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Redrawing the Boundaries:

Examining Dayanita Singh's *Museum Bhavan*

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The Hindi word *bhavan* translates in English to *building* or *house*. When Dayanita Singh (b. 1961) titled *Museum Bhavan* (2013) as such, it was not without the irony, subversion, and a bit of fun expected of the innovative Delhi native. *Museum Bhavan*, a collective work that reads as a sort of traditional photographic portfolio and is termed by the artist as a portable museum, and a book-object, contains approximately 241 silver gelatin prints divided into nine collections, or exhibitions.¹ *Bhavan* is the fourth in Singh's series of modular "photo-architecture" assemblies, and is by design a living exhibition characterized by interchangeable loose prints, and additions or exchanges made by the artist as she responds to possible configurations.² It is the first of its kind, however, to be comprised of clearly delineated separate exhibitions of photographs within one *museum*. It seems fitting for Singh to put the word *bhavan* into play, for although it can refer to a home, it more often points to the physical structure or a political or cultural institution. Consider the Raj Bhavan, a name referring to the multiple buildings serving as homes to India's state governors, or the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan (Institute of Indian Culture) in New York, where *bhavan* signifies both an organization and an institutional framework. While *Museum Bhavan* as both paradoxical title and concept appears to have eluded critics and scholars thus far, this singular work stands as a microcosm of Singh's oeuvre, all at once embodying the dismantling of institutionalist conventions, confronting the woman-artist construction, and redrawing the defining boundaries of an exhibition.

¹ There are 241 images included of the book version; the number of prints in the larger portable format fluctuates.

² Curator Roobina Karode refers to Singh's structural framework as pieces of "photo-architecture" in describing her exhibition "Conversation Chambers Museum Bhavan by Dayanita Singh," at Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (December 2015- May 2016), <http://www.knma.in/node/924>.

Museum Bhavan consists of nine photographic exhibitions, each labeled to assert an exhibition as a self-contained museum within a museum: “Museum of Photography,” “Museum of Vitrines;” “Museum of Furniture;” “Museum of Machines;” “Ongoing Museum;” “Printing Press Museum;” “Godrej Museum;” “Museum of Men;” and, “Little Ladies Museum.” The large-format version (Fig. 1) displays each museum of photographs, which range in time period from 1981 to today, in wooden collapsible modular walls that are designed to travel and to be universally adaptable to the occupied space. In 2017, Singh published *Museum Bhavan* (Fig. 2) in collaboration with Steidl Books as both a museum and a mass-produced commodity. In this version, Singh includes a tenth booklet entitled “Conversation Chambers,” in which she transcribed conversations between herself and her publishing company, Steidl Books, regarding the creation of her Pocket Museum, as if to emphasize her control over the work despite the publishing company’s third-party presence.

Singh and Steidl produced 3,000 *Museum Bhavan* Pocket Museums, which are sold locally by Singh, and to the public at large online through Steidl or sellers like Amazon. Each of the Pocket Museums unfold in an accordion-like behavior and on several of the booklets, alternate titles are printed on back covers, such as “Museum of Chance” for “Ongoing Museum,” or “Museum of Curiosities” on “Museum of Men.” For Singh ambiguity reigns supreme, believing photography to be a medium that itself inherently reveals different meanings, which is why her images are without titles and her museums can possess several.³ Beyond a trust in the medium, Singh speaks of the *Bhavan* subject matter with detached indifference: “I have such a difficult time even

³ Jordan G. Teicher, “Museum of the Future: Portable and Personal,” *New York Times*, 22 May 2017. <https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2017/05/22/museum-of-the-future-portable-and-personal/>.

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remembering where I took an image...I don’t want to remember.”⁴ Her relationship with the content of the *Bhavan* prints seems to be more rooted in the self-consideration of her formal efforts and in the exhibition format she employs.

Singh has been a photographer for decades, known for capturing untouched everyday spontaneities and banalities, alike, all while evoking distinct senses of wonder, familiarity, and longing. Singh’s keen awareness of composition serves as a common thread throughout the *Bhavan* images, which speaks to her consistency in stringing together hundreds of singular pictures spanning 1981 to present-day; the intensely cohesive property of the image group is more representative of work generated within a shorter time frame, or as part of an intentionally designated project. Throughout her entire career’s work, Singh’s black-and-white images are stylistically unchanging, as a result of her persistent voice and editing eye, and her loyalty of 25 years to the same camera, lens, and light meter. She discusses this devotion to her tools in terms of ritual, citing the necessary preparatory pause before a shot and the sensory experience of

taking time to load the film and listen for certain mechanical clicks, rips, and the like.⁵ It seems fitting that an artist so entrusting of the physicality of her process—because the absence of her chosen tools yields a hastier and less mindful shot—develops a method of exhibiting that leans heavily on the tactile nature of the delivery.

That method of exhibiting through the book format speaks to not only a preference for tactility but echoes Singh's preference for slowing down the creation and interpretation processes. Working through the action of unfolding a Pocket Museum, or

⁴ Teicher (2017).

⁵ Singh, "Slow Down You Shoot Too Fast," *Dayanita Singh, Random Thoughts on Photography, Art and Being A Soloist*, October 30, 2015. <https://dayanitasingh.org>.

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even strictly viewing the expanded pull-out program of images, demands a slower reception and response than viewing the images along a uniform horizontal line streamed across a flat wall. Singh began publishing photobooks in 1986, referring to them formally as book-objects. For Singh, the book is both intimate experience and simply a technical formatting vehicle for delivering a single art object, an exhibition of many art objects, and a museum for housing many exhibitions. This ongoing nesting mentality of related entities continues even further outward to propose additional questions, such as: Is there a metaphysical space for multiple museums, and if so, where is the line between exhibition and museum?

