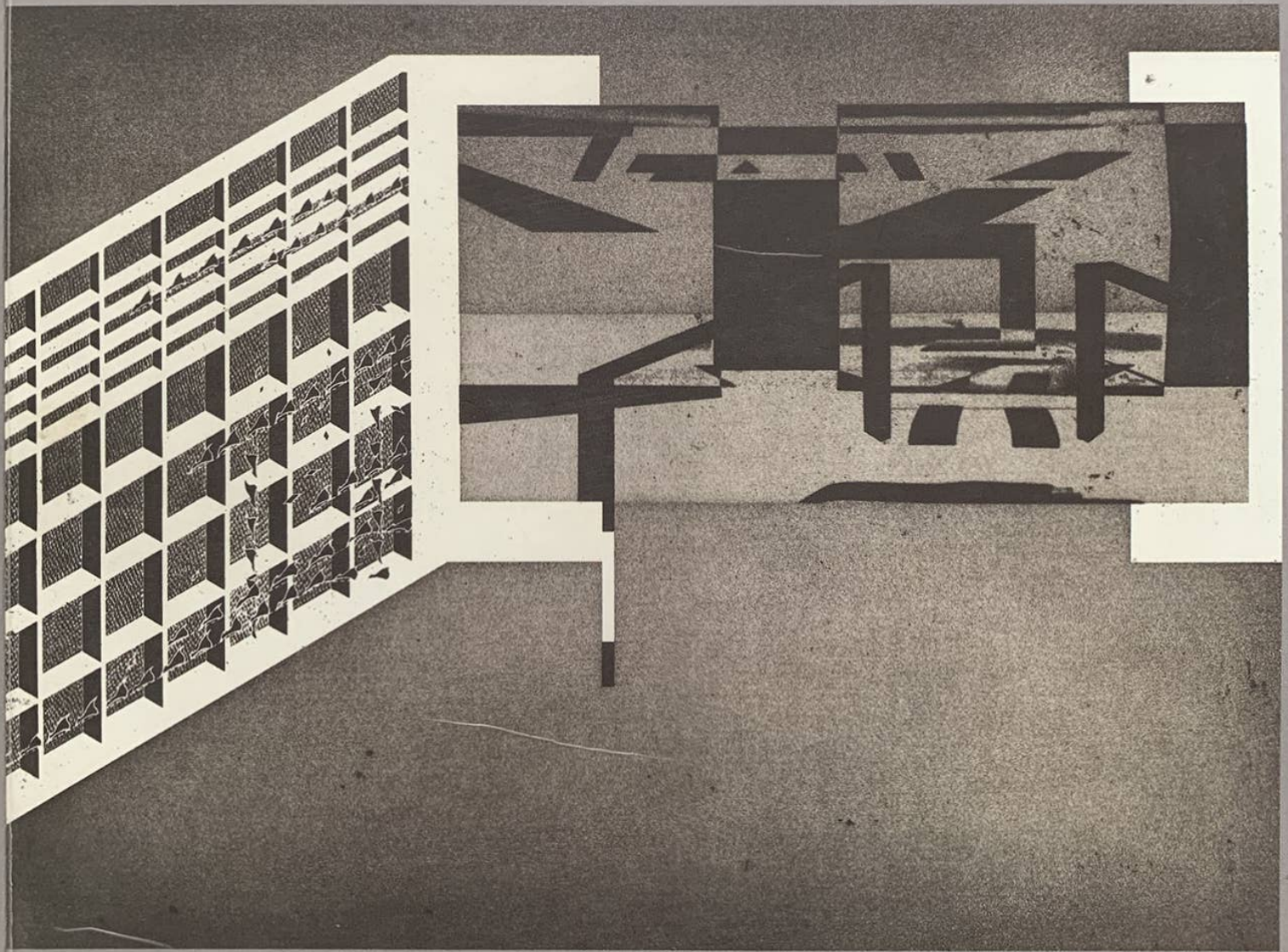


MARG

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in focus: Abstraction



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Parul Gupta's Performative Space

