BOOK REVIEW: Saloni Mathur, *A Fragile Inheritance: Radical Stakes in Contemporary Indian Art*

Emilia Terracciano

*A Fragile Inheritance: Radical Stakes in Contemporary Indian Art* pays homage to the lives, careers and creative practices of Indian artist Vivan Sundaram and of his life comrade-in-arms, the theorist, critic and curator Geeta Kapur. The couple, who married in 1985, maintained independent careers and have made significant contributions to the development of writing, curation, art-making, archiving and art initiatives, both at home and abroad. To be sure, Saloni Mathur writes, in the context of a radically stratified India, the couple’s initiatives were made possible by class privilege; but, as she argues, what matters is what both did with this leverage, the ‘freedom’ that came with it, and specifically, how they put it to use (p 5). Sundaram is an artist and activist who pioneered installation art in India, with a dedicated commitment to collaborative practices and artist-run spaces. Kapur was founder and editor of the *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, an essential and influential review of cultural studies published in New Delhi. Widely included and published in anthologies and museums around the world, Kapur also acted as one of the curators of ‘Century City’, held at London’s Tate Modern in 2001.

In 1976 the couple set up the renowned Kasauli Art Centre in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, which functioned as a cluster for the arts and promoted numerous art initiatives. A decade later, they became actively involved with establishing the cultural collective SAHMAT (meaning ‘compact’ or ‘in agreement’ in Hindi) that formed in the wake of the horrific murder of Safdar Hashmi, a member of the Communist Part of India (CPI) and a theatre artist and activist. Both Sundaram and Kapur have drawn on India’s secular and radical heritage to produce works that engage with important political and societal debates. And they continue to do so in an increasingly polarised society subjected to the dictates of a populist political Hindu movement.

Mathur’s *A Fragile Inheritance* is part of a working-through of an ongoing intellectual debt. Rich and luminous, the book offers an account of the multi-faceted creative and intellectual trajectories of the maverick couple, whilst musing upon the possibilities for engaged critical practice today. The close readings embrace dilemma, intimacy and vulnerability, and are premised on that utter self-reflexivity that comes with the wisdom of insecurity.
Over the years, with great care and scholarly perseverance, Mathur has engaged with the duo’s prolific and exuberant creative output. She first grappled with the complexities of Kapur and her work in 2002, publishing a review of the collection of essays *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (2000) in *Art Journal*.1 This review introduced and opened up Kapur’s provocative theoretical propositions to the wider international public, allowing many more readers to appreciate the chiselled intricacies of this formidable author. More recently, Mathur initiated a published discussion with Kapur in *Art Journal* and *October*.2 She has cultivated a similarly sustained dialogic commitment with Sundaram, inviting him to the Fowler Museum at UCLA in 2015, compiling a publication and curating an exhibition which brought together two large and distinct bodies of work, *Gagawaka* and *Postmortem*.3 This nurturing friendship has allowed for an immersive comprehension of Kapur and Sundaram’s distinct and creative contributions. Inspired by Edward Said’s notion of ‘affiliation’, closely related to his secular understanding of ‘worldliness’, Mathur’s sympathetic relationship with the couple has occurred through ‘social and political conviction, economic and historical circumstances, voluntary effort and willful deliberation’ (p 22). Drawing from multiple theorists, including Derrida, Adorno and David Scott, Mathur’s prose recapitulates and replicates a constitutive tension between art and theory; as critical portions of the book make very clear, we experience a duality, we hear multiple viewpoints.

In the immediate context, there are fascinating instances of ‘doubling’ operating between artist, critic and writer, who mirror one another in their concern with the relation of the written word and the made object to the lived life. Moreover, Mathur places both the artist and critic in dialogue, carefully ensuring that differences of pitch between the two, either sounded simultaneously or in succession, do not collapse into one another. This reading resonates with Kapur’s own investment in writing about creative practice. For instance, invoking Vietnamese artist Trinh T Minh-ha in 2000, Kapur suggested that ‘the relationship between art and theory does not lead to a simple equation and collapse of the fundamental assumptions between the two. Rather, it maintains the tension between them through a notion of the interval that neither separates nor assimilates.’4

*A Fragile Inheritance* includes an Introduction, four chapters and an Epilogue. The introduction reflects on the formative political and social experiences of artist and writer, their ‘separate journeys’ and uneven urban and bohemian pathways across the tumultuous 1960s in New York and London. Kapur pursued an MA in fine arts at NYU in 1963, returned to India in 1965 and

