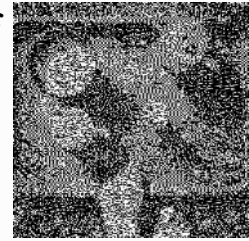




# Lady of Silences: The Enigmatic Photo-Text Work of Zarina Bhimji

Article by **Allison K. Young**

WORD COUNT: 10,948



## Abstract

Zarina Bhimji's work debuted in London in the 1980s, during a period that witnessed important revisionist critiques from the feminist and Black British art movements. Her early photo-text installations, primarily created while she was a student at Goldsmiths' College, address issues surrounding diaspora, the body, and the inhumanity of Britain's immigration process. While these understudied works are most often framed in relation to postmodernist identity politics, Bhimji's work avoids overtly political signifiers, instead privileging symbolically charged indices and abstract visual tableaux. As the artist states, "The language I use is related to vulnerability and this is not a culturally specific emotion". Working toward a more holistic understanding of Bhimji's art and its context, this article places it in dialogue with that of Mary Kelly, who taught at Goldsmiths throughout the 1980s and whose own production in London bridged the artistic and discursive boundaries that divided the art of the time. In so doing, it positions Bhimji in relation to both surrealist and second-wave feminist artists through her interest in affect, memory, and the symbolic representation of enigmatic childhood and domestic objects as expressions of subjectivity and the unconscious. As such, it demonstrates that postcolonial artists such as Bhimji are central, not peripheral, to the development of British contemporary art history.

## Introduction

*And finally, there is the difficulty caused by the author's having left out something which the reader is used to finding; so that the reader, bewildered, gropes about for what is absent, and puzzles his head for a kind of "meaning" which is not there, and is not meant to be there.*

—*The Use of Poetry*, T.S. Eliot

In 1993, the art critic Jyll Bradley wrote a profile in *Women's Art Magazine* on the Ugandan-Asian artist Zarina Bhimji, in which she reviewed the artist's solo exhibition at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham and assessed Bhimji's nascent practice.<sup>1</sup> Bradley recalls her first encounter with the artist's work about seven years prior, when she saw her degree show at Goldsmiths' College, London. Bhimji had prepared a series of color-stained photographs paired with short textual

phrases, each encased in black frames. Reading “SILENCE IS STARVATION” or “SILENCE ABOUT TO BREAK”, these feature quotations from third-wave feminist texts by such writers as Cherríe Moraga, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Hazel Carby.<sup>2</sup> Bhimji’s images, however, are wholly incommensurate with the declarative tone of her textual panels: they depict enigmatic tableaux of mundane domestic objects, photographed at floor-level or from unusual viewpoints and focusing on the interplay of light and texture, or the manipulation of scale. Titled *In Response to the F-Stops Exhibition (For the White Feminist)*, the series, according to Bradley, “seemed to address the unacknowledged absence of black women in white feminist discourses which encouraged women to re-see, re-read and re-invent lives and histories. Bhimji was using the ‘new’ language of sight to discuss that which was silenced”. Yet, the installation, she continues, “addressed this in subtle ways—the upsetting of a bowl, a foot penetrating the frame of a tray. Silences were small and significant, large and echoing” (figs. 1 and 2).<sup>3</sup>

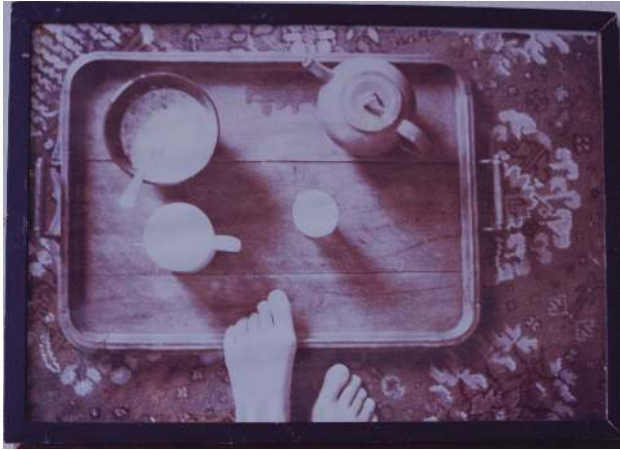


Figure 1

Zarina Bhimji, *In Response to the F-Stops Exhibition. For the White Feminist* (detail), exhibited at Chelsea School of Art, London, 1985. Also exhibited at Goldsmiths, University of London, 1986, installation consisting of photographs and text. Copper toned photographs on document art paper, 35mm film, black & white, hand toned, 330 × 270 cm (overall dimensions variable). Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS/Artimage 2021 (all rights reserved).



Figure 2

Zarina Bhimji, *In Response to the F-Stops Exhibition. For the White Feminist* (detail), exhibited at Chelsea School of Art, London, 1985. Also exhibited at Goldsmiths, University of London, 1986, installation consisting of photographs and text. Copper toned photographs on document art paper, 35mm film, black & white, hand toned, 330 × 270 cm (overall dimensions variable). Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS/Artimage 2021 (all rights reserved).



Figure 3

Zarina Bhimji, *Aroused Heat* (detail), artist commission for *QJM: Monthly Journal of the Association of Physicians* 90, no. 12 (December 1997), medium format camera, transparency, 46 × 314 × 6.4 cm (overall dimensions variable). Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS/Artimage 2021 (all rights reserved).

Archival records on Bhimji's early photo-text practice are scant; Bradley's review contains one of the only published mentions of her degree show, about which many questions remain.<sup>4</sup> In this short piece, the critic articulates a paradox that has continued to mark the reception of and scholarship on Bhimji's practice. While her work is understood to be concerned with issues such as migration and diaspora, the body, memory and trauma, and the violence of humanitarian crises, her images are also perceived as iconographically illegible, intentionally emptied of political or biographical signifiers. This apparent illegibility is amplified by the artist's persistent rejection of critical interpretations that read her images only in relation to her specific cultural background. Viewers must search for meaning, instead, in tender photographs of childhood objects or abandoned edifices; in ephemeral materials such as spices, flowers, and burnt cloth; in the play of light and texture; in personal keepsakes and lines of poetry (fig. 3). Such vignettes function as indices to the feelings of loss, betrayal, and melancholy that accompany the mass migrations and acts of violence of which her work softly speaks. Critics continue to describe her work as opaque, enigmatic, and purposefully evasive. This much is certainly true. Yet I would venture that this perception has as much to do with factors external to Bhimji's practice—such as the rise of artistic postmodernism and mounting debates about race, identity, and inclusivity in the British art world in the 1980s—as it does with the art itself. We assume that we are perceiving something absent or erased, yet too often ignore the visual intelligence of what is there, in plain sight before us.

Toward the advancement of scholarship on this earliest stage in Bhimji's career, this article focuses on the artist's photo-text work of the 1980s, and asks what new connections and frameworks may arise when we consider Bhimji's work in dialogue with a wider range of art made in and around the London scene of the 1980s and 1990s. The text unfolds in three sections: the first provides an overview of the institutional forces that limited the reception of work by Black British artists during these years; the second reconsiders Bhimji's art in relation to surrealist aesthetics and visualizations of memory and the unconscious, by way of the work of her tutor at Goldsmiths, the artist Mary Kelly; and the third addresses her work's relationship to poetry as an analogous creative form. In approaching Bhimji's work as part of a more complex art-historical lineage than is often assumed, I intend to trouble the stringency of art history's classificatory structures, as well as to demonstrate that post-colonial or Global South artists such as Bhimji are central, not peripheral, to the development of British contemporary art.

This strategy is motivated by the work of critics such as Jean Fisher and Kobena Mercer, who have long compelled art historians and critics to move beyond writing that overemphasizes sociological frameworks while neglecting the art object itself. As Mercer ventured in his essay "Iconography After Identity", which addresses the state of critical writing on Black British artists of the 1980s, "there is a strong tendency in much of this discourse to shuttle between two extremes, between a sort of low-grade celebrationism of multicultural murmuring and a highly charged, explosive and divisive controversy, both of which deflect attention from the work of art itself".<sup>5</sup> He later surmises that:

*because so much of the writing concentrates on the artist's biographical identity or the experience of exclusion in institutional practice, the more interesting problems and questions of interpretation concerning iconography and iconology tend to be continually pushed back and deferred.*<sup>6</sup>

In much of her writing through the 1990s, Jean Fisher astutely acknowledged that:

*to be locked into the frame of ethnicity is also to be locked out of a rigorous philosophical and historical debate that risks crippling the work's intellectual development, and excluding*

*it from the global circuit of ideas where it rightfully belongs.*<sup>7</sup>

I follow Fisher's imploration to "rethink the ways by which we frame art in order to *return to it what is proper to art*".<sup>8</sup>

My aim is not to discount the significance of Bhimji's position as a diasporic subject, which remains crucial to a holistic understanding of her art. Yet the issue lies with what is often a reductive reception of her works, whereby the search for biographical signification, guided by both the rise of critical postmodernism and the politics of racial representation in 1980s Britain, results in one of two outcomes: either the work is simplified and misread as being merely *about* South Asia, Uganda, or postcolonial histories in a didactic sense; or it is declared to be inadequate because such references aren't readily available at the surface. As one writer admitted in a 1988 feature on Bhimji's work, "[o]ne of the criticism[s] Zarina has received is that her work is 'not powerful enough', that it is too 'quiet', almost bordering on the passive".<sup>9</sup> Responding to this critique, Bhimji has stated: "my work is not passive. It deals with complex issues which I like to give time to".<sup>10</sup> By the early 1990s, Bhimji began to strongly resist being categorized or labeled as a "Black artist" or an "Asian artist", and refused to participate in any more group exhibitions that were premised around the theme of identity. As she told the art historian Zehra Jumabhoy in 2012, "I just don't find such conversations interesting".<sup>11</sup> Evidence of her refusals and objections are readily found and oft-noted in literature, interviews, and statements.

