

WIDER CANVAS



Indian art gains a new vocabulary as an increasing number of artists dabbles in different media like photography and video to startling effect

by Anshul AVIJIT and Kanika GAHLAUT

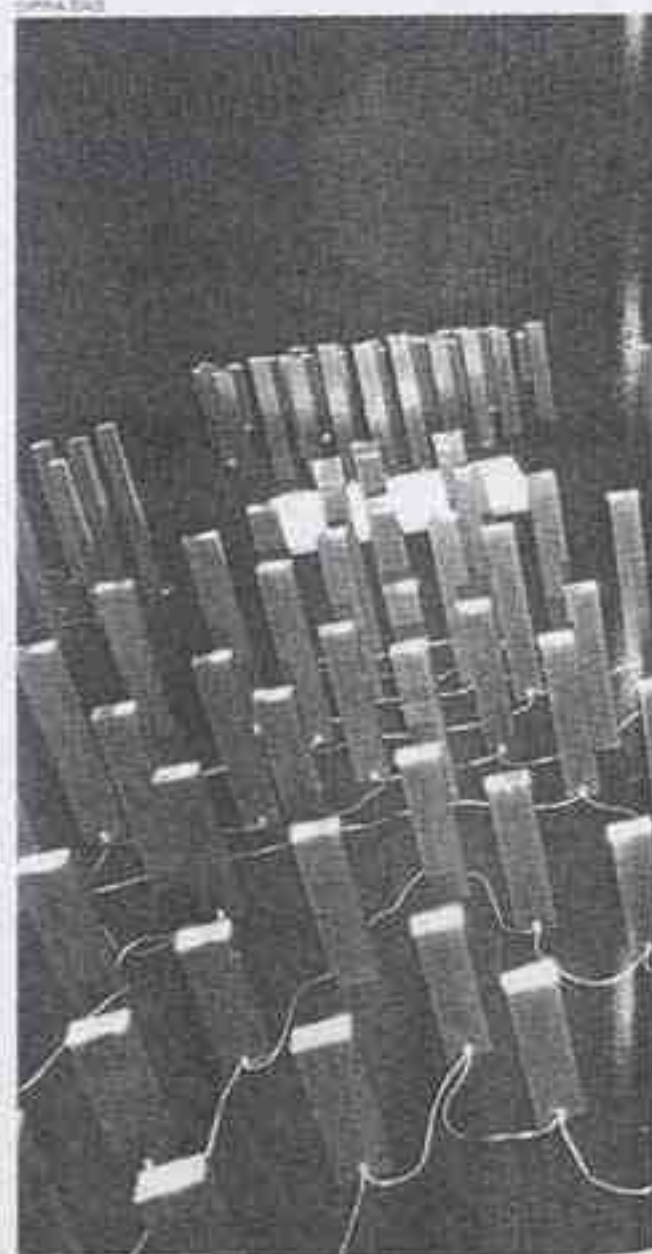
SCIENCE AND ART HAVE one thing in common: their practitioners are constantly trying to push the envelope. As an increasing number of Indian artists temporarily abandons the paintbrush and palette for a variety of alternative media, the effect has been surprising: to the audience and, in many cases, to the artists themselves. Pooja Sood, who curated a show of nine video artists recently in Delhi's Apeejay Media Gallery, says, "It's new and exciting and full of possibilities." At around the same time, another curator, Peter Nagy, was showcasing the works of 15 other artists and sculptors who were investigating photography as an alternative medium.

