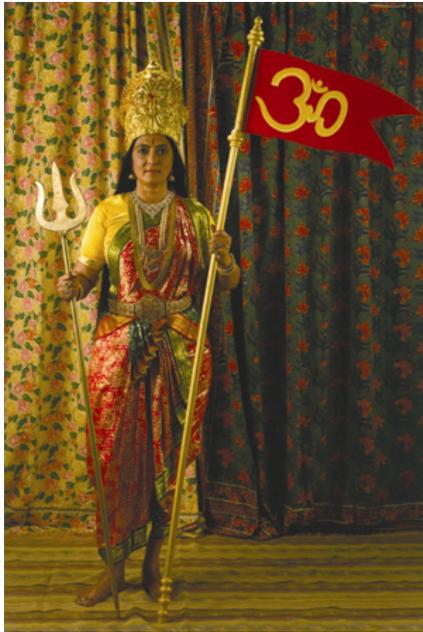


ACKLANDARTMUSEUM

Ackland Art Museum presents *The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in India since 1989*

Group exhibition explores India's culture wars, adds new chapter to the global history of activist art

For immediate release, 21 August 2013



Chapel Hill, NC—For over twenty years, the influential, Delhi-based artist collective Sahmat has enabled Indian artists in all media to create and present works that engage in important political and social debates.

Formed in 1989 in the weeks after playwright, actor, and activist Safdar Hashmi was fatally attacked by political thugs while performing a street play, Sahmat is an expansive network of Indian artists and intellectuals—painters, sculptors, writers, poets, musicians, actors, and activists—who create powerful and vibrant works of art in defense of freedom of expression and in celebration of secular, egalitarian values. Through a mix of high art and street culture, Sahmat artists take a consistent stance against the threats of religious fundamentalism and sectarianism.

In the first major exhibition about the group organized for U.S. audiences, *The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in India since 1989* (13 September 2013 – 5 January 2014) includes more than 60

artists, including several with high profiles in the international contemporary art world. With paintings, sculpture, prints, and photographs alongside ephemera, collaborative works, performances, and rich interpretive materials, the exhibition encourages a thoughtful assessment of the impact of this unique, multi-faceted—and sometimes controversial—collective on contemporary Indian society. It also adds a dynamic and stimulating chapter to the history of activist art worldwide.

“For the American viewer it may help to see these works in the context of the ‘culture wars’ as they are playing out in India,” said co-curator Ram Rahman. “Sahmat’s projects also reflect the camaraderie and community spirit of the Indian art scene, where artists of different generations and philosophical outlooks still have a close-knit sense of community and purpose.”

Sahmat is both an acronym for the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust and the Hindi word for “in agreement.” Engaging a broad base of collaborators—from celebrated artists and scholars to writers, musicians, and rickshaw drivers—the group pursues a mission of resistance against the forces that threaten “the essentially pluralist and democratic spirit of creative expression in India.” At the Ackland, *The Sahmat Collective* will examine the group’s key projects from 1989 to the present day, including street-based mobile performances, large cultural sit-ins, and conceptual exhibitions.

Exhibiting Artists

The Sahmat Collective includes works in a variety of media from over 60 artists including Manjeet Bawa, Atul Dodiya, Subodh Gupta, Zarina Hashmi, Rummana Husain, Bharti Kher, Pushpamala N., Nalini Malani, Gigi Scaria, Nilima Sheikh, and Vivan Sundaram.

A full checklist of works in the exhibition and select high-resolution images are available upon request. Please contact Emily Bowles at esbowles@email.unc.edu or 919.843.3675.

Safdar Hashmi and the Founding of Sahmat

Safdar Hashmi (1954–1989) was a political activist, actor, playwright, poet, and founding member of the street theater group Jana Natya Manch, or Janam (“birth”) for short. Like many of his generation in India, he was deeply committed to secularism and egalitarianism—principles that drove the nation’s struggle for independence from British colonial rule. He helped build Janam into a forum for democratic and accessible theater aimed at political change. On January 1, 1989, Hashmi and Janam were violently attacked while performing the play *Halla Bol! (Raise Your Voice!)* during municipal elections outside of Delhi. Hashmi died of his injuries the next day. His death aroused a nationwide wave of revulsion against political violence and led to the founding of Sahmat.