What should we make, then, of the subtle tableaux, fragmented textual phrases, and shifting points of view that characterize Bhimji's early photo-text installations? What other interpretive methods may be brought to bear on a practice that is intentionally guarded in the face of such critique? One method that is rarely explored is to reverse the terms of the above dismissal, to lean into the "quietness" in her art as a source of insight. In their edited volume, *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound* (2013), Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carillo Rowe suggest that "silence allows us the space to breathe. It allows us the freedom of not having to exist constantly in relation to what is said".<sup>12</sup> Running counter to the idea that "silence" is symptomatic of oppression and powerlessness—as in Gayatri Spivak's famous call for the subaltern to "speak"—Malhotra and Rowe problematize our accepted understanding of a power dynamic that favors those with the loudest voice, or the paternalistic notion that voice needs only be 'given' to marginalized individuals. They ask, instead, a question that motivates my research and reflections on Bhimji's art: "What nuances, strategic forms of engagement and ways of navigating or resisting power are made possible through silence?"<sup>13</sup>

### ***From Two Worlds and the Politics of Representation in 1980s Britain***

There is an almost playful sense of indirectness in Bhimji's statements about her upbringing and past experiences, which echoes the abstract visual language that characterizes much of her work. When asked about her childhood in Uganda, for instance, she has avoided factual anecdotes in favor of sensory invocations, describing images, sounds, and colors drawn directly from memory. In a 1993 interview, she explained that her earliest memories were "textural things which are very small rather than specific ... more like, the texture of the wallpaper, or the earth, or my brother being born".<sup>14</sup> One year earlier, speaking on BBC radio with the curator Mark Haworth-Booth, she recalled memories of "bees in cardboard boxes, the sound of it... the earth, the mud, the color of the mud".<sup>15</sup> Such anecdotes are of interest here, not necessarily because of *what* they tell us but *how*. Fascinated with such multilayered and subtle modes of expression, Bhimji has recounted the creative ways in which different members of her family "used" the Gujarati language: her father, for instance, incorporated metaphor into his speech, entangling

multiple meanings and associations, never satisfied with simple facts and narratives. “That’s how I think I developed my interest in poetry,” she muses. “Things that he’s told me, I found that I kind of use in my photography”.<sup>16</sup>

Bhimji was just eleven years old when her family, in 1974, joined the nearly 30,000 refugees who settled in the United Kingdom after Idi Amin’s decree calling for the mass expulsion of Asians from Uganda two years earlier. Raised in Leicester, she came of age in an era of British politics notable for the xenophobic and anti-immigration campaigns of Conservative politicians such as Enoch Powell and Norman Tebbit, a period followed by a decade of austerity and ethno-nationalist nostalgia under Margaret Thatcher. As a teenager, Bhimji became interested in feminist and anti-racist activism, and was naturally drawn to the theatricality of such demonstrations. She visited the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp, a non-violent activist community formed in the early 1980s to protest the establishment of an American nuclear base in the County of Berkshire, west of London. In their most well documented protest action in 1983, women gathered to link arms around nine miles of barbed-wire fencing. They affixed objects to the fences—baby clothes, bottles, teething rings, family photographs, and stuffed animals—so that these intimate objects would demonstrate the human toll of nuclear catastrophe. Bhimji has recently recalled how the fence resembled a kind of site-specific art: “Looking back, it was this mix of ethical and intellectual reflections that stayed with me throughout my career as an artist”.<sup>17</sup>

In 1983, Bhimji began her studies at Goldsmiths, where she continued to be drawn to the use of distinctive objects, or images thereof, as indirect stand-ins for her personal or emotional experience. Undated photographs from her student portfolio offer hints of her political awakening: in one, captioned “How India won her Freedom”, she layers her Student Union ID card from Goldsmiths over the visa document that allowed her entry to Britain from Uganda. In another, a pair of sandals is thrown haphazardly on the floor. One shoe has landed on a softcover book, which is open to the first page of bell hooks’ essay, “Racism and Feminism: The Issue of Accountability”.<sup>18</sup> The artist joined a women’s group at Goldsmiths, and read texts by Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, all of which informed her desire to fuse the personal and political in her art.

Bhimji’s debut on the British art scene coincided with several important group exhibitions of work by Black artists: *From Two Worlds* at London’s Whitechapel Gallery (1986), *The Image Employed* at Manchester’s Cornerhouse Gallery (1987), and *The Essential Black Art* at London’s Chisenhale Gallery (1988). Yet, like many artists of her generation, she soon grew uneasy that her participation in such survey shows would encourage the tokenization of her work within the wider British art world. Institutional interest in the work of Black artists, in the late 1980s, was often led by a new Arts Council policy whereby arts organizations could only access all available funding by promoting “diversity”.<sup>19</sup> Between 1985 and 1990 alone she participated in nearly fifteen group exhibitions that were themed around varied demarcations of racial or ethnic identity. These included shows that emphasized Asian or Asian-British identity, such as *Jagrati* at the Greenwich People’s Gallery, London (1986), *Darshan* at Camerawork Gallery, London (1986), and *Fabled Territories* at the Leeds City Art Gallery (1990), as well as those themed around Black or Black-British identity, including *Mirror Reflecting Darkly* at Brixton Art Gallery, London (1985), *Black Women Photographers* at Camden Arts Centre, London (1987), *The Devil’s Feast* at Chelsea School of Art, London (1987), and *Dislocation* at Kettle’s Yard Art Gallery, Cambridge (1987), among others.

Such exhibitions arrived on the heels of decades of activism waged in protest of the British art world's pervasive culture of racial exclusionism, yet they were inadequate solutions proposed via bureaucratic channels.<sup>20</sup> In 1981, for instance, the Greater London Council implemented a "Race Relations Unit" and "Ethnic Minorities Committee", the latter appended by a subdivision called the "Black Arts Division" that sponsored exhibitions and provided funding to artists. In the following few years, the Arts Council of Great Britain created new appointments and committees tasked with supporting "Black and Minority Ethnic" artists. This increase in financial support was certainly welcome, yet, as Naseem Khan had predicted half a decade earlier in her prescient 1976 report, *The Arts Britain Ignores*, the "creation of new structures, Ethnic Arts Boards and full time officers" ran the risk of furthering segregation within the art world, establishing "an alternative body—a sort of parallel black Arts Council", which would "perpetuate the myth that ethnic arts are some special activity for ethnic minorities alone".<sup>21</sup> These developments meant that Black artists were increasingly limited in their control over the contexts in which their work was displayed. The checklists for exhibitions bearing titles such as *Eastern Views: Works by Young Asian Artists from the Midlands* (New Walk Museum, Leicester, 1985) or *Double-Vision: An Exhibition of Contemporary Afro-Caribbean Art* (Cartwright Hall, Bradford, 1986–87), were guided by artists' backgrounds, rather than a desire for thematic or stylistic cohesion. Viewers, in turn, came to expect such projects to be instructive or educational, as if an exercise in sociology rather than art. As Fisher would later put it, the art criticism that followed "tends not to look at or address the experience of the work but rather, a commodified level of context".<sup>22</sup> The result is palpable in critical responses that range from the naive to the pernicious; in a review of the groundbreaking *Into the Open* at Sheffield's Mapping Gallery, Waldemar Januszczak ventures that "all black art is no more worthy of our undivided attention than all white art", a statement that is perhaps only palatable when understood as a condemnation of the "survey" model in general.<sup>23</sup> As Eddie Chambers notes, overtly racist language can be found in many critical assessments of the era's most significant exhibitions, where terms such as "loud and angry", or "choking on its own anger" are deployed "to describe art that had attempted to challenge racism or explore identity and culture".<sup>24</sup> Eventually, as Fisher has remarked, "the perception that an 'ethnicity marker' would, on the one hand, lead to limited readings of the work, and on the other, prejudice an artist's success in a commercial market unreceptive to non-white artists was ... a wide-spread anxiety".<sup>25</sup> This claim is evidenced by the refusals of such artists as Anish Kapoor and Shirazeh Houshiary, who primarily work in abstraction and have achieved widespread acclaim since the 1980s, to participate in exhibitions such as *The Other Story*. Bhimji's own early hesitance is legible in her contribution to the *From Two Worlds* exhibition catalogue, in which she asserts that "the act of making oneself visible, of exploring identity's many selves, can be a dangerous one", and that she "refuses to adopt the constraints of soul destroying stereotypes".<sup>26</sup>

In fact, the example of *From Two Worlds* at the Whitechapel Gallery, which constitutes Bhimji's debut in a major institutional venue, lends some context to these concerns. Themed around the notion of cultural synthesis, the show was organized by then director Nicholas Serota in collaboration with the artists Gavin Jantjes, Sonia Boyce and Veronica Ryan, who acted as selectors. In the catalogue, the organizers write that they "felt that the most valuable exhibition at this moment would be one which sought to reveal the limitation of labels such as "Asian", "Indian", "Japanese", or "Afro-Caribbean" which are often used unthinkingly to describe art of very different moods and ambitions."<sup>27</sup> The show generated mixed reviews, both within and beyond the Black British art scene. James Lampley wrote for the *African Concord* that: "*From*



*Two Worlds* ... openly invites the kind of labels that its organisers are determined to avoid: the “ethnic” tag generally appended to art emanating from the Third World, or in this instance, art by non-European artists living in Britain.”<sup>28</sup> In *City Limits: London*, Mark Currah suggests that the included work “overcomes the restrictions imposed on it: the category into which it had to fit to merit inclusion”.<sup>29</sup> The Artist Keith Piper wrote that *From Two Worlds* “looked and operated as if it had been formulated within the classic ‘survey’ mould”, echoing the response of Chambers, who declined to participate and later ventured that the show was “arguably, ultimately an exercise in marginalization”.<sup>30</sup>

The discourse surrounding this exhibition reveals much about the forces guiding the interpretation of work by Black artists that diverged from the kinds of sociological or political expressions that critics had by then come to expect. While Bhimji turned away from biographical and culturally specific content in her art of the 1990s, her early photo-text installations provide an interesting opportunity to expand our interpretive toolkit; in many cases, these works *do* address issues surrounding gender, immigration, and diaspora, but perhaps the more interesting question is *how*. Fisher, again, offers insightful commentary on art criticism in the age of postmodernist identity politics. She cautions against “a return to some hermetic formalist critique”, clarifying instead: “I am asking how we might effectively understand the processes of art, especially where cross-cultural symbolic orders are employed, without making them a sub-category of, say, anthropology or sociology. Visual art remains a material-based process, functioning on the level of *affect*, not purely semiotics—i.e., a synaesthetic relation is established between work and viewer which is *in excess of visibility*. It involves rather enigmatic sensations such as the vibrations of rhythm and spatiality, in a sense of scale and volume, of touch and smell, of lightness, stillness, silence or noise, all of which resonate with the body and its reminiscences and operate on the level of “sense” not “meaning””.<sup>31</sup> For *From Two Worlds*, Bhimji presented two photo-text installations (both 1986), which were installed across a corner of a gallery. One of these, entitled *What She Herself..Is...Was...Would Like To Be?* is a grouping of eight “stained” amber-colored photographs of clothing paired with elusive fragments of text (fig. 4). This work’s title is a reference to the short phrases that are embossed in a stenciled typeface across the panels. Visual motifs include clothing strewn across the floor, a small painted box with decorative floral patterns, and an embroidered object (fig. 5).



Figure 4

Zarina Bhimji, *WHAT SHE HERSELF...WAS...IS...WOULD LIKE TO BE?*, installation, Goldsmiths, University of London, 1986. Also exhibited at *From Two Worlds*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1986, toned photograph on document art paper. 35mm film, black & white, hand toned, 46 × 314 × 6.4 cm (overall dimensions variable). Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS/Artimage 2021 (all rights reserved).



