uploads/_pdf_file/387-8cdf0b15.pdf.

that female masculinity affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity, arguing that in fact what is understood as heroic masculinity has been produced across both male and female bodies.[256] Femininities and masculinities are shaped by socio-cultural processes, and they get defined by a national culture, a region, a religion. They are part of learned behaviors embedded in popular culture and the subject's surrounding environment and in a society where femaleness is identified with very stereotypical markers of femininity, this segregation often leads to discrimination against those who do not conform to those markers. With this work by Shah, Ganesh's critique of womanliness as role play from *Tales of Amnesia* recedes, as these women turn the masquerade of femininity upon its head and question the category of 'woman' itself as a discursive construct. In the works of both Ganesh and Shah, the performative body in its various guises continually transgresses heterosexual norms acceptable to the nation. Ganesh identifies the body within the paradigm of queer femininity whereas Shah distances themself from the gender binary and queers gender itself. Both artists move away from the idea of a 'national' body. With Nikhil Chopra's performances the nation's history enters the frame directly with Chopra masquerading in a postcolonial body that masquerades as androgynous and occasionally queer.

2.4 Nikhil Chopra

Chopra works with live performance asynchronously in time, drawing from styles of Indian and Greek theatre, from ancient histories to the present as he liberates the borders between installation, performance, painting and photography. His performances vary in duration, depending on the site and the event, they are partially choreographed. Each performance includes a drawing created by Chopra of the viewable scene from his performance site that is completed within the performance duration. Chopra usually dons a single and sometimes multiple personas for the duration of each performance.

2.4.1 Live Performance as a Genre

The genre of live performance has a rich and varied history since early twentieth century. Though the genre is largely associated with the 1960s Happenings, Events and Fluxus concerts that were taking place across Europe and America, it also had

256 Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 935–954.

earlier precedents in the live performances by Dadaists and experimental theatre at Bauhaus in the earlier part of the century. By the 1970s performance art subsumed different forms of performative actions, from conceptual to physical manifestations, both public or private, which could be held as complex events or singly across widely dispersed spaces and communities. In live performance the artist becomes the medium and his actions the art object, taking his art directly to a public forum without any mediation. By its very nature, performance has been the one medium able to evade complete absorption in global capitalism and its efficacy as a counter-hegemonic mode of social practice has drawn artists to address race, class, the politics of sex and gender and many other political topics.[257]

Guillermo Gomez-Pena a performance artist, radical pedagogue and an activist against all kinds of borders has created legendary performance interventions mixing experimental aesthetics and activist politics in, for example, *Border Brujo* 1988–89, *Couple in a Cage* with Coco Fusco in 1992–1993 and *The Living Museum of Fetish/sized Identities* 1999–2002. Gomez-Pena sums up some of the ideas on the genre of performance well when he says—

> Traditionally the human body is our true site of creation, an empty canvas, a musical instrument, an open book; our navigation chart and biographical map, the vessel for our ever changing identities. While the body is the center of the symbolic universe it is also a metaphor for the larger sociopolitical body. Though we treasure our bodies, we don't mind constantly putting them on risk. It is precisely in the tensions of risk that we find our corporeal possibilities and raison d'etre. Our job may be to open the Pandora's box of our times – smack in the middle of the gallery, the theater, the street. Once the performance is over and people walk away our hope is that a process of reflection is triggered in their perplexed psyches.[258]

The genre has seen some radical performative interventions since mid-twentieth century including Yves Klein *Anthroprometries of the Blue Period* (1958), Yoko Ono *Cut Piece* (1964), Chris Burden *Shoot* (1971), Adrian Piper *Mythic Being* (1971), Marina Abramovic *Rhythm O* (1971), Joseph Beuys *I like America, America likes me* (1974), for example.

In India, the introduction of the genre into contemporary art practice followed a different trajectory, India's has long been a performative culture where street plays and *nautankis* have long been part of popular tradition, not to mention the performative aspect of its festivals playing a huge role in the continuous

257 Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, 196–197.

258 Guillermo Gomez Pena, "In Defense of Performance Art." Accessed on September 12, 2018. http://www.pochanostra.com/antes/jazz_pocha2/mainpages/in_defense.htm.

production of India's festival culture. The practice of live performance as an 'art' genre in post-independent India arrived via radical interventions into the political and social environment, similar to video and installation art. Right from the early 1980s when Sushil Kumar tested the limits of his own body with works like *Parallel Reading* and *Veil* to Subodh Gupta's *Pure* in 1999, laying his naked mud-covered body in *shavasana* in a flattened field, onto husband-wife duo Shantanu Lodh and Manmeet Devgun's nude performance as *Hamam mein Hum sab Nangay hain par yeh hamam hai kahan*, in 2005, radical performance interventions were few and far between and mostly under the aegis of Khoj workshops and residencies.

