Allan deSouza and Mohini Chandra:
Conceptual Photography, Migrations and the Articulation of South Asian Identities

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The artists Allan deSouza and Mohini Chandra both work from the fluid site of the global South Asian diaspora. In their respective photographic practices, they regularly address themes of belonging and the contradictions and difficulties of finding and securing a place in the world from the position of a migrant outsider. More specifically, they are both deeply imbricated in debates regarding the nature of diasporic Indianness, and their works raise questions about the place of diasporas within the seemingly narrowing definitions of twenty-first-century national identities in the United Kingdom and United States.

That they are able to address such issues is achieved through their nuanced approaches to both the form and content of their work, wherein conceptualist photographic strategies and an engagement with identity politics act concomitantly in order to convey multiple aesthetic and sociopolitical concerns. Undertaking a close reading of two recent bodies of work, deSouza's *The World Series* (2010–11) and Chandra's *Plane Views* (2012), what becomes evident are the ways in which their application of Conceptual photographic forms facilitates a critical analysis of migration, broadly defined. It is the contention here that, in paying close attention to the vicissitudes of migration as not simply a formative experience, but an unremitting one, deSouza and Chandra each present the diasporic condition as an ontological one: a state of being continuously en route, in-between or in transit.

Art historical approaches to Conceptual photography have, in the main, concentrated on a limited historical timeframe during the 1960s and '70s, and have primarily focused on a distinct group of male North America-based artists, including Jeff Wall, Ed Ruscha and Joseph Kosuth (Soutter 1999, p. 8; Edwards 2004; Iversen & Diarmuid 2010, pp. 134–80). If, as Lucy Soutter (1999, p. 8) has argued, this group of artists refused 'to take photography seriously on its own terms', regarding the medium as a mode for conveying 'brute information or uninflected documentation', they nonetheless took photography in new directions, breaking out of Modernism's confines. As Urs Stahel (2004, p. 27) has noted, in its rejection of the Modernist fetishisation of the singular, hand-made art object, Conceptual art, narrowly defined, moved away from the notion of the 'auratic' and 'emblematic' in favour of thinking about photographic images as working in relation – whether that relation was to other images or textual annotations. The serial or sequential presentation of multiple photographs marked a move towards the understanding of 'art as a medium of research' (Stahel, p. 27), while a growing appreciation of the vernacular or quotidian street scene as a ready-made art image, and, following Marcel Duchamp, the presentation of the found photograph as a readymade art object, all expanded the terms by which photography defined itself (Edwards 2004, p. 143).

The strategies of the serial and the readymade, initiated in the '60s, have been deployed by deSouza and Chandra in various bodies of work. But unlike their Conceptual forbears who asserted theirs as a neutral, detached photography, deSouza and Chandra do not seek to jettison cultural context from their application of conceptualist forms (Bann 1999). Instead, their work reflects the evolution of Conceptual art to Conceptualism, where the latter term describes artworks that use conceptual strategies but which also 'function as an act of political engagement' (Camnitzer, Farver & Weiss

1999, p. ix). Using conceptual photography, they advance institutional critique informed by identity politics, enabling an address to the structures and spaces of power through which the diasporic subject navigates. To follow Okwui Enwezor, their work 'acts like, looks like, and resembles those practices' of Conceptual art, but refuses to adopt its claim to objectivity and a detached, disinterested stance.

Undertaking a critical analysis of deSouza and Chandra's work necessarily demands a reflexive appreciation of how (conceptualist) art by artists of colour has been framed within art historical discourse. Considering the historiography of Black British art history in which both deSouza and Chandra are positioned, Kobena Mercer has written of the 'chaos and confusion as to what the primary object of attention actually is. Is it the background information about the artist's cultural identity, or the foreground matter of the aesthetic work performed by the object itself?' (2005, p. 52). As Mercer (2005, p. 55) went on to argue, the biographical should lead to an exploration of 'the deeper structures of diaspora subjectivity that it opens onto', so that while an artists' subjective experience may have motivated a particular strand of artistic enquiry, this is not to say that the resultant artwork is wholly, or even partly, auto-biographical. Rather than reducing discussion of an artwork to an exposition of an artists' racial or ethnic identity, a productive balance must be found in order to consider those contextual factors in dialogue with the formal strategies and material qualities of the art object. However, as Nizan Shaked (2017, p. 28) has observed, critical historiography of Conceptual art has 'considered conceptualism and art concerned with identity as two separate developments'. How then, does one approach the work of artists whose practices are motivated by their personal experience of diaspora, and which engages with broader (collective) concerns regarding identity politics, while employing conceptual photographic forms and strategies? In short, the artists

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under consideration here reject any division between their formal concerns and critical intent, and audiences (including art critics, curators and historians), are beholden to be similarly attentive to the complex syntheses of ideas and forms in operation.