MEENAKSHI THIRUKODE

IN *HAIRFALL* (2011), BITS OF HAIR SLOWLY FALL OVER A WHITE SURFACE. BARELY perceptible at first, descending from an unseen source, the drizzle of lines falls haphazardly, bunching up on the surface, as we experience a linear transition of time. Filmed using a Canon 500D, during Parul Gupta's time at Nottingham Trent University, *Hairfall* marks a key engagement with what the artist observed in her world and how she began a transliteration of cognitive experiences into the gestural. The idea of gesture—a "grasping"¹ of her immediate surroundings—captures Gupta's dominant engagement with a formal visual element. Gupta takes what appears opaque in an initial encounter and enables us to understand it, simultaneous to her own engagement and questioning. The gesture here marks a preoccupation with line, built space, the surroundings and the human encounter of these three aspects, as ways to *queer* the seemingly mundane.

Gupta's self-awareness that is embedded in the gesture of the subtle evolves further in *Drawing The Line* (2012) (figures 1a and 1b). At the Experimental Gallery, India Habitat Centre in Delhi, Gupta extended the idea of drawing itself. Alongside a suite of ink-on-paper drawings of varying scales, the white walls included works on paper

that had a rip or a gentle embossed rupture as mark-making. Plastic packets of a similar size, each with bits of Gupta's hair, were pinned to the longest wall in the room. While the layout appeared to follow no apparent pattern, Gupta's process involved her own body's navigation through the space, which then placed each work within the built area in very deliberate ways.

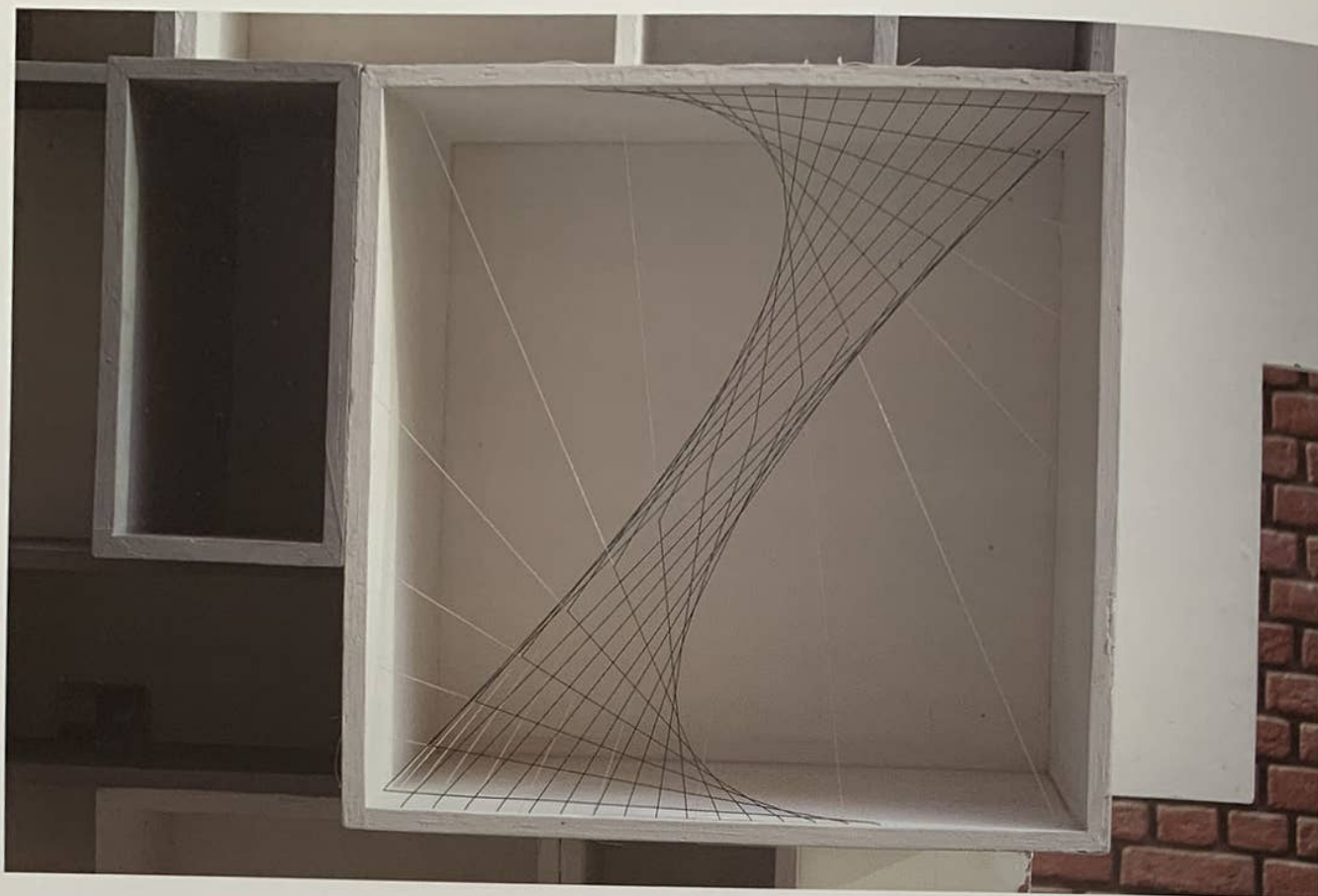
These early works reveal an intimacy in using her own body as the first site of enquiry, and questioning and locating the more organic and "natural" line through her use of body hair. In the second of only two video works Gupta made in her early experimentations, the camera zooms into what looks like a human arm. The viewer watches an excruciatingly uncomfortable act where a tweezer plucks one strand of body hair at a time, expanding the experience of duration into something much longer and drawn-out than the actual roughly five minutes. From thereon, the experience of the body as a whole in a built environment of constructed lines, extends this translating of the familiar, into a very malleable and unstable version of the unfamiliar. In this aspect of her practice Gupta shares the same artistic tendencies as Ana Mendieta. In Mendieta's *Fetish* series (1976), historian Jane Blocker remembers confronting the mound of dirt in her hometown in Iowa, such that it "disrupted the horizon and defamiliarizes the land".² While in Mendieta's case it shifted Blocker's assumption that she knew these surroundings, her place, her citizenship and how it positioned her understanding of the self in relation to the region, in Gupta's case the experience is situated in a more stoic aspect of geography. What is shared in the reading of the two artists is the body as performative—both that of the artist and that of her viewer, where the traces of the process are displaced.

