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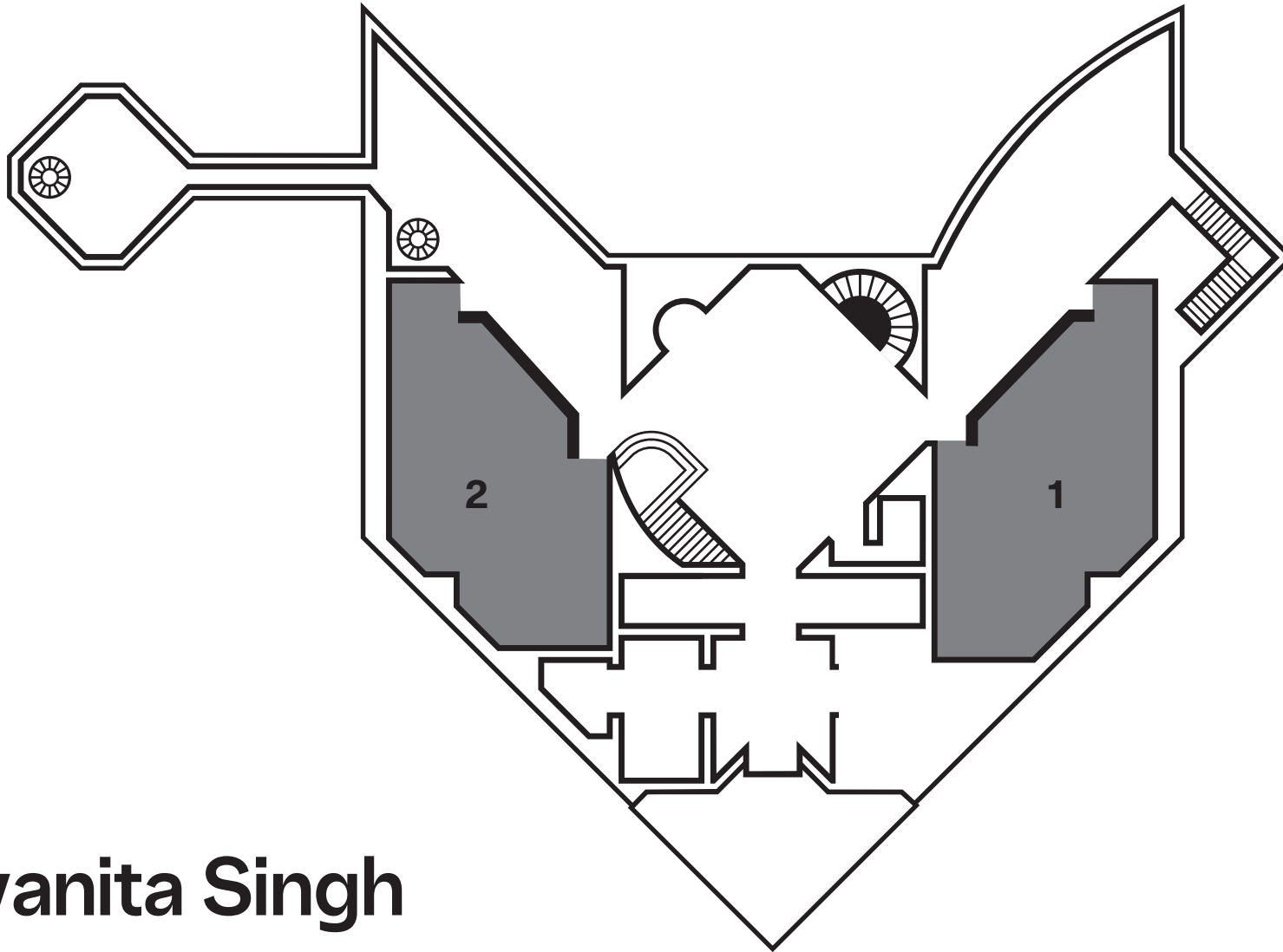
Dayanita Singh

Dancing with my Camera

12.05 — 10.09.2023

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Curator

Stephanie Rosenthal

Curator of the presentation at Mudam

Christophe Gallois

assisted by Clémentine Proby

Level 0

1. West Gallery

2. East Gallery

The exhibition

For four decades, Dayanita Singh (b. 1961, New Delhi) has developed a body of work distinguished by her genre-defying approach to photography, one that constantly pushes the limits of the medium. *Dancing with my Camera*, the most important exhibition dedicated to the artist to date, spans the entirety of her oeuvre, from her first photographic project devoted to the musical universe of the percussionist Zakir Hussain (b. 1951, Bombay) up until her most recent works, including *Let's See* (2021), inspired by the format of contact sheets. A testament to the formal inventiveness that characterises Singh's work, the exhibition also highlights the artist's singular perspective on themes such as the archive, disappearance, music, dance, architecture, gender and friendship.

