

H A L E S

SUNIL GUPTA

Eduardo Gion, Sunil Gupta's Visual history of the Gay Community,
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SUNIL GUPTA

In conversation with
EDUARDO GIÓN

Edited by JESSICA MICHAULT

Portrait by DANIKA LAWRENCE

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Respected photographer Sunil Gupta has followed his heart across many continents over his lifetime. And with each move, from Canada to New York

EDUARDO GIÓN: You were born in India, in New Delhi. What was your childhood like there?

SUNIL GUPTA: My childhood was idyllic. I lived in a neighborhood where homes were not locked, and children played on the streets outside and went into each other's houses. It was a very secure environment, and we also had a great deal of freedom from being overseen by our parents. Furthermore, I live next to a Mughal monument, a tomb with a huge garden, which was like a fascinating, giant playground.

E.G.: In your youth, you emigrate to Montréal in Canada with your family. What was that contrast like, between these two very different cultures for you?

S.G.: It was a huge contrast. Gone were the close relationships and all the people I knew around me. I had to start from scratch, and the only people I knew were my parents. And for the first time in our lives, we were thrown together 24/7. In my first year, I went to a high school in Montréal where my classmates had never heard of India. It meant that all of my knowledge was of no use in my new life. It was very disorienting. Without the physical closeness of India, I lost the ease of meeting people to have sex with and for a while, I had no knowledge of how this kind of cruising was done in Montréal, if at all. However, I encountered gay liberation on the first day I went to college and it completely changed my identity and it's something I became completely involved with as it offered me opportunities both social and for my emerging interest in photography. I joined a gay student group, we ran a newspaper and I took photos for that. I also took photos of all the people around me. This became the basis for a recent exhibition called *Friends and Lovers: Coming out in Montréal* in the 70s which took place at the Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto.

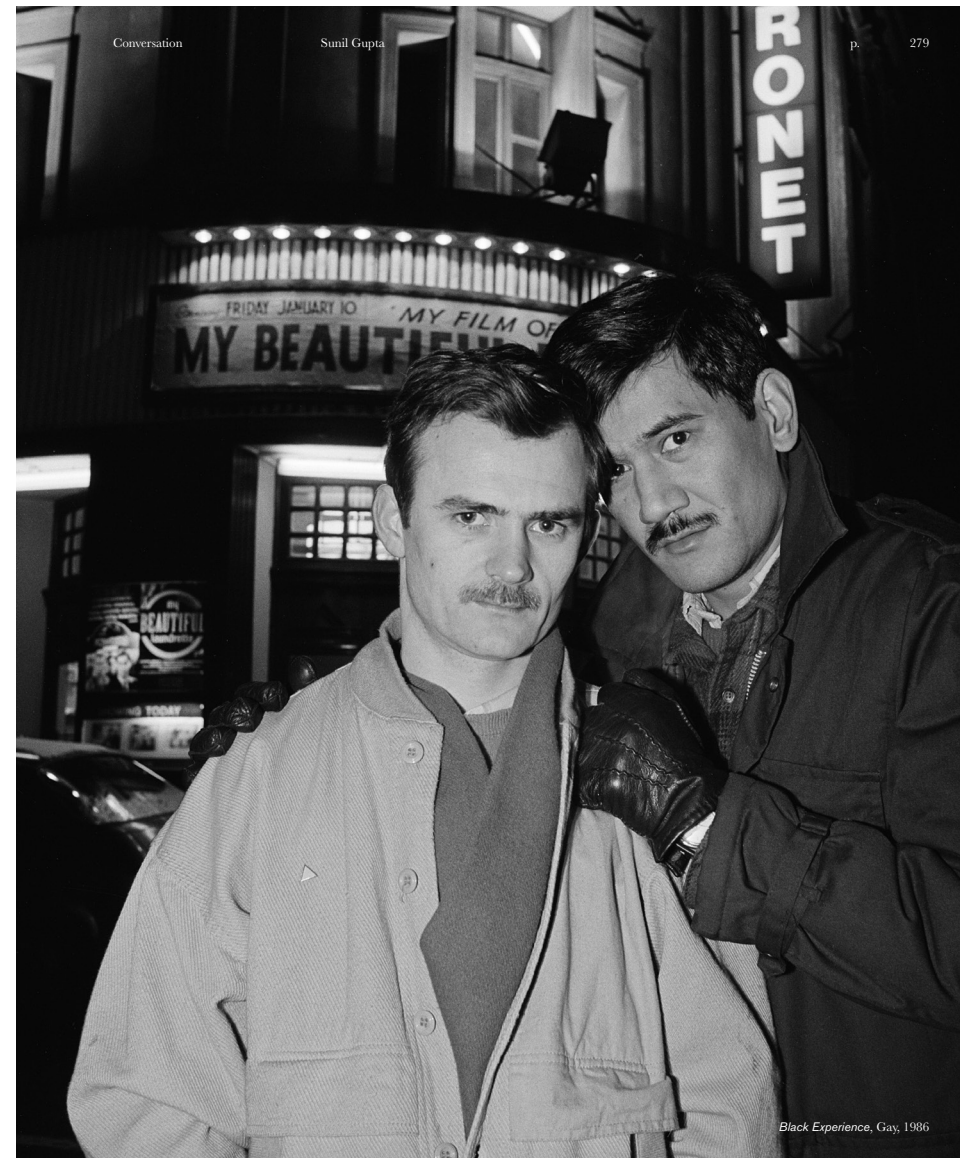
E.G.: But the idea of being a full-time photographer only really began to crystallize in your mind when you moved to New York. Why was that?

