

SIGHTS AND SITES

A joint show by Gauri Gill and Seher Shah gives **Sayandeb Chowdhury** the occasion to muse about the politics of spaces and the desire for newness.



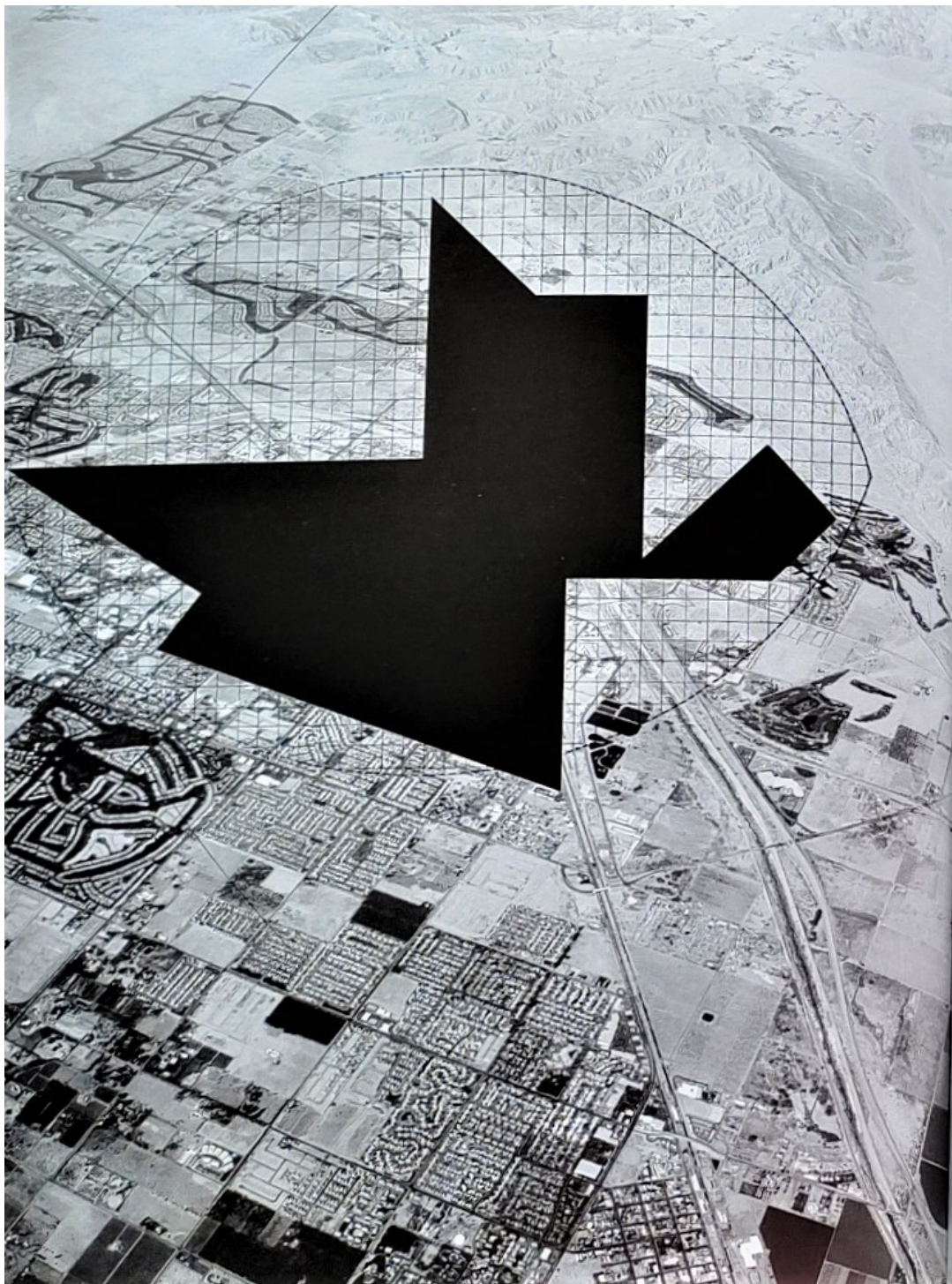
In 1967, French philosopher Michel Foucault wrote in his brief treatise *Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias*: "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed". Contemporary art has responded to the assertion by trying to dismantle space as we know it – by disorienting the topological, by de-familiarizing the everyday.