Photography, far from being a fixed image, constitutes a 'raw material' for Singh: a point of departure, in which the 'where' and 'when' of the image matters less than the impression it arouses the moment it is experienced, and put in relation to other images. According to a unique editing process that places great emphasis on intuition, the artist culls images from her archives that she then combines and reinterprets, resulting in temporary assemblages wherein various periods, places, figures, architectures, objects and motifs intermingle fluidly.

Singh is notably recognised for her books, which represent an essential part of her practice. She sees them as exhibition spaces in their own right. Here she experiments with different forms of photographic presentation, animated by her interest in the capacity for books to circulate in time and space, and the privileged, intimate relationship they establish to the reader. Since 2004, she has been collaborating closely with the celebrated German publishing house

Steidl. Her 'book-objects' frequently appear in her exhibitions.

In the early 2010s, Singh began incorporating her images into mobile wooden structures – what she describes as 'photo-architecture' – allowing her to exploit to its fullest potential a conception of photography based on montage and the narrative possibilities offered by the juxtaposition of images. This approach notably gave rise to the creation of a series of 'museums', such as the *File Museum* (2012), the *Museum of Chance* (2013), and the *Museum of Tanpura* (2021). These can be organised in different configurations, allowing for a rapid rearrangement of the constellation of images and space. They combine both the principles of the archive and the exhibition and invite viewers to move freely – or 'dance' – around them to experience the images.

West Gallery

The first gallery of the exhibition revolves around notions that are closely linked to the medium of photography: the archive and memory, disappearance and erasure, editing and the circulation of images.

File Museum (2012), the first of the 'museums' created by the artist, gathers images depicting archives in India of various sorts, photographed in different contexts: administrative or governmental archives, bundles of documents kept in offices, boutiques, or workshops. Sometimes, the 'guardians' of these archives appear in the images. 'In India, there's no one, single format for the archives. Archivists design their own structures, ... and most of the time also design their own catalogue systems', comments the artist. In certain images, the quasi-geological accumulation of documents causes the archive to oscillate between order and chaos, the conservation of the past and its inevitable disappearance. A sensitive, almost 'tactile', relationship to these places and objects emerges from these images – what the novelist Orhan Pamuk (b. 1952, Istanbul) describes, in a text on Singh's work, as the 'texture of time'.

This sensuous relationship to archives can also be found in the ensemble of photographs **Time Measures (2016)**, for which Singh photographed, close-up and from a uniform overhead perspective, bundles of documents bound by strips of red fabric – a pigment traditionally used to repel insects. The colour of the fabrics has faded in irregular patterns with time, due to the way they've been preserved, their exposure to light, and the way they were knotted. While the content of these bundles remains inaccessible, Singh's photographs invite us to dwell on each of these forms, to direct our attention to

their particularities, and by extension, to the passage of time.

Created shortly after *File Museum*, **Museum of Chance (2013)** constitutes, for the artist, the 'mother of all museums', in that it could potentially contain all of her other museums. Existing on a larger scale and comprising a significantly greater number of images, it is distinguished, above all, by the heterogeneity of the photographs it contains. The 163 prints bring together images related to music, dance, cinema, places of work or living, as well as those close to the artist or people she's met. As its title suggests, chance, intuition and associations occupy a central place in *Museum of Chance*, both in the choices that guided the artist in the moment of the work's creation and in the relationships between the images, which are renewed with each presentation.

Numerous works in the West Gallery highlight Singh's interest in the circulation of images through their reproduction and distribution – what she calls their 'possibilities of dissemination'. Singh often describes herself as an 'offset artist' (a nod to the printing technique most commonly used in the field of publishing) and readily blurs the boundaries between the space of the book and the space of the exhibition. As other works in the gallery, **Suitcase Museum (2015)** is the very embodiment of the channels that Singh continues to forge between these two spaces. In keeping with *Museum of Chance*, the work gathers forty-four copies of a book published in collaboration with Steidl in two leather suitcases. This book is unique in that it has forty-four different covers. Each copy features, on its front and back covers, two of the eighty-eight photographs published in the book, combined in random order. When the work is exhibited, the books are presented along the wall with the help of wooden frames in which they can be slipped, while the two suitcases remain in the exhibition space.