Exhibition themes and sections

In the more than twenty years since Hashmi’s death, Sahmat has drawn on India’s secular heritage and an expansive group of collaborators to produce a series of projects that engage in political and social debates through both traditional and less conventional forms of art.

The Sahmat Collective is divided into a twelve case studies of key themes and projects: Sahmat’s Beginnings (1989), Children’s Books (1989–1990), Images and Words (1991–1992), Slogans for Communal Harmony (1992), Ayodha: the Demolition of the Babri Masjid and After (1992–1993), Tribute to Gandhi (1994–1995), Gift for India (1997), Art on the Move (2001), Ways of Resisting (2002–2003), Reasserting Secularism (2004–2007), Free Speech and Defending Husain (1996–ongoing), and Performance (1989–ongoing). These projects are defined in part by their consistent stance against the threat of religious fundamentalism and sectarianism—known in South Asia as “communalism”—in public life. Collaborations have cut across class, caste, and religious lines and have involved artists, performers, scholars, and a wide array of other participants, such as the Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim auto-rickshaw drivers in the contest “Slogans for Communal Harmony.”



Projects also have sought to counter political distortions to India’s history, most notably in Sahmat’s multifaceted response to the demolition of Babri Masjid (Babur’s Mosque) in Ayodhya. In other cases,

Sahmat has sought to celebrate India's cultural diversity and democratic ideals, engaging artists to create work that responds to ideas of national history and individual identity.

Lines of Control

Offered in parallel to *The Sahmat Collective* at the Ackland, the exhibition *Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space* at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University (19 September 2013 – 2 February 2014) explores the creation and maintenance of borders, both physical and psychological, as well as the idea of partitions as a productive spaces where nations forge new identities and relationships. Many of the artists focus on the border between India and Pakistan, and two also have work on view in *The Sahmat Collective*. To learn more, visit www.nasher.duke.edu.

Lines of Control is made possible by the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust, Fenwick Foundation, and Barbara Nicholson McFadyen.

Credits

Organized by the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, *The Sahmat Collective* is co-curated by Jessica Moss, Smart Museum Associate Curator for Contemporary Art, and Ram Rahman, a photographer and independent curator. *The Sahmat Collective* is made possible by The Smart Family Foundation; Helen Zell; the Efroymsen Family Fund, a CICF Fund; The Joyce Foundation; and the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional support is provided by Larry and Marilyn Fields; Barbara Fosco, The Fosco Family Foundation; and the University of Chicago's Committee on Southern Asian Studies.



TheJoyceFoundation



At the Ackland Art Museum, *The Sahmat Collective* is generously supported by the James Keith Brown and Eric Diefenbach Fund for Contemporary Art, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust, the William Hayes Ackland Trust, Fenwick Foundation, and Barbara McFadyen.



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About the Ackland

The Ackland Art Museum is located on the historic campus of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The Ackland's holdings consist of more than 17,000 works of art, featuring significant collections of European masterworks, twentieth-century and contemporary art, African art, North Carolina pottery, and folk art. In addition, the Ackland has North Carolina's premier collections of Asian art and works on paper (drawings, prints, and photographs). As an academic unit of the University, the Ackland serves broad local, state, and national constituencies.

Hours and Admission

Wednesday 10:00 AM - 5:00 PM

Thursday 10:00 AM - 8:00 PM

Friday, Saturday 10:00 AM - 5:00 PM

Sunday 1:00 - 5:00 PM

Closed Mondays and Tuesdays

Admission to the Museum is always free, with donations accepted.

Location

The Ackland Art Museum is located on South Columbia Street, near the corner of East Franklin Street, on the campus of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Parking is available at several nearby municipal and private parking decks, and at meters on Franklin Street. More information is available at 919.966.5736 or www.ackland.org.

Media Contact

Emily Bowles, Director of Communications, esbowles@email.unc.edu, 919.843.3675.



www.ackland.org

Images:

Pushpamala N., *Motherland with Om Flag and Trishul*, 2009, digital print.

Interior of performance tent, *Safdar Hashmi Memorial, The Making of India*, January 1, 2004.

Ram Rahman, *Gandhi March*, 1995, photograph for *Postcards for Gandhi*.