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PORTFOLIO

DAYANITA SINGH'S MUSEUM BHAVAM A BOOK, AN EXHIBITION, A PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE

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"The book is a conversation with a stranger in the future."¹

Dayanita Singh

Dayanita Singh is a photographer and bookmaker who works with printed images to make them into polysemantic objects. After studying Visual Communication at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad and Documentary Photography at the International Centre of Photography in New York City, she embraced a career in photojournalism, reporting on India for major international publishers.² Deeply inspired by Robert Frank's work, her gaze has long been focused on Indian society, which she has depicted in all its many shades.³

Drawing on the documentary power of photography, Dayanita has explored its narrative value, questioning since the late 1990s how photographs can be viewed, understood and preserved.⁴ The artist has translated this theme into two main creative practices: the making of photographic books, which arrange a series of photographs into a printed narrative and at the same time stand as travelling collections of works of art; and the design of mobile displays capable of exhibiting the images in different combinations and sequences, thus modulating the narrative the installations generate.

Some of her recent projects aim at collecting photographs in accordion-fold books that can be opened and displayed in museums, galleries and other non-conventional exhibition locations (*Sent a letter*, 2008); they are built as installations in which the images become part of a continuous narrative (*File Room*, 2013, and *Museum of Chance*, 2014); in some cases they can be considered as proper archives, organised in designed structures endlessly growing and combining (*Museum Bhavan*, 2016).⁵

Sent a letter is the outcome of a project involving the production and collection of 'photographic letters' that Dayanita created in duplicate from 2001 to document the journeys she took with her friends. Each photo-letter was made by cutting images from her Hasselblad's medium-format contact sheets and pasting them onto paper. She used to address one letter to her friend and keep one for herself, filing it in her Moleskine notebook like an old copybook. A selection of the notebooks' content was published in 2008 by Steidl, turning from a private archive into an exhibition that has been shown all over the world.⁶

Simrat Dugal saw a very effective way to understand this work and, by extension, all of Dayanita Singh's later art. He wrote:

Sent a letter [...] gave the reader a glimpse into her own life, revealing the details and contours of some of her closest relationships. This is one of the most distinct facets of *Sent a letter*: that at its very heart it is a series of correspondences between friends. [...] *Sent a letter* forms the bedrock of Singh's artistic practice: the book is no longer merely an object *in* the exhibition but *becomes* the exhibition itself.⁷

With the publication of *File Room* a few years later, Dayanita Singh confirmed her deep interest in the form of the archive, which had evolved from a model for display to the subject portrayed in her photographs.⁸ The artist has photographed public and private archives in India for over a decade, compiling a collection of images that, despite depicting different places, are similar in composition, shooting angle and framing. Each represents files and shelves of documents filling spaces that are often too small for the volume of materials and memories they are tasked with holding. Above all, these images are linked by the common purpose that each of the places portrayed has taken on: preserving the Past through conserving documentary records.

The *File Room* series was first exhibited at the 54th Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte of Venice. Once transformed into a series of photo books, this collection has been exhibited in various formats and displays, such as a book-object show, eventually becoming part of the permanent collection of Dartmouth College in Hanover.⁹

These are just some of the projects that have come together in *Museum Bhavan*, perhaps among the most iconic on the themes of narration and archiving.¹⁰ The *Museum Bhavan* is one of the works that best represents Dayanita Singh's intention to reflect on the process of encountering, relating to, and looking at photographs. "A photograph is just raw material; it needs a structure, a housing, an

architecture. A form best suited to experiencing the image."¹¹ By gathering work on 'photo-architecture', 'book-objects' and 'photo-letters', this project consists of nine wooden 'museums', each of which houses a collection of images derived from her photographic production. In this case, the work is both the image and its allocation in the wooden structure, both the 'museum' as an exhibition idea and an archive of visual documents on the artist's *œuvre*. The sequence of images these structures store and display is a literary and documentary story.

Since 2017, the project has been transformed into a collection of books published by Steidl and gathered in a clamshell box with a coloured fabric cover, so that any collector, *amateur* or professional, who has managed to obtain a copy can potentially set up nine of the artist's exhibitions inside and outside the museum realm.