Extending from *Time Measures*, other works presented in this gallery reflect an interest in processes of disappearance and erasure. The series **Painted Photos (2021–22)** consists of photographic prints whose surfaces have been covered by a layer of white paint. All that transpires from the photographs, through this white veil, are ghostly silhouettes. 'The *Painted Photos* reduce the images, pare them down to an essence, even a scent, if you will,' says the artist, 'they just become hints of the images.'

The question of loss is likewise at the centre of **Museum of Shedding (2016)**, which collects images marked by a lack, an emptiness, an 'austere and pared down beauty'. Most of them depict living spaces stripped of all human presence. In addition to the mobile structure built to accommodate the photographs, *Museum of Shedding* is composed of wooden elements with clean lines evocative of furniture: a bed, a desk, a table, a bench, two storage units and three stools, as well as nine little wall-like structures that are able to display prints. Together, these objects incarnate the reduced, but quintessential, shapes of domestic space. The words 'Director', 'Registrar', and 'Curator' are written across the three facets of a paper weight placed on the desk, suggesting a latent presence.

In dialogue with *Museum of Shedding*, the West Gallery concludes with a series of photographs that explore the intimate links between physical and mental spaces. Created in the late 1990s, **I am as I am (1999)** was made at the only ashram (spiritual monastery) in Varanasi to have been founded by a woman, the mystic Mâ Ananda Moyi (b. 1896, Kheora, India (today in Bangladesh) – d. 1982, Dehradun, India), and to be reserved for young women. It was a place that Singh used to visit as a child, where several members of her family stayed, and where

her father had, at one point, intended to send her. The images depict young girls in moments of meditation, play or study. They seek, above all, to translate the interior determination that animates the girls' existence, the 'I am as I am' of the title.

East Gallery

The second gallery of the exhibition displays different themes that traverse Singh's oeuvre and frequently intersect each other: music, dance, space, architecture, gender, the construction of identity, and individual and interpersonal trajectories.

Presented at the centre of the gallery is one of the artist's most recent 'museums', **Museum of Tanpura (2021)**. A stringed instrument whose form recalls that of the well-known sitar, the tanpura is an essential component of classical Indian music. Used to produce a continuous harmonic drone, it essentially serves as the basis and support of a vocal melody or that of another instrument. If the tanpura is generally relegated to a supporting role, Singh makes it the 'lead character' of her installation.

Music has occupied a central role in Dayanita Singh's body of work from the start: as a motif and subject, but also through certain formal links that she establishes between music and photography, around notions of tones, temporalities, rhythms, or even moods or silence. 'Despite a difference in their specificities of medium, two forms of art may be seen as sharing the same relation to life', writes Indian singer and ethnomusicologist Ahona Palchoudhuri in the exhibition's catalogue.

Singh's first photographic project, the book **Zakir Hussain: A Photo Essay (1986)**, is the product of a fateful meeting between Singh and the famous Indian percussionist Zakir Hussain. Singh met Hussain in 1981, while a student at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, and she was able to tour across India with him and other musicians for six consecutive winters. Hussain became a spiritual guide for

Singh, the person from whom she'd learn the importance of rigorous artistic practice (*riyaz*) and concentration (*dhyaan*). In 2019, she published a facsimile of the working maquette of the 1986 book, with all the marks and annotations it entailed (**Zakir Hussain Maquette**).

This set of works around the subject of music is completed by two recent publications, which both take the form of a leporello (a book that unfolds like an accordion) and both result from new arrangements of older images: **Kishori Tai (2021)** is a collection of photographs of the Indian classical singer Kishori Amonkar (b. 1932 – d. 2017, Bombay), taken during a Guru Purnima (a sacred day during which the students of a spiritual teacher celebrate and honour them), while **Musician's Bus (2021)** is composed of images of musicians photographed while on tour, accentuating the intimacy of the bonds that form between them and the different 'moods' – in a sense that here takes on a musical quality – that exist within the band.