However, it is perhaps Inder Salim's work that completely engages with the 'politics of performance,' within a specifically situated national context. Salim, after being exiled from his homeland Kashmir during the mass exodus taking place from the valley in the late 1980s, took on the hyphenated identity Inder-Salim in 2002, discarding his original surname Tickoo. This radical performative gesture was his response to the communal Gujarat riots, deliberately staking a claim to a dual Hindu-Muslim cultural inheritance. Inder Salim's performances have been some of the most radical avant garde performances including the series on *A Dialogue with Power Plant, Shrill Across a Dead River* in the 1990s, when he cut off the little finger of his left hand and threw it in the Yamuna river near Delhi to create a metaphysical bridge to connect himself with the river. Salim has, since then, been continuously engaging with political issues, especially with the precarious politics of Kashmir. Once again, the Khoj Live International Performance Art Festivals have provided the space and opportunity for artists such as Inder Salim, Neha Choksi and Sonia Khurana among others with a platform to practice the genre.

Chopra began his art practice in live performance with the creation of *Sir Raja* in 2003 at Ohio, the inception of *Sir Raja* stemming partially from his study of British colonial photography. Seated at a chandelier lit table laden with fruit and wine, *Sir Raja II* portrayed an Indian royal steeped in British culture for a total of six hours. On his return to India, he carried the postcolonial critique to the genre of British imperial photography, creating a series of photographs as *Sir Raja* in Kashmir in a bid to re-create Bourne's majestic photographs of the Kashmir valley.[259] The genre of colonial photography that Chopra was referencing had functioned as yet another apparatus of control in colonial India. Bourne's photographs comprised of a set of selected, intensified locations and events, almost staged with the obvious motivation to find architectural forms

259 For an overview of Chopra's personal relationship with Kashmir, please refer to Chapter 1 of this study.

and landscapes that would please the taste of his clients back home in England. It was mainly in Kashmir that Bourne was able to find the tidy grandeur that reminded him of the landscapes of England.[260] Chopra's photographs referenced and critiqued the genre directly as he partook of a royal repast in open air splendor, costumed as *Sir Raja*—the setting majestic and opulent, redolent of pompous imaginaries of a colonial past for the Raja under British rule (Fig. 6).

2.4.2 *Yog Raj Chitrakar* in India

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the persona of *Yog Raj Chitrakar* drew partially from his own roots in a need to be closer to 'home.' *Yog Raj Chitrakar* is defined by Chopra as a "romantic fool who wanders the world in search of the perfect vista, a soldier, a draughtsman." Rummaging through family archives for costumes worn by his grandfather for this very first performance, Chopra emphasised the key part played by costuming as a signifier of identity and history.[261] From the inception of his adoption of the genre of performance itself, Chopra was engaging with Bhabha's concept of mimicry, critiquing the power dynamics of the relationship between Britain and India. Bhabha argues that "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite*…almost the same, but not quite does not merely rupture the discourse but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence,"[262] even by producing a partial presence it simultaneously fixes the colonizer as an authorizing object of regulatory power, the point of reference. These are notions that Chopra's performances as *Yog Raj Chitrakar* closely engage with. Of all the cities in India that are closely tied to colonial memory, Bombay or Mumbai as it is now called, takes pride of place. Bombay was part of the marriage settlement between King Charles II and Catherine of Braganza since 1661 and was ceded to the East India Company in 1668. The city served as the capital of Bombay Presidency (administrative province) under British rule, and during the late 19th and early 20th centuries it was a centre of Indian nationalist activity. After his first performance at a Khoj residency in Delhi, Chopra's second performance as *Yog Raj Chitrakar* was at Mumbai. Titled *Memory Drawing II* (2007), it was performed on the top floor of an old building Kamal

260 Peter Osborne, *Travelling Light Photography, Travel and Visual Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 40–48.

261 Nikhil Chopra on https://pad.ma/BWS/player.

262 Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 86.

Mansion in Colaba in South Mumbai and lasted for 72 hours. The location of this performance was significant—South Mumbai is known for its colonial architecture—prominent examples include the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus, the Municipal Corporation Building, the Rajabai Tower, the David Sassoon Library and the Bombay High Court,—and Kamal Mansion was not too distant from the famed Gateway of India which is an example of Indo-Saracenic style and was built to commemorate the visit of the King-Emperor George V in 1911.

