

Storytellers of Art Histories





Living and Sustaining a Creative Life

The Living and Sustaining a Creative Life series of books reveal the realities of today's artists and culture producers. These timely publications comprise essays that generously share innovative models of creative lives that have been sustained over many years. Their first-hand stories show the general public how contemporary artists, creative individuals and change-makers of the twenty first century add to creative economies through their out-of-the-box thinking, while also contributing to the well-being of others. Although there is a misconception that artists are invisible and hidden, the truth is that they furnish measurable and innovative outcomes at the front lines of education, the non-profit sector, and corporate environments. Intended to spark conversations across and beyond the arts, each path is an inspiring example that provides exceptional insight.

All of the contributors have been chosen by guest editors who are distinctive and generous in their own lives. It is my hope you enjoy each essay as much as I have. I believe they will surely inspire new avenues for artists to thrive for years to come.

– Sharon Loudon, Living and Sustaining
a Creative Life series editor









Storytellers of Art Histories
Living and Sustaining a Creative Life

Edited by Alpesh Kantilal Patel and Yasmeen Siddiqui



Bristol, UK / Chicago, USA





First published in the UK in 2022 by
Intellect, The Mill, Parnall Road, Fishponds, Bristol, BS16 3JG, UK

First published in the USA in 2022 by
Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 1427 E. 60th Street,
Chicago, IL 60637, USA

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A catalogue record for this book is available from
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

Cover image: Shazia Sikander *Promiscuous Identities*
Patinated bronze 2020 Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery
Photo by Jason Wyche
Copy editor: Newgen
Production manager: Tim Mitchell
Typesetting: Newgen
Cover and book design: Holly Rose

Print ISBN 978-1-78938-427-7
ePDF ISBN 978-1-78938-428-4
ePub ISBN 978-1-78938-429-1

Part of the Living and Sustaining a Creative Life series
Print ISSN: 2516-3574 | Online ISSN: 2516-3582

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

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PREFACE

The cover of our book is a painted bronze sculpture by our contributor Shahzia Sikander. Perhaps well known for her work in manuscript painting, she has worked in a variety of media, such as animation and collaborative performance. We both saw this—Yasmeen in person and Alpesh virtually—in December 2020 when it was first exhibited at Sean Kelly Gallery. On a basic level, Sikander’s work brings together two lineages—the Greco-Roman and (South) Asian. The two figures are intertwined—a Greek goddess and an Indian *devata*, or spiritual being.

At first glance, the arrangement of legs and arms suggests that the goddess is carrying the weight of the *devata*. Or is the latter pushing against or away from the former? It is both/and rather than either/or. Indeed, the delicate interplay between pushing and pulling is a profound metaphor for what Gayatri Gopinath writes are the “promiscuous intimacies,” a phrase Sikander appropriates for the title of the sculpture, “of multiple times, spaces, art historical traditions, bodies, desires and subjectivities.”¹

Sikander’s work challenges our assumptions of division (Greco-Roman, Indian) and thereby opens up a space for the writing of a different history of art—one that is porous, conflicted, antiracist, and not heteronormative. The contributors to this volume boldly disrupt borders and divisions—disciplinary and otherwise—and we dedicate this anthology to them for graciously sharing parts of their lives in their deliberate messiness.

Note

1. Gayatri Gopinath, “Promiscuous Intimacies: Embodiment, Desire and Diasporic Dislocation in the Art of Shahzia Sikander,” in *Shahzia Sikander: Extraordinary Realities*, eds. *Sadia Abbas and Jan Howard* (Munich: Hirmer, 2021), 119.



INTRODUCTION: THE STORY BEHIND STORYTELLERS

Alpesh Kantilal Patel and Yasmeen Siddiqui

IN EARLY 2017, Sharon Loudon asked if we would be interested in editing an anthology for her *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life* book series, which focuses on the lives of artists working today. This was to be a book about the lives of art historians. She saw a confluence: Alpesh an art historian and theorist working within the academy, Yasmeen an itinerant writer and curator. Both of us, in our realms, eschew orthodoxies and ready-made interpretations of the ways artists have worked and continue to work.

Alpesh was intrigued because his own art historical scholarship often involves bringing himself into the histories of art he writes. He felt quite strongly that if art historians would make their stakes in the subjects about which they write visible, then it would be clear that these histories are subjective. Yasmeen's practice involves working closely with artists, designers, editors, and authors. She is interested in long-term engagements with a broad array of meaning makers to build exhibitions, books, and conversations. This project caught her attention as an opportunity to examine and, perhaps, expand the application of the subject at hand, art histories.