S.G.: I was in business school, and I have arrived in New York City to do an MBA. However, it was also the first time I had lived in a city that had such a vast photographic scene — galleries, museums, auction houses, etc. What was a weekend interest began to take over my life and I gave up my MBA classes, and instead enrolled in photography classes at the New School with Lisette Model and Philippe Halsman. Lisette would talk about her most famous former student, Diana Arbus, and I became aware especially of the *"New Documents"* exhibition that took place at MoMA in 1967. This legitimized street photography for the museum. Not only that, but I was in the very city whose streets were often the subject of the history of photography. So, I began to photograph certain street corners myself.

E.G.: In 1976, you shot a series of portraits in Manhattan called *"Christopher Street."* They focused on portraying the gay liberation movement that centered around that street. What was it like at that time to portray the social scene of gay culture so out in the open, in broad daylight?

S.G.: It was very exciting for me. I'd never seen so many gay men out and about in public, promenading, and wanting to be seen. After living most of my college years going to gay nightclubs and discos almost always at night, it was quite amazing to see this very visible gay culture. Part of the politics of gay liberation had to do with the idea of the nuclear family and it was very pro-promiscuity as a strategic way to escape from the traditional norms of family. Suddenly, there was a number of young available gay men, offering themselves in public. There was a very positive sexual vibe about it as well. I realized one way to deal with it, since I couldn't sleep with everyone, was to start photographing them.

to London and a return trip to his hometown of New Delhi, he has used his camera as a critical lens through which he has documented the gay community. Using it as a framework to discuss other vast social issues including race, family, migration, health, and of course, sexuality, his work has helped raise awareness about gay rights. It has cast an inclusive light on a community that, until very recently, did not feel much warmth of acceptance.