Figure 5

Zarina Bhimji, *WHAT SHE HERSELF...WAS...IS...WOULD LIKE TO BE?* (detail), exhibited at Goldsmiths, University of London. 1986. Also exhibited at *From Two Worlds*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1986, toned photograph on document art paper. 35mm film, black & white, hand toned, 46 × 314 × 6.4 cm (overall dimensions variable). Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS/Artimage 2021 (all rights reserved).

No doubt prompted by the overarching theme of *From Two Worlds* as it relates to expressions of cultural identity, commentators tended to search for perceived signifiers of “Indianness” within Bhimji’s contribution to *From Two Worlds*, despite there being very few within the images (fig. 6). Nick Axarlis, for instance, suggested that the artist “uses photography and text to investigate the lives of Asian women”, a statement that seems slightly at odds with the highly personal nature of Bhimji’s art;<sup>32</sup> Deanna Petherbridge misidentified an object in one photograph as a “skull cap” worn by Muslims during daily prayers.<sup>33</sup> Yet relevant iconography was subtly present. In addition to the titular stenciled phrase, Bhimji included handwritten texts, photographed and re-printed for the installation, which seemed to narrate her personal negotiation of cultural identity: “The past is a dream”, reads the leftmost panel, in cursive handwriting. “Flying my flag of identity, I prowl, in search of the chanting, incognito still, alone, but aware, visible. In peach shalwar kamiz with red geometric pattern ... Black Boots”. A nearby photograph depicted a pair of trousers, a blouse, and a pair of black Doc Martens. For some, the shoes may have recalled Mona Hatoum’s 1985 *Roadworks* performance in Brixton, wherein the British-Palestinian artist walked barefoot, with Doc Martens—a symbol of British ethno-nationalism, “usually worn by both police and skinheads”—laced around her ankles like prisoner’s shackles (fig. 7).<sup>34</sup> As such, in Bhimji’s piece, text and image work together to suggest that her British and Indian identities may be tried on or taken off at will.



Figure 6

Zarina Bhimji, *WHAT SHE HERSELF...WAS...IS...WOULD LIKE TO BE?*, installation, Goldsmiths, University of London, 1986. Also exhibited at *From Two Worlds*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1986, 1997, toned photograph on document art paper. 35mm film, black & white, hand toned, 76.4 × 113.6 cm. Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS/Artimage 2021 (all rights reserved).



Figure 7

Mona Hatoum, *Performance Still, Roadworks*, 1985–1996, gelatin-silver print on paper, mounted on aluminium, 76.4 × 113.6 cm. Collection of Tate (P80087). Digital image courtesy of Mona Hatoum (all rights reserved).

The second installation, entitled *Peckham = Uganda*, similarly comprised a set of enigmatic photographs of found objects, mainly dolls and childhood toys arranged atop rocks or within abstracted, empty fields (fig. 8). In most cases, the objects were placed on the floor or viewed from unusual angles; sometimes, the rug or floor alone was all that was captured in the frame. The images were paired with a disjointed narrative that described memories related to assault, fear, and police violence in both Uganda and Britain. While Bhimji's texts offered a view into the visceral experience of living through a civil war, the images in both installations were comparatively inscrutable.



Figure 8

Zarina Bhimji, *Peckham = Uganda*, exhibited at Goldsmiths, University of London, 1986. Also exhibited at *From Two Worlds*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1986, 1986, liquid light on glass, text, muslin, box frame, 66.04 × 33.02 cm. Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS/Artimage 2021 (all rights reserved).

Writing for the *Financial Times*, Petherbridge devoted to Bhimji the highest word count of all the artists exhibiting in *From Two Worlds*. More specifically, she targets the artist's use, or alleged misuse, of the photo-text installation format. After discussing Rasheed Araeen's piece *Look Mama...Macho* (1986), which draws inspiration from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, and contains, in Petherbridge's description, "photographs of blood and slaughter" meant to symbolize religious ritual, the critic then posits an affinity between Araeen's and Bhimji's works, writing that "Zarina Bhimji has also chosen to work within the conventions of the cultural models of the photo-text practice". She continues,

*Zarina's family fled Idi Amin's dictatorship when she was 11, and her personal experiences are incorporated within the work following the conventions of feminist practice where personal and political are opposed as a dialectic. Although her red photographic images of clothes—embroidered skull caps and abandoned saris—are poignant and sad, [the] rigid alienation techniques of this very specific form of art-practice are shown up as being inadequate for her needs.*

*In exhibitions of black or non-European artists working in Britain, criticisms have been made of inadequate uses of cultural models: What is not observed is that perhaps the standard and restricted models of mainstream Western art are not adequate for the passion, the newness, or the discord of the message.*<sup>35</sup>

Petherbridge seems to appreciate the tender beauty of Bhimji's photographs, yet expresses some hesitation with regard to the artist's choice of a "rigid" artistic format that had been used to comment on issues of representation or mass media by postmodern artists such as Barbara Kruger, Adrian Piper, and Lorna Simpson in the United States, and by Mitra Tabrizian and Victor Burgin in Britain. She brings certain expectations to her encounter with Bhimji's work, whereby the "message" projected in works by "black and non-European artists" is seen in opposition to art that is "standard" and "mainstream"—terms that establish the modernist white artist as a normative or neutral aesthetic standard.

There is much to unpack in this view that Bhimji's work is somehow disconnected to the aims of photo-text installation. For one, this claim reflects wider divisions emerging within fields concerned with identity politics, such as feminist art, around this time. As the critic Janet Wolff has explained, for instance, the photo-text format had been relegated to one side of a rigid boundary that separated "the cerebral" from "the intuitive" as conceptual aims in women's art practices since the 1970s.<sup>36</sup> This dichotomy is one among many binary oppositions that were debated within feminist circles, such as "'scripto-visual' work versus painting; deconstruction versus celebration; theory versus experience; and elitism versus accessibility". To this point, by opening her own discussion on Bhimji's work with a statement on the artist's diasporic background, Petherbridge suggests from the start that because the work's content is likely biographical or personal, her use of a "critical" aesthetic format appeared to transgress the boundaries that separated these two distinct methods of practice. In contrast to the cool and ironic style associated with the media-savvy generation that preceded her, for which photo-text art may be most suited, Bhimji's work seemed too diaristic and intimate. As Petherbridge suggests, more generously, the format itself was perhaps too rigid a choice for her distinctive artistic vision.

The difficulty of placing Bhimji within the photo-text genre can be read between the lines of much commentary on this stage of her practice, and is alluded to, for instance, in Kellie Jones's significant *Artforum* essay "In Their Own Image" (1990).<sup>37</sup> In this piece, Jones writes about the ways in which Black women artists on both sides of the Atlantic make use of the photo-text method. She claims astutely that the genre's efficacy stems, in part, from its ability to mirror "the way photographs usually circulate in the world: in magazines, newspapers, and advertising, and on television an image is always accompanied by a verbal cue", noting that adding text "can also expand the meaning of a single image".<sup>38</sup> Such works, Jones explains, provocatively address "the commodification and objectification of women", while in some cases, "strident texts appropriate a 'male' voice, critiquing the foundations of authority".<sup>39</sup> These descriptions best suit examples such as Mitra Tabrizian's renderings of movie posters (1986–1987) that feature "women who appropriate femininity as power" (fig. 9).<sup>40</sup> Jones connects Bhimji's more introspective photographs to this group by way of her attention to "the broader issues of migration, displacement and identity", but she also writes that her images depict "vaguely defined objects connected with 'Indianness'", that "float in and out of view" and are often encountered as "large, at times grainy, photographs" in which the images are blurred, overexposed, or somehow unresolved—qualities that seem at odds with the confrontational and slick aesthetics of much postmodernist photo-text installation.<sup>41</sup>



Figure 9

Mitra Tabrizian, *The Blues* (detail), colour photograph.  
Digital image courtesy of Mitra Tabrizian.  
DACS/Artimage 2021 (all rights reserved).

It is to these early works and their reception that we may trace the origin of what Jumabhoy calls “the problem of situating Bhimji”.<sup>42</sup> The artist’s work is undoubtedly informed by third-wave feminist literature, and by her own experiences as an Asian woman and an immigrant in Britain. Thus critics expect to encounter a deconstructive practice—perhaps signaled by operations of appropriation or the use of mass media artifacts—but instead they find a more intimate and elusive art. Following these observations, most recent scholarship on Bhimji’s practice has acknowledged its enigmatic nature. For instance, T.J. Demos identifies in Bhimji’s recent work an “aesthetics of opacity ... a poetics of the image disconnected from background information”, the implications of which he sensitively outlines with regards to Bhimji’s diasporic identity.<sup>43</sup> As he puts it, Bhimji’s later filmic works “‘speak’ ... with a telling silence”.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, responding to the observation that “Bhimji herself has for years been vitriolic” about the subject of racial categorization, Jumabhoy aligns the artist’s “hazy” aesthetic with the theories of cultural hybridity espoused by Homi Bhabha and others, linking her imagery to Bhabha’s own “swishy language, the unraveling sentence structures, the muddying of metaphors” that offer ambiguity in both content and form.<sup>45</sup>

Expanding on the work of these and other scholars, I propose a kind of lateral view across art history—one that seeks connections across modalities and movements without necessarily making a claim that such interrelationships are derivative or directly consequential to one another. Bhimji’s photo-text work can be understood, for example, through the lens of a wider range of local artistic models than the cohort with whom she most often exhibited. Specifically, her emphasis on affect, memory and the symbolic use of childhood or domestic objects, and her blending of the “critical” and the “intimate”, may have its roots in another constellation of artists working in and out of London at this time, mainly Bhimji’s tutor, the conceptual artist Mary Kelly (but also Susan Hiller, Helen Chadwick, and others).