The performance venue was an enclosed space with no view of the seascape visible at a distance. Cameras were fixed on top of the building which beamed a 360 degrees panoramic view of the landscape into the performance space, providing a point of reference for Chopra's wall drawing. The genre of live performance was a novel idea for the Mumbai art-going audience and viewers streamed in to view the performance at all hours. Chopra silently carried on with his performance routine creating the landscape drawing interspersed with the everyday acts of eating and sleeping. The finished landscape drawing comprised the sea view projected by the cameras (Fig. 37). At the end of the performance, Chopra gowned himself in crinoline (Fig. 38), and it was then—dressed as a queen—that he met the eyes of his audience for the first time, acknowledging their presence, almost accepting obeisance. This was the first performance where Chopra as *Yog Raj Chitrakar* adopted the persona of the Victorian queen, deepening and broadening his postcolonial masquerade to include the transformation of gender in an act of greater empowerment after he had staged the death of *Sir Raja* in 2007. Both royal personages had been deeply intertwined with India's conflicted colonial past. Engaging with two distinct personas almost worlds apart, further sharpened Chopra's critique of the nation.

Chopra returned to Mumbai in 2010 as *Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory Drawing X*, the performance retained its postcolonial focus but was driven by another set of personal impulses by the artist—the desire to connect the two 'hip' parts of the city, Bandra, an upscale residential neighborhood where Chopra had his studio, and Colaba in the south of the city, another upscale neighborhood where most of the city's art galleries are located. This 48-hour performance for Chopra was a very deliberate attempt to alter his own experience of a city that served as his home by walking the distance of 30 km. The first act of undergoing a persona transformation began at his studio in Bandra itself, with the shaving of his head hair, the setting was almost like that of a little roadside market stall in any random city in India—with two little stools mysteriously covered with cloth, Chopra's travel backpack was laid out, ready to leave (Fig. 39). Chopra dressed in blue shirt and beige trousers, deliberately subdued and nondescript, so as to not draw attention to himself in public spaces and walked a distance of 12 kilometers on the first day and reached the Bombay Central railway station with the intention to spend the night in the first class waiting room on the platform. But

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Fig. 37 & 38. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar : Memory Drawing II,* Mumbai 2007. Courtesy the artist.

he was forced to change plans as the police cleared the platforms for the night, this had become a security issue since the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai. As a result, Chopra had to park himself in a bench like any itinerant traveler with no place to go, belongings secure under his head (Fig. 40).

The next morning, he walked further south to Oval Maidan, the *maidan* (field) is a large public space that also occasionally serves as a public cricket ground. During India's freedom struggle movement in the 1930s and 1940s, it had served as a spot for protests and demonstrations including two speeches by Gandhi in 1931, once before leaving for England for the Round Table Conference and the second time upon his return. Chopra's vantage location in the *maidan* commanded a vantage point of view of the colonial buildings in the distance including the Mumbai High Court (Fig. 41), built between 1871–1878, it had been designed by British engineer Colonel James Fuller in the style of Gothic Revival,

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Fig. 39–41. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar : Memory Drawing X,* Mumbai 2010. Courtesy the artist.

the court has also played an important role in India's colonial history, it was famously the site for Bal Gangadhar Tilak's Sedition Trial in 1916. Chopra's performance audience was limited to young amateur cricketers who were using the field to practice their game. That second night of his performance Chopra stayed at the Victoria Terminus railway station (called Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus since 2016). The Victoria Terminus is a protected UNESCO World Heritage site, designed by Frederick William Stevens in the style of Victorian Italianate Gothic Revival architecture, it was built in 1887 to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria and it is one of the busiest railway stations in India, serving as a terminal for both long-distance trains and commuter trains. These choreographed locations referenced not only the city's colonial architecture but also the sites of nationalist histories. Some observations made by the artist himself during this performance are useful to understand the nature of urban public spaces in India, especially in a city like Mumbai, where every inch of land considered to be a public space seems to belong to someone. Chopra had to constantly negotiate with someone or the other to even spread his drawing canvas, in utter contrast to his performances in other parts of the globe. Bringing the genre of live performance as an art form to the street also removed some misconceptions about the liberal character of a cosmopolitan city like Bombay, there were certain expectations of audience entertainment from the viewers, perhaps in the style of popular folk street theatre genres such as the *nautanki*, which is also one of the genres that Chopra's performance indirectly draws from. Chopra's performance was critiqued for not being entertaining enough and was also considered embarrassing because it involved a half-naked man cutting off his hair in a public space. The performance was a cathartic experience for the artist and altered his own experience of what cities actually are at the ground level rather than as a rarefied middle class urban experience, emphasizing the existence of sharp class differences and dissonances.[263] In a city like Bombay the tremendous contrasts in the lives lived by the slum dwellers and the upper classes residing in swanky high-rise apartments delineates the urban class divide in very clear terms. Chopra's performance in *Memory Drawing X* could be termed as an act of courage as the artist exposed his urbane classed self to the vicissitudes of public spaces and an unknown street culture with its wayside dwellers, inhabiting an unsegregated city space continuously over a period of 72 hours. This performance visualized the character of India's most cosmopolitan city characterizing its class divide and inequalities and followed a markedly different pattern in his performance ritual, here he was always *Yog Raj Chitrakar*, the anonymous gentleman traveler, there

