

## Reading between the lines: the imprinted spaces of Sutapa Biswas

Prelude: the summer of 1991

For two weeks in May I travelled around the coast of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland in a cruise boat. My ticket had been bought for me by a woman of eighty-five, my mother's dearest friend, and one of mine, too, who wanted to travel in comfort while showing me British medieval castles, and eighteenth-century to modern homes, estates and gardens.

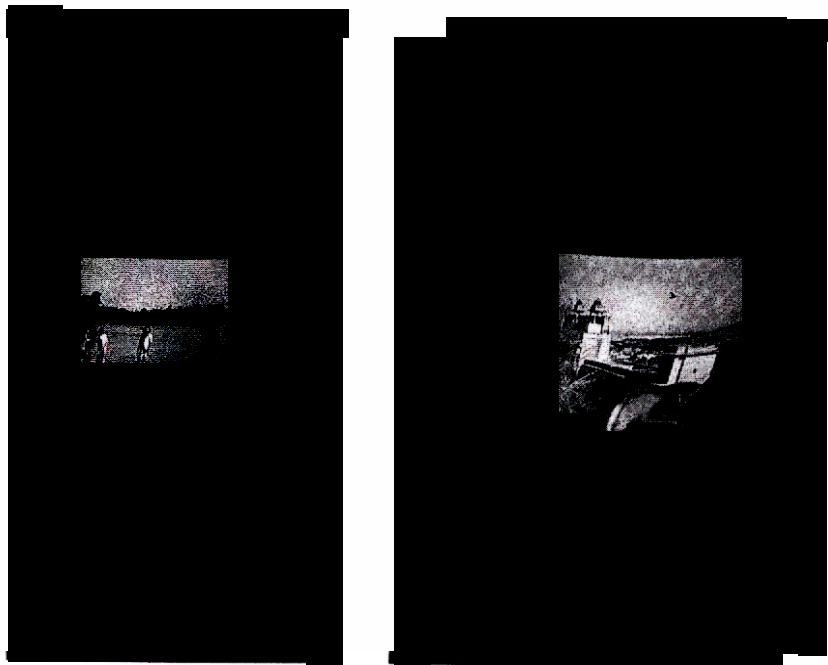
I discovered abruptly when we joined the cruise that the boat's passengers were exclusively white, mostly in their seventies and eighties; that its staff of stewards, stewardesses, waiters and rank-and-file sailors were all from the Philippines; and that the ship's tanking officers were Scandinavian and German. During the next two weeks I oscillated between gratitude to my friend for her generosity, curiosity about the cultural meanings of the sites we visited, and political shock. I felt as if I was on a boat in the last days of the Empire. But, equally, I was confronted with contemporary international versions of colonialism.

I have never worked through the implications of my personal and emotional relationship to Britain's colonial past. Given the particularities of my upbringing and my way of living in America it was not until this cruise that I had ever been so literally, intimately and personally confined within such a classic colonial experience. My parents were left-wing and anti-colonialist, and I attended a highly progressive school with an international student body. I later studied at the London School of Economics, and then left for America where I now live in a culturally diverse community. After the cruise I returned to London and there – obsessively, and in hindsight surprisingly unconscious of its impulses – began to immerse myself for the first time in the history of the cultural exploits of the British Empire. I purchased *The Raj: India and the British, 1600–1947*, a catalogue of a huge exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 1990. I went to the Victoria and Albert Museum – a few days before I had seen Edward Said on English television remarking that 'museums are the archives of the Empire' – and saw its famous Indian collection, which had begun to be assembled in the eighteenth century, the days of the *de facto* rule of Bengal by the English East India Company. I also went to the British Museum, another 'Empire archive', to see an exhibition of Benin sculpture, much of it taken from Nigeria after the British

sacked Lagos, the Benin capital, in 1897, killing many of its inhabitants. Bringing Benin art to England was part of a systematic attempt to subvert a political and cultural revival in the Benin kingdom. Surely there is a parallel to this in Indian history? I went from museum to museum, bookstore to bookstore, reading a mixture of art, political and cultural history texts.

It was during this intense time (I was still staying with my eighty-five-year-old friend) that I spent an illuminating afternoon with Sutapa Biswas. We sat for hours in an English pub talking about the Empire, India, history, culture, race, and gender: and we talked, too, about what we were doing in our respective work. Biswas had grown increasingly impatient with the relentless stream of publications on the cultural and artistic impact of colonialism on India, regardless of the often politically correct tone of the authors. A year ago (1990) she received a grant to research the influence of Indian art on the West. She is now conceptualising an exhibition that may include loans from the Victoria and Albert Museum's Indian collection. We talked about cultural cross-currents, cultural exchanges and multiple cultural identities and homes as well as cultural imperialism and post-colonialism. In many ways we continued a conversation that had started when we first met in the fall of 1990 when Biswas participated in the 'Disputed Identities' exhibition held at Camerawork, a San Francisco gallery.

