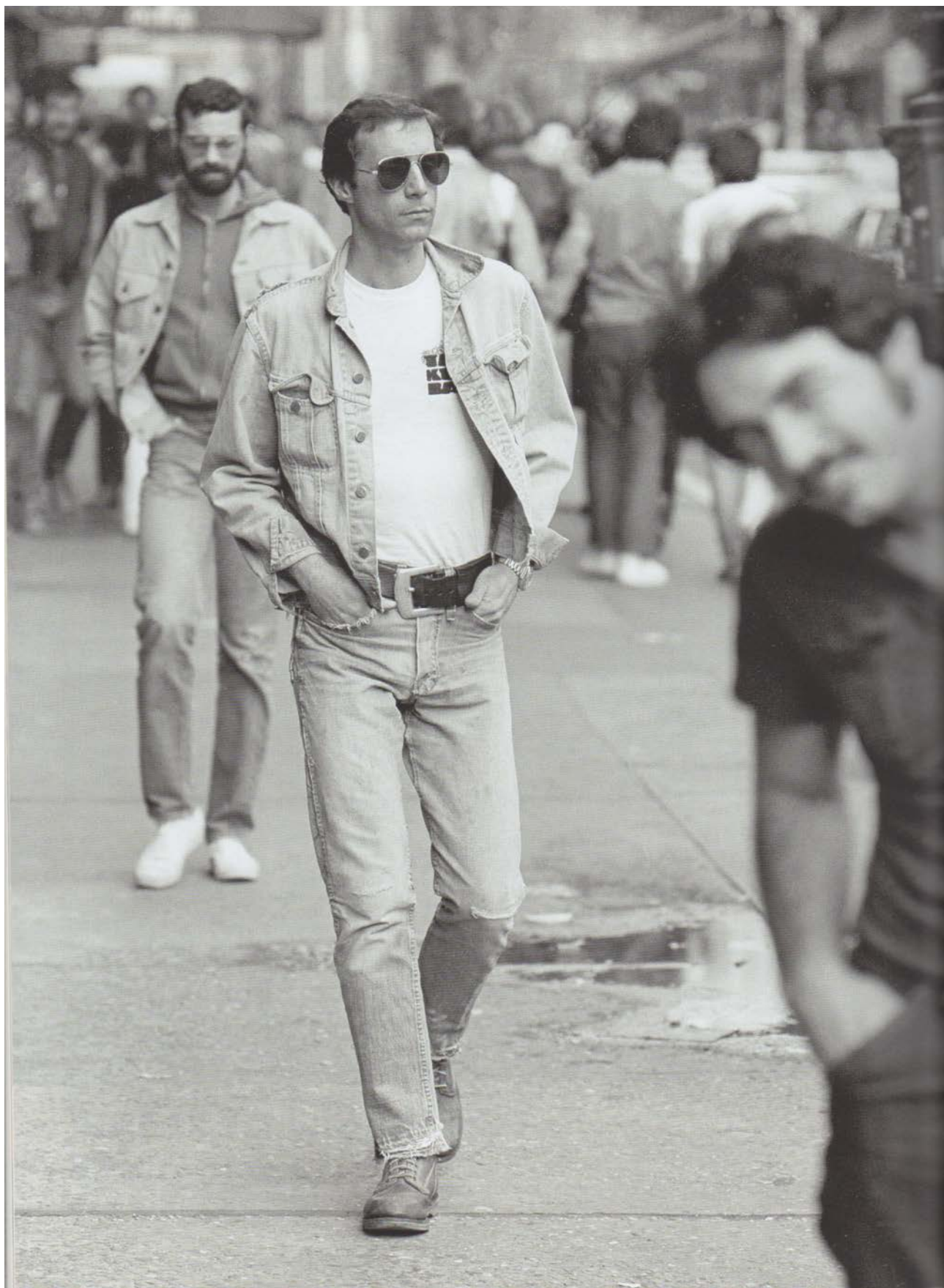


Sunil Gupta
captures the
flourishing of gay
pride in the years
following the
Stonewall riots,
the same years
he himself went
through a journey
of self-discovery.
Words by **Daniel**
Boetker-Smith



**Christopher
Street**

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All images from the series *Christopher Street, 1976* © Sunil Gupta.

In 1976, a 22-year-old Sunil Gupta spent a term studying photography in New York City. Little did he know that this period would prove to be a defining one in his creative life. The work he made during his short stay in Manhattan would become, decades later, the book *Christopher Street, 1976*, published in 2018 by Stanley/Barker and subsequently shortlisted for the Paris Photo-Aperture PhotoBook Award, the Lucie Photo Book Prize and Les Rencontres d'Arles Book Award.

The *Christopher Street, 1976* work, a simple series of black-and-white street photographs taken over the course of a few weeks in Lower Manhattan, will be shown for the first time ever in the *Masculinities* exhibition, in the section titled 'Queering Masculinity', alongside fellow New York-based photographers Peter Hujar, David Wojnarowicz and many others. Christopher Street, in the West Village neighbourhood of New York, resonates in the collective consciousness as the site of the Stonewall uprising of 1969 and the beginning of the gay rights movement in the US. Gupta arrived seven years later in 1976, and for a short time made images in the burgeoning openly gay and permissive community, made possible by the upswell of activism, gay pride and liberation resulting from Stonewall. This period is significant also, in retrospect, as it pre-dates the emergence of the Aids epidemic that was to strike at the heart of New York's gay community. "That period," Gupta tells me, "was when battles were being fought – and won. Freedoms were gained and the gay community had come out of the shadows." The *Christopher Street* images were Gupta's response to these freedoms and a desire to capture the scene of which he was part. It also documents a young man's journey of self-discovery and acceptance.

