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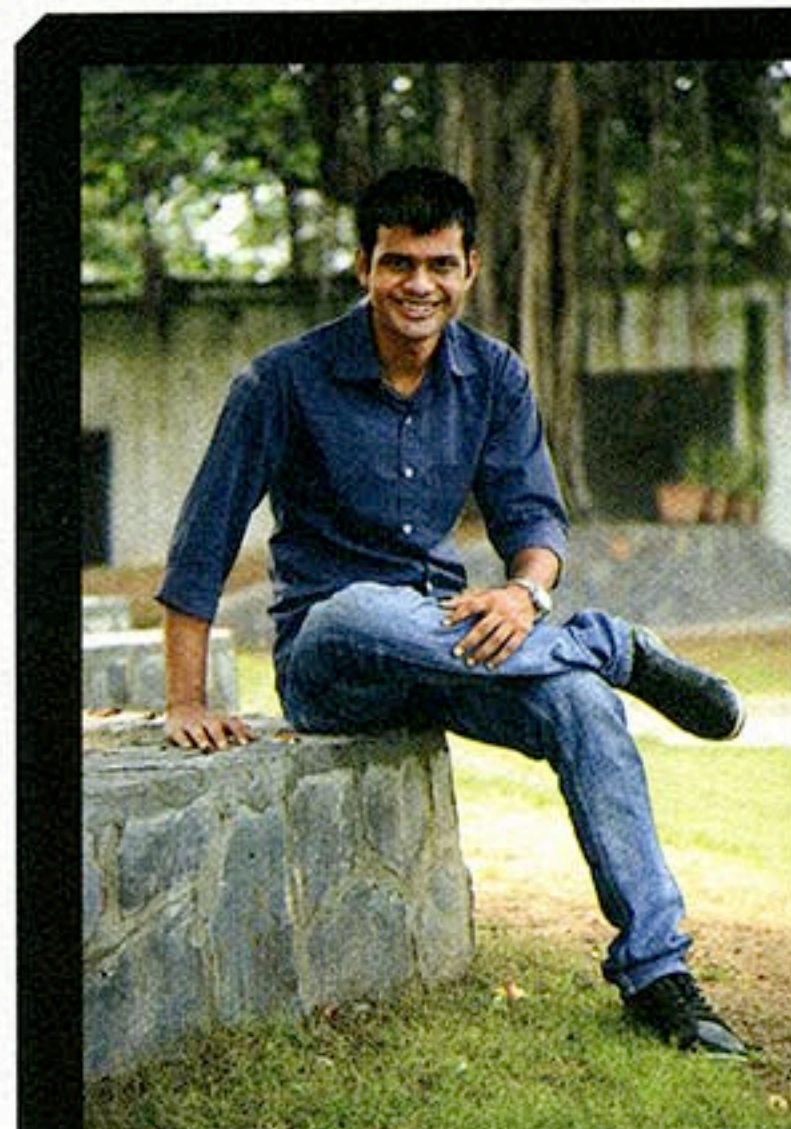
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Photograph of Vicky Roy
Photo Courtesy : Haran Kumar



Installation by chinar

GEN-X DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

As camera activates the photography gene in the artistically inclined generation of today, Dr Deepak John Mathew underlines some of the contemporary photography approaches and practices using examples of his own students' documentary works.

We are at an interesting time in Indian photography as the art scene in India embraces photography like never before. Photographers are considering galleries to be a possible outlet for exposure. There have been many movements in the past to push photography along with painting and sculpture, but not as many as today. More and more photographers prefer to stay in the world of 'art', willing to continue as 'practicing artists' and to exhibit their works in galleries as limited edition prints to support their practice.

The aim of this article is not to make a list of photographers who work with the medium of photography, but to look at those specific ones who work in the area of documentary, but have moved away from the conventional practice of documentary photographs. Though there are many approaches and practices which lead to various visual outcomes, the themes and approaches chosen for this article are the ones dealing with issues related to the contemporary Indian society and the photographers who share a common ground in terms of their motivations, concerns and working practices.

Photographers who have devised strategies, performances and staging especially for the camera are mentioned in this article as they have challenged the traditional stereotype of documentary photography. Some photographers go out for a daily shoot, looking for the moment when a picture of great visual quality appears in the frame. They work with a pre-conceived idea and frame in mind and capture an image which fits their prerequisite about documentary. This does not address the aspects of documenting contemporary art performances, although some outcomes can have the quality of the casual documentation of the artistic performance.

Though the work tells a story, it avoids the aspect of tableau photography in contemporary art. Tableau photography is also called constituted or staged photography because the angles of the camera and the elements depicted are worked out in advance and put together to articulate a formulated idea for the creation of the image. Some of the photographs look into the idea of photographic aesthetic. The image may lack drama or visual impact within the picture, but the size and presentation do the needful. The impact of these kinds of images is lost when they're printed in small books or magazines.

Another interesting aspect to look at is photography projects that push the boundaries of what would be considered as a 'good' subject for 'art' is a trend to ignore objects and spaces that are normally dismissed as ordinary. But they are conceptually photographed and presented as 'art'. By this definition everything in the real world could be a potential subject, if viewed subjectively. Another idea is to retain or create the machine-made look of photography when intimate subjects are approached. If we concentrated on personalizing, it would look like a diary,

Photograph by Dinesh Abhiram



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and the technical perfection would be abandoned for an approach adopted to make it look like a snapshot. In photo-journalistic approaches, the most important thing is to be there at the 'right time' and witness the most crucial moment. Sometimes we see work which has arrived at the site of disaster a few moments late or after the event has taken place, resulting in allegorical imagery of the actual happening.