The 'colonial' boat experience continued to haunt me after I returned to the USA. It dramatically brings forth, like some giant visual allegory, the albatross



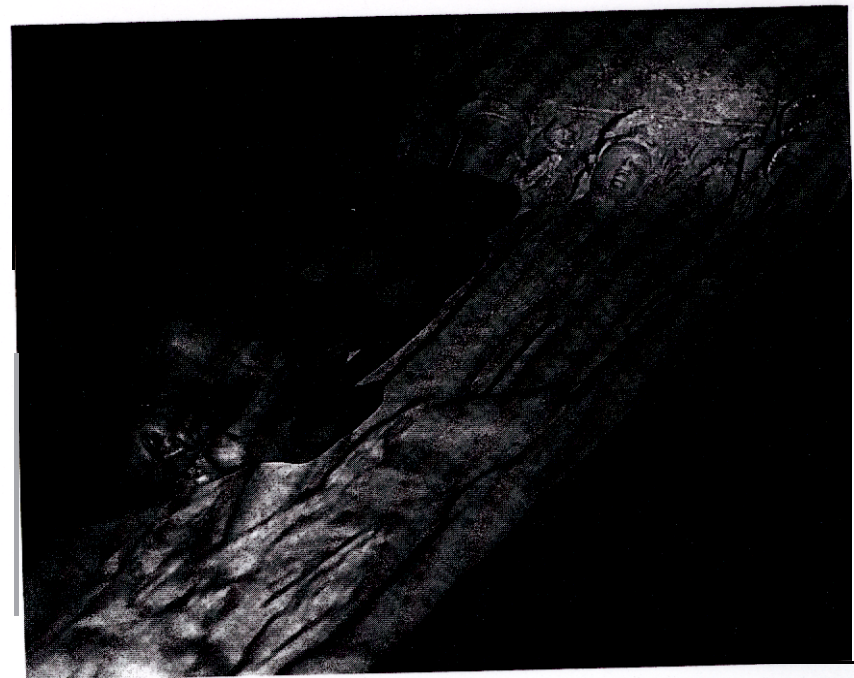
5 SUTAPA BISWAS *Synapse I* (Nos 1 and 5 images). Black and white photographs, 1992

of the colonial heritage of my own culture. In a recent phone conversation with Biswas, she spoke about synapse as a metaphor for this Canadian exhibition and laughed as she amplified it, 'In other words, undefined territory'. Perhaps the experiences of looking and thinking about Biswas's work and the process of this diary-like essay combined with the 'memory' images of the colonial-cruise episode, will encourage new impulses to be transmitted in this undefined, unruly terrain of multiple cultural identities which I inhabit more and more by choice.

I realise that this is the first extensive piece of writing I have embarked on—the metaphor of a journey is most apt — since my visit to England. An interesting coincidence that it should be about Biswas.

30 September 1991, Berkeley, California

*Synapse* series photographs (eight out of the series' twelve) came Federal Express a few days ago from England together with a package of slides and texts. Biswas is so complex and layered an artist that I think it might be easier, even reassuring, for me first to immerse myself in these texts written by her and writings on her rather than in looking. I might read them to find a theoretical context for my looking, in order to avoid cultural and political pitfalls in my essay. By reading the texts, I might begin to wrestle with the recent bombardment of theory (in anthropology, literature, and cultural and art studies) that raises questions of cultural difference, colonialism,



6 SUTAPA BISWAS *Synapse II* (No. 1 of 2 images). Black and white photograph, 1992

imperialism and post-colonialism. I might begin by studying Biswas's art in terms of concepts of representation and artistic practices in England and India, postmodernist and deconstructive strategies, distinctions between foregrounding and subtexts, the concept of 'the other', and the notion of the woman's body as a site of cultural discourse. Instead, I have elected to begin this encounter with Biswas – which I hope will become a conversation – by recording my immediate responses to the *Synapse* series photographs.