Another group of works in this gallery highlight Singh's sensitive gaze toward architecture and living spaces. Composed of stackable cubes containing photographic prints, the three 'pillars' situated in the space take as their point of departure specific architectural elements: the pillars of a building by Le Corbusier (b. 1887, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland – d. 1965, Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France), in Chandigarh, in **Corbu Pillar (2021)**; the dialogue between a natural rock formation and a building by the Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa (b. 1919 – d. 2003, Colombo, Sri Lanka), the Kandalama Hotel, in **Bawa Rocks (2020)**; and stairs designed by the Indian modernist architect Balkrishna Vitaldas Doshi (b. 1927, Pune, India – 2023, Ahmedabad) in **BV Stairs (2021)**. In each of these 'photo-architectures', a three-dimensional space is created from the two-dimensional space of the photograph.

Each of the works in the series **Architectural Montages (2019–21)** places at least two images in dialogue, and by extension, two architectures, two temporalities, two geographies – as if creating passageways between them. The montage is done using an 'analogue' method, by cutting and juxtaposing existing prints by hand, from photographs taken in Japan, Sri Lanka, India, Germany and Italy, among others. The images 'begin to suggest their own resonances and affinities. Editing is akin to dreaming. It need not obey the coherence of time and space that governs social life. ... A deeper logic, richer and stranger, is permitted to emerge', comments the writer and curator David Company (b. 1967, London).

'Making images is maybe ten percent of my work. And the rest of it is really weaving, editing, editing, editing, then the sequencing', Singh says. The importance of the practice of editing in Singh's work is further emphasised in this room with **Go Away Closer (2007)**. The photographic series, which resulted from such a process, marks a turning point in the artist's practice, as it allowed her to shift from a purely documentarian approach toward a more intuitive relationship to images. Composed of twenty-eight photographs taken between 2000 and 2006, the piece juxtaposes images with contrasting atmospheres, resonating with the work's oxymoronic title – between proximity and distance, presence and absence, tradition and modernity. Often compared to a novel without words, *Go Away Closer* explores the narrative potential of certain strategies of withdrawal – an attitude that Singh links to the writing of authors such as Italo Calvino (b. 1923, Havana – d. 1985, Siena). 'I take out that one image to disorient you. I am not interested in that complete picture that you can hold on to', she explains.

Blue Book (2008) is marked by a similar narrative strategy. The ensemble of photographs, which also exists as a book, brings together urban landscapes and views of industrial sites photographed at dusk, in different regions of India, devoid of all human presence. At first, Singh had planned to use black and white film, but finally opted for daylight colour film, realising later that when used in the context of nightfall, it would confer an exaggeratedly blue tint upon the images. The blue that envelops this series accentuates the melancholy of landscapes and deserted sites, shifting the documentary image into an elegiac form.

The other works presented in the East Gallery address subjects related to the construction of identity and personal trajectories.

Displayed in a small room of its own, **Let's See (2021)** plays on the profusion of characters, bodies, actions, movements, contacts, and relationships. While this work was created very recently, on the occasion of this exhibition, it harks back to the beginning of Singh's career: it comprises images taken in the first half of the 1980s, in the artist's personal environment, in the homes of friends, or during her travels. The principle of wooden structures for accommodating prints is applied here as wall elements inspired by contact sheets (a term that designates the print containing all the exposures of a roll of film on light sensitive paper). As in the 'museums', the images here can be organised in an ever changing arrangement, generating new relationships and narratives each time.

Described by the artist as the 'twin' museum of *File Museum*, with which it shares the same structure, ***Little Ladies Museum 1961–present (2013)***, features a multigenerational 'family' of women Singh is surrounded by. It is one of the artist's most personal works: the year 1961, included in the title, corresponds to her year of birth. This museum gathers photographs of Singh and her sisters taken by their mother, Nony Singh (b. 1936, Lahore, India (today in Pakistan)), as well as portraits by Singh of young girls and women, often photographed at different moments in their lives. We find characters we've already encountered in other works in the exhibition, such as Jyoti, who is also present in *I am as I am*.

The exhibition concludes with an ensemble of works dedicated to a close friend of the artist: Mona Ahmed (b. 1935 – d. 2017, Delhi), who Singh described as the most unique person she's ever met. Singh made her acquaintance in 1989, while she was doing, on behalf of the British daily newspaper *The Times*, a photographic report on eunuchs in India. Mona lived for a time in a community for third-gender people before being rejected for her unconventional ideas and finding refuge, 'excluded among the excluded', in the house of a cemetery in Old Delhi called the Mehndiyan. In 2001, Singh published *Myself Mona Ahmed*, a photographic essay composed of her images of Mona accompanied by texts written by Mona herself.

