

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Christopher Street

By Sunil Gupta



Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Professor Sunil Gupta
Name of Output:	Christopher Street
UCARO link/s:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/5561/
Output Type:	T – Other; multi-component output comprising artist's book and exhibitions
Year and mode of dissemination:	<p>BOOK</p> <p>Gupta, S. (2018). <i>Christopher Street</i>. London: Stanley Barker.</p> <p>EXHIBITIONS</p> <p><i>Out and About: New York and New Delhi</i>, Sepia Eye, New York, 2014</p> <p><i>I am a Camera</i>, Fotofest, Houston, 2015</p> <p><i>Sunil Gupta: Christopher Street</i>, Hales, New York, 2019</p> <p><i>Art After Stonewall</i>, Lesley-Lohman Museum, New York, 2019</p> <p><i>Art After Stonewall</i>, The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum, Miami, 2019</p> <p><i>Masculinities</i>, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2020</p> <p><i>Art After Stonewall</i>, Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, 2020</p> <p><i>Masculinities</i>, Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2020</p> <p><i>Sunil Gupta: From Here to Eternity</i>, The Photographers' Gallery, London, 2020</p>
Key Words:	Christopher Street, New York, gay men, cruising, Stonewall, gay liberation, photography, art
Funding:	Gupta funded the printing of the book by marketing an editioned print from the series to a number of collectors. The 2020 exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery was co-funded by the Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto.

Synopsis

Christopher Street is a multi-component research output created by Professor Sunil Gupta. It consists of a book of 60 black and white photographs (Stanley Barker, 2018) made by Gupta, and an international series of exhibitions (2014—2020). The work has also been disseminated within the collections of major international museums (such as Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Vancouver Art Gallery).

The research began with an archival process, as although the primary documentary photography source material was made by Gupta in 1976, it was only excavated and disseminated from 2014 onwards. This process included rediscovering and cataloguing Gupta's archival material, documenting it using modern scanning techniques, and disseminating it using different formats.

The series of black and white photographs were shot in and around Christopher Street in New York, documenting the emergence of an exuberant gay public space after the

Stonewall riots of 1969. They describe the empowering experience of a beleaguered community, long vilified and finally able to walk the streets with pride. They also turn on the gay male idea of 'cruising'. Subsequent to this moment, in 1981, HIV/AIDS arrived in New York and called into question this sexual freedom as society began to label these very same gay men as the carriers of a new 'plague'.

By working through and sharing these previously unshared photographs, this research provides new insights into both the time of their production and the images' continued resonance within a twenty-first century context.

This portfolio outlines the project's underpinning research context, aims and methods and presents a PDF of the *Christopher Street* book. It also includes images of the exhibitions and information on funding and visitor numbers. For additional context, a conversation between Gupta and Flora Dunster, published in *Third Text*, is also provided.

Sunil Gupta



*Houston Fotofest, "I am a Camera",
2015*

FOTOFEST

*I Am
A
Camera*

LGBTQ communities seen from within

July 9-August 29, 2015

Exhibition Sponsors

Lee Anthony and Travis Capps Jr.; Bill Arning and Mark McCray; Michael A. Chesser; Susan Oliver Heard; David J. Klunkowski; Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town/Johannesburg, South Africa; Eliane Thweatt; George J. Toland III; and anonymous donors

FotoFest 2014-2015 Exhibition Program Sponsors

Houston Endowment Inc; City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance; National Endowment for the Arts; Texas Commission on the Arts; The Wortham Foundation; FotoFest Board of Directors; Judith and Gamble Baldwin; Robert Gerry III; William and Rosalie Hitchcock; European Photography Magazine; HexaGroup; Houston Public Media; iLand Internet Solutions; and Silver Street Studios

Zackary Drucker
and Rhys Ernst
Sunil Gupta
Lindsay Morris
Frédéric Nauczyciel
Irina Popova
Anna Charlotte Schmid
Paul Mpagi Sepuya
Charan Singh



*Houston Fotofest, "I am a Camera",
2015*

Context

Christopher Street was shot as a documentation of gay street life in New York City, 1976, when Gupta was living there as a student at the New School. A particular influence on his work was the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). MoMA began collecting modern photography in 1930 and established its photography department in 1940. It originated Edward Steichen's 1955 exhibition, *The Family of Man*, that toured the world for eight years attracting more than 9 million visitors.