In 2012–13, Gupta's practice reveals her preoccupation with the notion of movement. While still oscillating between the intimacy of applying ink to paper and the heavily gestured movement of the body as a whole in the process of making marks, there is a preciseness to each work during this period that reveals a visible maturity in her questioning. This is notable in her series *Site Specific* which included interventions during Sarai Reader 09 (October–November 2012) within different spaces, from the Cybermohalla Hub, an architectural prototype created by artists Nikolaus Hirsh and Michel Muller, to the galleries and buildings of the Devi Art Foundation at Gurgaon.

In *Site Specific #1* (figure 2a) Gupta's lines took on a sensual quality as a curvilinear form disrupted the mostly square and rectangular grids of the Cybermohalla



1a and 1b.
Views of the exhibition
Drawing The Line
by Parul Gupta,
India Habitat Centre,
New Delhi, 2012.
Drawings, drawing sculptures,
installation, video;
size variable.
PHOTOGRAPHS: PARUL GUPTA.



2a and 2b.
Parul Gupta, views of
Site Specific Installations—
Sarai Reader 09,
Devi Art Foundation,
New Delhi, 2012.
Transparent tape, fishnet wire,
black marker, insulating tape;
size variable.
PHOTOGRAPHS: PARUL GUPTA.

structure. Using fishnet wire stretched between nails, its tautness was understated and yet visceral. Here the black ink drawings were transferred onto the “real” world, where the eye—the act of perception itself—with all its biases absorbed the artistic intervention as simultaneously an encounter, a disruption, a translation and an aesthetic form that was sufficient in and of itself. The boundaries between medium and meaning were more ambiguous. You paused to look and shift; beyond this nothing occurred, in an act that mimicked the artist who placed the work in the line of the viewer’s vision in the first place.