Since the 1990s both deSouza and Chandra have engaged with the potentialities of photographic practices developed in the 1960s and '70s to pose questions about living in, or with, a perpetual transitory sense, or what might simply be called a diasporic sensibility. As someone of Goan heritage, born in Kenya, raised in London, and who now lives in the US, deSouza cannot, as Margo Machida has noted, 'claim first-hand, "authentic" knowledge of India', and yet he is 'implicated in the discourses of Indianness' due to his position within the South Asian diaspora (2008, p. 79). Likewise, Chandra's ancestors originated from India, but her immediate family came from Fiji, while she was born in Britain and raised in Australia. She has written about her family's history as indentured labourers from India, who were transported by the British to Fiji to work in the sugar plantations in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Chandra 2000). Scarce and incomplete records mean that it is unlikely that Chandra will ever know where in India her family were from, so the continent, as Salman Rushdie (1992, pp. 9–21) has so eloquently described, exists as an 'imaginary homeland'.

However, created by numerous historical, often coercive dispersals and ejections, diasporic South Asian identities cannot be 'conceived in terms of a single homeland' (Machida 2008, p. 77). Although an imaginary India may be a shared point of familial origin, arguably, what links deSouza and Chandra, and a heterogeneous South Asian diaspora more generally, are shared experiences of colonial and post-independence displacement, migration and racism; experiences informed by multiple dispersed geographies, cultures

and histories. As such, these artists respectively bring to their work a critical understanding of how personal identities are imbricated within larger historical and contemporary discourses of migration. Formed at the interstices, the in-between, their work seems to convey the experience of migration not as a journey with a start and end point, but an ontological state of being. As W. J. T. Mitchell has observed: 'The most salient fact about migration in our time is the way it has become, not a transitional passage from one place to another, but a permanent condition in which people may live out their lives in a limbo' (2011, p. 63).
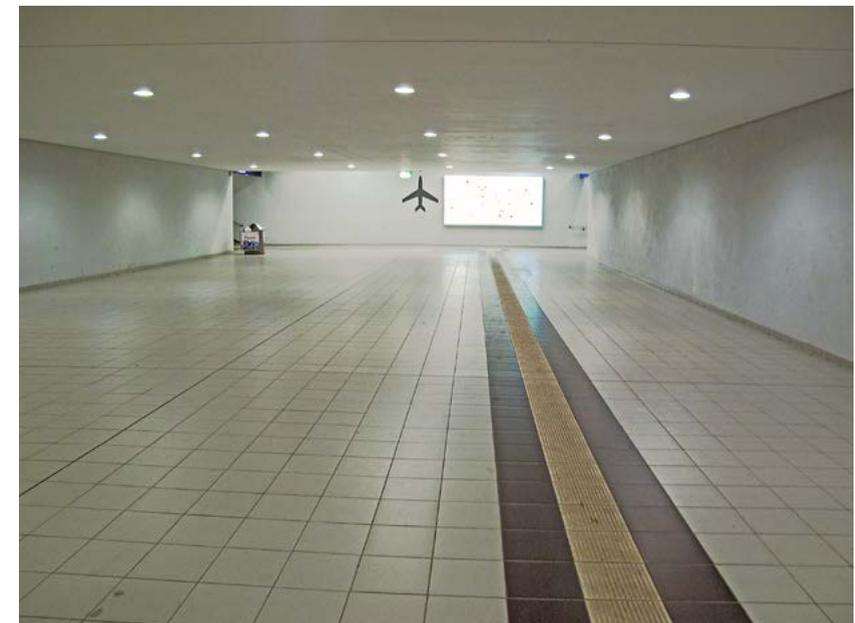

Fig. 1 Allan deSouza, *Terminal*, from *The World Series*, 2010–11. C-print, 30.48 x 40.64 cm © the artist.

Working with an expanded definition of the ready-made, and regarding the everyday environment as a potential readymade image, deSouza has utilised and photographed the existing visual environment in order to prompt a renegotiation of explicit and latent signified codes embedded within, for example, street signage, advertising and the in-transit spaces of airports. deSouza's *The World Series* (fig. 1) was initially made

in response to Jacob Lawrence's epic Modernist narrative, *The Migration Series* (1940–1), which charts the mass migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North in search of a better life during the 1920s. Building on this conceit of aspirant migration, deSouza's sixty colour photographs present a collection of routes and throughways, urban intersections, street furniture, aerial views and internal rooms and corridors, locating the viewer in various banal, everyday spaces across North America, Europe and South Asia.