During Gupta's time as a student in New York, John Szarkowski (photography curator at MoMA) was a well-established scholar who had positioned documentary photography in a place of importance in the museum, particularly in the exhibition *New Documents* in 1967. Szarkowski also published *Looking at Photographs*, the very influential MoMA book on the aesthetics of collectible photographs (Szarkowski, 1973), which had an influence on Gupta's work shooting street corners.

Gupta studied with Lisette Model and Philippe Halsman, both of whom embodied the particular moment in photographic history when modernism moved from Germany westwards to France and then to the United States. Gupta was thus influenced by documentary photography as the new modernist art. He photographed *Christopher Street* to document his subjects as objectively as possible, using the entirety of the frame to make black and white prints that revealed all

information possible on the negative. Only his choice of subject matter – gay men cruising – was subjective.

Documentary photography projects from this period are enjoying a moment of renewed interest, for instance Paul Graham's 1981 *A-1: The Great North Road*, which was republished in 2020. Gay photographer Vincent Cianni has published his street photographs, including the decade-long series *We Skate Hardcore* (2004) and *Gays in the Military* (2014), providing a precedent for the rediscovery of past documentary photography which is being re-contextualized in the present.

REFERENCES

Cianni, V. (2004) *We Skate Hardcore*. New York, NYU Press

Cianni, V. (2014) *Gays in the Military*. Daylight

Graham, P. (2020 [1981]) *A-1: The Great North Road*. London: Mack

Steichen, E. (1955) *The Family of Man* (MOMA, exhibition)

Szarkowski, J. (1973) *Looking at Photographs: 100 Pictures from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art*.

Research Questions and Aims

Research questions:

The research questions that inform the contemporary publication of the images are as follows:

What was it like to be at the onset of a growing gay liberation movement?

What role did physical cruising play in the formation of communities and non-biological family clusters?

How did masculinity and homosexuality play out or get performed in a public space?

How does understanding this affect contemporary thinking?

Research aims:

The original aim was to make a “mass observation”-style photo documentation of street life.

In retrospect, however, Christopher Street became symbolic of Gupta’s gay subjects who have become a focal point for that time of promiscuity, pride and cruising after the birth of gay liberation and the riots around the Stonewall Inn, 1969, and before the onset of AIDS in the early 1980s. The aim of re-visiting these images was thus to understand better the context of production and consider its resonance in the twenty-first century.





Hales Gallery, New York, 2019



Hales Gallery, New York, 2019

Research Methods and Process

Following the documentary photography itself, the research process of re-visiting Christopher Street began with Gupta acknowledging that it was time to catalogue his archives which date back to the late 1960s. Much of the initial process was to organise a systematic and affordable process for doing this that could be sustained over a large number of images and ephemera.

The cataloguing of Gupta's negatives led to his rediscovery of the Christopher Street photographs and the realisation that this body of work had never been seen before in public. Where many projects are researched, financed and produced from start to finish in that order, *Christopher Street* marked a different process of excavating archives for ideas which

had been tried out but not seen through to completion. The original printing paper was no longer available, so a new digital route had to be established to make the prints. This involved scanning the negatives and using a digital exposure on silver gelatine paper that is processed in a darkroom in the traditional way.

Gupta began the process of dissemination with the exhibition of a small number of the new prints and some remaining vintage prints, while a larger number were placed online. The response they received was very positive, prompting the publication of the photographs as a book, funded by print sales, after which international exhibition and museum acquisitions followed.

Research Insights and Contribution

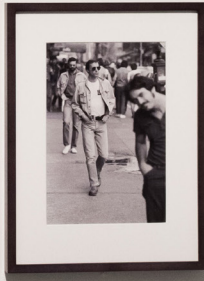
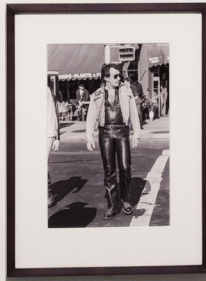
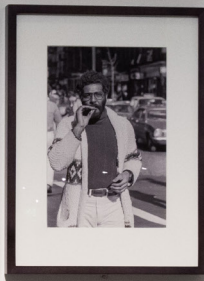
At the time the photographs in *Christopher Street* were made both modernist photography and gay liberation were in a similarly 'innocent' and naive state. It was an exhilarating time to challenge the status quo around public sexuality and to literally 'come out'. People wanted to be seen and photographed, and at the same time there were none of the current ethical concerns that complicate contemporary street photography (Coleman, 1987).

