



**THE
ARCHITECTURE
OF A
CONVERSATION**

DAYANITA SINGH

BY JYOTI DHAR





“You see, it’s not me,” says the 52-year-old bookmaker and photographic artist Dayanita Singh, describing the impetus behind her practice. “It’s always *in* conversation with someone.” In the seclusion of her spacious, two-floor apartment in South Delhi, where the top floor serves as her studio, Singh tells me about the previous evening’s discussion with her collaborator and close friend, the writer Aweek Sen, on the “architecture of a conversation.” Excited by the idea that furniture and its varying spatial relations may induce different types of liaison and rapport, Singh has recently taken to designing bespoke wooden tables, cabinets and benches to be used within her home as well as during exhibitions. The idea is to stimulate varied forms of engagement and storytelling, whether between two people or between viewer and artwork. The furniture ranges in form from divan-like seating for an alcove in her studio, which tests out her theory that “the best conversations are often horizontal,” to long dining tables for her holiday home in Goa. Among these quasi-architectural structures are her “mobile museums,” encasing interchangeable sequences of photographs drawn from her 30-year career, which were included in “Go Away Closer” (2013) at London’s Hayward Gallery, her first major retrospective in the United Kingdom. Back in Delhi, in the middle of a room lined with boxes marked “Nony Negs” and “File Room 2,” as well as framed poetic texts and Singh’s own photographic prints, the artist reveals that our interview will be the first dialogic exchange to test her latest prop—a stylized, square table.

After discussing various authors who have influenced her over the years, Singh explains how she has come to think of the surrounding photographs as “just 15 words on the wall,” to be used in the same way a writer would draw from their own extensive, reiterative vocabulary. It soon becomes clear how important language and communication are to Singh, a fact she recently acknowledged at

the opening of her Hayward show, for which she admits to having spent as much time curating the seating plan at the dinner as she did the show itself. “Whatever I’ve been able to do,” she told her fellow diners, “whoever I am today, I owe to the conversations with certain people, most of who are sitting here today.” Yet, while telling me about how she thrives on regular input from “key people,” Singh also refers to herself as a “soloist” whose practice requires sabbaticals of silence. She refers to the latter as periods during which she “returns to zero” and pauses to “listen to the work.” The paradoxical tensions between intimacy and privacy, stimulus and emptiness, productiveness and restraint, are at the heart of almost all she does. The conceptual significance of the *khali* or “empty note”—the pause between resonant beats in a composition—was first introduced to Singh by her mentor (and the subject of Singh’s first book), the world-famous percussionist Zakir Hussain.

Singh first met Hussain at a critical juncture in her life. It was her first year at the National Institute of Design (NID) in Ahmedabad, where she studied visual communication from 1980 to 1986, and it was also the year that her father died, when she was just 18. Singh’s mother, nicknamed Nony, held progressive views, and had fought with her father to allow her to go to NID in the first place. Nony, a talented amateur photographer, played a pivotal role at this point. She did not ask Singh to return home, settle down and take over the family’s affairs, as would have been customary for the eldest child in such circumstances, but told her, in Singh’s words, to “go, be happy, study . . . have as many lovers as you want, but think carefully if you want to get married or not, because I don’t think you’re the marrying kind.” Shortly after, Singh met Hussain backstage at one of his concerts, in an infamous incident in which she fell over, shouted and sulked, apparently charming the bemused young musician in the process. “And then the world just opened up,” Singh says of the

(Previous spread)
MONA AND MYSELF, 2013,
inkjet print, 30.5 × 45.7 cm.

(Opposite page)
ZAKIR HUSSAIN AND ABBAJI, 1983,
from *Zakir Hussain* (1986).

(This page, top)
MYSELF MONA AHMED, 1996,
from *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001).

(This page, bottom)
**ZAKIR HUSSAIN AND TABLA MAKER
SADANAND**, 1982, from *Zakir Hussain* (1986).