Kelly’s work of the late twentieth century combines the stark didacticism of conceptual art with disarmingly personal subject matter, which sometimes includes abject bodily reference. She has resisted the appellation “feminist artist”, despite her work’s engagement with themes surrounding women’s embodied and psychological experiences. In the artist’s words, “you have to talk about feminist interventions in art practice and not ‘feminist art’”.<sup>46</sup> Thus, poised between the

boundaries of several post-war movements, her practice has been subject to critique on all sides: conceptual artists bristled at her inclusion of references to motherhood and child-rearing in an otherwise stark and theory-driven artistic field, while feminist artists often found her work alienating and inaccessible.<sup>47</sup> In ways that echo my characterization of Bhimji's inclination in the 1980s, Griselda Pollock has described Kelly's filmic and artistic practice according to qualities of negation, which are shared by that of Laura Mulvey and other avant-garde filmmakers in 1970s London, for instance, "the refusal to opt either for social realism and political immediacy or formalism and self-referentiality".<sup>48</sup>

While the multivalence of Kelly's practice cannot be captured in full herein, I wish to focus on a facet of her work that has been brilliantly examined by Margaret Iversen, which is her oeuvre's apparent engagement with (and perhaps, intervention in) surrealist aesthetics via psychoanalytic theory. The combination, in Kelly's practice, of purposefully disorienting or distancing visual methods with a deep interrogation of subjectivity and the body, opens up new interpretive pathways that we may bring to Bhimji's own early work, specifically her focus on symbolic part-objects and the relationship of text and image. As with Bhimji's later practice, Kelly resists figural representation in many of her installations made during the 1970s and 1980s, which instead feature articles of clothing, indices of touch, and unfiltered writing as a gateway to questions of subjectivity and the subconscious. These works originate, Iversen proposes, in a modernist interrogation of the subconscious that can be traced to the early twentieth-century avant-garde, and not necessarily in the postmodern politics of representation, although the latter provides a crucial framework for the development of both artists' work. Toward the thesis that Bhimji's photo-text work is ultimately intended as a poetic articulation of memory, the following section proposes an alternate artistic lineage for Bhimji's distinctly enigmatic visions of diaspora experience.

## **The Intimacy of the Index**

While connections between Bhimji and Kelly have not been ventured in the scholarship on Bhimji's work, aside from a brief (and important) mention in a footnote in Demos's aforementioned essay, traces of this relationship can be found scattered throughout archival materials and lesser-known primary sources. Bhimji mentioned the influence of her tutor in a 1992 radio interview with Mark Haworth-Booth, when she describes the formative nature of her experience at Goldsmiths; she briefly recalls that "Mary Kelly was teaching there at the time" and notes the influence of women's student groups, adding that "I'd never read poetry or come across poetry in my life before [...] so I learnt things like that".<sup>49</sup> Further, the connection is noted in a 1987 article by Anandi Ramamurthy in *Artrage Magazine*, which discusses the work of several Asian artists. Succinctly anticipating some of the arguments that I hope to develop here, Ramamurthy writes:

*We are all living in Britain and we are by no means oblivious to the experimentation and creativity that is going on around us. Zarina Bhimji's work for example, has been influenced by Mary Kelly and other white feminist artists. Like Mary Kelly, she too creates portraits of herself through her clothes and belongings, but her works are less time specific and evoke a multiplicity of emotions.*<sup>50</sup>

Born in Iowa in 1941, Kelly lived in London from 1967 to 1987. She was involved with the Berwick Street Film Collective in the early 1970s and attended Saint Martin's School of Art, known for its cultivation of an advanced conceptual art cohort. She held a teaching position at Goldsmiths from 1977 to 1987. The distinct character of her artistic style—marked by an



emphasis on repetition, seriality, and duration—is perhaps indebted to her training at Saint Martins, yet her practice developed in what she called the “open space” left unexplored by her male peers, who were reluctant to address the gendered condition of subjectivity through a deconstructive lens. “I did want to shift the emphasis from the notion of the analytical proposition to a more synthetic process”, she notes. “In my case, obviously, the founding condition is an investigation of the subject”.<sup>51</sup>

Affect and theory work in tandem in Kelly’s art to encourage the viewer’s emotional identification with her subjects, an aim which is made possible through the auratic nature of individual artifacts and texts. In her seminal installation, *Post-Partum Document*, Kelly draws from psychoanalytic discourse on femininity and motherhood in order to align her “insistent and almost intuitive” desire for theory with “the cathexis of the everyday experience of mothering”.<sup>52</sup> Completed in 1973–1979, the installation comprises six parts, with the later stages unfolding during Kelly’s tenure at Goldsmiths. Each presents material objects that index the evolving relationship between the artist and her infant son: wool vests, diaper liners, and examples of the child’s scribbles, writings, and speech acts (fig. 10). These artifacts are accompanied by analytic diagrams and diary-like texts written by the artist; such private traces are then sorted, classified, and preserved, re-enacting the mother’s attempts to postpone the loss of her son to the world of language and culture. Kelly mines her diagrams from psychoanalytic literature and from Western aesthetic and philosophical history, emphasizing the legacy of Enlightenment visuality through allusions to thinkers such as Leon Battista Alberti and René Descartes. In so doing, she absorbed a then recent wave of critical theory that described modernism as a pervasive epistemological system, which itself must be deconstructed before any real social change could be expected. Yet Kelly insists on a kind of haptic aesthetic not present in much deconstructive art; as she later remarked, “there’s no point at which it can become a critical engagement if the viewer is not first—immediately and affectively—drawn into the work”.<sup>53</sup>





Figure 10

Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document: Documentation IV, Transitional Objects, Diary and Diagram (prototype)*, 1 of 11 units, 1976/2015, Perspex, white card, plaster, cotton, ink, string, wood, 35.5 × 28 cm each. Collection of Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital image courtesy of The artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London (all rights reserved).

The dualities and oppositions inherent in Kelly's work reveal the double-bind that women artists—and others whose perspectives have been erased within high modernist discourse—had to negotiate as feminist art and politics gained visibility in the 1970s. Debuted at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, *Post-Partum Document* was lambasted and ridiculed for the inclusion of “dirty nappies” in the galleries; those who were sympathetic to the modernist project of artistic autonomy vilified the installation’s body-oriented materiality. On the other hand, many felt that her work’s emphasis on theory was alienating, even *anti-feminist*, “too cerebral and obscure”.<sup>54</sup>

Within the contradictory space between these critiques lies one of the primary affinities between Kelly and Bhimji: both artists are deeply interested in the politics of the body, yet refuse to directly represent it in their work. Referring to the performative gestures that came to define feminist art practice in her generation, Kelly later explained, “a number of women used their own bodies or images to raise questions about gender, but it was not that effective, in part because this was what women in art were expected to do”.<sup>55</sup> Bhimji has likewise very rarely produced representations of the body in her art; the primary exception among her photo-text works—the 1989 installation *Live for Sharam and Die for Izzat*—contains images only of a nude male figure (figs. 11 and 12). The absence of the artist’s own body works strategically against (white) viewers’ preconceived expectations for her work. In fact, Kelly has likewise hinted that her decision not to picture the body was meant as a preventative measure against women’s own subconscious “identification with the male voyeur”.<sup>56</sup>



Figure 11

Zarina Bhimji, *Live for Sharam and Die for Izzat* (detail), commissioned by The Photographers' Gallery, London UK, 1989, installation consisting of seven lith film prints, hand-colored, suspended from the ceiling. Fourteen gelatin-silver prints and text, wall mounted, 35mm film, black & white, dimensions variable. Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS/Artimage 2021 (all rights reserved).



Figure 12

Zarina Bhimji, *Live for Sharam and Die for Izzat* (detail), commissioned by The Photographers' Gallery, London UK, 1989, installation consisting of seven lith film prints, hand-colored, suspended from the ceiling. Fourteen gelatin-silver prints and text, wall mounted, 35mm film, black & white, dimensions variable. Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS/Artimage 2021 (all rights reserved).



Figure 13

Mary Kelly, *Interim, Part I: Corpus (Menacé)*, detail, 1 of 30 framed parts, 1984–1985, laminated photo positive, silkscreen, acrylic on Plexiglass, 121.9 × 91.4 cm each. Digital image courtesy of The artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London (all rights reserved).



Figure 14

Mary Kelly, *Interim, Part I: Corpus (Extase)*, detail, 1 of 30 framed parts, 1984–1985, laminated photo positive, silkscreen, acrylic on Plexiglass, 121.9 × 91.4 cm each. Digital image courtesy of The artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London (all rights reserved).

In her 1997 essay, “Visualizing the Unconscious”, Iversen traces many of Kelly’s artistic choices to surrealist art, an unexpected source that nonetheless casts works like *Corpus* in a new light. She focuses on Kelly’s direct engagement with concepts in psychoanalysis, a point of departure shared with André Breton and his surrealist cohort, who sought to envision the workings of the unconscious mind using methods like automatism and dream-work. As Iversen explains, “the combination in Surrealism and in Kelly’s work of psychoanalysis, politics, word-image art practice, found objects, as well as ‘ethnographic research’ and documentation, makes the comparison compelling”.<sup>57</sup> While the writer warns of some significant ideological differences—namely, the culture of sexism (and I would add primitivism) that characterized many of the surrealists’ exploits—this reading nonetheless opens up an alternate art-historical lineage for certain photo-text practices of the later twentieth century that seem slightly out of sync with the deconstructive or media-centric methods of postmodernist art. If we may further triangulate this lineage—that is to say, to position surrealism, Kelly, and later Bhimji in dialogue—we might understand that the younger artist’s work need not be written off as semiotically illegible or “closed” to critique, as has often been proposed; rather, it succeeds at an entirely different aim: the articulation of her personal experience not through iconographic representation but rather through the illogical and enigmatic languages of dreams, memory, and the irrational. Iversen explains, for instance, that articles of clothing often functioned in surrealist art as fetishes that signified the absent body, as in Meret Oppenheim’s sculpture of bound shoes (*Object*, 1936), Giorgio de Chirico’s paintings of gloves and other isolated hand-like forms (such as in *The Song of Love*, 1914), and André Breton’s cast-bronze sculpture of a woman’s glove (*Gant de Femme*, 1926). She asserts that the images in Kelly’s *Corpus* may have been inspired by the latter—that

“article of clothing suggesting a metonymy of part for whole (the glove standing in for the whole woman) and having a definite expressive character” (fig. 15).<sup>58</sup>

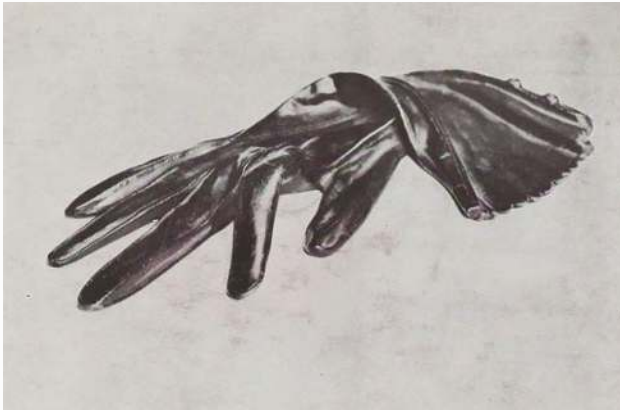


Figure 15

Brassaï, *Untitled*, from André Breton, *Nadja*, 1924, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Association Atelier André Breton (all rights reserved).