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3 ‘Making Strange: Gagawaka + Postmortem by Vivan Sundaram’, was at the Fowler Museum at UCLA, 19 April–6 September 2015, curated by Miwon Kwon and Saloni Mathur; the catalogue, edited by Kwon and Mathur, was published by the Fowler Museum in November 2015

a couple of years later travelled to London to complete an MA in art criticism at the Royal College of Art. Mathur highlights significant intellectual encounters for the young Kapur: John Berger and Peter de Francia. Sundaram also travelled widely, journeying across North America, participating in various movements associated with ‘May 1968’, and making his way back to India via land, train and hitchhiking. Artist and writer both returned to India, their paths overlapping during the Emergency, a political state enforced by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, lasting from 1975 to 1977, when civil liberties were suspended, opponents silenced and jailed, and violence was sanctioned against the poorest of the poor. It is possible that the urgency, the political volatility and the state of friction between culture and society brought the two closer. Redoubtable, solitary and fierce, Kapur’s writings from this period offered a brave and singular indictment of the realities at stake in India, strengthening her resolute and life-long distancing from the state and other institutions. That willingness to forge planetary, grass-roots ‘affiliations’ and South-South solidarities, described by Mathur, are perhaps lodged historically in those precarious times.

In Chapter 1, Mathur engages with Sundaram’s *earthy ecologies*, probing in detail his *Works in Engine Oil and Charcoal*, produced in the early 1990s and solicited by the first Gulf War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of communal violence in India. The series signalled a formal and experimental transition in Sundaram’s work, with the medium of painting gradually opening up to installation, video and multimedia. Mathur offers a fascinating and eco-critical reading of this series in engine oil as a complex response to the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and the US in 1990–1991. Drawing on the work of scholar Rob Nixon, amongst others, she investigates the materiality of this deadly fossil substance to shed light on the multiple meanings of oil in Sundaram’s series – as a ‘natural’ resource, global commodity, painterly medium rooted in Euro-Western high culture, and a fuel that sustained the long and slow destruction of
ancient Mesopotamian cultures in the Middle East. In Chapter 2, Mathur advances a detailed analysis of Sundaram’s multimedia installation *History Project*, mounted inside the Victoria Memorial Museum in Kolkata in 1998. Mathur delves into this demanding site-specific installation, probing its significance both in the specific context of the colonial, monumental museum set up by Curzon in 1901 following Queen Victoria’s death, but also in consideration of decolonial debates unfolding today worldwide. Placing Sundaram’s complex installation in conversation with Hans Haacke’s intervention at the Reichstag in Berlin, Mathur also ponders the unresolved ambiguities and doubts that attend *History Project* – namely, the relationship between historical reality and memory, as well as the sense of trauma that comes with the failure of promises unrealised: visionary aspirations produced by anti-colonial nationalism in Bengal, and that seemingly unbridgeable gap between the revolutionary dreams of the intelligentsia and the horrific lived realities of the majority of the Indian populace.

Moving to Chapter 4, through an analysis of Sundaram’s installation *Trash* (2005–2008), a large-scale city maquette, Mathur seeks to explore the relationship between citizenship, time and democracy by analysing debates on waste in India. *Trash* becomes a way to rethink waste, bearing in mind wider ecological processes that affect the livelihoods of the large and marginalised urban communities operating in the growing landfills of consumer-driven Delhi. Mathur’s reading of recycling as a sensorium of waste is intriguing and offers novel ways to rethink the linearity of the modern, and how biomass waste, often museumised in the West, could rework the narratives of materials, economies, and the ‘commons’ themselves.

Chapter 3, meanwhile, presents a broad and concise analysis of Kapur’s writings, beginning with the publication of her MA thesis, supervised by Peter de Francia at the RCA at the end of the 1960s, and ‘ending’ with her seminal compilation of essays published under the title *When Was Modernism*. In this collection of essays, Kapur questioned how modernism came to be construed as a cultural movement, taking as a cue the Welsh literary critic Raymond Williams’s phrase ‘the politics of modernism’. For Williams, this central issue precipitated another problem, which he posed but in many ways left unanswered: when was modernism? Registering the historical permutations of what being modern signifies, he wrote about its slipperiness, its meaning deferred and forever open to contestation. Primarily invested in the study of modernism in Europe, he had formulated this question historically for ‘the wide margins of the century’. Modernism in art and literature needed to be understood as a selective tradition: creative protagonists are interpreted as being a centrifugal force to its movement, while others, by contrast, are displaced to the periphery, pushed to oblivion. Importantly, Williams claimed that at the heart of such selective criteria, the ideology of modernism produced the urban metropolis as the centre through which artistic possibilities are construed as such. He did not offer a prescriptive approach on how ‘to break out’ of the ahistorical fixing of the postmodern, but did
advance the view that the search for differently imagined forms of modernism could take place in the discarded, the neglected, even the useless ‘trash’ of European commodity culture.