All images in this article are courtesy the artist.

moment. Still a student, she was invited to accompany Hussain and his peers on their travels and ended up documenting the maestro’s rise to fame over the next six years.

The result would be Singh’s first publication (and her design project for her final year at NID), *Zakir Hussain* (1986). The book is comprised of black-and-white photographs, ranging from sequential shots of the musical prodigy performing on stage with his father—the famed tabla player Allah Rakha—to close-ups of Hussain joking around with his daughter and nephew, as well as ethereal portraits of him looking up at the sky or gazing back at the viewer intensely from behind his tablas. Just as the tablas appeared to become an instrumental extension of Hussain’s being, so did the camera for Singh. Even at this early stage, she began to have a sense that it was not necessarily photography but different ways of working with photographs that intrigued her. Regardless of this, the impact of Hussain’s paternalistic mentoring on Singh was profound. “Zakir took it upon himself to become my guru,” she recalls. “I received the best training I could ever have got. I understood the importance of focus and most of all I understood rigor.” Singh and Hussain would talk for hours, about life, loss and the importance of *riyaz*—the highly disciplined practice necessary to hone one’s skills. At a time when she was interested in learning the flute, calligraphy and massage, among other skills, Hussain is said to have advised her, “Keep the focus on what you have chosen to do. Don’t give in to every temptation that comes your way. You must push the limits of your medium . . . and be prepared to give 18 hours a day to whatever you choose.”

The importance of pushing the boundaries, and also of never repeating oneself, remain integral to Singh’s practice. After this formative time with Hussain, she decided to venture to New York, where she studied photojournalism at the International Center of Photography from 1987. Upon her return to India the following year, Singh took on a number of assignments for *The Independent*, *The New York Times* and *The Times* (UK), often with a brief to document the obligatory social issues of India—poverty, child labor and disease. It was then that another chance incident would have a lasting impression on Singh’s psyche and practice. When she was asked to document a community of eunuchs living in Old Delhi in 1989, one subject, Mona Ahmed—whose first name is a woman’s and last name is a man’s—refused to be photographed for fear of being recognized by her relatives in the UK. Singh agreed to drop the assignment, a decision that profoundly touched Mona and earned Singh the respect of this highly marginalized group. It was only years later, in 2001—when Mona, who had since lost her adopted child and been thrown out of the community, decided to tell her story—that Singh eventually published these photographs.

Singh’s first book had received some criticism for not being sufficiently personal, but *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001) was praised as an affecting and genuine portrait of emotional anxieties and of the intense relationship between artist and subject. As a woman from a wealthy, upper-class family in Delhi, Singh admits that photography was the only possible meeting point for Mona and herself. Having first documented the life of a sought-after celebrity, Singh had now ventured into the territory of a neglected outcast. Through her time with Mona, Singh learned what it was like to not always be





understood by one's own social circle, to surround oneself instead with a chosen family and, most importantly, to take the unexpected path. Rather than attempting to represent "the unrepresented," as would be more typical of documentary photography in India—such as that practiced by the country's first female photojournalist, Homai Vyarawalla, who incidentally met Mona and Singh before her death in 2012—Singh's photographs started to enter a space of fantasy and intersubjectivity. The partly staged, partly unprompted monochromatic images in *Myself Mona Ahmed* vary from Mona gracefully posing in the manner of a 1950s film heroine, to an aged, distraught Mona seemingly caught off-guard as she clings to a baby monkey. Others show the two protagonists together, staring back at the viewer with deadpan expressions or with Singh's head resting peacefully in Mona's lap.