To create *Corpus*, Kelly applied semi-transparent photographic laminates directly to the Perspex. Each image would cast a faint shadow behind it, “emphasizing the space or gap behind”. For Iversen, this effect bears resemblance to works on glass by Marcel Duchamp, such as *Glider Containing a Watermill* (1913–1915), which “sits on a hinge attached to the wall and throws a shadow on the wall”, just as Kelly’s images of jackets and vests cast a shadow on the matter within the frame.<sup>59</sup> As she explains, quoting the artist:

*Kelly gives us a clue to what she found valuable in this work and the photographs when she contrasts the function of perspective construction, in which the surface of the picture is tied to a geometric point and conceived as the intersection of a pyramidal path of light, with another kind of picture found in “the realm of lost objects”, a realm where “vanishing points are determined not by geometry, but by what is real for the subject, points linked, not to a surface, but to a place—the unconscious—and not by means of light, but by the laws of primary process”.*

*Orthodox perspective construction was either entirely disposed of, or skewed and exaggerated, as in painting by de Chirico or Dalí. But for the representation of lost-objects, traces of experience or traumas cut off from consciousness, the object is perhaps best represented as isolated, floating in an uncharted space. [my emphasis]*<sup>60</sup>

Above, Iversen posits that new types of perspectival construction seen in surrealist photography are visually representative of unconscious states; such images depart from the conventions of naturalism, whose aim is to transcribe “reality” in an objectively accurate and recognizable (iconic) manner. This effect can also be discerned in Bhimji’s early photographs, which utilize a generous manipulation of aperture and other techniques of distortion. Bhimji has remarked that early in her studies, she was “interested in the idea that you could photograph something in macro lens and blow it up so big” to present a humble subject in monumental scale or heightened focus. This brings to mind canonical examples of surrealist photography such as Brassaï’s *Sculptures Involontaires* (fig. 16).<sup>61</sup> Across her early works, subjects are often severely

[illegible]

Brassaï, *Sculptures Involontaires*, from *Minotaure*, Nos. 3-4 (Paris: Albert Skira, 12 December 1933), photograph. Collection of RMN-Grand Palais. Digital image courtesy of Estate Brassaï / Photo: Jean-Gilles Berizzi (all rights reserved).

Iversen's invocation of Duchamp's works on glass is especially pertinent to Bhimji's own lesser-known experiments in the same medium. In Bhimji's installation *Peckham = Uganda*, exhibited in *From Two Worlds*, the artist did not make use of paper at all. Grey picture frames were transformed into shallow display boxes, into which she placed pieces of muslin embedded with typed prose, which is printed on the cloth itself. She exposed six photographic images directly onto the sheets of glass that are set within these frames, using an emulsion called liquid light—a light-sensitive colloid that can be spread over any surface to create a photographic substrate. Using this method, the artist produced a ghostly, ethereal effect in which each semi-transparent image hovers over thin lines of text. In a similar manner to *Corpus*, the wall-mounted installation comprises floating images that create the shadow effect previously described (fig. 17).

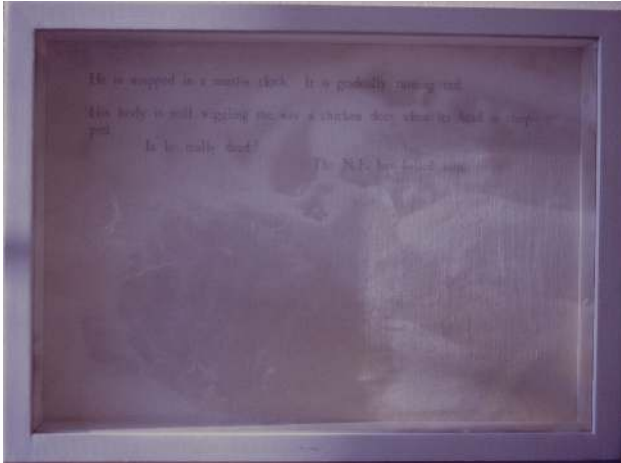


Figure 17

Zarina Bhimji, *Peckham = Uganda* (detail), exhibited at Goldsmiths, University of London, 1986. Also exhibited at *From Two Worlds*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1986, liquid light on glass, text, muslin, box frame, 35mm film, black & white, 66.04 × 33.02 cm. Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS/Artimage 2021 (all rights reserved).

The use of transparency and hovering images serves to mimic and exaggerate the suspenseful compositions of Bhimji's photographs. For instance, one image depicts a small figurine, which is cropped and diagonally angled such that it appears to be lying on its back. While miniscule, the object occupies the majority of the composition and is further magnified by its isolation within an empty visual field. Another image in the sequence features a baby doll lying unclothed on a sullied surface; her plastic eyelids are lightly shut and her tousled hair is covered in a sticky substance. The doll's face and chest are lit from above. Bhimji's camera scrutinizes the form of the head with her macro lens, as individual hairs and bits of dust catch light and focus. In a third photograph, Bhimji captures a broader spread of fragmented objects: a child's shoe (its strap unfastened), the detached leg of a plastic doll (à la Hans Bellmer, perhaps), and other objects resting on a stone surface. The image is shot from directly overhead in bright sunlight, such that each object's shadow is cast just beneath it.

Bhimji's photographs appear to allude to the visual presentation of dreams and fantasies, and the repression of trauma. Precedents for her aesthetic choices may also be found in the surrealists, who were suspicious, at first, of photography's capacity to visualize the unconscious. Breton was famously skeptical about images, in general, favoring automatic writing as a method through which the "pure creations of the mind" could be channeled. As Rosalind Krauss explains, photography's indexicality is potentially problematic because of its close ties to the physical world.<sup>62</sup> Because we often *expect* photography to be realistic, any apparent "distortions" will appear artificially derived.

However, as Victor Burgin has commented, retinal images seen by the human eye are already inverted and distorted. He writes:

*We make mental allowances for the known relative sizes of objects which override the actual relative sizes of their images on our retina; we also make allowances for perspectival effects such as foreshortening, the foundation of the erroneous popular judgment that such effects in photography are "distortions".*<sup>63</sup>

As he later concludes, “seeing is not an activity divorced from the rest of consciousness”.<sup>64</sup> Surrealist images, then, draw attention to the hidden mechanics of vision; naturalism in art is, in fact, *less* real and *more* manipulated. For photography to further embody the tenets of surrealism, the medium needed to be dislodged from its status as a narrative document that simply recorded the real. If artists could disorient and distort the photographic image, perhaps the real itself could be recast as surreal. Likewise, Krauss posits that photography’s indexicality works in service of surrealism when the image is able to express “the paradox of reality constructed as a sign—or presence transformed into absence, into representational space, into spacing, into writing”.<sup>65</sup> This is achieved through experimentation with the medium itself, such as “solarization, negative printing, cliché verre, multiple exposure, photomontage, and photocollage”, to which we may add the ghostly result of developing with liquid light, although straight photography can also dislocate reality.<sup>66</sup> In essence, surrealist photography performs a kind of visual automatism wherein the world writes itself—through the use of isolation, cropping or framing, through manipulating scale and point of view, such images model “the experience of nature as a sign or representation”.<sup>67</sup>

While Kelly’s installations reproduce the isolating effect of surrealist photographs, Bhimji may have also found precedent in the work of artists like Mari Mahr, whose surrealist-inspired photographs featuring displaced or fragmented objects were on view in several (solo and group) exhibitions in London throughout the 1980s.<sup>68</sup> Born in Chile in 1951, Mahr arrived in England after studying photojournalism in Budapest during the 1960s and 1970s, but quickly abandoned the documentary style. Interested in memory, imagination, and fantasy, Mahr photographed “ephemeral objects, insignificant in themselves, which may nevertheless carry a charge powerful enough to release memories and associations long since buried”.<sup>69</sup> Bhimji even noted some similarities between her practice and Mahr’s, such as Mahr’s use of document art paper (which lent the photograph an object-like tactility).<sup>70</sup> What is more striking is the way each artist subverts the verisimilitude of photography through manipulations in scale, strange juxtapositions, and imagery that appears haunting or elegiac (fig. 18). Nigel Finch, for instance, describes the quotidian sources of Mahr’s inspiration in a way that echoes Bhimji’s descriptions of her own work, writing that “she seemed to be fabricating a world from glimpsed events, snippets of overheard conversations, and borrowed objects”.<sup>71</sup> As immigrant artists living in a society different from the one in which they were raised, perhaps Bhimji and Mahr shared a heightened awareness of details in the visual environment that others fail to notice; even the most everyday signs and utterances can be rich in aesthetic impact and easily rendered strange.



Figure 18

Mari Mahr, *Untitled #5*, from *13 Clues to a Fictitious Crime*, 1983, gelatin-silver photograph, 23 × 15.2 cm. Collection of Art Gallery of New South Wales (547.1996.5). Digital image courtesy of Mari Mahr / the Art Gallery of New South Wales (all rights reserved).

Mahr added handwritten texts to some of her photographs in her early series, *Movie Pictures* (1980), widening the range of associations invited by her images. In fact, both Kelly and Bhimji likewise include traces of linguistic rhymes, doubles, and automatic processes in their photo-text work, recalling the automatist experimentations and wordplay of the surrealists. In *Corpus*, cursive texts are silkscreened directly onto the backs of each Plexiglass sheet paired with an image of clothing (fig. 19). Kelly's hand-rendering of her texts ensures that these narratives can be read as indexes, or in her words, "as a texture of writing, as evidence of the body". She explains that "[t]he use of the first personal indicative feels as if you're listening to someone speaking. It's about that experience of the voice".<sup>72</sup> Moreover, the viewer is able to see herself reflected in the Perspex, "inviting pleasurable identification with the characters" who describe each anecdote. The work speaks to the power of a collective unconscious, a chorus of "many bodies, shaped within a lot of different discourses".<sup>73</sup>





Figure 19

Mary Kelly, *Interim, Part I: Corpus (Menacé)*, detail, 1 of 30 framed parts, 1984–1985, laminated photo positive, silkscreen, acrylic on plexiglass, 121.9 × 91.4 cm each. Digital image courtesy of The artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London (all rights reserved).

As such, turning finally to the text that Bhimji includes in *Peckham = Uganda*, both the narrative and the form of her writing seem to reflect such processes as psychoanalytic excavation or dreamwork. Again, it is only in looking *through* the transparent images that the viewer may approach the written words, suggesting that these components are in dialogue with one another, and with the viewer's reflection, and thus unfold simultaneously in real time. Beginning with the photograph of the toy figurine, her prose opens with a subtle allusion to that image:

*Bapa and I arrived in Uganda  
at our old home.*

*During the troubles, while  
Amin's army was about,  
we all sleep together in the  
same bedroom.*<sup>74</sup>

Such passages move between past and present tenses, implying a narrative that hovers in the shifting space and time of memory, dreams, or *déjà vu*. The format of her telling exemplifies what Freud called “secondary revision”, which describes “the act of ordering, revising, and supplementing the contents of the dream so as to make a more intelligible whole out of it”.<sup>75</sup> Narrative pathways are created between disparate photographs in the installation. Bhimji's prose, for instance, continues beneath the second photograph, which depicts toys scattered across a stone surface, offering similar resonance between image and text:

*Yasmin Zaherah and mother  
have to sleep on the cement  
floor*

*in the kitchen.  
The floor is cold  
and dirty.*<sup>76</sup>

In the remaining texts, Bhimji describes scenes of violence—perhaps drawn from memory, dreams, or pure fiction—that shift between the contexts of Uganda and Britain. She writes, “They are bombarding our / verandah broken bottles. / or is it bullets?” “Bapa is angry. / He wants to kill a white / policewoman”. “I won’t let him, I say that if he / rapes her it / would be the same as raping / me”. As one “reads” the installation, violence is no longer a veiled or muted undertone; it acquires urgency as the text continues, culminating in the description of a coffin; “He is wrapped in a Muslin / cloth. It is / gradually turning red”. Later, the text references racist attacks associated with the rise of the National Front: “The N.F. / has killed him”.