We realized early on that contemporary art histories were being written by a range of individuals and that we wanted the anthology to reflect this fact. For instance, we discussed how archives become so important as source material for many historians, and yet archivists are rarely brought to the forefront for the integral roles they play in writing histories. Also, artists

have increasingly begun to deconstruct histories as knowledge. Of course, curators and art historians have more traditionally been seen as shapers of knowledge. Yet, at the same time, we noted a huge ideological divide between curatorial studies and those shaping the histories of art—despite the fact that the display of artworks and the beginnings of the writings of art history emerge together and are therefore intertwined.

The writing of histories is about storytelling, which is by its very nature subjective, yet histories are usually taught and presented as inviolable truths. We wanted to frame the anthology through the lens of “storytellers” rather than “art historians.” As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes, “History is, after all, a storying. The French language has it very conveniently in the word *histoire* which means both history and story.”¹

We focused on those who were actively dealing with issues of gender, race (including Whiteness), class, sexuality, and trans/nationality.² We are proud that we have twice as many contributions by women than men. We also felt that we did not want this anthology to somehow appear as something radical that had never been done before. Therefore, we purposefully focused on an intergenerational approach that would bring together individuals who are early or mid-career with those who have been pushing against cisgender White males for decades. We also wanted to make sure that contributors would not only come from the Euro-American monolith. While the dominant art history is a collection of stories of art from Western Europe and North America, it is generally not marked as the regional art history it is.

Once all of the above was in place, we had to figure out who to invite. Following the format of Sharon’s previous books, we aimed to have 25 to 30 contributors, each of whom would write up to roughly two thousand words. Our long list of names can readily fill at least two anthologies. In the end, we had 35 contributors in total. The individuals we invited reflect the networks we have both developed through our work. Those we did not know were recommended by colleagues.

Each contributor is actively engaging with producing “art historical futures” impacting a broad range of culture sectors. This term and idea, “art historical futures,” was fixating. Our aim is to address the ties that tether futures to pasts. How might we write for the futures we envision without losing sight of what was, what has been? Alongside commissioning this book, we

organized the panel “A Reckoning with the Recent Future of Art Historical Knowledge Production” for the 2019 College Art Association (CAA) conference. We crafted a group that would introduce artist Allan deSouza, curator Candice Hopkins, archivist Josh T Franco, art historian Marsha Meskimmon, and director Namita Wiggers in a discussion encouraging a close and honest look at our interdependence as researchers working in and for different types of institutions. In 2021, we continued this inquiry through our moderated panel “Futures of ‘Activist’ Scholarship” at CAA’s annual conference, which invited artist Shahzia Sikander, art historian Jenni Sorkin, and curator Alexandra Chang to reflect on their relationships to art history and their work in its destabilization.

Each individual in this book has provided short, often very personal contributions indicating how they began to become passionate about their practice. Indeed, another way in which histories function more honestly as stories is if the authors become visible and this effectively underpins their subjectivities (even if unconsciously so) and the subjectivity of scholarly writing. This anthology aims to show the highly interested nature of the work the various contributors do while not undermining the rigor of their practices.

It is worth noting that we came across the Spivak quotation in art historian Moira Roth’s engaging book *Difference/Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*.³ It is written in a diaristic style and embodies the kind of critical art history that we believe should be written. We kept this in mind when we wrote a “prompt” for our contributors to respond: “Of particular interest to us is your providing a first-person account of your stakes in the field, how you maintain and nurture your own practice in the face of overwhelming odds against the feminist, decolonial, anti-racist, transnational, and queer work you do, the events that led you to this work, and why you chose this path.”

The contributors responded in a multitude of surprising ways, appealing equally to people enmeshed in the field through their work and to those simply interested in the field. The stories you will read take various forms—a letter written to a friend, a re-visioned grant application, the pastiche of image and text, children’s fables, interviews, coauthored narrative, memoir, manifesto, apology. A number of the essays perform, through a combination of recollected early memory alongside scholarly

research, the roots of the theories they explore through publishing, curating, and archival work.

The writings in this anthology reflect our strong interest in amplifying the voices of those who are reshaping art histories. An overwhelming majority of our contributors have fluid practices that make categories like art historian, archivist, curator, or artist moot. Collecting this range of narratives born from different workplaces and disciplines speaks to our belief in the potential boundlessness of the art history that shapes the stories we consume.

Notes

1. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak interviewed by Alfred Arteaga, "Bonding in Difference," in *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands*, ed. Alfred Arteaga (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 283.
2. Intellect's house style is to capital "W" in "white," however we have left the decision about whether or not to capitalize to each individual author.
3. Moira Roth and Jonathan D. Katz, eds., *Difference/Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage* (Amsterdam: GB Arts International, 1998).