Whereas some of these more choreographed images can be read as pointed allegories, others are more ambiguous and are left open to interpretation. The photographs become documents of Singh's artistic gestures and direction, tools for Mona to reclaim her agency, and symbols for larger, universal narratives. Though the works have a satisfying composure to them, Singh reminds me that the meaning she strives for extends beyond the borders of her photos. "My image is not in the photograph," she says. "It's what's outside it, what you can't see, what I'm hinting at—and then an image is successful." Despite the seeming success of these poignant portraits, which straddle the confessional and the elegiac, Singh still feels that they never did Mona justice. In 2013, Singh accidentally pressed the record button while trying out her new digital camera with Mona. The result is a three-minute, black-and-white video clip in which Mona listens and mouths the words to her favorite Bollywood song from *Chori Chori* (1956). The resulting "moving still" image, *Mona and Myself* (2013), was shown in the German Pavilion at last year's Venice Biennale. Finally, a third medium had perfectly captured "a third sex," as Mona calls herself. "I could put all this work aside," Singh says as she points to the photographs scattered around us in her studio. "I could toss the whole lot out. That moving image has something no still has."

In retrospect, Singh's frustration and dissatisfaction with classic, print-on-wall photography began to surface in "Chairs" (2005), a series created during a residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, for which she explored the domestic object as a repository for metaphor and drama. Using highly pared-down imagery, "Chairs" plays with the tension between absence and presence, anticipation and residue—themes that she had begun to develop in the earlier series "Privacy" (2003), which depicted the interiors of homes owned by upper-middle-class friends and family. At the launch of the former's exhibition, "Dayanita Singh: Chairs," at London's Frith Street Gallery, she came to a new understanding. "When I went to see exhibitions," she says, "I thought, 'So what if you have 50 beautiful pictures?' It wasn't enough. For me the thrilling part was having the book in my hands." While the opening was taking place downstairs, Singh invited select audience members to the apartment upstairs, where she had on display diaries filled with images taken during her residency in Boston. She later chose ten friends to distribute ten copies each of the exhibition's bespoke publication as they saw fit. With this gesture and this exhibition,

Singh began to challenge the prescriptive frameworks of the gallery world, including print editions for photographs, standard framed formats and the role of exhibitions themselves. Cultural theorist and critic Ranjit Hoskote has talked about the superfluous nature of exhibition-making in his extensive writings and even proposed the library as an alternative form. Singh was beginning to realize that, for her, the book was the most natural and yet versatile form of exhibition.

It was in 2007 during the making of a new book, *Go Away Closer*, however, that, as Singh recalls, "all hell finally broke loose, and suddenly the rules weren't there." The realization came when Singh was in Kolkata, taking a photograph of a young schoolgirl sulking face down on her bed. "I thought, I know this feeling, I've shot with it before. I rushed back to my contact sheets and found all the images with that same feeling." The energized Singh took the images to her house in Goa, laid them out on long tables while listening to Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 1 for the next 24 hours. "I had finally been able to photograph the unsayable," Singh says now. "I realized that I could make something, not based around Mona, Zakir or Privacy. I could break free of that." It was here that Singh moved away from the idea that an individual photograph was limited to its use within a particular series. Instead she started to think of her images as a liberated lexicon with which to build limitless narratives, making sequences from her archives for the first time. For this, she did not need words or accompanying text—imagined associations between corresponding images were enough. "For [sequencing] the understanding of music, rhythm and pacing are very important," she tells me. "Do you want to do a raga, going slowly, exploring the notes, or do you want to go straight into a great Wagner piece?" Through her knowledge of the work of classical composers such as Gustav Mahler, Richard Wagner, Rashid Khan and Kumar Gandharva, Singh started thinking about how to convey a similar range of simultaneous emotions through imagery alone.