While the piece does refer to some known aspects of the artist’s biography, it also contains fabricated scenes, illogically merging references across place and time. Her text, thus, should not be decoded as if biographically accurate but rather treated as akin to a kind of dreamwork, which would feature “real” people acting in unreal scenarios. As Burgin explains, citing Freud, “in dreams, words and phrases are just meaningful elements among others, accorded no more or less status than are images, and their meanings have no necessary relation to the meanings they would carry in waking speech”.<sup>77</sup>

When confronted with readings that overemphasize the biographical nature of her art, Bhimji has typically retorted that her work is intuitive and that her images are open to multiple associations. “I don’t consciously decide to photograph particular objects. I mean particular Indian objects”, she later clarified. “But over the years I’ve realized that I’ve been doing that without knowing it”.<sup>78</sup> She has elsewhere written about her creative process as intuitive, rather than premeditated, commenting that she prefers to photograph “objects which are personal to me as well as various images, conversations, bits of cloth, food labels ... I collect because they either trigger some memory or because I like them and relate to them on different levels”, adding that “the image lies in front of me, and my diary, and the work begins”.<sup>79</sup>

## **Poetry and Art as Pathways to Empathy**

If Bhimji’s photo-text work can be understood as representing memory or the irrational content of dreams, one may reasonably ask next, to what end? Inviting the viewer to create “mental images” (both in image and text), rather than offering straight documentary images, is not merely a stylistic preference; it also serves to encourage a more genuinely empathetic response from viewers. The word “poetic” is often used to describe Bhimji’s images on the basis of their indirectness, and this is no coincidence given her love of that literary genre. On more than one occasion, in fact, Bhimji has substituted lines of poetry in lieu of an artist statement. Throughout the late 1980s especially, one of her most oft-cited passages came from T.S. Eliot’s poem *Ash Wednesday*, from which Bhimji frequently extracted and reprinted the following lines:

*Lady of Silences  
calm and distressed  
torn and most whole*<sup>80</sup>

These words grace the label for an untitled photograph in the Arts Council Collection, which depicts a tableaux of shorn hair, chiffon, and rose petals. The caption reads, “In this work, [Bhimji] wanted to capture the feeling of ‘being fragile and yet whole’ and ‘beauty, yet sadness’”, before quoting the above verse.<sup>81</sup> Eliot’s poetry is famously elusive: rich in symbolism and difficult to conclusively decode. The “lady of silences”, for instance, as G.

Douglas Atkins has pointed out, is “an enigmatic and for many a perplexing if not contradictory figure”, about whom many readers likely feign understanding. Atkins admits that “paraphrasable content, as it were, holds little interest or value” for the poet.<sup>82</sup>

Bhimji’s desire to invite many possible associations is, of course, so common an approach taken by visual artists that it is almost not worth mentioning. However, given the context of representational politics which this article has presented, such a stance may be traced not only to a personal aesthetic taste but also to what Mercer calls the “burden of representation”—the widespread expectation that Black artists must shoulder the responsibility of “speaking as ‘representatives’ in the sense that they are expected to ‘speak for’ the black communities from which they come”.<sup>83</sup> Bhimji explained as much when she cited *Ash Wednesday* in the context of her preparations for the 1989 Whitechapel Open. “The gallery thought I was making a piece about trying to break out of Asian boundaries”, she recalls. “It had absolutely nothing to do with that. I responded by sending them a quote by T.S. Eliot. ... You see, it was about loss of innocence and not about being an Asian woman”.<sup>84</sup>

A lady of silences herself, Bhimji used the term “silence” not only in her degree show, mentioned earlier, but also in the title of the most celebrated photo-text installation of her early career, *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* (1987) (fig. 20), which presents an elegiac meditation on loss, resilience, and memory. In this piece, four double-sided Plexiglass panels hang suspended from the ceiling by wire, floating above a scattering of powdered turmeric and red chili on the floor below. Rose-tinted photographs face out from each side of the Plexiglass panels, layered over thin swatches of muslin cloth. They depict a range of intimate objects that shift in and out of focus: embroidered slippers, a dead bird, a piece of metal jewelry. Some are intentionally blurred to the point of near illegibility, as in the image of a sparrow, placed delicately on its back: the bird’s recumbent body dissolves into a foggy aura of white light, as both figure and ground remain frustratingly out of the viewer’s reach. Such images are paired with fragmentary textual phrases, dry-transferred via Letraset onto the muslin, which fail to form a cohesive storyline. “The anger turned inwards”, one reads. “Where could it go except to make pain?”



Figure 20

Zarina Bhimji, *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence*, installation exhibited at *The Place is Here*, Nottingham Contemporary, 2017, 1987, installation consisting of eight hand-colored, gelatin-silver prints; text printed on muslin sandwiched between the photographs; latex gloves; Plexiglass; photocopied passports on the muslin; turmeric and chilli powder scattered on the floor, each image 49.7 × 51 cm (overall dimensions variable). Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS/Artimage 2021 (all rights reserved).

Most literature on *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* focuses on the work's fourth panel, which offers subtle iconographic allusions. One side contains a set of latex gloves, pressed between muslin and Plexiglass. This is a reference to the harrowing experience of Indian immigrant women who, as reported by the *Guardian* in 1979, were “intimately examined, to determine their virginity, by Home Office officials—wearing surgical gloves”.<sup>85</sup> The other side reveals a transferred image of the artist's own visa stamp, permitting her entry to Britain as a young refugee from Uganda. This panel appears to signify the inhumanity of border regulations, the politics of space, and the individual's struggle for agency within it. Yet Bhimji has been persistent in her rejection of any historic, biographical, or cultural specificity in this piece, explaining, “it is not just about virginity tests—that is simply one example and a reminder of what life can be outside gallery walls”.<sup>86</sup>

The texts, expectedly, do not form a cohesive narrative across the sequence; rather, they seem like a collection of voices collaged together, alternating between grammatical tenses and a range of characters. Each describes an incident of hostility toward immigrants or women, and many commentators have concluded (with partial accuracy) that the texts “comment on the experience of Pakistani immigrants” or reflect “the forcefulness of spoken declaration, the anger of response, the violence of racism”.<sup>87</sup> The most oft-cited line of text is inscribed above the pair of surgical gloves: “Sometimes there, white people on their way to work laughed at their Indianness ... shouted PAKI: APRI BHENOI ... sucked their teeth, dismissing them”.

It has not been revealed in extant scholarship on *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* that these texts are not, in fact, written by Bhimji, but instead are extracted from a variety of literary sources. Each is rooted in a different historical condition of exile or diaspora, ranging from narratives on Jewish refugees in Western Europe to Caribbean immigrants in Brooklyn. Another

common thread is that each story contains a reflection on the author's or protagonist's mother, in many cases as an epitaph. Printed over one of the images of a dead bird, for instance, is a passage drawn from a poem titled "Putting the Good Things Away" by Marge Piercy; it was published in her 1985 anthology, *My Mother's Body*, in which the writer reflects on the loss of her mother. The poem begins with an inventory of tactile, symbolic objects:

*In the drawer were folded fine  
batiste slips embroidered with scrolls  
and posies, edged with handmade  
lace too good for her to wear.<sup>88</sup>*

Throughout the poem, Piercy reflects on her elderly mother at rest—"in the coffin she was beautiful"—and on the innate connection between mother and daughter—"our minds were woven together". The passage that Bhimji quotes marks a shift in the poem's tone from a sense of nostalgia to one of bitterness and grief:

*The anger turned inward, the anger  
turned inward, where  
could it go except to make pain?  
It flowed into me with her milk.*

*Her anger annealed me.  
I was dipped into the cauldron  
of boiling rage and rose  
a warrior and a witch.<sup>89</sup>*

The phrase "anger turned inwards" appears in Freud's essay, "Mourning and Melancholia", where he uses these words to describe the physical sensations that accompany melancholy, a form of depression associated, specifically, with the hollowing sadness of grief. As in Bhimji's installation, Piercy's grief is expressed through allusions to textiles and other material traces that her mother left behind (figs. 21-25).



Figure 21

Zarina Bhimji, *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* (detail), 1987, installation consisting of eight hand-colored, gelatin-silver prints; text printed on muslin sandwiched between the photographs; latex gloves; Plexiglass; photocopied passports on the muslin; turmeric and chilli powder scattered on the floor, Perspex height: 49.7 cm. width: 50.8 cm. depth: 0.07 cm. Collection of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (PH.7208:1-1987). Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS 2021 (all rights reserved).



Figure 22

Zarina Bhimji, *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* (detail), 1987, installation consisting of eight hand-colored, gelatin-silver prints; text printed on muslin sandwiched between the photographs; latex gloves; Plexiglass; photocopied passports on the muslin; turmeric and chilli powder scattered on the floor, Perspex height: 49.7 cm. width: 50.8 cm. depth: 0.07 cm. Collection of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (PH.7208:1-1987). Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS 2021 (all rights reserved).



Figure 23

Zarina Bhimji, *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* (detail), 1987, installation consisting of eight hand-colored, gelatin-silver prints; text printed on muslin sandwiched between the photographs; latex gloves; Plexiglass; photocopied passports on the muslin; turmeric and chilli powder scattered on the floor, Perspex height: 49.7 cm. width: 50.8 cm. depth: 0.07 cm. Collection of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (PH.7208:1-1987). Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS 2021 (all rights reserved).



Figure 24

Zarina Bhimji, *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* (detail), 1987, installation consisting of eight hand-colored, gelatin-silver prints; text printed on muslin sandwiched between the photographs; latex gloves; Plexiglass; photocopied passports on the muslin; turmeric and chilli powder scattered on the floor, Perspex height: 49.7 cm. width: 50.8 cm. depth: 0.07 cm. Collection of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (PH.7208:3-1987). Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS 2021 (all rights reserved).