Experimenter's new exhibition from October the 28th to December the 29th, *Ways of Seeing* with Gauri Gill and Seher Shah, was in the long line of zeitgeist responses to the "epoch of space", fully conscious of the weight of the modern practitioner to engage with it. The show's resolute contemporaneity was bolstered by the fact of it being housed in Experimenter, Kolkata, which has over the last few years emerged as a no-nonsense gallery for cutting-edge art practices in India. The exhibition was mounted in collaboration with Nature Morte, New Delhi.

Gauri Gill. *Fields of Sight - Fishing Scene*.
Ink on archival pigment print. 24" x 16". 2014.

The show brings together Gauri Gill's *Field of Sight* and *Rememory* and Seher Shah's *Mammoth* and *Capital Complex*, all four in a kind of silent accord with each other. Needless to say, the exhibition borrows its title from John Berger's book on art appreciation, which the press release rightly says, raises "several questions about the hidden ideologies in visual images". The press release adds that "Over the last four decades since this seminal book was written, the emergence of the Global South, its own complexities and how the world has seen, expressed and visually presented itself has dramatically changed and has possibly necessitated a revisualization of the way we see things today."

This kind of epic proclamation borders on being both inordinately ambitious and ambiguous because this idea can



[Facing page] Seher Shah, *Mammoth* – Aerial landscape proposal. Archival digital print, 17.5" x 13", 2013. Images courtesy the artists and Experimenter, Kolkata.

be variably used across most contemporary art practices from all emerging economies.

So before one concentrates on the exhibition one is likely to be weighed down by expectations, the results of which inevitably fall short of satisfaction. Gill has distinguished herself as one of India's gifted photographers who have managed to expand the genre of candid photography further than most. She has travelled widely and imaged subjects removed far from her own conditions. She has also remained resolutely political, having lensed Indians in America or the girl child in India (*Balika MeLa*) or the 1984 pogrom through a complex understanding of not just her in-focus subjects but also the often overwhelming conditions they are part of. To that end, her series *Fields of Sight* – a set of 20 frames – in which she collaborates with the Warli painter Rajesh Vangad, remains underwhelming. Each frame is a shot of Vangad as a singular human being, positioned prominently in his village; this shot is amply superscribed with Warli motifs. The small, animated figures of conjoined inverted triangles with round heads and thin arms and legs are typical of Warli art; they are often seen on a wall, cloth or canvas enlivening a rural landscape, engaged in everyday hard work. We are expected to read Gill's photographs and these motifs as constitutive of each other's hidden ideologies. This is a not a new idea but creates a potentially interesting approach. In the works on show, however, the results are less than satisfactory. The first few frames seem to hold your interest which peters out soon, not least because the photographs are not very exceptional. Gill has not let her lens overwhelm Vangad's brush and this has taken a lot of substance away from the collaboration. In comparison, *Rememory* shows Gill at home in disparate spaces – Mumbai's skeletal highrises, the Chambal's riverbed, Gurgaon's ugly steel-black boxed homes. Unfortunately, this is the smaller section and seems to have been added as an afterthought.

Seher Shah was born in Pakistan and now lives in the United States. She has come into prominence lately thanks to her graphic critique of contemporary architectural spaces – specially the built structures that represent city planning exercises. This idea is explored in her smaller section *Capitol Complex*, which breaks down Le Corbusier's prominent Chandigarh landmark into cut-and-dried horizontal slices – filled with colour blocks, it appears draconian in its *management* of space. Her *Mammoth* is the most impressive section of this show. In *Mammoth*, Shah collaborates with photographer Randhir Singh to create a series of aerial views (interspersed with drawings) of South Asian cities which seem to have been imagined by Brutalist architects in the 1950s. As the cartographic plan is 'unpopulated', each photograph appears like a gigantic design, devoid of human agency and framing a desire for order and control. In her book *View from Above: The Science of Social Space* (2013) Jeanne Haffner has presented a history of using aerial photography (from its birth after the Great War in Europe) for ethnographic purposes, deliberating the desire of humans to control social space from above, from where it is apparently least calculable. One can read Shah's *Mammoth* series as an artistic endorsement of Haffner's critique. If Shah's broader idea is to problematise aerial photography as a metaphor for 'planning from above' with its insistent tendencies to de-humanise, then this series of aerial counterpoints is indeed attention-grabbing.

Gill's *Rememory* and Shah's *Capitol Complex* – forlorn, stark, expressive – are in evident conversation with each other, while the link between the two other sets is less explicit. Together, the two artists, through an inter-disciplinary ideation of space as a cultural-political metaphor, do manage to construct a complex imagery of the present. And between themselves, they share the promising new space of contemporary art photography. One would hope they are not too weighed down by the need to look 'new'. They are accomplished enough to make older *ways of seeing* still matter.