To this day Singh takes several small bundles of mini-prints wrapped in white cloth with her whenever she travels, in case she suddenly has an idea for a sequence. "The longest time is not in the making of the pictures," she says. "That I can do with my eyes shut. The rigor is taking those five prints . . . putting them out, leaving them, and putting them out again. When I'm ready, I know." When asked how she knows when an edited series is complete, Singh once again credits Hussain as having taught her innovation, concentration and restraint. "I'm incredibly lucky to have people like that in my life," she says, talking of everyone from Hussain and Sen to her long-standing friend and publisher Gerhard Steidl, whom she cites as "maybe the key for me right now." From 2000 to 2007, Singh went on a number of short journeys to explore various cities, often visiting museums, monuments and ashrams, either with one of these various key contacts or with them in mind. After each trip, she made a pocket-sized book filled with a sequence of photographs that reflected her thoughts, experiences and travels. She would send one copy to the friend "as a thank you for opening up [her] mind in some amazing way" and keep one for herself on her kitchen shelf. Singh began to refer to this growing collection—now totaling 30 books—as her "kitchen museum," while deeming those with copies as "keepers of the museum."



(Opposite page, top)
BALLERINA CHAIR, 2003,
from *Chairs* (2005).

(Opposite page, bottom)
SAMARA AND POOJA
MUKHERJEE, 1996,
from *Privacy* (2004).

(This page)
BOOK BINDING, 2006, from
"Go Away Closer" series (2007),
silver gelatin print, 25.4 x 25.4 cm.

(This page)
Installation shot of "Sent a Letter" at
Satram Das Jeweller, Kolkata, 2008.

(Opposite page, top)
BLUE BOOK 17, 2008, from "Blue Book"
series (2009), C-print, 45.7 x 45.7 cm.

(Opposite page, bottom left)
BLUE BOOK 7, 2008, from "Blue Book"
series (2009), C-print, 45.7 x 45.7 cm.

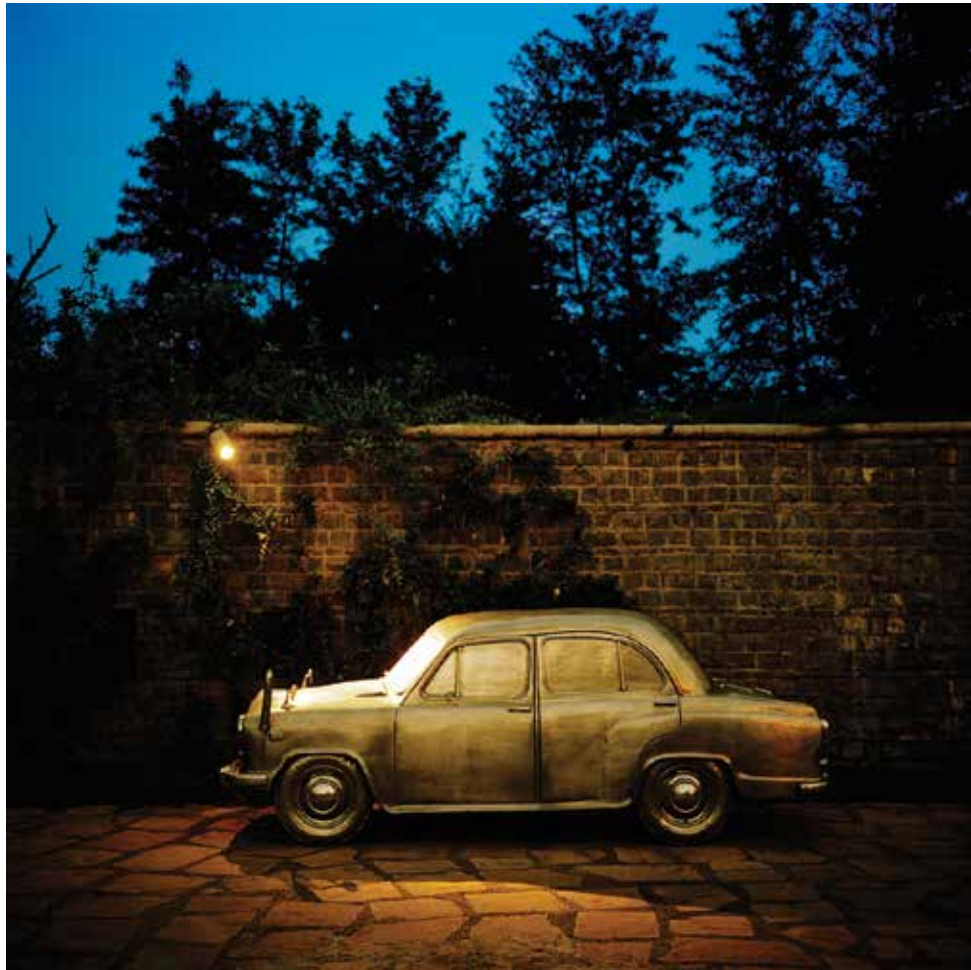
(Opposite page, bottom right)
BLUE BOOK 18, 2008, from "Blue Book"
series (2009), C-print, 45.7 x 45.7 cm.