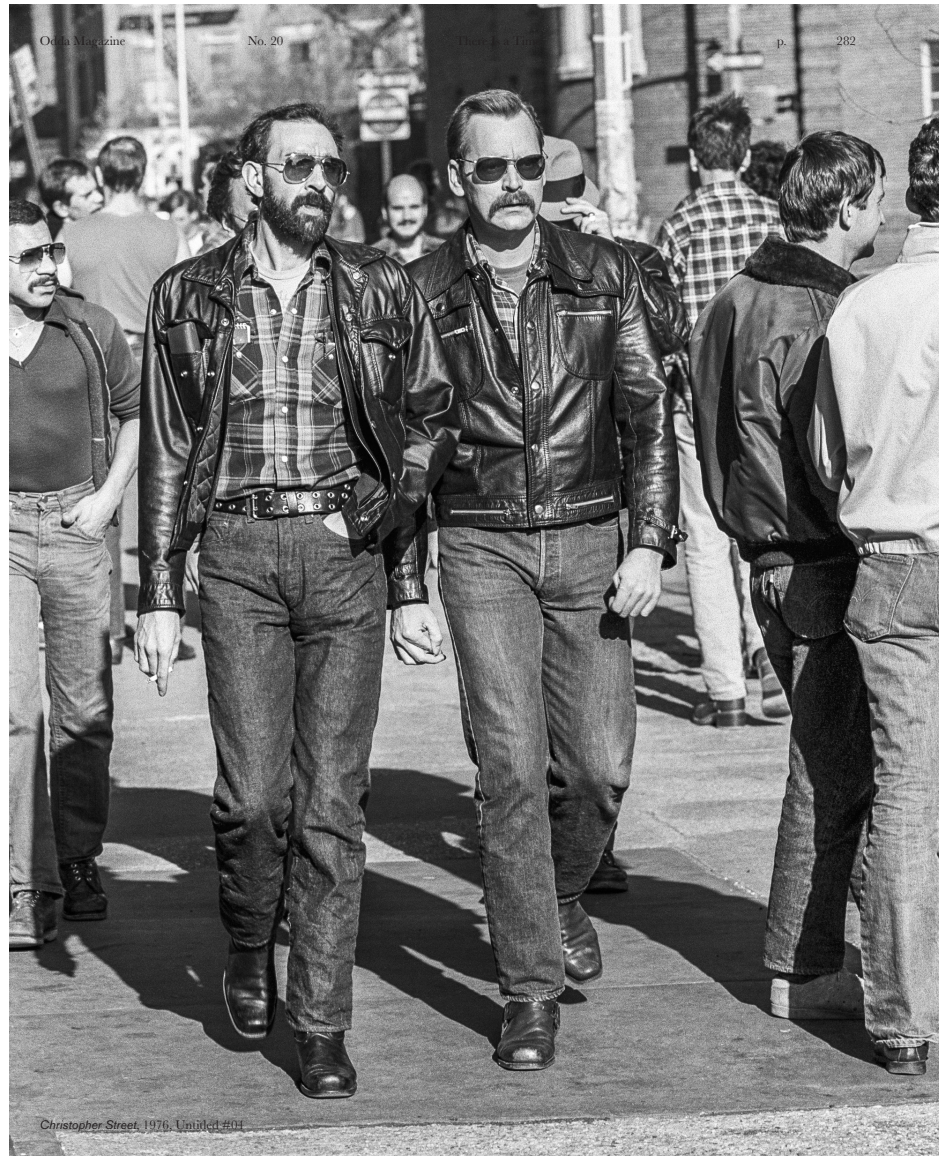




Friends and Lovers: Coming out in Montréal in the early 70s, the morning after the gay sauna Aquarius was fire-bombed, three customers had died, 1975

London, 1982, Untitled #04

*The body is so central to our culture,
especially to gay male culture,
it was hard to imagine it as
diseased and powerless.
For me, photography was a way back to recover a sense of my
own body image.*



E.G. In your portraits, the boys pose in a powerful and proud way. Many with smiles on their lips. Were the lives of gay people really like this or did they live in a heteropatriarchal society that continued to keep gays out?

S.G. I think it was tribal and very localized. New York or perhaps the USA, in general, seems to be composed of quite segregated and localized tribal communities and this was just another one emerging and claiming a public space for gay men. "Coming out" was very important, one had to not only see but be seen and recognized as a gay man.

E.G. Eventually, you moved to London, where you live now. Has your life always been a one-way ticket? Is it exciting to live from one place to another for an artist like you?

S.G. I was following somebody around first to New York and then to London. It's not something I had really planned; my life has been a series of relationships and the geographies have been a little bit secondary. I suppose I've become something of a professional migrant.