In some of the *Synapse* series photographs a nude woman 'holds' memory images: these are projected slides supported or cradled by her hands, or resting upright against her bare stomach. They are of people standing in water, edifices in a landscape, scaffolded façade of a building and fragments of figurative sculpture. In other photographs, the woman herself is 'held' by similar images. In one she lies curled up on her side, with her cheek resting on her hands, her eyes open. She reclines on a strangely slanted stone bed, a sculptured female figure at her feet. Is she showing or displaying these memory images to us? Protecting them with her own body? Being protected by them? How does memory work here, and how shall I read these images of a woman and her world? Is this the world of 'a woman', of 'Woman', or of Sutapa Biswas? Of an Indian woman in an Indian world, or an abstract portrait of human presence in a world of nature and art?

Some of Biswas's images remind me of x-rays. Such exposure both on and of the body evokes the vulnerability of a woman in a hospital examination, and the possible disclosures that may result from such an investigation.

Perhaps most apparent of all in the series is the sense of a constantly shifting terrain of the body, of the landscape, of the buildings, of the art and of man-&es. Restful and restless multiple perspectives.

As I reflect on these representations of a woman crossing and exploring space and time, the words *dream*, *beauty* and *home* keep recurring in my mind.

In my *Oxford American Dictionary* I find this definition: *dream* n. 1 a series of pictures or events in a sleeping person's mind. 2 the state of mind of one dreaming or daydreaming, goes around in a dream 3 an ambition, an ideal. 4 a beautiful person or thing.

To speak of beauty in art seems almost forbidden these days, yet Biswas's art is beautiful. There are, however, so many loaded cultural readings in viewing beauty: for example, the woman's body as object of desire, the alienating and racist history of Oriental exoticism, and the voyeurism of the 'male gaze' in so much Western art. It is not accidental that Biswas's work allows us a sense of pleasure but simultaneously reminds us of our boundaries; there is an edge to the work, a treading of a fine line. Since cultural discourse has tested the parameters of Eurocentric art history, one must now consider these issues within an international framework; a synthesis of a transcultural experience. This is the space in which Biswas lives and makes her art.

The title for my essay, 'Reading Between the Lines: The Imprinted Spaces of Sutapa Biswas', came to me yesterday while she and I were talking long-distance on the phone about the nature of exile and home. Since she was three

and a half years old, she has lived in England, not India where she was born in 1962. I, on the other hand who was born in England in 1933, have now lived in North America since my early twenties. We both locate ourselves in dual cultural homes. We both work out of a passion to deal with issues that are transcultural. For me, Biswas's recent art and thinking provides a liberating space at arms length from certain prevalent theoretical constructs in contemporary discourse, despite her most sophisticated awareness not only of their existence but also of their impact on her.

1 October 1991

Today I have looked for the first time at Biswas's own typed statement about the proposed exhibition. About the title, *Synapse*, she explains: 'This in medical terms is the anatomical relation of one nerve cell with another, the junction at which a nerve impulse is transferred, which is affected at various points by contact of their branching processes. The state of shrinkage or relaxation at these points (synapses) is supposed in some cases to determine the readiness with which a nervous impulse is transmitted from one part of the nervous system to another.' Biswas's recurring fascination with scientific and medical terminology is connected to her general interest in the technological world. Interestingly, her brothers and sisters are all research scientists.

In her text there is a striking use of nouns and verbs about exchanges, conjunctions, proximities, and shifts from one system to the next in her text. Perhaps most interesting to me is the idea of 'shrinkage or relaxation' as the synapse points, which may determine the readiness of the transmission of impulses from one system to the next.

Biswas stresses 'the notion of synapse as a metaphor for the human condition with particular reference to the experience of memory. Synapse here is symbolic of an undefined territory or space. Memory is itself of a shifting nature, vivid in places, with blind spots, Desire becomes an important element in this process. Sometimes connected to real experience, conceptually it is an imagined space or territory: She goes on to speculate on the work's 'complex dialogue between "real" and "imagined" spaces'.

Memory and desire. Undefined territory/space. The real and the imagined.

How is memory transferred? What contacts are made in memory between 'real' and 'imagined' spaces? In the *Synapse* installation, Biswas creates an in-between zone, a space inhabited by a woman on whose body are imprinted memory images. Hers are of India, and any visitor to the exhibition space will surely think of India. But while in her world, her visitors may also speculate about theirs. Her work may make us think of our own relationships to memory and desire, about the processes in the triggering, transferring and transforming of our memories.

I am increasingly immersed in the effect of Biswas's metaphors on me. I am drawn to the process of 'journey' in her work, and the placing and mapping of

the fragments of her memories. It is becoming a **balancing** act to **write** on **Biswas** and yet **also** locate myself within **all this**.