Although deSouza's photographs physically exist as separate prints, they are not presented in isolation. Displayed in a single line, they were conceived to be viewed collectively, with their arrangement enticing the audience into what David Campany has described as an 'active decoding of relations between the images' (2008, p. 73). Closer examination of the framing and composition of each photograph reveals that the journey does not advance along a single arc, but rather, progresses in staccato-like rhythms, with journeys taking place within journeys. Clusters of images work together to progress movement, while others hinder or abruptly bring it to a halt. In a sequence of four images navigating the spaces of an airport, *Point, Revolve, Terminal* and *Stop*, progress is made only falteringly as the repetition of vertical lines within each of the four photographs prohibiting easy lateral progression from one to the next. If these photographs of banal airport spaces present what Marc Augé (1995) and others have described as postmodern non-spaces, taking the position of the migrant provocateur, deSouza's works show these sites of mobility as inherently restrictive, and often prohibitive for non-conforming bodies. Drawing attention to the inbuilt systems of power and surveillance that organise the practices of everyday life, deSouza asserts a socio-political critique through the very quotidian nature of what is pictured.

Fig. 2, 3, 4 Allan deSouza, *Indians, Mahatma* and *Welcome Back*, from *The World Series*, 2010–11. C-print, each 30.48 x 40.64 cm © the artist.

On their journey, deSouza's migrant provocateur subversively collates details. In a sequence of three images, *Indians, Mahatma* and *Welcome Back* (fig. 2, 3 and 4), Indian identity is wilfully misunderstood, translated and transformed in visual and verbal play. A statue of the Indian Independence leader Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), with his hand raised in a sign of friendly recognition, is positioned between two photograph: one records graffiti in a US penitentiary proclaiming 'Indians Welcome', and the other shows an interior space at London's Heathrow Airport, complete with a billboard-size studio portrait of a British-Asian policeman pictured with his arms held open in a welcoming gesture. Engaging with a network of pre-existing linguistic and visual signs, deSouza considers here the inter-

section of the individual (diasporic) Indian with the typological, while also questioning the efficacy of visual and textual tropes when exposed to subversive misinterpretation. In the context of the US, the 'Indians' identified here most likely refer to indigenous peoples. Nonetheless, in deSouza's photographs, signals of welcome are made to and by the Indian who is identified as within and without a national imaginary, in both the US and UK. But with knowledge of Gandhi's status as a trained lawyer, his imprisonment in South Africa by British colonial authorities, and his policy of non-cooperation during the Indian independence movement, his statue's position sandwiched between the prison and policeman undermines any easy, hospitable welcome. Attention to these three images also demonstrates that deSouza is alert to the different conventions of Conceptual photography available to him. While *Indians* recalls an informal snapshot, and *Welcome Back* a banal document, *Mahatma* presents an apparent 'effacement of camera skills' (Buchloh cited in Edwards 2004, p. 146), in which deSouza has deliberately aped 'bad' photographic composition. Reminiscent of John Baldessari's *Wrong* (1967), in *Mahatma* the light source is positioned obliquely behind the statue, casting its face into shadow, while a flagpole rises from the top of the sculpture's head and culminates in a rippling US flag, here positioned as Gandhi's hat. The consequence of these compositional tactics is a sense of destabilising humour, whereby deSouza is able to ironically challenge the emotive power of the flag, and the powerful governmental and national structures it represents. Cumulatively these three works propose that welcome is dependent upon one's designation as a 'good' or 'bad' Indian: the lateral flow between images challenges viewers to see the double standards at play according to when and where the South Asian migrant is greeted.

In his various references to the Indian in *The World Series*, deSouza addresses the experiences of a

heterogeneous South Asian diaspora that is continually negotiating its own identities in opposition to reductive stereotypes. As such, he engages with the value systems inherent in language, challenging its ideological structures and the normalisation of pejorative terms designed to delimit, contain and disenfranchise. What is at stake when reading deSouza's – as indeed in Chandra's – work beyond the biographical is the notion that artistic engagement with identity politics can critique hierarchies of power rather than be confined to expressions of the self (Shaked 2017, p. 28).

Fig. 5, 6. Mohini Chandra, from the series *Plane Views*, 2012. Archival photographs, dimensions variable © the artist.