263 Nikhil Chopra https://pad.ma/BWS/player.

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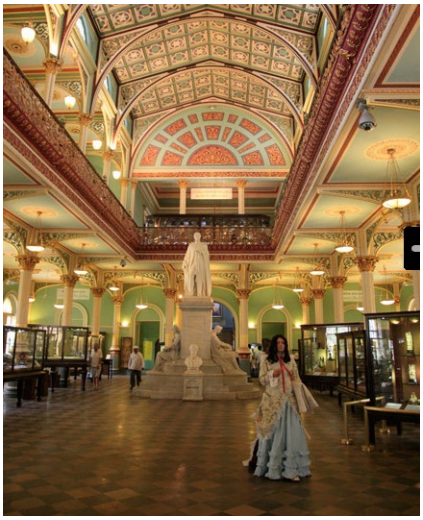

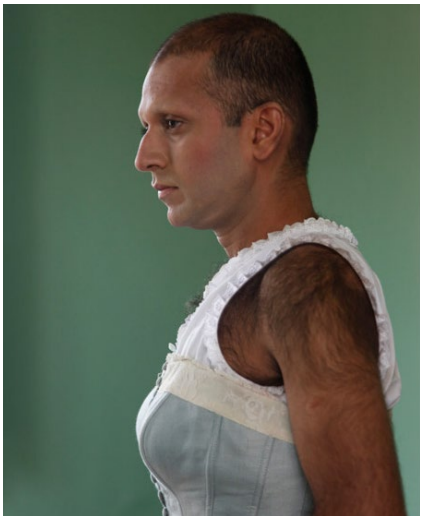

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Fig. 42–45. Chopra *Yog Raj Chitrakar : Memory Drawing X Part 2*, Mumbai 2010. Courtesy the artist.

was no costuming or engendering or an attempt to masquerade as a historical persona.

But this changed once more at his next performance in Mumbai at the newly restored Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Titled *Yog Raj Chitrakar Memory Drawing X Part 2* (2010), this was relatively a shorter performance that took place for twelve hours over two days. This performance was Chopra's first performance within a museum space in India, referencing not only colonial histories but also institutional histories. Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum had previously been the Victoria and Albert Museum, it was the first colonial building to be built for the specific purpose of housing a museum in India and was designed by George Birdwood, its first curator. The collection of the first museum established in 1855 was partially destroyed during the 1857 Mutiny and the museum was rebuilt in 1862. Stocked with duplicates of the arts and crafts exhibits sent to the Great Exhibition in 1851 to showcase the Empire's achievements, the museum with its Palladian exterior and high Victorian design, grand wrought iron palisades, staircase railings and arched supports, as well as the Corinthian capitals and columns imported from England, formed an impressive and appropriate setting (Fig. 42) for Chopra's post-colonial persona. For this performance, Chopra costumed himself as an English noblewoman from the beginning of the performance itself, the transformation process documented through the photographs of the performance foregrounds the hairy body of the 'native' male (Fig. 43), as it ostensibly transformed with costuming and makeup. The parody of the classical museumized image as a stereotype is clear in the photographs of the performance (Fig. 44) and also in the plein air picnic style setting that the persona mimicked in the Victoria gardens attached to the museum space as he created the landscape vista (Fig. 45).

These early performances by Chopra, specifically those in Mumbai were significant performative interventions in a city that had a comparatively conservative relationship with the genre of performance art. Despite the active gallery circuit, radical performances such as those by Sushil Kumar and Inder Salim that had happened at Khoj were based in and around Delhi, while Chopra's singularly radical 'political' performance had already been enacted earlier as part of another Khoj residency in Srinagar, in 2007.

2.4.3 The Politics of Local and National Histories

Chopra undertook this performance as part of a Khoj residency in Kasheer, Srinagar, Kashmir in November 2007 and it was at this site that the importance of site-specific performance art and the role it can play in highlighting the vulnerability of public spaces towards distrust and suspicion came to the fore in this three-hour performance