The historiographical role of the photographic image and the archival aspect of Dayanita's art emerge clearly throughout her professional career. From her years as a photojournalist, when she was interested in telling the stories of the large Indian community through images, to her latest projects involving the presentation of these images, the path her work has taken so far is remarkably consistent. *Museum Bhavan*, in particular, sums up her long and complex research. The artist does not conceive images as monads but as parts of a complex system of meanings, like words in a living and constantly evolving language. She also regulates its grammar since the creative act is completed with the display design of the works, which is usually delegated to the museum curator or gallery manager. Dayanita Singh's activity goes beyond the artistic act as commonly meant; she conceives it as a commitment that begins with the conception of the photographic material and is completed with defining the most appropriate museographic layout to enhance its meanings.

This artistic practice is relevant for the studies on exhibition and curatorship of post-conceptual art and general historiographical research. In fact, by gathering a series of monothematic shots taken by the artist over time, each project is able, on the one hand, to allow the public to experience a journey through different places, times and lives portrayed; and on the other hand, to provide art historians with a visual account of the artist's professional biography.

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1 Dayanita Singh, *Book Building*, (Göttingen: 2022), frontispiece verso. For more on Dayanita Singh's work with books, see also the video posted on the official YouTube page of her main publisher, Steidl: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xonYMhJspRg>. Accessed on 5 May 2025.

2 For further details on her biography, see at least the recent publications by Inês Grosso and Joana Bravo (eds.), *Dayanita Singh. A aventura de uma fotógrafa*, (Fundação de Serralves, 2023) and Jana Johanna Haeckel, "Danser les yeux fermés. L'archive, le corps et le hasard dans le travail de Dayanita Singh", *Critique d'art*, no. 61 (2023): 156-173.

3 In the second half of the 1990s, Dayanita Singh won a grant from the Andrea Frank Foundation, having followed Robert Frank's work with intense interest since her formative years. June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation. "Foundation". <https://www.leaffrankfoundation.org/about>. Accessed on 5 May 2025. To mention one of her works, the project *Myself Mona Ahmed*, first published in 2001 after a decade of research and photography, was exhibited from August 2024 to March 2025 at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. See: Dayanita Singh, *Myself Mona Ahmed*, (Zurich – Berlin, 2001), and Asian Art Museum. "Myself Mona Ahmed". <https://exhibitions.asianart.org/exhibitions/myself-mona-ahmed/>. Accessed on 5 May 2025.

4 A selection of exhibitions from the early 2000s to the present day can be found on the artist's website: Dayanita Singh. "About". <https://dayanitasingh.net/about-2/>. Accessed on 5 May 2025.

5 Dayanita Singh, *Museum Bhavan*, (Steidl, 2017); Id. *Museum of Chance*, (Steidl, 2014); Id. *File Room*, (Steidl, 2013); Id. *Sent a letter*, (Steidl, 2008).

6 *Sent a letter* was exhibited in Arles (2008), Kolkata (2008), Mumbai (2008), Madrid (2010), Amsterdam (2010), Winterthur (2010), Bogotá (2011), Umeå (2012-2013), London (2013), Seoul (2014), New Delhi (2014), Frankfurt (2016), Mumbai (2016), Tokyo (2017), New York (2018), Dhaka (2019), Dubai (2021).

7 Simrat Dugal, *Sent a letter* (2008), in Dayanita Singh, *Book Building*, 2022, 81.

8 Dayanita Singh, *File Room*, (Göttingen, 2013).

9 To find out more about *File Room* exhibitions, see Simrat Dugal, *File Room* (2013), in Dayanita Singh, *Book Building*, 2022, 49.

10 *Museum Bhavan* includes nine previous projects, some of which have been reworked, merged and presented under new titles. These projects are: *File Museum*, *Little Ladies Museum*, *Museum of Furniture*, *Museum of Vitrines*, *Museum of Photography*, *Museum of Men*, *Museum of Machines*, *The Printing Press Museum*, and *Museum of Chance*.