In postcolonial scholarship, this redemptive directive has been theorised with singular urgency in the writings of Kapur, who has sought to work and write about artistic production of countries once understood as peripheral to the mainly European centres of power. The task has not been to write these works into history, but to reflect upon a future in which the very idea of community can be imagined anew. Mathur attends to the paradoxical sense of temporality that Kapur’s prose invokes interpreting the latter’s preference for ellipsis, ‘loopy forms of repetition’, and relay, as strategic means to preclude teleology and frustrate chronologies (p 127). Mathur elevates these calibrated interventions to a formal strategy.

There are two ways one could approach the work of Kapur, a scholar and critic whose career spans five decades and who in the course of this has revisited a number of themes in subtle and sinuous combinations. One is to interrogate and historicise the shifting possibilities that might be discerned over this lengthy and turbulent period of time in India. The other is to juxtapose Kapur’s various and temporally remote outputs and consider them as one entity, sub specie aeternitatis, with lesser emphasis or dependence upon the temporal portions of reality. In this chapter, Mathur takes the latter approach, an ambitious undertaking which relegates a more nuanced understanding of the specific periods in history that fired the writer’s prose, solicited dismal analysis, and ushered the reader into recalcitrant hope. An alternative reading might be that Kapur’s reassessment and revision of multiple seminal essays does not so much signal the ‘inexhaustibility of the subject matter itself’ (p 123) but, rather, the starkly humble cognisance of an author whose reckoning with the practice of writing has been a lifetime’s endeavour.

Mathur seeks to persuade the reader that Kapur’s ‘elliptical returns and recursive loops’ (p 124) are parts of a singular and continuous interpretative project, rather than being the product of contingent circumstances and historical shifts in her own life and work. Mathur writes that Kapur’s MA thesis, formulated under the mentorship of the Marxist thinker, teacher and painter Peter de Francia in 1969, ‘allows us to position, some five decades later, the meaningful coordinate that is Kapur’s recent essay about the body of work produced by her deceased friend, the artist Nasreen Mohamedi (1937–90)’ (p 101). I have offered a different reading of Kapur’s recursive and multiple critical assessments of the work and life of artist Nasreen Mohamedi in my book Art and Emergency: Modernism in Twentieth-Century India. There I argued that Mohamedi’s non-mimetic art could not, and did not, elicit a critical response from Kapur until Mohamedi’s untimely death, for historical and political reasons that can be made sense of only retrospectively. To argue otherwise would mean placing on Kapur an impossible hermeneutical burden. Repetition, even compulsion, and the lack of narrative closure can play an active part in the process of assigning novel meaning retroactively, and even valuing for the first

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7 See Emilia Terracciano, Art and Emergency: Modernism in Twentieth-Century India, IB Tauris, London, 2018
8 The first iteration of Geeta Kapur’s essay ‘Elegy for an Unclaimed Beloved: Nasreen Mohamedi (1937–1990)’ was published in the posthumous publication Nasreen in Retrospect, Ashraf Mohamedi Trust, Bombay, 1995
time what the writer says and cannot say: constellations in thinking may disclose themselves in the process.

Vigilant, scrupulous, and on guard against any slackening of intellectual and creative tension, Kapur eliminates anything that is stale from writing to ensure vital and continued growth amidst difficult times. Writing has become a place to live in, but also a place in which living, for Kapur, is a restless pursuit. Her voice contains multitudes; discrepancies are more than likely to emerge in the process of writing and living. From such incommensurability can issue forth the possibility for hermeneutics, for doubt and historical critique. The reader’s task is to critically elaborate upon and historicise this brilliant writer’s dissonant archive: an archive that has no ‘inventory’, and, as Gramsci would put it, is also the complex product of an unfolding historical process. Such hermeneutical recovery (imperative for Gramsci) is linked to the politicisation of memory and can re-ignite the relationship between writing and action. Reading can allow for the weighing up of contingencies for transformative action, the imagining of other kinds of social and political relations from the ground up and into the future.

Mathur’s Epilogue places Sundaram’s ‘extravagant’ creations alongside Kapur’s more recent enigmatic, and even epigrammatic writings: writings which stubbornly uphold the ‘avant garde’, first endorsed by Kapur in 1989 in the context of the Havana Biennale, as both a historical and aesthetic principle. Ultimately, A Fragile Inheritance questions what kind of futures might the evaluation of the life-work of Sundaram and Kapur allow for and rely upon; the forms of collectivities and communities that their growing archive can call into being and imagine for the future. Precariously poised, and tethered to hope, Mathur foregrounds the fragility that attends to acts of bequest: what kind of critical writing can today honour the couple’s lived commitment, continue to nurture the body of art, sustain its vitality, and as Kapur once wrote ‘allow it mortality’ whilst rescuing it from ‘a premature condition of hypostasis’? A Fragile Inheritance is an essential, thoughtful and riveting work that asks the addressee to co-participate in the making of its meaning.


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Dr Emilia Terracciano is Lecturer in Modern Art History in the Department of Art History and Cultural Practices at the University of Manchester