Lal Chowk is a public square located in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, a state which till fairly recently enjoyed a special autonomous status under Article 370 in the Indian constitution according to which the state's citizens lived under a separate set of laws including those related to citizenship, and ownership of property. The contentious history of the state before and after independence has been at the heart of India's conflict with Pakistan. Lal Chowk was named after the Red Square in Moscow and has been historically important since 1947, when the first Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru unfurled the national flag here for the first time in 1948. In 1980, Bajaj Electricals, a private electrical company, raised a clock tower in the middle of the square. The square further came into the news when in 1991, at the height of militancy in the state, the right-wing BJP leader Murli Manohar Joshi took the BJP youth wing to hoist the Indian flag at the site, thousands of bullets were fired in the air by militants across the Valley to express resentment. Given the tower's status as a 'political symbol,' the tower and the square are often used as sites to address political rallies and gatherings. It is against this politically charged background that we need to understand the strategic selection of Chopra's performance site. Chopra began his performance donning the mandatory colonial attire replete with tweed coat, starched shirt, half trousers, boots and golf cap, and walked thirty minutes to the site, followed by local students and the art fraternity posing as media professionals (Fig. 46). Yog Raj walked ahead and positioned himself in front of the clock tower, requesting the gathering crowd to part and allow him a direct view of the clock tower and then, without prior permission, he began drawing directly on the tarred road surface (Fig. 47). Numerous passersby stopped and gathered to watch, and a police crackdown followed within minutes. Traffic was blocked from both ends of the square and the crowd that had gathered to watch the performance was lined up and frisked. Chopra's performance lasted an hour and continued through the crackdown, and the audience remained interested, undeterred by the police presence. This was a lay audience, just as it had been at Mumbai, the average city resident going about his or her business who had no vested interest in viewing the performance beyond sheer curiosity. Far from being a self-conscious act of public protest or disobedience it transformed into an uncertain situation through the turn of events that followed Chopra's performance, reaffirming the precarity of life in Srinagar as much as an indicator of its charged political status.[264] Chopra's performance highlighted the close connect between politics and art, in a reminder that apolitical interventions can easily acquire political overtones at contentious locations. However,

264 http://www.nikhilchopra.net/home/?p=1501.

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Fig. 46–48. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar Visits Lal Chowk*, Srinagar 2007. Courtesy the artist.

along with these interventions in India, the post-colonial persona of *Yog Raj Chitrakar* was also simultaneously performing internationally at festivals, exhibitions and biennales.

2.4.4 *Yog Raj Chitrakar* Travels the Globe

Chopra as *Yog Raj Chitrakar* performed in multiple venues in the years between 2008 and 2011. In *Yog Raj Chitrakar Memory Drawing VI* (2009) during the Kunstenfestivaldesarts Brussels in 2009 he performed for 96 hours, his longest in the persona of *Yog Raj Chitrakar*. The seventeenth century chapel Les Brigittines was his living space. Having gone through various iterations since its creation, the Les Brigittines had been designated as a space to support and participate in new forms of expression at the national and international level since 1999. In this performance, Chopra travelled to create the French and Flemish halves of the city from the top of the Galgenburg hill in two separate panoramas over three days (Fig. 49 & 50). Each night he would return to Les Brigittines and display the day's drawing so that people visiting the space could view the work that had been done. On the last day he painstakingly sewed the canvases together to create a 16-meter canvas (Fig. 51), imperfectly aligned, rather like the culturally divided halves of Brussels itself. This combined panorama served as the backdrop as he struck his final pose emulating classical Greek sculpture (Fig. 52), as his hairless persona switched genders once more.[265]

In this performance shades of a Gandhian persona entered the frame, noticeable in the wrapping of an Indian style shawl, in the shaved head with the horn-rimmed glasses and the manner in which Chopra sat in the theatre space and sewed the two halves of the canvas together. Sitting on the floor, draped in the shawl, wearing his glasses and absorbed in his task he almost emulated Gandhi's rejection of colonialism, spinning cotton on his famous *charkha* (spinning wheel), during India's nationalist struggle calling upon his fellow countrymen to boycott British manufactured goods and wear home spun textiles.

Chopra admits that he did not willfully go about creating this Gandhian persona, however, he acknowledges the Mahatma's persona as a significant influence on his performativity. Gandhi possessed a carefully sculpted identity—with his *dhoti*, his bald head, his glasses, his chappals and his lifestyle, all coming together in a a very deliberate construct. The Mahatma used his body in empowering and liberating the nation and the performative aspect of Gandhi's

265 Nikhil Chopra presentation https://pad.ma/BWS/player.

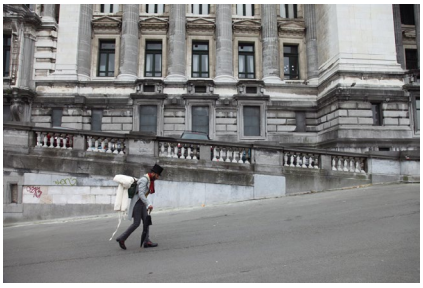

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Fig. 49–53. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar : Memory Drawing VI*, Brussels 2009. Courtesy the artist.