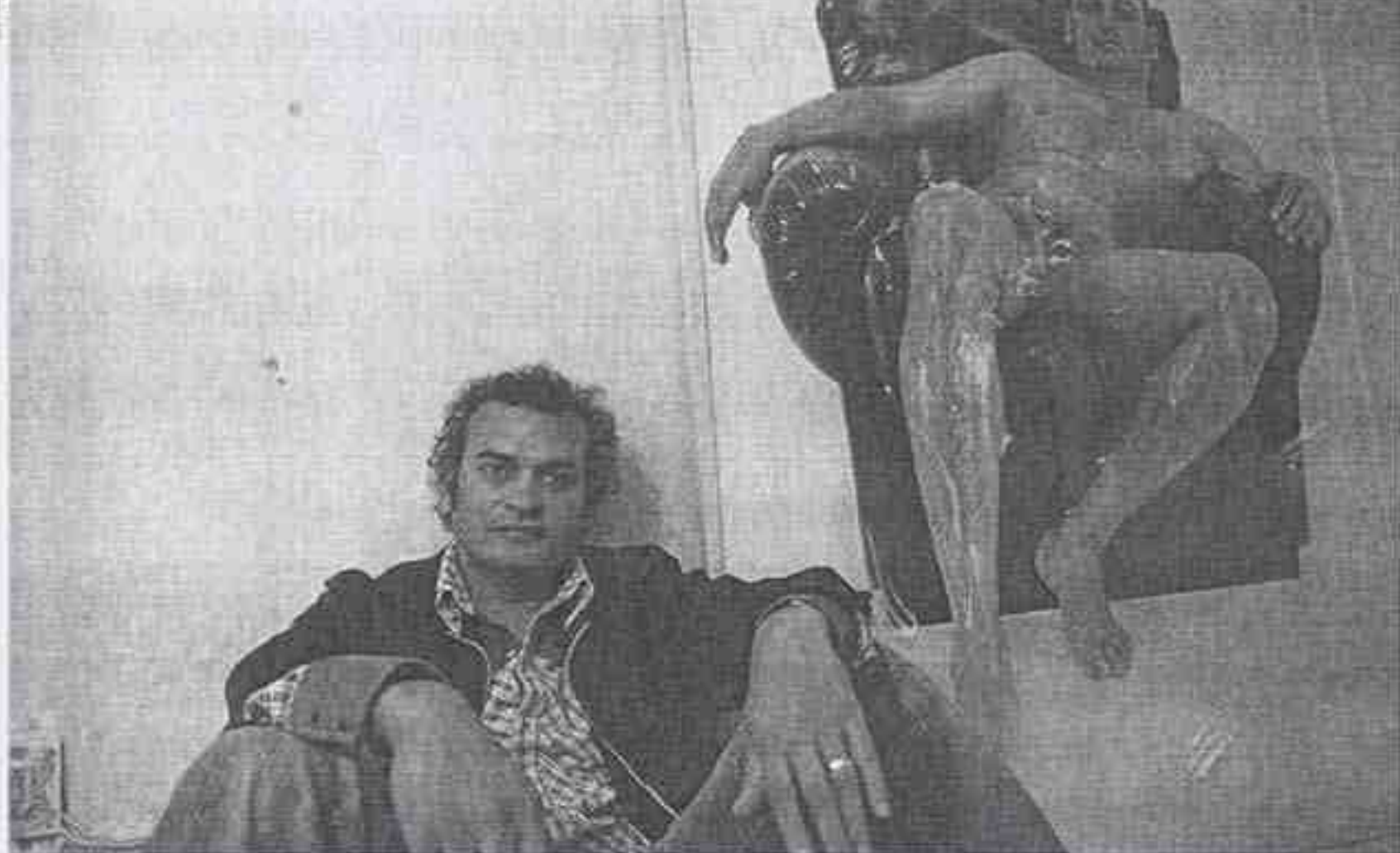
On show was installation artist Vivian Sundaram, now a master at digital deception, who captured his aunt Amrita Sher-Gil in a series of pictures, sometimes with other family members, superimposed, merging past and present, fantasy and fact. The

younger Subodh Gupta, who seemed to have recently discovered a coalition between exhibitionism and avant-gardism, showed himself lounging in the buff—well only just, since his genitalia was gingerly hidden behind the chaos of soap-simulating vaseline. Both have been simultaneously experimenting with video art as well.

The use of photography in art is not new: western artists have been using such media for decades. Nor for that matter is video, but Indians, fatigued by an incestuous, decades-long exchange of imagery, are learning that both can greatly supplement the visual lexicon. At an earlier show, two months ago, four artists—Sheba Chhachhi, Navjot Altaf, Shilpa Gupta and Shakuntala Kulkarni—also had video- and sound-based works further underlying the trend, now on the threshold of becoming a movement. Chhachhi, the most impressive, presented an elaborate multimedia installation called *Neelkanth (Blue Throat): Poison and Nectar*, of photographs on miniature turrets

SHRINA DAS





STRADDLING A SHIFT: (Clockwise from left) Sundaram's digital manipulation of his family photographs; Gupta's experiment with photography is an extension of his work as a painter; Chhachhi's video art relates the myth of Shiva to the reality of choking cities



with a video work playing in the centre. The work referred to the myth of Shiva in which he swallows poison that threatens to destroy the universe and thus is idiomatic of the choking cities that we live in.