The Museum of Dance (Mother Loves to Dance) (2021) is an homage to Mona as much as it is to dance, to which Singh often compares her photographic practice, as the title of the exhibition suggests. 'Imagine if you could learn to dance around your subject; imagine the range of images that would emerge', proclaims the artist. This museum brings

together images from the 1980s and 1990s that depict people in the midst of dancing. We see Mona dance, alone or in the company of her adopted daughter, Ayesha, or with friends, in various contexts, such as the cemetery where she lived. She is surrounded by other dancers: Singh's mother; her friends from the National Institute of Design; classical Indian dancers, among them Yamini Krishnamurthy (b. 1940, Madanapalle), Kumudini Lakhia (b. 1930, India), and Birju Maharaj (b. 1938, Handila – d. 2022, Delhi); and even the famous Bollywood choreographer, Saroj Khan (b. 1948 – d. 2020, Bombay).

In the series ***Mona Montages (2021)***, images of Mona have been cut by hand and combined with other photographs by Singh, which serve as decor: a dance scene with Saroj Kahn, who Mona greatly admired; views of archives; and a replica of the Taj Mahal in Bombay. Here as well, chance plays an important role: the *Mona Montages* are born of a studio 'accident', when photos of Mona accidentally 'landed' on other prints. They also refer to collages that Mona made herself, this time digitally, by superimposing portraits of herself taken by Singh onto landscapes (***Mona's Montages, 2001/2021***). Here, Singh uses the almost magical capacity of collage to allow otherwise discrete people, places, and contexts to coexist – to invent alternative realities.



Dayanita Singh, *Museum of Chance* (detail), 2013 © Dayanita Singh

The artist

Dayanita Singh (b. 1961, New Delhi) has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (2021); Tokyo Photographic Art Museum (2017); Tate Modern, London (2017); Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Bombay (2016); Fondazione MAST, Bologna (2016); Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, Delhi (2015); the Art Institute of Chicago (2014) and the Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, London (2013). In 2022, Singh was the recipient of the Hasselblad Award, and, in 2018, the International Centre of Photography Infinity Award. Her work is part of the collections of institutions such as the Centre Pompidou, Paris; K21–Kunstsammlung NRW, Düsseldorf; Moderna Museet, Stockholm and SFMOMA, San Francisco. She lives and works in Delhi.



Dayanita Singh, *Museum of Chance* (detail), 2013 © Dayanita Singh

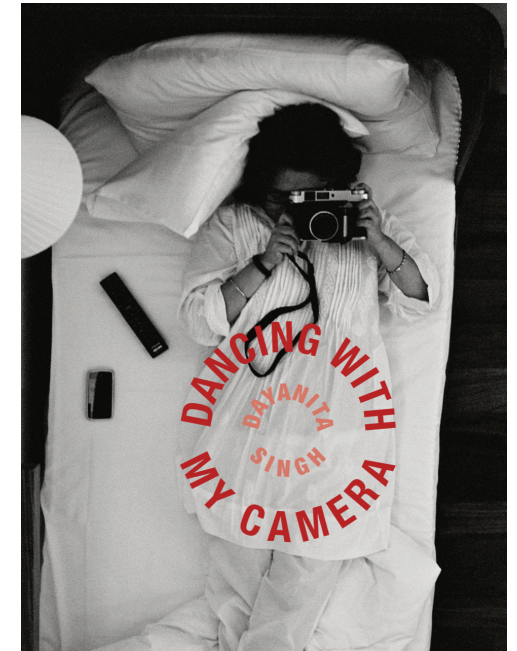


Dayanita Singh, *Mona Montage VII* (detail), 2021 © Dayanita Singh

Publication
Dayanita Singh.
Dancing with my Camera

Published by Gropius Bau and Hatje Cantz and edited by Stephanie Rosenthal, this publication brings together for the first time the different forms created by the artist in conversation with photographs made over four decades. It features new scholarly essays by Teju Cole, Kajri Jain, Ahona Palchoudhuri, Stephanie Rosenthal and Thomas Weski putting Singh's work in relation to subjects such as Indian classical music, photographic traditions, choreography and the archive. It shows some of Singh's most iconic images alongside all of her forms: the wooden museums, the suitcase museums, the pillars, the book-objects, the book-carts and the book-cases. Ultimately, it demonstrates how she expands our notions of photography to include, crucially, the concept of form.

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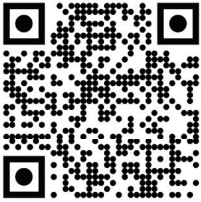
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Dayanita Singh, *I am as I am* (detail), 1999 © Dayanita Singh

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