personality had played a significant role in mobilizing the nationalist movement through peaceful resistance, with his famous Salt March at Dandi (1930) for example. The figure of the Mahatma confidently walking has become iconized in its visual representations—as has been the fasting, the silence, the imprisonment, the beatings all of which the body took and created into a memory, his deliberate acts / performances demonstrating tremendous endurance and will, played an important role in mobilizing an entire nation.[266] Gandhi's was the most ubiquitous figure on the nation's visual landscape in the first half of the twentieth century, visible in chromolithographs, calendar art, posters, even in art works by Nandalal Bose and M.F. Husain,[267] and innumerable artistic representations after, Ramaswamy terms him as an "inspiring muse and a critical prop to think with."[268] The Mahatma's inspirational influence is apparent in Chopra's own long duration performances when he puts his endurance to test through the tasks he assigns himself that range from making outdoor landscapes in sub-zero temperatures (performances for *Indian Highway* at London and Oslo in 2010 and 2011) to dragging 300 kgs of canvas across gallery spaces and constructing his living space almost single-handedly. (*Coal on Cotton* Manchester 2013) In the performance at Brussels, Chopra's transformation from a persona referencing the Father of the Nation into a feminine western Other located as two polar opposites on the identity scale, provided an even sharper edge to his postnational critique.

2.4.5 Key Aspects—Performance Structure

In the *Yog Raj Chitrakar* series, Chopra begins the performance dressed in a certain persona, usually as a gentleman explorer and creates a landscape drawing either in the same space he is inhabiting for the duration of the performance or at another previously chosen site. In between, and depending upon the length of his performances he performs the everyday acts of eating and sleeping unmoved by the activity around him, the viewer could very well walk in to view the performance and Chopra would be taking a much-needed rest in full public view.

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266 Aasheesh Sharma, "Nikhil Chopra: The Chameleon-like performance artist," *Hindustan Times* June 26, 2016. Accessed on May 28, 2018. https://www.hindustantimes.com/brunch/nikhil-chopra-the-chameleon-like-performance-artist/story-IlrFf2ee12ThRarYDW7L0K.html.

267 Sumathi Ramaswamy, "The Mahatma as Muse: An Image Essay on Gandhi in Popular Indian Visual imagination," in *Art & Visual Culture*, 238.

268 Sumathi Ramaswamy, "The Canvas of Disobedience," in *Gandhi in the Gallery: The Art of Disobedience* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2020), 186.

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Fig. 54. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar Visits Lal Chowk,* Srinagar 2007. Courtesy the artist.
Fig. 55. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar : Memory Drawing VII,* Venice 2009. Courtesy the artist.

The living space is also the space where he critiques notions of how technology has taken over our lives through his use of old- fashioned objects, shaving with an old, styled razor, washing in a metal wash tub and metal basin. The transformational persona change occurs when he scrubs himself clean with the help of these familiar objects. Washing is a pivotal moment in the performance structure as an act of erasure before he transforms into someone else and he does this slowly and very deliberately, in full public view.

The creation of the tableau vivant style in his productions derives from his interest in the *mise-en-scène* inspired by greats such as Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Vermeer and Velasquez. Chopra enjoys drama in a composition, an aspect especially visible in his performances as *Sir Raja.* If the archive of photographs after each performance were to be examined, one will find a couple that focus on the deliberate creation of a mise en scene, dramatic tableaux where objects are

arranged just so, almost like a still life. For example, Chopra elaborately stages and lays out his costumes before he even begins the performance. The deliberate and public display of those pieces of attire (Fig. 54), marks the ritual costuming he follows in each performance. Food is often arranged in a similar fashion, the act of nourishing the body is vital to the success of his durational performances, the time he gives to this activity, the kind of food that he eats and the ways in which it is aesthetically arranged, especially the process of dining on a formally arranged table setting (Fig. 55), is yet another form of post-colonial critique that is partially autobiographical.

2.4.6 Importance of Site

Site is a key aspect of all live performance work, since the performance is as much about situating the body in a site as it is about acknowledging the space and its histories in the moment of the performance. Chopra is often invited to participate in exhibitions, shows and festivals that are open to public interaction—therefore audience response and participation play an important role in ensuring the success and visibility of each performance. The Biennial or mega-exhibition space offers greater possibility for the number of footfalls and interaction whereas an individual performance in a gallery or exhibition space less so, while an institutional site provides a ready-made historical framework to engage with. Chopra usually selects an indexical site for his performance, a location that has a history of its own and that is part of the collective public memory. Through his own research he adds fictive elements to the personas he is researching. Chopra's performances as *Yog Raj Chitrakar* involve a fair amount of archival research as he gets to know the performance site, its key characteristics, histories and personas. Rather than viewing the site as a linear narrative, Chopra explores its ambiguity and works with an amoebic narrative which allows the possibility of re-interpretation.[269] This re-interpretation ties in closely with the duration of the performance, in longer durational performances the possibility to play with the idea of transformation offers more flexibility as he inhabits a place with enough time to transform himself internally as well, into someone other than he is.