From the other side, traditional documentary filmmakers too are enjoying the vagabondism of video. At the prestigious "Documenta 11", an art biennial in Kassel, Germany, curated by the revolutionary Nigerian Okwui Enwezor earlier this year, drawing and painting took a backseat as four Indian filmmakers displayed their works with 120 other international artists. An installation was done by the Raqs Media Collective featuring a Jamia Millia-trained trio, Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi and Shuddhabrata Sengupta, who have been chronicling urban methods, management and mayhem for quite some time. Their work had three screens placed in the corners of an enclosure, empathetically showing casualties of a toxic metropolis: workers who travel on cycles, manual labourers, car-less pedestrians, demolitions, shams. Delhi-based filmmaker Amar Kanwar's specially commissioned *A Night of Prophecy* was also shown along with Ravi Agarwal's 18 photographs on slum-dwellers. All the works were re-

played recently at a day-long workshop at the School of Arts and Aesthetics in Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University.

For many artists, video art is a logical choice. It is the medium of the times, technologically upbeat, pictorially elastic, sociologically accurate. And its growth is not unrelated to the fact that many Indians have finally learnt to intercept and overtake Modernism, a movement that had deteriorated to a pathological condition. The artists also point out that the decision is not just dictated by international fads or the desperation to be cutting edge or the promise of festival invitations. "It just makes the artist more expressive and experimental," says Sood.

The slow duplication of image in the grainy videos is common strategy, a sign of existential impasse or just to show that this is not a linear documentary but zig-zag artwork. At the Apeejay show, erstwhile painter Subha Ghosh's video, on a big open-air screen, showed him being buried under all types of waste: wood scrap, paper-dried marigold, ash—the excreta of the city that comes back to vex its people. Painter Ranbir Kaleka depicts a man whose cockerel tries to fly away while a mirror image on the bottom of the screen blurs these dual desires of flying and fettering. Sontia Khurana, who has



GAINING GROUND: The Raqs Media Collective had their work on display at the prestigious *Documenta 11* in Germany; (below) Dayanita Singh has shows at Berlin and London lined up

been working with video art for the past five years, has a chicken being flayed on one screen while a dog feeds on its entrails in another. Nataraj Sharma had even used a quote by Jean-Paul Sartre just so the viewer is not overly puzzled by the image of hazy, slow-moving Mumbai at night. The darkness of an empirical world seems to take centrestage in current screen practice.

CURATOR and critic Yashodhara Dalmia showed her commitment to art as photography by including Dayanita Singh's work in her recent show in Delhi. Singh, the photographer who hates to be called an artist and wields the lens with a high emotional quotient of its own, profiled contemporary Parsi families in Mumbai in the technique of Renaissance portraiture. But just as in the case of filmmaking, commentators point out a difference between artists dabbling in photography and established photographers who are trained and technically sound. Some analysts have said that the works of the neo-lensmen aren't better than a sophomore's raggedy effort or like the kind of stuff that was over and done with in the 1960s and 1970s. Curators—who are the first to sense early indications of a new market trend—however, ignore the distinction and are using shows to propagate its oneness.

Nagy, in fact, used the exhibition to inaugurate Photosphere, an offshoot of gallery Nature Morte that



will from now on host shows exclusively for photo-art. However, the curator is quick to point out that he was not "creating a trend". "I was simply aware that all these artists were experimenting with photography and I decided to put them together as a show."

Similarly curator Geeta Kapur included works of Indian photographers Ketki Seth and Singh in her show at the Tate Modern in London two years ago. More recently Gulam Mohammed Sheikh had a show in New York where Ram Reftman recreated an old-fashioned photographer's studio complete with landscaped props. Indian photographer Pamela Singh also had a show recently in New York where she painted on her snaps—very

much a part of the Indian tradition when photography had just come in, which is now seeing a fashionable revival. Dayanita is holding a large retrospective in Berlin besides having exhibited small prints at Firth Street Gallery, London.

"Artists are simultaneously experimenting with photography and photographers are using the medium to transcend reality, and it is creating interest as art forms because these are names well-known in the market," says Dalmia. "It is adding to the art vocabulary." But the question is, will it also add to the vocabulary of sales, especially in a country which shies away from investing heavily in anything other than painting or sculpture? ■