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Photography in India: from archives to contemporary practice

Manila Castoro

The presence of photography in India can be witnessed since the very early years of the invention of the camera in 1839. Nonetheless, though large and diversified bodies of work have been produced, critical literature on photography in and of the subcontinent is relatively scarce. *Photography in India*, a collection of essays edited by Aileen Blaney and Chinar Shah, seeks to respond to this lack. The study proposes a winding trajectory within past and present photographic experiences, in which in-depth discussions and narratives of archival materials intersect with contemporary debates and struggles faced by photography and photographers, 'galvanizing existing debates while starting new ones at a moment in contemporary India when photography is more ubiquitous than ever' (2).

The book is divided into two sections, each of which comprises seven chapters: 'Photographic Time and Memory' and 'Photographies in Contemporary India'. A foreword by Anna Fox and an afterword by Fred Ritchin open and close the book.

The first section, 'Photographic Time and Memory', responds to the 'archive fever' (7) that has spread among scholars and researchers alike, who attempt to rescue experiences and temporalities from oblivion by adopting a concerned gaze and critical approach. The aim is to trace forgotten histories, deconstruct and demonstrate the 'partiality of collections' (7), the subjective identity of the interpreter, as well as the relevance of the site of archives itself. As a result, thought-provoking journeys into public, private, and personal archives are excavated and constructed, in which the identities of photographers and subjects photographed are challenged, summoned, and mobilised. For example, personal albums and neglected, 'worn-out negative jackets' (75) become instrumental for the construction of gender narratives in the essays by Denise Wilson and Sabeena Gadihoke (Chapters 2 and 5). Wilson's close reading of the nineteenth-century photographs of colonial India produced as a privileged *passe-temps* by Lady Heriot Dufferin demonstrates – through the choice of subjects and composition – the subtle presence of unavoidable expectations and etiquettes of Victorian femininity often condescendingly performed.

Gadihoke introduces the reader to a more playful and breezy femininity in 1960's Nehruvian India, as captured in Homai Vyarawalla's fashion photographs. In a historical period concerned with making sense of national identity, Gadihoke emphasises how Indian and expatriate women 'could play out [their] fantasies' (84) and the idea of being Indian in shows where the local, traditional and global interacted.

Continuing with gender-related matters, Gemma Scott's contribution (Chapter 6) offers an attentive analysis of the visual strategies adopted by the bulletin *Socialist India* (the official organ of the Congress Party) during the Indian Emergency (1975–77). Scott identifies the substantial inclusion of photographs of women attending rallies and other political events within the pages of the bulletin, with a political expedient that sought to demonstrate women's support for the Emergency measures established by Indira Gandhi. However, Scott also convincingly argues that this visual existence contrasts with the lack of female presence in the narratives set out in the columns of the bulletin, which deprives them of any direct agency and silences any discourse regarding women's actual participation in the emergency.

Syrian Christian family albums with photographs of weddings and deaths provide an excuse to speculate on family hierarchies, genealogy and community belonging in the essay by Pooja Sagar (Chapter 4). By framing the discussion within Gilles Deleuze's theoretical conception of events, Sagar offers an enthralling, passionate account in which oral histories coalesce with personal memories that capture a glimmer of sense amidst the chaos from which family photographs often emerge.

Artists are not immune to the 'archive fever' either, and this section makes sure to include some examples. The work by Raqs Media Collective (Chapter 1) is symptomatic of this. The ever-growing archive of photographs, their relentless circulation and diffuseness offer fecund *loci* from where the collective gleans material to build fresh, imaginative stories from scratch, challenging the very idea of archival photographs as repositories of truth. The work of contemporary Pakistani artist Imran Channa, acutely discussed by Zahid R. Chaudhary (Chapter 3), revolves too arounds the re-proposition of iconic archival photographs of the India/Pakistan partition, which he painstakingly reconstructs through graphite drawings before later either fully or partially erasing them. This translation from photographs to drawings and what follows is surgery as

its highest point as much as its negation: the negation of iconicity, of the indexical trace as *pars pro toto*, of faithful memory, and of communicability. The closing essay by Christopher Pinney (Chapter 7) also underscores the 'productivity of the past' (103) for contemporary Indian photographic practitioners. In 'Copying and De-Synchronizing', Pinney shows us the multiple ways in which photographers recovered, appropriated, deformed and, at times, de-synchronised archival material to reconfigure time and allow new stories to be told.