The sites that form part of a single *Yog Raj Chitrakar* performance can sometimes be multiple—the outdoor space where he creates the landscape drawings such as in Hyde Park with the living space as a tent outside the Serpentine

269 Chopra at Kochi Biennale 2013 talk, Accessed on May 27, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZm1nIqSktg.

Gallery in London, or Galgenburg Hill as his drawing site and the Les Brigittines as living space in Brussels, where he brings back his completed work and displays it. As *Yog Raj Chitrakar*, he has been the quintessential traveler, seemingly travelling for the purpose of creating the drawing, to Oval Maidan in South Mumbai, to the pier in Oslo, to Ellis Island in New York, enacting the part of a flaneur, "the eye, the protocol, memory, judgement and the archive,"[270] as observer and chronicler, Chopra's stroll through urban spaces connects with a city's memory, to a time gone by, when travelers explored spaces in a leisurely way and preserved a mental record of those spaces.

Among Chopra's performance sites as *Yog Raj Chitrakar* (Paris, London, New York, Chicago, Brussels, Tokyo), many are cities and world capitals functioning as epicenters of globalization, as *spaces that epitomize contradictions between excess and desire.* In these temporally mobile spaces, the histories of the present and the past come together in locations that have been the hubs of transnational migrations through history (New York and London for example), the sites he selects to perform in, embody the realities, contradictions and peculiarities of their histories and people—Ellis Island in New York, Galgenberg Hill in Brussels, Hyde Park in London, Lal Chowk in Srinagar, Oval Maidan in Bombay and sometimes certain historical associations may unwittingly get reflected in his own performance. For example, in Brussels, he created the landscapes of the Flemish and French parts as two separate halves and joined them a little imperfectly, highlighting a non-seamless process just like the two histories of the city. The strength and historicity of his performance derives as much from the contemporaneous nature of the enactment as from his playing with the idea of locatedness. Chopra's engagement with personas and sites emerges largely from the global turn in which the postcolonial rather than being taken up in a politically confrontational stance, functions rather, as a memory that the centuries of oppression have left as indelible imprints on the 'Indian' persona, and how these can only be erased or confronted through highlighting their existence in the present memory and by running a critique.

2.4.7 Drawing the Landscape

The act of drawing is a central part of each performance—the visual capture of the mobility of a moment—the entire performance is built around this one task he allocates to himself. It is usually created either in the space where Chopra performs

270 Nooteboom Cees, "All Souls' Day," Die Zeit, 1995, 49.

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Fig. 56. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar : Memory Drawing III,* Manchester 2009. Courtesy the artist.
Fig. 57. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar : Memory Drawing V Part 2,* Oslo 2009. Courtesy the artist.

(Lal Chowk Srinagar) or on a large canvas in a selected public site (the pier at Oslo, Kensington Gardens in London). The drawing often features a historically familiar visual icon that can resonate with public memory (the High Court, the Bhau Daji Lad Museum in Mumbai, the Clock Tower in Srinagar,). 'Making a mark,' through his ephemeral drawings becomes the tool for him to locate his body as *Yog Raj Chitrakar*. Chopra uses charcoal—an artist's most recognizable tool and a primitive fossil fuel—to establish his presence at a given site. It is with charcoal that he deliberately breaks down his persona from a civilized gentleman to a primitive, charcoal covered stranger laboring at his task, almost disappearing under its dust (Fig. 56). In almost all his *Yog Raj Chitrakar* performances, Chopra carries his drawing canvas in a sack and brown paper wrapped art supplies tied with a string, walking in the city, becoming one with the surroundings (Fig. 57), completing his masquerade into anonymity.

2.4.8 Costuming as Masquerade

Chopra's costuming almost mimics the slowness of a Kathakali performer's ritual of dressing. The deliberate and careful washing up of his whole self during the performance after he finishes the drawing is an emphatic reminder of the constructed-ness of the persona and its ongoing masquerade. At the start of his *Yog Raj Chitrakar* performance, he is often dressed as a gentleman explorer (sometimes 'acting' the explorer, pitching his tent in the host city, like he did at Hyde Park, London during the *Indian Highway* performance). The act of costuming—dressing and undressing—the process of 'uncivilizing' the gentleman and reversing the process, becomes even more aggressively transgressive when the colonial, heterosexual, male character transforms into a feminine persona steeped in colonial history. The construction of the postcolonial subject takes place through the discourse of memory as Chopra refers to certain significant aspects of these histories—the concepts of androgyny, the indeterminacy of genders—all of which were almost taboo subjects in the colonial period and the evidence of this persists to this day in the enacting of draconian laws that still prevail in independent India. Chopra often shaves off his head hair, also the beard and moustache during his performance—shaving is a reminder of a man's disciplinary regime towards normality in appearance, and a signifier of his masculinity. The act of shaving itself is a transformative act and as he sometimes shaves his entire body hair in his performances, (Brussels) it becomes an act in keeping with the current conventions of fashion and beauty not only for women but also gestures towards the hairless body of the metrosexual male.