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When Steidl received his own volume, which contained photographs of Rabindra Setu (popularly known as Howrah Bridge), a matrimonial photography studio and a Kolkata-style portable trunk that turns into a bookshop during the day, he suggested that Singh publish some of her "kitchen museum." Seven compact books—"Bombay," "Calcutta," "Allahabad," "Varanasi," "Devigarh," "Padmanabhapuram" and "Nony Singh" (after her mother)—were presented together in a slip case, each containing 20 images that folded out like an accordion, together forming the pivotal series and publication *Sent a Letter* (2008). Displayed in a range of formats and places, the series marked a moment of simultaneous culmination and departure for Singh. Progressing from the "Go Away Closer" series, for which she made sequences that depict an overarching narrative, these images were to be read fluidly, like a collection of short poems. Each delicately designed set of books, wrapped together in a white canvas cover, was not in place of, or an alternative to, the exhibition, as had been the case with *Zakir Hussain* and *Chairs*, respectively; it was an aesthetically composed work of art in its own right. And, in contrast to the limited circulation of *Chairs*, *Sent a Letter* would be mass produced and widely disseminated, despite its deliberate use of analog formats of print, paper and film.

Excited by the idea of her books "traveling," her next project, *Blue Book* (2009), was a publication designed as 23 postcards bound together, with the intention that two copies be purchased, allowing one set of cards to be retained and the other taken out and posted. This time Singh gives us soulless, expansive, industrial landscapes resembling deep, azure, color-field paintings that we can hold in our hands. Significantly, this was Singh's first foray into color, aside from her earlier magazine assignments, and was, once more, a fortunate accident of an imprecise science. "When I made those factory pictures," she recalls, "I meant to shoot in black and white, but I ran out of film. So it was a mistake." While other notable photographers living in India, such as Raghubir Singh and Ram Rahman, have used color liberally, Singh had always found color to be problematic, overwhelming and distracting. Through *Blue Book* and her collection of nighttime seascapes, *Dream Villa* (2010), Singh found a color language of her own that toyed between anxiety and calm, seduction and terror: "*Dream Villa* was really my perverse self . . . They're delicious prints. They're so beautiful you want to lick them!" These two series broke away from traditional bookmaking formats, and *Dream Villa* further confounds expectations by having all its images across two pages. The result is that a part of the image is lost within the book's binding, reminding viewers that, for Singh, the image is not sacrosanct.





(Opposite page, top)
CAR, 2010, from the “Continuous Cities/
 House of Love” series (2010), inkjet print
 50.8 x 50.8 cm.

(Opposite page, bottom)
GIRL WITH CAMERA, 2010, from
 the “Dream Villa” series (2010), C-print,
 45.7 x 45.7 cm.

(This page)
MUSEUM OF CHANCE, 2013, installed
 at “Dayanita Singh: Go Away Closer”
 at Hayward Gallery, London, 2013.
 Photo by Simon White.