The conceptual and historical rationale that closely ties the chapters together in the first part of the book becomes somewhat looser in the second section, 'Photographies in Contemporary India'. This section, which, as Blean and Shah suggest, is aimed at accommodating an 'expanded notion of photography in the Indian context' (10), attempts to assemble heterogeneous and thought-provoking contributions on current debates around photography, elaborating on the inclusiveness of the concept of photography today. An example of this inclusiveness can be found in Muthatha Ramanathan's essay 'Satellite Images in India' (Chapter 11), which, adopting an insider's perspective, critically examines the practicality as well as the ambiguities connected to the use of satellite remote sensing technologies to obtain information and map vast areas of India regions to implement natural resource management.

The effects and countereffects of photojournalism are examined in Chapters 8, 9 and 10. The recodification of visual patterns in the representation of rural India actuated and sanctioned by trite journalistic and ethnological documentation is tackled by Kathleen L. Wyma in 'Photography at the Edge of Representation' (Chapter 8). Wyma engages with the photographic work of artists Binu Bhaskar and Arunkumar HG, spelling out their stubborn resistance to and critique of the representation of poverty and labour. Wyma interestingly argues that, by dismissing the functionality attributed to the photographic document and becoming art objects exhibited in the space of the art gallery, the portraits of Indian farm labourers produced by Bhaskar and Arunkumar activate new modes of communication and reception, making it possible to 'rethink the space of rural life and the narrowly defined productive function of its occupants' (123). The capacity of independent photojournalism to counteract official and hegemonic state narratives is discussed in Avrati Bhatnagar's essay 'Interrogating "Credible Chhattisgarh"' (Chapter 9). Bhatnagar offers an effective critique of the photographs of official tourism campaigns that portray Chhattisgarh as a picturesque, charming, idealised state and its people as hardworking and productive, counterpoising the alternative narratives produced by independent photojournalists who focus attention on a state moulded by conflict and exploitation. Chinar Shah's essay (Chapter 10) focuses on the capacity of photojournalistic images to inflict enduring and new violence on the subjects of violence they represent. Shah focuses on the effects that the extensive dissemination, through print and online media, of the portraits of Qutubuddin Ansari and Ashok Parmar taken during the Gujarat riots of 2002 still have on these men. While discussing her own project 'Silenced ruptures' and reflecting on the opportunity for photo-based art projects to create space for victims of traumas, Shah advocates not only for a stronger ethics in image production but even, more imperatively, for an ethic of image consumption.

The conceptual complexities of the networked image are examined in a timely, compelling manner in the last part of the section, although at times the essays refer only tangentially to the pertinence of the discussion to the Indian context. This is the case with Nishant Shah's well-crafted disquisition on the circulation and implications of the selfie as a critical digital object (Chapter 12). It also applies to Joan Fontcuberta's lucid inquiry into the meaning and consequences of the over-flux of digital images and remarkable incursion into photo practitioners' strategies of resistance and post-photographic activism (Chapter 14). In both cases, India remains slightly at the margins of the discussion. The study of the life of the digital image on the web, its paradoxical nature and complex and unpredictable behaviour is what drives Fabien Charuau's artistic practice (Chapter 13). In his essay, Charuau lucidly reflects on his own work and abdication from the photographic act to chase the enigmas, meaning and multiple lives of the computational image.

The diversity and cogency of the arguments and experiences examined in each essay make *Photography in India* a very welcome read for anyone interested in the subject. This collection of essays offers a refreshing, highly engaging contribution that enriches scholarship in the field of Indian photography.