Figure 25

Zarina Bhimji, *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* (detail), 1987, installation consisting of eight hand-colored, gelatin-silver prints; text printed on muslin sandwiched between the photographs; latex gloves; Plexiglass; photocopied passports on the muslin; turmeric and chilli powder scattered on the floor, Perspex height: 49.7 cm. width: 50.8 cm. depth: 0.07 cm. Collection of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (PH.7208:4-1987). Digital image courtesy of Zarina Bhimji. DACS 2021 (all rights reserved).

Two panels in the work borrow their prose from a 1959 novel by Paule Marshall, titled *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.<sup>90</sup> Set in post-war Brooklyn, the book traces the coming-of-age story of Selina Boyce, the daughter of Caribbean immigrants, and speaks to the intersections of gender, sex, and race within a small Barbadian community in New York. Bhimji altered these lines slightly, substituting “Ismaili” for Boyce’s “Bajan” identity. “Slowly she raised her arm”, the line reads, “thin, dark brown the sun-haze circled by two heavy gold bangles. This had come from home—every Ismaili girl wore from birth”.<sup>91</sup> Locating cultural identity in heirloom objects, this text hovers above the photograph of jewelry, delicately resting upon a bed of white muslin cloth. Finally, the work’s title can be located in a passage from Albert Cohen’s 1954 novel, *Le Livre de ma mere* (*Book of My Mother*), a collection of essays on war and exile that also reflects on solitude, aging, and grief. Cohen’s family migrated from the Greek island of Corfu to Marseilles when he was child. As German forces advanced to France in the early 1940s, Albert moved to London, and it was there “that he received news of the death of his mother” in Marseilles, as David Coward has relayed. “Unable to mourn her, he expressed his grief in a series of articles written for a morale-boosting periodical, *La France libre*”.<sup>92</sup> Like Bhimji, Kelly, and the aforementioned authors, Cohen’s grief is conveyed through the symbolism of trivial objects and pneumatic traces of his mother:

*quince jelly, pink candles, illustrated Thursday papers, plush teddy bears, joys of convalescence, birthdays, New Year letters on jagged-edged notepaper ... childhood, little scraps of peace, little scraps of happiness, Maman’s cakes, Maman’s smiles, O all this I*



*shall know no more, O charms, O dead sounds of the past, vanished smoke and withered seasons.*<sup>93</sup>

Near the end of the book, Cohen laments the thought of his mother lying buried in the ground: “She loved to breathe the sea air on those Sundays of my childhood”, he writes. “Why is she now beneath a stifling plank, that plank so close to her beautiful face? She loved to breathe, she loved life.”<sup>94</sup>

In light of these connections, Bhimji’s piece grows more complex than a mere protest of the Heathrow incident. It comes to reflect on the feelings of grief and mourning that are often attendant to experiences of migration and exile. The scattered spices beneath Bhimji’s photographs resonate as a burial, invoking ashes or the blanket of earth that covers a fresh grave. The jeweled shoes signify the absence of feet that may have once slipped into them. Noting an elegiac aesthetics in Bhimji’s later cinematographic works, Achim Borchardt-Hume asked the artist, in 2012, “What motivates this grief?” In an illuminating response, she speaks not about personal loss but about this sensation as being familiar to those who have experienced diaspora:

*Although I have relatives in India, because of the long migration period, it takes time to relate. This is what is sad; you can never really go back. Migration is about having to abandon family and friends. I wonder whether it is both, the one who leaves and the one who is left behind ...? Separation causes rupture and cultural inheritance is being questioned. The loss of this attachment may awaken anxiety; the new environment may be hostile and therefore assimilation not straightforward. Refugees are forced by circumstance to leave their country with returning home often out of question due to political reasons. This brings isolation and loneliness, and results in a complex process of mourning.*<sup>95</sup>

The poems and passages quoted throughout *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* are not cited in the installation itself. Their letters dissolve across muslin grounds, representing the whispers of many possible subjects, detached from locations, dates, or names. Bhimji encourages this ambiguity in her use of grammatical shifters such as “she”, “I”, or “here”, each only carrying a temporary reference to a fleeting act of utterance. This should encourage the viewer to transcend the specificity of the artist’s biography to find his or her own story in the images and stories she presents.

Writing on the work of T.S. Eliot, Atkins has suggested that the poet “is interested in something other than an intellectual or merely rational response to literature. He wants the whole person involved, not just ‘the heart’ but also ‘the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts’”.<sup>96</sup> As this article has shown, Bhimji extends a lineage of artists who have sought to relay the intimate content of memory, dreams, and fantasies, using objects as indices to loss or memory. In Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document*, for instance, elements such as the artist’s son’s handwriting or the imprint of his hand in clay transform into pneumonic objects; the artist clings to these as she mourns her child’s “entry into the patriarchal order”.<sup>97</sup> The absence of figural representation, as asserted above, serves to encourage a mode of identification that is not socially mediated; as Iversen has written, “the intimacy of the index, its relation to the sense of touch, is like an impression on memory which resists verbalization.”<sup>98</sup> Like the authors whose texts she has quoted, Bhimji’s photographs invite remembrance by focusing on ordinary objects and images, which gain meaning in their sedimentation in the unconscious over time. “I like to photograph things that are familiar and give them a charged feeling”, she has stated. “I am interested in speaking of that which is hard to speak about. Also, I am very inspired by literature that is quite intimate in the way it will describe something. ... There is an intimacy in the writing so that you can almost feel the details from the way they are described”.<sup>99</sup> Such comments

deepen with consideration of Bhimji's interest (noted recently by Demos) in the work of the literary theorist Elaine Scarry, whose ideas concern the failure of language to express the subject experience of pain. Writing on the importance of empathy, Scarry explains that "our capacity to injure other people is very great precisely because our capacity to imagine other people is very small".<sup>100</sup>

Yet art and literature have the ability, in Scarry's words, to "incite in our imaginings the vivacity of the perceptual world" and to impact our interpersonal behavior.<sup>101</sup> Bhimji's work achieves this directive through a range of eloquent formalist strategies that expand both on surrealism's legacy of engagement with dreams and the visualization of memory and on Mary Kelly's emphasis on intimate materiality in a feminist context. It is the artist's wish that her depictions of symbolic objects and poetic texts will "tell stories of personal and cultural significance and create metaphors for people, emotions, and events".<sup>102</sup> Our capacity to imagine others, as Scarry would have it, expands through this encounter.

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## About the author

Dr Allison K. Young is Assistant Professor of Art History at Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge. She received her PhD in Art History at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts in 2017, and specializes in postcolonial and contemporary art of the African diaspora and Global South, centering issues surrounding migration, transnationalism, and social justice.

Young has published scholarship and criticism in *Art Journal*, the *International Review of African American Art*, *Artforum*, *Apollo International*, the *Photoworks Annual*, and other platforms. She has contributed to several exhibition catalogues including *The Measurement of Presence*, the Dutch Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale (2019); *Out of Easy Reach* (2018); *All the World's Futures*, the 56th Venice Biennale (2015); and the forthcoming *Prospect.5: Yesterday We Said Tomorrow* (2021).

Before joining LSU, Young was Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow for Contemporary Art at the New Orleans Museum of Art, where she curated and published an exhibition catalogue for *Lina Iris Viktor: A Haven. A Hell. A Dream Deferred* (2018).

## Footnotes

1. Jyll Bradley, "An Audience unto Herself: Zarina Bhimji profiled by Jyll Bradley", *Women's Art Magazine* 51 (March–April 1993).
2. The text panels spell out the following phrases: "THE IMAGE OPENS"; "SILENCE IS STARVATION"; "SILENCE IMPOSED AND CONDONED"; and "SILENCE ABOUT TO

BREAK”. An unpublished text that Bhimji wrote at the time, which the author was able to access during a studio visit in May 2016, includes a longer quotation from Moraga: “Silence is starvation. It is from this starvation that other starvations can be recognized. If one is willing to be responsible to the result of the connection.”[fn]These sentences are drawn from Cherríe Moraga, “La Güera” [1979], in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), 22–29. Elsewhere, she quotes a passage from an essay by Audre Lorde, for which see Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, Sex: Women Redefining Difference”, in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1980), 114–123. She also quotes from a text by the artist Jennifer Comrie.

3. Bradley, “An Audience unto Herself”, 23.
4. Zarina Bhimji’s CV contains reference to a 1985 group exhibition titled *F-Stops*, which was held at the gallery of the Chelsea School of Art, but she has not been able to recollect the premise or curatorial framing of this show for the author, and archives could not be located. This presumably gave some inspiration to the title of her 1986 photo-text installation, *In Response to the F-Stops Exhibition (For the White Feminist)*.
5. Kobena Mercer, “Iconography after Identity”, in *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, ed. David A. Bailey, Sonia Boyce, and Ian Baucom (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 52.
6. Mercer, “Iconography after Identity”, 53.
7. Jean Fisher, “The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism”, in *New Histories*, ed. Judith Wilson, Milena Kalinovska, Lia Gangitano, and Steven Nelson (Boston, MA: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996), 34.
8. Jean Fisher, “The Work Between Us”, in *Trade Routes: History and Geography: The 2nd Johannesburg Biennale*, ed. Rory Bester and Okwui Enwezor (Johannesburg: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, 1997), 20.
9. Roomana Mahmud, “An Interview with Zarina Bhimji: The Frustration with the Art Establishment”, *The Daily Jang* (London), 19–20 March 1988, n.p., V&A Archive, London, in a file on Zarina Bhimji’s 1991 residency in the South Asian Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum, consulted October 2014.
10. Zarina Bhimji, quoted in Mahmud, “An Interview with Zarina Bhimji”.
11. Zarina Bhimji, quoted in Zehra Jumabhoy, “Betwixt and In-Between: Reading Zarina Bhimji”, *n.paradoxa* 31 (January 2013), 88. Jumabhoy cites an interview with Bhimji that took place in October 2012, writing in note 2 that “the comment was also made at a recent talk that Bhimji gave at The Courtauld Institute of Art, May 2012”.
12. Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carillo Rowe, introduction to *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections on the Edges of Sound*, ed. Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carillo Rowe (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.
13. Malhotra and Rowe, *Silence, Feminism, Power*, 2.
14. Zarina Bhimji, Interview by David Brittain, “Oral History of British Photography: Zarina Bhimji”, 22 September 1993, British Library Sound Archive, London.
15. Zarina Bhimji, interview by Mark Haworth-Booth, “Judith Bumpus Radio Interview”, *Third Ear*, BBC Radio 3, 3 April 1992, British Library Sound Archive, London.
16. Bhimji, “Oral History of British Photography”.
17. See Achim Borchardt-Hume and Kathleen Bühler, “From Politics to Poetry: Zarina Bhimji in Conversation with Achim Borchardt-Hume and Kathleen Bühler”, in *Zarina Bhimji*,