Physical cruising played a crucial role in the formation of communities of belonging. Being in a public space meant that not only could you be out and about and see and be seen, but the repetition of the act weekend after weekend brought a comforting familiarity and a series of casual sexual encounters might turn into lovers and friends and a community. Gay masculinities went to extremes, and in the public space, perhaps as a defence mechanism to ward off potential attackers, a hyper masculinity took shape based on

American working-class stereotypes — cowboy, construction worker, fireman or policeman. This was embodied by the band The Village People, who seemed to be referring to Greenwich Village as a specific geography. Levi 501 jeans and plaid shirts became the norm, as did moustaches which heralded the period of the 'clones. The singer Lou Reed parodied these extremes in the rear cover images of his 1972 album, *Transformer*. Gupta's work brings all these aspects of this period back to light, providing insight into a particular time and place as seen from the viewpoint of the twenty-first century.

REFERENCES

Coleman, A. D. (1987) 'Private Lives, Public Places: Street Photography Ethics'. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08900528709358295>



Paul Smith
1970s
From the series 'Street Style' 1970-1975
Black and white photograph
100 x 100 cm

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Black and white photograph
100 x 100 cm



Masculinities

Liberation through Photography

Mon 13 Jul—Sun 23 Aug 2020

🕒 This is a past event



[About](#) [Exhibition Guide](#) [Reviews](#) [Curator Tour](#) [Learning Resources](#) [Touring](#)

Through the medium of film and photography, this major exhibition considers how masculinity has been coded, performed, and socially constructed from the 1960s to the present day.

Examining depictions of masculinity from behind the lens, the Barbican brings together the work of over 50 international artists, photographers and filmmakers including **Laurie Anderson, Sunil Gupta, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Isaac Julien** and **Catherine Opie**.

🕒 This is a past event. [Subscribe to our newsletters](#) to hear about upcoming events

*Image from Christopher Street
used in publicity for Barbican Art
Gallery, London, 2020*

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Dissemination Details:

The book was widely distributed and sold out its 1,000-copy print run in a year.

VISITOR NUMBERS, WHERE KNOWN

Works from Christopher Street were exhibited in *Masculinities* at the Barbican Art Gallery, which had a total of 40,783 visitors.

Hales New York had a total of 1876 visitors for *Christopher Street*

Follow-on-activities:

Gupta was invited to deliver one of the keynote presentations at the conference 'Cruising the 1970s: Imagining Queer Europe', Edinburgh College of Art, 14-16 March, 2019. This paper has been published as 'Do You Have Place? A Conversation with Sunil Gupta' by Flora Dunster in the journal *Third Text*, January 2021 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2020.1860391>) (appended to this portfolio).

FURTHER PLANNED EXHIBITIONS:

Masculinities, FOMU, Antwerp, 2021

Masculinities, Arles Festival of Photography, 2021

Sunil Gupta: From Here to Eternity, Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto, 2021

Cruising the 60s, 70s and 2010s, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi 2021

Stanley Barker, the publisher of the *Christopher Street* book, has invited Gupta to publish two more books from his archives.

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Influence of research:

Gupta's work, including *Christopher Street*, has received coverage in *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/sep/30/saunas-sex-clubs-street-fights-sunil-gupta-global-gay-life-miss-uk>

It has also been the subject of an article in *The Lancet*: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanhiv/article/PIIS2352-3018\(20\)30338-6/fulltext?dgcid=raven_jbs_etoc_email](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanhiv/article/PIIS2352-3018(20)30338-6/fulltext?dgcid=raven_jbs_etoc_email)

The *Christopher Street* book was shortlisted for the Aperture – Paris Photo Book of the Year, November 2019.

A subset of the works was acquired by the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2019 for their permanent collection.

Thomas Cawson, designer at Helmut Lang, was inspired by the *Christopher Street* in conceiving his 2020 collections. Gupta was asked to photograph the collections as a contemporary version of the archival work. Both the 1970s images and the new fashion work were displayed in a photographic exhibition at Helmut Lang's flagship store in February 2020, replacing the usual catwalk show in New York, as covered by Vanity Fair: <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2020/02/helmut-lang-sunil-gupta-presentation>





*The Photographers' Gallery,
London, 2020*



The Photographers' Gallery, London, 2020, including public responses on note cards and a vitrine showing ephemera from the period



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FRONT COVER IMAGE
Christopher Street, Untitled #22

BACK COVER IMAGE
Christopher Street, Untitled #06