As a young Indian migrant arriving in Montreal in the late 1960s, Gupta's family provided him with three choices for college – engineering, medicine, or business. His love of photography came out of actively rebelling against his business degree, and the community he found as the resident photojournalist for the student newspaper. "I was involved in the early gay liberation movement in Montreal," he recalls. "I had come out, and photography was a hobby but also a way for me to document my new extended gay family. My parents were slightly bemused, and I remember giving them a reading list, a kind of gay bibliography to study; I wanted to help them understand, but they never really did."

His graduate studies would then take him to New York for an MBA where, instead of attending classes, he immersed himself in the extraordinarily exciting gay community and arts scene he found in Greenwich Village and Chelsea in the mid 1970s. "There must have been over 50 small galleries with openings, and new events happening each weekend," Gupta recalls. "And alongside this, the whole history of American photography was at my fingertips in the major galleries." The impact of the 1967 *New Documents* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, curated by John Szarkowski, was still being felt and

the young Gupta, inspired by the work of Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, enrolled into photography classes at the New School. Finding himself being taught darkroom printing by George Tice, portraiture by Philippe Halsman, and documentary photography by Lisette Model, Gupta's life was changed forever. "We used to do portraiture classes in Halsman's apartment in the Dakota building," he recalls. "Model was an incredibly strong and opinionated figure, and she really encouraged me to experiment and make street photographs."

Wandering the streets of Manhattan, Gupta eventually settled on three specific spots on Christopher Street to make his photographs. "The area was flooded with gay men, and sex was everywhere, in the bars and on the piers, and Christopher Street was at the centre of all this," he remembers. Repeatedly returning to these same three street corners, Gupta made simple images of his community at a time when the world seemed to be changing for the better. The impact of Stonewall had been significant, he recalls. "That time was so positive, and full of life and there was no sense of the impending disaster of Aids. I look back at these images with an incredible sense of nostalgia. We were so innocent, and we were celebrating that we were able to live our sexuality in public, and announce our presence to the world."

Following his short time in New York, Gupta followed his then partner to London, and has lived in the city ever since. As in New York, he enrolled on a photography programme to satisfy residency requirements and subsequently did five more years of study, ending up with an MA from the Royal College of Art. The London he found in the mid 1970s was in opposition to the openness and vitality of the New York he had just left. "In retrospect, there was very little going on in London, and no photography galleries or scene," he says. "So instead I found work in commercial and editorial photography for newspapers and the like."

During these years of study and working in the mainstream industry for publications such as *Woman's Own* magazine, Gupta relegated his *Christopher Street* work into storage and didn't think about it again until recently. "The New York work didn't even figure in my thinking. It was before I had entered serious studies, and then I was moving house," he tells me. "And I realised I had this huge back catalogue of negatives that I had never printed." During his time with Lisette Model in New York, Gupta had only printed three or four of the *Christopher Street* negatives, and the rest had been filed away. Gupta then embarked on a methodical process of digitising all of his negatives from that period, ordering them chronologically and via this process rediscovered his earlier work. "I put these old projects up onto my website, and then I received a message from Gregory Barker [of Stanley/Barker] saying he'd seen the work and that he thought that we could make an interesting book with them."

The 2018 publication, now sold out, is an accomplished example of good design craft and production not getting in the way of a strong and simple body of work. The book takes the same shape and size as the original 8x10 silver gelatin prints that Gupta made for Model's class in 1976; and it is spiral bound, giving it a rough and lo-fi quality. The cover is bare cardboard, and the cover image is printed in halftone, giving the book the feeling of an archival or historical document. "The process of making the book was collaborative, and I was conscious of letting the publisher have their input into the final outcome," says Gupta. Future collaborations with the same publisher are planned, mining Gupta's back catalogue of colour street photographs from his early days in London, and his series *Lovers: Ten Years On*, of gay couples in west London prior to the epidemic of Aids. The latter publication will coincide with his upcoming retrospective at The Photographers' Gallery in London in the autumn. **BP**

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42-49_Adi Nes: Soldiers



68-73_Aneta Bartos: Family Portrait



80-85_Samuel Fosso's self-portraits



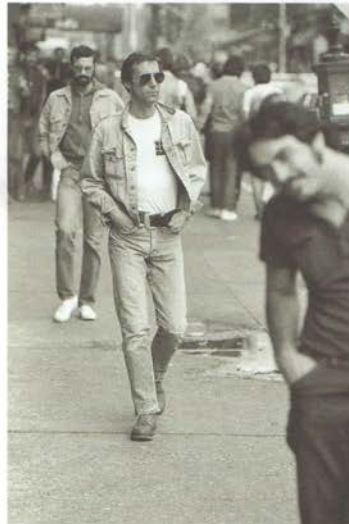
50-66_Karen Knorr: Gentlemen



86-90_Hans Eijkelboom: With My Family



34-41_Karlheinz Weinberger: Rebel Youth



74-79_Sunil Gupta: Christopher Street



20-23_Bill Brandt/Henry Moore



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