Here are some of the examples of various documentary photography practices being explored today:

Adira Thekkuveetil's works talk about the violence against women, especially in the city as she searches for expression of violence inherent in men. She looks at the murals of Ahmedabad, considered to be a "safe city" and finds evidence of the society's attitude towards women. The pictures of colorfully painted murals of the underpasses and walls of Ahmedabad look like a symbol of its vibrant culture, but a closer observation reveals the deformation of the images of women. Each of the women's face is defaced either by spitting or graffiti interpolations. Adira adds objects and elements that work as symbols along with these mural images to bring in the context. In the context of the recent media attention



Photograph by Anupam Singha

on the gruesome incidents of rape and aggravated sexual assault on women, this body of work raises questions on the safety of women in unseen scenarios. We can see an element of performance, along with the documentary style in Adira's works.

Sneha Trivedi:

A documentary project on a riot-torn place, 11 years later will evoke questions in traditional photojournalism. Sneha visited the victims of the Gujarat riots, after 11 years, to see the survivors' present condition. Though devoid of any definite political affiliation, they are the victims of somebody's political agenda. Irrespective of their culture and religion, they faced extreme losses and continue to suffer. In her approach, she did a topological



Photograph by Debanshu Bhowmick

study and then made portraits of the people who were affected. They were staged to be cooking while their present condition could be seen in the background. These glaring portraits act as proof of the state government's false claims to have paid a sum of Rs. 500 million to these people.

Chinar Shah:

You can see the change in approach in Chinar's work, 'Silenced ruptures', which is about the riots of 2002. The project started as an investigation into the lives of the people of the 2002 riot, however, the approach changed into a performance/installation where the recreation of one of the most iconic images of the riot was installed at one of the sites. As the people visited the memorial, the image became an icon and this became a documented activity. Due to its size and the location, the site-specific photograph is reproducible only as a documentation of the event. The temporality of the work adds to the subjective meaning of the image.

Anupam Singha:

Anupam looks at the issue of the LGBT people who were criminalized and punished till recent times because of their sexual orientation. He created a set of staged group portraits that captured them involved in day-to-day activities. The

subjects are slightly conscious as they are looking straight into the camera, but involved in activities of their own world, an element of candidness and snapshot quality in his work makes it look like they are shot for some family function. This approach makes the pictures look like a social documentary, however, in full awareness of the photographer's presence.

Debanshu Bhowmick:

The documentary photographer usually approaches a subject related to socio-economic or historically glorified issues like poverty and exploitation, but Debanshu looks at the farmers and the supply chain of agricultural producers and sees the middlemen prosper. His images show the luxuries and their living conditions. The kind of lifestyle they live is shown through the objects they use. Here, the so-called photogenic objects become symbols and create a new aesthetic in this context. A framed gun, a rocking chair on a polished floor, gold rings on fingers etc. become symbols of the neo-rich. The time of shooting or the 'decisive moment' is not important. But the static and timeless moments become a part of the composition. Here one can see the aesthetic of a snapshot, but closer observation, reveals the pre-calculation. A direct approach to a contemporary issue has all the dangers

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and frames, Dinesh has taken a neutral gaze that leaves us with more questions.

In photographs, the object in front of the camera creates the objectivity, and the person behind the camera creates the subjectivity. But, in the works of these photographers, the idea of the purpose of the photograph is not to serve as an evidence for any legal, medical, educational or anthropological discussion. We can see an element of objective fiction, and some traces of photo documentary approaches, as these photographers present the idea of subjective facts. In many cases, we can say that this is a construction of a documentary.

The question raised would be 'Is photography Art?' After 'mediatic realism', many painters have converted into 'photo artists' and they are trying to alter some of the fundamentals of photography, for example, their mechanically produced originals, their potential for mass reproduction, its link with commercial application, and the need for 'artistic' skill. That is why these photographs are seeking a space in the gallery as the fundamentals still remain true to these photographs. And by using the same rules the contemporary photographer is an artist. Roland Barthes says in his book, *Camera Lucida*, that the viewer has two choices; to perceive it as creating perfect illusions; or as revealing an unquestionable reality. And he, himself, says that this choice between photographic illusion and photographic reality is, of course, not a choice at all. Photography now in its increasing but transient form, is a sign of the transient culture that is changing.

< Photograph by Sneha Trivedi

Artwork by Adira

of becoming photojournalistic if it isn't done carefully but Debanshu has managed to pull it off with ease.

Dinesh Abhiram:

A photograph of ordinary objects becomes meaningful when it is placed in context with something. Dinesh's photographs of Siddhpur, Gujarat are careful compositions of the fast disappearing 19th century houses of the city. He assumes a neutral point of view as the pictures of these buildings act as a silent observer of the changes happening to the city. He doesn't make any statements with words, but the neutral colours, lack of activity and the absence of people in the images make them intriguing objects to look at. The society's disregard of history is reflected in the visual language. Instead of choosing dramatic and evocative angles