Discussing her continual subversion of conventional categories of art, photography and bookmaking, Singh says, “My medium [photography] is quite limited. If I were a writer I wouldn’t have to invent so much, because there’s so much you can do with words.” Among the books that have been central to Singh’s practice are Italo Calvino’s short-story collection *Difficult Loves* (1970), Vikram Seth’s poems in *All You Who Sleep Tonight* (1990) and English writer Geoff Dyer’s *Zona: A Book About a Film About a Journey to a Room* (2012) about Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1979 film *Stalker*. Singh has found the multiple streams of consciousness employed in *Zona* a useful point of departure for constructing layers of narrative, but also adopts the intensity and open-endedness found in *Difficult Loves’* fictional literary form, and even appropriated the cover of one of its editions for her own book, *House of Love* (2011). Singh feels that this last series should be classified as literature rather than photography, while *Myself Mona Ahmed* should be filed under biography. Repeatedly, Singh asks me what photography really means in today’s world and suggests that we rename the photographer as author or editor: “If you really thought about photography, you wouldn’t photograph, because what you have, will never be again. You think you’ve got it, but you haven’t. You’ve got nothing.” These notions of desire, longing and missed opportunities surface again when we discuss Seth’s poetry. “*All You Who Sleep Tonight* is the most important book for me,” she says. “It’s all about the fact that everything’s an illusion. Photography’s an illusion, it’s a mistake. And love, what could be a bigger illusion than love?” Noticing the affinities between Seth’s poems and *Go Away Closer*, Singh cut up copies of the latter book and pasted them in her copy of the former.

For Singh’s most recent rendition of *Go Away Closer* at the Hayward Gallery last year, she displayed a new assortment of archival photographs in seven stand-alone wooden structures—her “mobile museums”—each of which will have its own catalog. “In one sense,” she says, “I’ve gone away, I’ve departed from something—but I had to go through all that practice, exhibitions and books to arrive at this.” The structures reference quotidian, domestic furniture but also hark back to another of Singh’s preoccupations: the personalized archive. Encased in an unusual grid-like formation, the images can be read horizontally as well as vertically and, for Singh, need to work in every possible direction. The selection of the photographs can

take up to three months, and goes back to her intense practice of editing, sequencing and reading multiple images together on contact sheets. “I think the mobile museum can be a great form for me, like the book was an important form . . . I have found a way for this two-dimensional form to take on a three-dimensional quality, where the body has to engage with the work.”

Singh is now busy designing structures for her own Museum Bhavan, which is currently displayed on the first floor of her apartment in Delhi, and will be open to the public every full moon by appointment only. As we leave, Singh shows me more wooden furniture in the foyer of her apartment, this time two customized cabinets, each filled with one of her recent publications: *File Room* and *Nony Singh: The Archivist* (both 2013). The latter, a record of her mother’s obsession with photography, archiving and album-making, strikes up a conversation with the images of chaotically stacked files that fill the former. She intends to send both of these cabinets together to museums, libraries and even old printing presses, with the photograph reproduced on the cover of *File Room* varying between each of the 70 images contained within, so that the effect is that of an exhibition. “These book structures are changing something for me. They’ve been a big breakthrough.” When I mention that there seems to be something performative in the staging or engagement with these structures, Singh agrees: “Yes, Aavek was getting at that yesterday . . . I don’t know what it is and I don’t want to know. Don’t give me some fantastic theory, because you’ll kill it for me!”

We come full circle to Sen and Singh’s discussion on the framework of a conversation and how different discussions may develop within curated architectural settings, and what an interview conducted while standing alongside her “mobile museums” might be like and how tables that slide over beds might be quite useful when having reclining conversations. “I see that this table works really well.” Singh decides, looking at our current arrangement. “The work that I’m really looking forward to making is a cell for myself, four meters by five meters, that contains all the furniture I need in one compact space. It could be dismantled and travel with me. I don’t know where [the idea] will go and that excites me. I feel like I have a box full of all the ingredients—now let’s see what I do with it. In that sense, it feels like I’ve just started.”