Singh endeavors to answer this question by formulating her own definitions and redrawing traditional boundaries between the two concepts. In recent years, Singh's work has been the subject of much writing, most of which centers on the unconventional exhibition method of the portable museum in blurring the line between book and museum exhibition, or museum and artwork. More interestingly not often discussed is the relationship between exhibition and museum, and Singh's unapologetic dismantling of institutionalism at the core of these definitions.

Her work also blurs the boundary between high art and commercial art, not as individual artworks or as the concept of art production itself; instead, Singh presents the novel idea of the museum exhibition as a commercial, mass-produced object that can be sold as one product. Pocket museums evolved in a natural progression out of Singh's photo essays, yet the former is distinctive from its predecessor as both book-object and museum in several ways. Traditionally the photo essay strings together a series of

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images devoid of textual identifiers, and Singh's essays are no different.⁶ However, the publishing of Singh's thoughtfully curated photo collections as a book and museum creates a more tangible, intimate experience, and allows for different configurations as opposed to a linear sequence of images. Interacting with a book, turning the pages and extending the paper accordion of images, is a physical engagement unique to this object. *Museum Bhavan* permits and encourages the viewing of the prints to be an individual experience, standing the images up in different configurations and inviting the consumer to join her as curator.

Unlike a traditional museum, however, the individual components are not labeled; instead, they possess only singular pictorial identity concerning content, as opposed to identity developed or suggested by a title. There is little suggestion to the artist's intention for each photo, save for the collective title of the "museum" or image group. In that respect, Singh invites viewers to weave the images together with or without narrative, or to intimately relate to them in a wholly subjective experience.

It is this effect of making the museum experience private, or deflating the aura of the public institution, that *Museum Bhavan's* title points to (perhaps while giggling). Both the museum and the bhavan can be physical structures and/or institutions. By titling her portable museum endeavors as "museums," Singh puts several provocative ideas into play. She effectively subverts the prescribed formal museum experience, redefining the idea of the museum itself, and confronts the historical role of the institution. Because Singh's portable and self-contained museums can go anywhere, be situated in any

⁶ See, for example, Singh's "Go Away Closer," (2007), published as a book-object in 2008; or, "Blue Book II," *India International Centre Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (Summer 2009), (which contains color prints).

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configuration, and penetrate the boundaries of spaces that are by-definition *not* museums, her museums become transformative of the space around them. In place of the individual traveling to and entering the museum, Singh's museum travels to and enters the individual; with this exchange, there is between the institution and the individual a shift of action, submission and ultimately, power.

By defining her portable museums as museums, Singh confronts the institutionalist notion of conferring value to art through its presence within, or connection to, a certain space or establishment. Her museums do not require, nor do they desire, the status of an additional museum or gallery name, as they already possess that status inherently. Singh has effectively robbed such establishments and the idea of establishment itself, of their power or control over the art objects or concepts inside their walls. On the contrary, Singh's work generates its own walls and draws its own boundaries within which to operate. With its clearly demarcated, self-contained state and status, the portable museum distorts the multifaceted dynamic between

institution and exhibition or artwork, dismantling the current institutionalist system and redefining that system on its own terms.

Two ideas emerge from this dismantling: the first is the sense of control exhibited by Singh as an artist, and the second is her decided break with cultural convention; both in the context of contemporary Indian photography are significant. Contemporary photography in India is still currently slowly evolving out of the 1970s male-dominated culture of photojournalism, which was the cornerstone of the medium until the late- 1980s. Photography was an unambiguously masculine endeavor until that point, and not at all considered an artistic medium.

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As art critic Rosalyn D’Mello described upon attending the inaugural Delhi Photo Festival in 2011: “I tried to look up the history of contemporary Indian photography. I wanted to be able to trace a lineage, like in contemporary Indian English poetry... I found nothing of any consequence. I thought I was missing something until I realised it just hadn’t been documented.”⁷ D’Mello comments further that India’s arrival to the world of contemporary photography as artistic medium was rather late, relative to the length of time photographers had been practicing independently.⁸ Singh, like her majority-male counterparts, began in photojournalism but branched out to independent photography in the early 1980s. Without that documented connection to the development or evolution of photography in her country, and without the connection to a foundation of Indian photographers working as independent artists, Singh’s departure from photojournalism in 1981 was a monumental step on an uncharted path; and moreover, as Deeptha Achar discusses, the notion or “category” of the Indian woman artist was not something that existed before the mid-1980s.⁹ Both of these points speak to a confidence in Singh’s individual voice, intention, and motivation, which is carried over through the years and reveals itself in her subversive portable museums and mass-produced Pocket Museums.

D’Mello attributes the progress made in Indian photography culture to the “proliferation of magazines, websites, blogs, collectives, and the simultaneous expansion of gallery space to include photography,” as being democratizing side effects of the digital revolution.¹⁰ Singh, possibly one of best-known photographers in India today, clearly benefits from this digital shift in terms of exposure, but continues to prefer the physicality of her film process, as well as the physicality of her exhibition methods, as opposed to fully embracing the digital in her own work.

⁷ Rosalyn, D’Mello, “The Inheritance of Loss,” *OPEN Magazine*, 29 October 2011. <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/arts/the-inheritance-of-loss>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Deeptha Achar, “Ascribing Feminist Intent: The Invention of the Indian Woman Artist,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 39, no. 3/4 (Winter 2012-Spring 2013), 220.

¹⁰ D’Mello (2011).