E.G. I have read that in London you suffer a sentimental breakup that is reflected a lot in your later photographic projects. Is that so? Is sadness a creative valve?

S.G. Yes, I broke up with the person I followed from Montréal to New York to London which was a great shock to me. I didn't think that kind of thing would happen to me. One of the ways I tried to resolve this crisis was by seeking out other gay couples to have conversations with and I did this by making a photographic project in their homes. Sadness can be a creative trigger, as can other strong emotions. For me, a lot of my work has come from an emotional response to a situation whether it's personal or social didn't matter as long as there was feeling.

E.G. You returned to India with a project that is very interesting to me called "Exiles" where you photographed queer Indian people. And you did it at a time when homosexuality was still prohibited in the country. What was it like working on that project at that time in India's history?

S.G. I was very keen to take pictures that centered on the situation of gay men in India. But when I got there I realized that nobody was out, and nobody wanted to be photographed and although I could do this surreptitiously, I decided it wasn't very ethical to do that. I had to find a different way, so I decided to reconstruct my pictures in a documentary style by casting them with real gay men and it was important to me to shoot them in real gay cruising places.

E.G. Did you face any problems or punishment for shooting those pictures?

S.G. The sites when the pictures were taken were actually really cruising sites. But I did choose them because they were well-known and often with the subject of colonial photography of India. There was no problem shooting the pictures at the time because there was complete silence around gays in India which meant there was no punishment either or rather there was no threat. Well, not in terms of taking the pictures anyway. The people only agreed to be in the pictures because they would not be shown in India at the time.

E.G. Was it a way to go back to your hometown to slap society in the face and take a little revenge?

S.G. Well, not revenge really as I was very aware of India's post-colonial position in relation to the U.K. where I was living. I wanted to show that there was gay life, even though no one was talking about it. In the 80s, it did seem like the only gay culture there was existed in London, New York, and Paris. I wanted to show that other places had their own histories, especially my hometown where I had grown up as a gay child.

E.G. Did you ever go back to India to show your work?

S.G. Yes, in 2004, I had my first big show in India showing the gay and HIV material which turned out to be surprisingly acceptable even though homosexual sex was still illegal. In the process of installing the show, I met a guy and fell in love and moved to live there again in 2005, by which time the guy had lost interest. But I thought that since I was there, I should make a go of

it. I was there till 2012. Finally, a show of the "Sun City" series, originally commissioned by the Centre Pompidou, at the Alliance Française Gallery in Delhi was reported to the police who closed it, and I decided to return to London.

E.G. Fundamentally what do you want to express with your work?

S.G. In my work, I try and visualize the larger issues that affect me and the people around me, whether they be personal, social, or political. Identity is one of those issues that undergo transformations every decade or so it seems. My work is to respond to these shifting perceptions of gender and sexuality and of course of the very important question of race and migration.

E.G. As a result of your own suffering from HIV, your work has also focused on the body, on the body as a political element – biopower or biopolitics. Your images tell the story of how medicine governs our lives when we are sick.

S.G. Yes, we don't seem to have much consent or control over our bodies when it comes to their medicalization. I think, particularly in the case of HIV, it came with so much stigma and social approbation that a lot of people initially felt helpless in the face of it. It took me four years after diagnosis to begin to think to make a project about my own condition. The body is so central to our culture, especially to gay male culture. It was hard to imagine it as diseased and powerless. For me, photography was a way back to recover a sense of my own body image.

E.G. What are you currently working on?

S.G. I have a commission from Studio Voltaire that I am trying to finish which is a video, "From HIV to COVID" that I am making in partnership with Positive East, an HIV support group in East London. A larger commission has been postponed due to COVID, also with Studio Voltaire, and this time with the Imperial Health Trust, which means I'll be working with two London hospital settings; one is the HIV outpatients group at St. Mary's Hospital and the other is the gender reassignment clinic at Charing Cross Hospital.



From Here to Eternity, Chicago, 1999