Much of Chandra's work has utilised and reflected upon her father's personal photographs that recorded his multiple migrations, which took him from Fiji to Canada, the UK and Australia. *Plane Views* is an assemblage of photographs taken by her father during the 1960s and '70s, depicting aerial views of the Earth, taken from the windows of multiple aeroplanes undertaking different journeys (fig. 5 and 6). All share a similar compositional form, variously showing the oval frame of the aeroplane window, a glimpse of an engine, or the tip of a wing. The horizons beyond are captured via slightly blurry views of clouds, sky and indistinct landscapes. Seen together, *Plane Views* presents a typology of views. Much like Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), which documented different gas stations using similar compositional forms in order to highlight their unique but ultimately uniform design,

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Chandra's *Plane Views* gesture towards different, but ultimately similar journeys. Seen as a series, the differentiation between each of Chandra's vernacular readymades dissolves, and distinct journeys become interchangeable. In this reading, the start and end point of the journey is effaced leaving the unseen migrant forever en route; there is no before and after, there is no here or there. Held in this state of perpetual motion, the passenger never lands, disembarks or settles down; it is not known whether what is shown records the relief of escape, or thrill of arrival (or vice versa). In a family photo album, it might be expected that an aerial view taken from an aeroplane would be preceded by a picture of the departing traveller, and/or succeeded by an image of their arrival. But *Plane Views* offers no such comforting narrative: the aeroplane never touches the ground. Chandra's repeated views of the in-between marks her migratory subject as different – other – from fellow passengers who might also temporarily inhabit this space of the aircraft. *Plane Views* gives an embodied experience of the diasporic migrant for whom travel is not an easy form of postmodern nomadism; what is captured is not cosmopolitan nomadism in a Deleuzian sense, of being at home in the world, everywhere and nowhere. Here, the migrant is always and forever on the move, always in a state of unsettled restlessness. As such *Plane Views* cumulatively conveys a poignant and pensive meditation on perpetual displacement. Indeed, Chandra has stated:

> in a diaspora situation, when the trip being made is for the purpose of migration, this process of seeing and then photographing the view from a plane goes beyond the generic and acquires a specific set of meanings. The resultant images, which record a kind of limbo, the space in between departure and arrival, can be read as a metaphor for the migrant's own particular state of 'not belonging' (Chandra 2015, pp. 110–11).

Without that final act of disembarkment, each image of *Plane Views* is suffused with anxiety of unknown futures and the possibility that entry will be denied. Knowledge of the archival source of Chandra's readymades is pertinent not *because* the work is necessarily about her father, but because that information adds a contextual, and ultimately poignant, layer to the broader objectives of her appropriation of those particular images. As well as standing as a tribute to her father's resilience in the face of multiple migrations, his authorial gaze out of the aeroplane window is rendered in Chandra's re-presentation as indicative of a more widely felt diasporic state of being.

deSouza and Chandra 'go to the heart of the displacement, slippage, interruption, and alienation that stem from the conditions of human mobility' (Mathur 2011, p. xi). It is my contention that they are able to address these concerns so successfully because of their concentration on, and prioritisation of, in-transit sites and transitory spaces. As Homi Bhabha reminds us: 'These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself' (1994, pp. 1–2). Significantly, each artist utilises personal and collective South Asian diasporic experiences in order to participate in contemporary debates around migration and freedom of movement; their work alludes to the multi-locational positioning of the global South Asian diaspora as colonial consequence, as well as commenting on contemporary anxieties over the migrant as an invasive body, or body out of place. Considering *The World Series* and *Plane Views*, what reverberates is a heightened sense that arrival and settlement is bestowed, granted or permitted, and may not be permanent. Cumulatively, but in formally different ways, these photographic series propose that living in transit is part and parcel of a shared diasporic condition

and they consequently speak to a broad and varied spectrum of constituents.

While knowledge of deSouza's and Chandra's personal heritage and migratory experiences may underpin an initial approach to *The World Series* and *Plane Views*, it is clear that discussions of these works cannot be limited to the personal or sociopolitical. The journeys pictured in deSouza's *The World Series* may recall his own experience of multiple migrations, but are not documents of them. In *Plane Views*, Chandra may present photographs found in her father's personal archive, but articulated as readymade art objects they are displaced from the Chandra family biography and repositioned as allegorical and indexical signifiers of a shared experience of diasporic migration. Attending to the formal and visual rhetoric of the photographs themselves, it is evident that these are works of art that are sensitive to both the exigencies of identity politics and the operations of Conceptual art. Indeed, the formal and material choices made by deSouza and Chandra directly assist their critical enquiry: utilising strategies of street photography, documentation and linguistic play, deSouza exposes existing ideological systems of spatial control, language and iconography. By putting those systems on display and opening them to scrutiny, *The World Series* performs a meta-critique of the assumptions that organise society. Presenting her readymades as 'a suite of variations on a theme' (Wollen 1978, p. 22), Chandra's *Plane Views* explores the nuances of typological multiplicity while simultaneously activating the specific materiality of the found, archival photographic object in ways that extend the personal experience into the communal. Here the image-object functions as both historic document and contemporary commentary. Cumulatively, through their respective series of photographic works, deSouza and Chandra demonstrate that the binary separation of Conceptual art forms and political critique cannot be sustained.

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