Chopra's carefully conceived costumes, the Victorian style white gown with its artificial cage crinoline—popularized by Queen Victoria when she wore white for her wedding dress—an eighteenth century mantua hair style, a bob or page boy cut typical for 1920s women, top hats or homburg hats worn by the upper class pointy leather shoes with leather spats etc.—all play a pivotal role in establishing the veneer of his extremely civilized, colonial, upper class persona, following Bhabha's ideas on mimicry, creating an Anglicized 'authentic' stereotype in a "final irony of partial representation."[271] The colonial style attire is a specific critique of the "white sahib" as he strides past, an epitome British authority—replete with leggings, breeches, stockings, high necked collared starched shirts, floral waistcoat and cravats (Fig. 58). With the donning of the carefully laid out costumes and occasional application of make-up, Chopra critiques the construction of identity through the Occidental west / the oriental

271 Bhabha, 88.

Fig. 58. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar : Memory Drawing VII,* Venice 2009. Courtesy the artist.

east for example, when he applies kohl to his eyes, a practice that belongs to eastern cultures.

Temporality takes center stage when he merges dimensions of time and space, as he strolls through the busy streets of Chinatown and Lower Manhattan dressed in a black cape and a top hat from 1920s New York, his sack of belongings over his shoulder, (*Yog Raj Chitrakar Memory Drawing IX* New Museum 2009). He could be any traveler emerging across time, representing a world that no longer exists, but bringing it into the contemporary moment through his own anonymous presence. Yet, even in faraway New York or Brussels, a flicker of a submerged national identity emerges in the way he dons the grey plaid to cover himself in Indian style—wearing *kolhapuri chappals* as an Indian farmer in Manchester and *langhot* as underwear in place of regular boxer shorts as he strips down for his performances. With this deliberate critique he masquerades Indian-ness as a stereotype that is associated with certain objects that define an identity.

The one character from postcolonial history that Chopra seemed to don regularly as *Yog Raj Chitrakar* is that of the Victorian queen, (*Yog Raj Chitrakar Memory Drawing* II Mumbai 2008; *Chalo! India* Mori Art Museum Tokyo 2008; *Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory Drawing VIII* Manchester 2009; *Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory Drawing X Part 2,* Mumbai 2010). Taking up the persona of the Victorian queen has many connotations, from the referencing of the Victorian era itself as one of the tremendous growth of the British colonial empire with India as the jewel in the crown, to the persona of Queen Victoria herself as a signifier of empowerment, as also of the era that came to be defined by a clear delineation of segregations marking modern sexuality and its concomitant restraints. Chopra's attention to troubling the gender binary essentially works with stereotypes and assigned behaviors that create a particular identity within

'recognizable standards of gender intelligibility.' This performativity within 'culturally established lines of coherence' as a repetitive act and its mis-citation calls into question the stability of personality stereotypes. (Butler 1990) Whether in the pompous acts of a bejeweled Indian royal as he surveys his land in Kashmir, or the enervated Raja who lies on his death, bed to playing out the gracious obeisance of the British queen as he accepts homage from his subjects, all the studied movements of Chopra as *Yog Raj Chitrakar* the colonial explorer, mimic the manners and dress of the master, this partial 'blurred' representation is a deliberately staged representational strategy to visibilise the construct and strengthen the critique further.

To conclude, all three artists project their performative masquerading bodies to critique stereotypical notions of 'Indian' identity. For Ganesh, the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic is not merely a piece of nostalgia from her childhood, its logic of origin is decentered, and the queer body is brought center stage, confronting the social condition of women, directly in conflict with the heterosexual ideologies of the nation. Shah's works in multiple mediums help to simulate a productive tension with the queer performative body between existing aspects of reality and also intervene simultaneously in the moment, to create it anew in an outrageously theatrical camp sensibility. The transgendered body critiques physical stereotypes that signpost normative bodies that tie in with notions of Indian-ness as does the photo archive foregrounding female masculinity. Chopra's 'Indian' body becomes invisible as he walks through and performs in cities across the globe and intervenes in the present with an anonymous postcolonial self. Through the masquerade of his elaborate costuming he makes the exotic-ness of the 'other' visible, to remind, that like Shah and Ganesh each identity is also a construct.

Their heterogeneously constructed selves indicate a well-known truth, that identities are always subject to some form of politics, some connect with the nationalist socialist imaginary, but is it possible to transcend this politics towards a more open and reflexive consciousness? This is a question my next chapter addresses.