In *Site Specific #2* (figure 2b) the uncanny occurred, where Gupta’s lines (created by using insulating tape, on a first-floor passageway with glass panels on either side) further dislocated the movement of lines on the ground floor. Here, the patterns of the architectural design together with the illusion of height were negated with the eyes tricking you as you walked; in this, Gupta almost innocuously converted a drawing into the grandiosity of the gestural.

Site Specific #4 (figure 2c) was perhaps the most interesting of the series, where an intervention within the work of a fellow artist questioned perception as phenomena. Using transparent tape, Gupta engaged with the shadows created by the wooden frames of Sayantan Maitra Boka’s work *The Scaffolding*. The anxiety of this particular encounter, after having many such experiences through her two months within this built space, resulted in a play between what is seen and what is *assumed* to be seen. The transparent tape formed a vertical grid between two wooden strips, casting a shadow onto the wall, such that it accentuated those cast by the structure itself. This work evoked an inevitable reference to Mendieta’s *Siluetas* where shadows function as a trace of the artist’s body, as uncanny doubles in the Freudian sense, instilling a sense of discomfort in the viewer to locate the body (of Mendieta) within the only



record of it—the photograph. No one has ever been present to see Mendieta's *Siluetas*, and within the photographic record, the eyes seek to build a narrative to explain this abstraction of a trace of something obscure, yet recognizable. There remains a similarity, despite the formal elements being different, between Gupta and Mendieta in terms of the process through which they arrive at their work, engage with the resultant anxiety of site/space and then articulate it through a performative language. What is also pertinent in relating both practices at this stage is the fact that Gupta tends to distance herself from the narrative or from representation. However, it is important to note that abstraction is not by any means devoid of a narrative or dislocated from the cultural, social or the political fabric of society, especially for artists who carry the burdens of being the "Other".³

In Gupta's use of photography and a presentation in a three-person show at Exhibit320, *Phenomenology of Perception* (2015), a different set of propositions was offered within the white cube space of the gallery (figures 3a and 3b). For Gupta, photography is a means to confront her own susceptibility to a site. As a self-taught artist, her use of the camera is a way of approaching her encounter with a place. For Gupta, stepping into a familiar, seemingly generic space, and moving between its margins and centre, is a constant process of trying to understand her physical presence in a specific site and gauging her own response to it. Although this is a consistent starting point to most of her work, in the use of photography as a medium, the process of recording becomes a way to capture the essence of a question—the only fixed point from which

2c.

Parul Gupta, view of
Site Specific Installations—
Sarai Reader 09,
Devi Art Foundation,
New Delhi, 2012.
Transparent tape, fishnet wire,
black marker, insulating tape;
size variable.

PHOTOGRAPH: PARUL GUPTA.



a resultant *form* or composition of many other *forms* may occur. The photograph becomes a record of her own bodily disruption first and foremost before it goes on to instigate a reaction again and again to other sites and other bodies.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Gupta expanded on the series *Extending The Line* (2015). The composition included drawings and large photographs of interiors of a white-walled built space. One of the more successful experiences for a viewer was in confronting a shaft of light that moved across a wall, slowly from left to right, mimicking the familiarity of natural light that comes in through an open window. Placed right beside a larger photograph of a similar beam of light streaming in from an unknown source, installed closer to the floor, the viewer was thrown off course as soon as she entered the exhibition. At once, the viewer's body is turned around, looking upwards and over the shoulder before being befuddled, searching for a source from which this light had interjected the space, only to find nothing there. The photograph, and its relation to this slow meditative movement of light, alluded to the idea of dismantling or dissecting one's experience of what is natural and what is built.⁴ Here the moving shaft of light was not an image or object, but an experience that shifted the idea of a photograph, not as a record but instead as an element within a larger experience. The formal aesthetics of a medium dissolved and instead a set of propositions and interventions began to reveal themselves as the viewer navigated the exhibition space.