11 Singh, *Book Building*, 21.











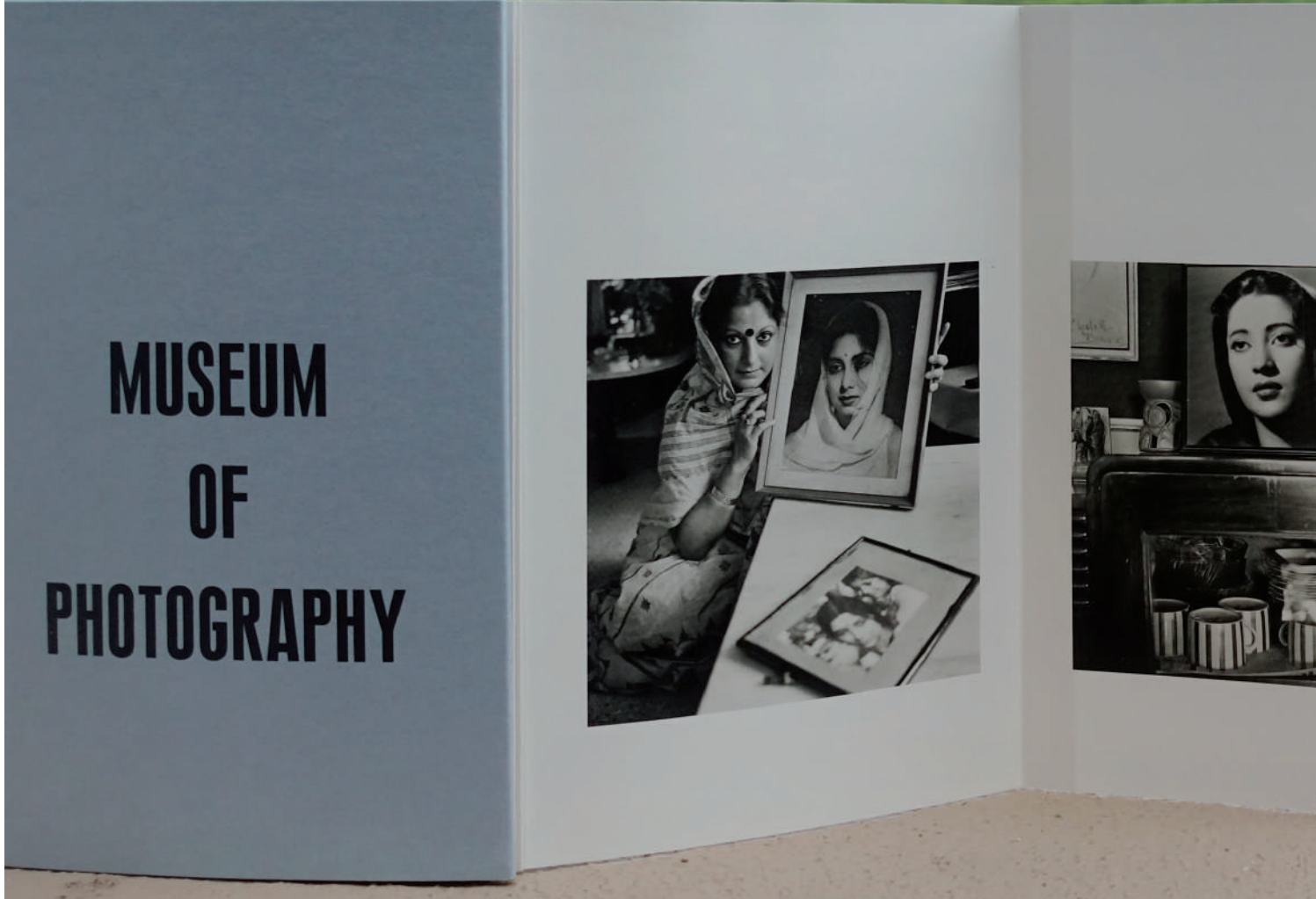








IMAGE CAPTIONS

- Page 244** *File Room* book-case in *My Offset World*, Callicoon Fine Arts, New York (2018)
- Page 249** **[Top]** Pages from Dayanita Singh, *File Room*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2013.
[Middle] Pages from Dayanita Singh, *File Room*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2013.
[Bottom] Pages from Dayanita Singh, *File Room*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2013.
- Page 250-251** The colossal upright hardbacks of *Museum Bhavan*. Pictured here are the *File Museum* and *Little Ladies Museum* in *Conversation Chambers*, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi (2015-2016)
- Page 252-253** *Museum of Chance* in *Conversation Chambers*, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi (2015-2016)
- Page 254-255** A private exhibition of *Museum Bhavan*, curated by Bilal Qureshi, with the Taj Mahal in the distance (2017)
- Page 256** *Museum Bhavan* at Tate Editions, London (2017)
- Page 257** **[Top]** *Sent a Letter* in *Growing Like A Tree* at the Ishara Art Foundation, Dubai (2020)
[Bottom] *Sent a Letter* in *My Offset World*, Callicoon Fine Arts, New York (2018)