- exhibition catalogue (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2012), 33.
18. The photographs referred to here are unpublished but were viewed by the author on a visit to Bhimji's studio in May 2016.
  19. See discussion of this report in Richard Hylton, *The Arts Council of Great Britain 1986-89: the 'Action Plan', 'Towards Cultural Diversity' and the Visual Arts Department*, in *The Nature of the Beast: Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector: A Study of Policies, Initiatives and Attitudes 1976-2006* (London: Institute of Contemporary Interdisciplinary Arts, 2007), 57-70.
  20. There is a lengthy bibliography of scholarly sources on this period. Those directly quoted are cited herein but, beyond this list, readers may consult some of the following: Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities", in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 441-449; David A. Bailey, Sonia Boyce, and Ian Baucom, eds., *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Eddie Chambers, *Things Done Change: The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists in Britain* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012); Paul Gilroy, "Cruciality and the Frog's Perspective: An Agenda of Difficulties for the Black Arts Movement in Britain", *Art and Text*, 32 (Autumn 1989), 106-117; and Richard Hylton, *The Nature of the Beast: Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector: A Study of Policies, Initiatives and Attitudes 1976-2006* (London: Institute of Contemporary Interdisciplinary Arts, 2007).
  21. Naseem Khan, quoted in Richard Hylton, *The Nature of the Beast*, 41. See, as well, Naseem Khan, *The Arts Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain* (London: Community Relations Commission, 1976).
  22. Fisher, "The Syncretic Turn", 34.
  23. Waldemar Januszczak, as quoted in Eddie Chambers, "Black Art Exhibitions in Britain", in *Creation for Liberation Open Exhibition: Art by Black Artists*, exhibition catalogue: Brixton Village, Brixton Hill, 17 October-7 November 1987 (Creation for Liberation, 1987), 13-16. Accessed at ACAA Archive, Chelsea College of Arts Library, London.
  24. As recounted in Eddie Chambers, *Things Done Change: The Cultural Politics of Recent Black Artists in Britain* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 21. The quotation is partly a reference to Januszczak's review of the exhibition, *The Thin Black Line*; see Waldemar Januszczak, "Anger at Hand", *The Guardian*, 27 November 1985.
  25. Jean Fisher, "The Other Story and the Past Imperfect", *Tate Papers* 12 (Autumn 2009), <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/no-12/the-other-story-and-the-past-imperfect>.
  26. Zarina Bhimji, artist statement in *From Two Worlds*, ed. Rachel Kirby and Nicholas Serota, exhibition catalogue (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1986), 25.
  27. See Nicholas Serota and Gavin Jantjes, introduction in *From Two Worlds*, ed. Rachel Kirby and Nicholas Serota, exhibition catalogue (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1986), 5.
  28. James Lampley, "Artists and Categorisation", *African Concord*, 4 September 1986, 41.
  29. Mark Currah, *City Limits: London*, 7-14 August 1986, n.p.
  30. Keith Piper, foreword to *The Image Employed: The Use of Narrative in Black Art*, ed. Keith Piper and Marlene Smith (Manchester: Cornerhouse Gallery, 1987), n.p. Also see Chambers, *Things Done Change*, 25.
  31. Fisher, "The Syncretic Turn", 33.
  32. Nick Axarlis, "Artists Show Spirit of Struggle", *The News Line*, 7 August 1986, 9.

33. Deanna Petherbridge, "Bold Conflict of Images from Two Worlds", *Financial Times*, 7 August 1986, 21.
34. See "Mona Hatoum: Performance Still, 1985, 1995", Tate, October 2013, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hatoum-performance-still-p80087/text-display-caption>.
35. Deanna Petherbridge, "Bold Conflict of Images from Two Worlds". According to recent correspondence with the artist, many of the objects named in this excerpt were misidentified; the clothing was primarily "Western" style, and no saris or skull caps were depicted.
36. Janet Wolff, "The Artist, the Critic and the Academic: Feminism's Problematic Relationship with 'Theory'", in *New Feminist Art Criticism*, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 15.
37. Kellie Jones, "In Their Own Image", *Artforum*, November 1990, reproduced in Jacqueline Bobo, ed., *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 173–183.
38. Jones, "In Their Own Image", 174.
39. Jones, "In Their Own Image", 174.
40. Jones, "In Their Own Image", 176.
41. Jones, "In Their Own Image", 180–181.
42. Jumabhoy, "Betwixt and In-Between", 88.
43. T.J. Demos, "Zarina Bhimji: Cinema of Affect", in *Zarina Bhimji*, exhibition catalogue (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2012), 15.
44. T.J. Demos, "Zarina Bhimji: Cinema of Affect", 23.
45. See Jumabhoy, "Betwixt and In-Between".
46. As quoted in Dominique Heyse-Moore, ed., *Mary Kelly: Projects, 1973–2010*, exhibition catalogue: Whitworth Art Gallery, 19 February–12 June 2011 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 12.
47. This is documented in several sources on Kelly but is concisely captured in Margaret Iversen, "Visualizing the Unconscious: Mary Kelly's Installations", in *Mary Kelly*, ed. Margaret Iversen, Douglas Crimp, and Homi Bhabha (London: Phaidon, 1997), 32–88.
48. Griselda Pollock, "Still Working on the Subject: Feminist Poetics and its Avant-Garde Moment", in *Re-Reading Post-Partum Document: Mary Kelly*, ed. Sabine Breitwieser (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 1999), 240.
49. Zarina Bhimji interview by Mark Haworth-Booth.
50. Anandi Ramamurthy, "Spilling Over Margins: Anandi Ramamurthy on the Question of Categorisation for South Asian Artists", *Artrage Magazine* 18 (1987): 6–7.
51. As quoted in Terry Smith and Mary Kelly, "A Conversation about Conceptual Art, Subjectivity, and the 'Post-Partum Document'", in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 451.
52. Terry Smith with Mary Kelly, "A Conversation about Conceptual Art, Subjectivity, and the 'Post-Partum Document'", 451–452.
53. Paul Smith and Mary Kelly, "No Essential Femininity: A Conversation between Mary Kelly and Paul Smith", with introduction by Jane Weinstock, *Camera Obscura* 5, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 1985), 153.
54. Iversen, "Visualizing the Unconscious", 34.
55. Douglas Crimp, "Interview: Douglas Crimp in Conversation with Mary Kelly", in *Mary Kelly*, ed. Margaret Iversen (London: Phaidon Press, 1997), 15–16.
56. See Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 170.
57. Iversen, "Visualizing the Unconscious", 35.

58. Iversen, "Visualizing the Unconscious", 54.
59. Iversen, "Visualizing the Unconscious", 57.
60. Iversen, "Visualizing the Unconscious", 57–58, where she quotes from Kelly, *Imaging Desire*.
61. Bhimji, "Oral History of British Photography".
62. See Rosalind Krauss, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism", in *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism*, ed. Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 31; Krauss's quotation of Breton on "pure creations of the mind" appears on page 15.
63. Victor Burgin, "Photography, Phantasy, Function", in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Palgrave, 1982), 192–193.
64. Burgin, "Photography, Phantasy, Function", 192–193.
65. Krauss, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism", 31.
66. Krauss, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism", 25.
67. Krauss, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism", 35.
68. Mahr showed in solo and group exhibitions at the Photographers' Gallery, London in 1977, 1984, 1986, and 1989, and at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1986 and 1988, where she participated alongside Bhimji in *British Photography: Towards a Bigger Picture*, ed. Keith Arnatt and Mark Haworth-Booth, exhibition catalogue, *Towards a Bigger Picture*, Victoria and Albert Museum, 30 November 1988–15 January 1989 (New York: Aperture, 1988).
69. John Stathatos, "A Sextant for Mnemosyne", in *Mari Mahr: Isolated Incidents*, exhibition catalogue, Photographers' Gallery, 17 March–1 April 1989 (London: Photographers' Gallery, 1989), n.p.
70. Bhimji mentions Mahr's work as an influence in "Oral History of British Photography".
71. Nigel Finch, foreword to *A Few Days in Geneva: Photographs by Mari Mahr* (London: Travelling Light, 1988), n.p.
72. Crimp, "Douglas Crimp in Conversation with Mary Kelly", 19.
73. Iversen, "Visualizing the Unconscious", 57; see also Mary Kelly, "That Obscure Subject of Desire: An Interview with Mary Kelly by Hal Foster", reproduced in Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 169.
74. This text is from Bhimji's installation, *Untitled*, presented at the *From Two Worlds* exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery in 1986.
75. Burgin, "Photography, Phantasy, Function", 197.
76. This text is from Bhimji's installation, *Untitled*, presented at the *From Two Worlds* exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery in 1986.
77. Burgin, "Photography, Phantasy, Function", 197.
78. Bhimji in Mahmud, "An Interview with Zarina Bhimji".
79. Bhimji, "Photo-Text by Zarina Bhimji".
80. T.S. Eliot, "Ash Wednesday" in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York, San Diego and London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1980): 62.
81. Based on observation in 2013 of an untitled photograph in the Arts Council Collection at its Brighton offices. This poem has been mentioned several times in publications and exhibition catalogues, including Tania V. Guha, "Face to Face: An Interview with Zarina Bhimji", in *Beyond Frontiers: Contemporary British Art by Artists of South Asian Descent*, ed. Amal Ghosh and Juginder Lamba (London: Saffron Books, 2001); Mark Haworth-Booth, introduction to *Zarina Bhimji: I Will Always Be Here* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 1992); and

- Bhimji's biographical page in Rasheed Araeen, *The Essential Black Art* (London: Chisenhale Gallery, 1988).
82. G. Douglas Atkins, *T.S. Eliot Materialized: Literal Meaning and Embodied Truth* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 6–9.
  83. See Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation", *Third Text* 4, no. 10 (1990): 62.
  84. Bhimji, as quoted in Guha, "Face to Face", 94.
  85. As described by Mark Haworth-Booth in "Zarina Bhimji", *British Journal of Photography*, 24 March 1994, 17. The article referenced is likely Melanie Phillips, "Virginity Tests on Immigrants at Heathrow", *The Guardian*, 1 February 1979, 1.
  86. From an artist statement provided to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, upon acquisition of the work *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence*; also cited in Deborah Cherry, "The Art of the Senses and the Making of a Diasporan Aesthetic: Zarina Bhimji's 'She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence', 1987–2002", *Tessera* 32 (Summer 2003), 43.
  87. Cherry, "The Art of the Senses and the Making of a Diasporan Aesthetic", 41.
  88. Marge Piercy, "Putting the Good Things Away", in *My Mother's Body: Poems by Marge Piercy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 20–23.
  89. Piercy, "Putting the Good Things Away", 20–23.
  90. Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (New York: Random House, 1959).
  91. Bhimji's text from *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence*.
  92. David Coward, foreword to Albert Cohen, *Book of My Mother*, trans. Bella Cohen (London: Owen, 1997), n.p.
  93. Cohen, *Book of My Mother*, 42–43.
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