The smaller-scale photographs in the exhibition included drawn or embossed lines that at times escaped and transformed into threads that gave one the impression that they were coming out of the frame and encompassing or outlining the gallery site itself. The forms in this body of work were much more deliberate as compared to those in *Extending The Line*. This body of work was to be looked at in its entirety and simultaneously as one where each constituent element was complete in itself. The viewer's encounter with the images was a performative one, as she moved through the space in an orchestrated mode of viewing, being made aware of her own body and its relationship to its surroundings at any given moment. In *Extending The Line*, the whole became more conducive to this idea than its parts. Taken apart—the photographs, which did something more substantial to the artist—became a more tempered experience for the viewer.

Gupta consciously negates meaning-making in her work; focusing instead on subtle notions of movement and the relationship of a body to space. And yet abstraction does not mean an eschewing of narrative. The works of abstractionists such

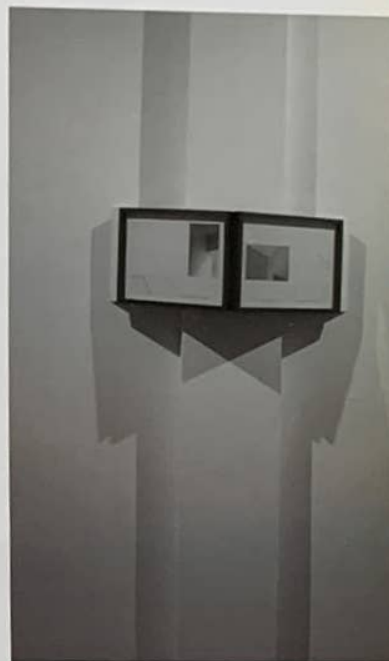


as Norman Lewis and Jack Whitten present a completely different lens from which to understand this art history. To align to the histories of Lewis and Whitten, two African-American abstractionists who mingled with De Kooning and Klein as well as Romare Bearden, becomes extremely important when engaging with the work of artists like Gupta. It is essential to consider a self-imposed dislocation of practice such as that of Mendieta's who refused to ascribe her work to the feminist movement of 1970s' New York because she felt it was predominantly occupied by white women and negated the experience of the immigrant exile that she embodied.

There is a beckoning here to not just look at a chronological reading and instead to think of practice as a set of connections, much like Gupta's own compositions that present themselves in the *now*; one that at the outset can be denied, confronted, accepted, or that can show a fresh perspective or perhaps reiterate what has already been said, in order to present renewed possibilities.

NOTES

- 1 In this version of understanding, the "grasp" contains the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press), pp. 191–92.
- 2 Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performance and Exile* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), p. 71.
- 3 Recent pedagogy, research and exhibition-making on artists such as Norman Lewis and Jack Whitten bring to light artists of colour (Lewis and Whitten are African American) who were part of the large narrative on Abstract Expressionism which was predominantly white and never part of the visible histories handed down to us. In an article published in *Hyperallergic*, Stan Mir writes, "Lewis's innovative, socially conscious abstract painting, thanks to the work of curators at PAFA and younger scholars, will now play a larger role in the histories of mid-century abstraction. This should be a boon to young artists who might be trying to navigate their own political and aesthetic interests. A deeper familiarity with the names of artists such as Lewis, Alma Thomas, Hale Woodruff, Howardena Pindell, Jack Whitten, and many other under-known artists of colour, will fill out the story of American abstraction so that the future doesn't reflect the faulty records of the past". Accessed <http://hyperallergic.com/281487/filling-out-the-story-on-the-art-of-norman-lewis/>, April 25, 2016.
- 4 Here a reference perhaps to the basic tenets of Minor Architecture as proposed by Jill Stoner where she argues that "Architecture can no longer limit itself to the art of making buildings; it must also invent the politics of taking them apart." Accessed <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/toward-minor-architecture>, April 25, 2016.



3a and 3b.
Views of the exhibition
Phenomenology of Perception
by Parul Gupta,
Exhibit320 Gallery,
New Delhi, 2015.
Photographs, light installation,
drawings, site-specific
drawings; size variable.
PHOTOGRAPHS: PARUL GUPTA.