**Biswas** has been influenced by early Indian miniature paintings, and by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Indian religious maps of sites and landscape, which contain detailed drawings of the profiles of temple buildings and their surroundings. Inhabited by small figures and animals.

At this moment in the process, she envisions a component of 'mapping'; she likens the tracing of maps to the tracing of memories. She writes that 'like notations in a diary, I may install an aerial-like view of an incomplete map, landscape-like. A topographical relationship is important to the notion of memory in that, likewise, memories occupy a sense of landscape'.

In my mind; eye I imagine an aerial view that can provide an overall sense of these landscapes of memory and desire. How does one learn to fly over them, to survey them from above? (When I showed a draft of this essay to Lucy Lippard, she said it reminded her of the ancient Peruvian Nazca earth patterns, which are most readable from the air, and also of Shaker inspirational drawings.)

**Biswas** ends her speculations by writing that 'the themes of migration, separation and displacement which echo throughout are not straightforward equations but are, in fact, delineated by repeated conflicts, between near and far, intimacy and estrangement, integration and alienation and between pleasure and pain'.

*Migrate* v. i to leave one place and settle in another. 2 (of animals, birds) to go periodically from one place to another, living in each place for part of a year.

2 October 1991

Today I am rereading a special issue of the quarterly publication *SF Camera* devoted to the 'Disputed Identities' exhibition, and discussing its rich range of American and English work. In her essay 'What Are We Doing Here? Cultural Difference in Photographic Theory and Practice', Judith Wilson quotes from a statement by **Biswas**: 'I want people to research into my culture, as I've been doing into European and Western culture.'

This brings up the whole notion of 'cultural homework', a task for the critic writing across cultures.

The package **Biswas** has sent me contains notes from an unpublished 1990 autobiographical essay. In 1981, at the age of eighteen, she began to study art at Leeds University. In its theory-based programme she encountered the art of Artemisia Gentileschi, Edward Hopper and Robert Rauschenberg, amongst others. She was drawn also to notions of European and American art/life theories of the 1960s and 1970s and to early performance history. The ideas of the European Situationists attracted her: that lively, contentious, anarchistic and loosely structured international group that emerged in the late 1950s and was officially dissolved in 1972. Equally, she studied the Happenings movement, and was especially intrigued with Claes Oldenburg's events. At a certain point, she experimented with performance work herself. Twice she presented *Kali* (1984-85) to a single invited instructor at the college.

Each watched, head hooded, and seated in a chair around which a circle had been painted on the floor, demarcating his/her territory. Each was enveloped by a blend of masks, puppets-life-size and miniature-and taped languages, Bengali and Bantu. For **Biswas** (and, as **Griselda Pollock** discusses in her catalogue essay, for her instructors, too) this performance was a pivotal assertion of her own ideas about art and culture in the context of the intellectually heady but simultaneously deeply Eurocentric focus of the Leeds art department. (For me, there are parallels between this early *Kali* event and *Synapse*- both have strong performance elements, set up cultural worlds of language and symbols, and invoke issues of territory, literal and meta-physical.)

It was also in 1984 that **Biswas** began to work on her first major piece, *Housewives with Steak-Knives* - a huge painting in which a modern *Kali*-esque woman confronts the viewer. This painting is the beginning of a group of canvases (1985-88) about Indian women whose characters, moods and voices are suggested by their titles: *As I Stood, Listened and Watched; My Feelings Were This Woman Is Not For Burning, Last Mango in Paris; and The Only God Indian*

I reread **Gilane Tawadros** on **Biswas** in her powerful *Third Text* essay 'Beyond the Boundary: The Work of Three Black Women Artists in Britain'. She writes that '**Biswas's Housewives** defies the distinction drawn between the private and avowedly 'feminine domestic sphere, in this case exemplified by the kitchen, and the public, allegedly "masculine" domain of political action . . . [I]n *The Only Good Indian* (1985) . . . a[n] Indian woman is sitting watching the television, quietly peeling a potato which has metamorphosed into an uncanny resemblance to the former Home Secretary, Leon Brittan. Kitchen utensils have become the tools of defiance where the domestic space is conceived as the arena in which the hegemonic order is contested?'

**Tawadros's text** makes me consider the relationship of these painted domestic spaces and iconographies to those of the *Synapse* installation. Surely this new space constitutes an extension of **Biswas's** explorations of the notion of the domestic space of women, 'the arena in which the hegemonic order is contested'.

*Domestic* adj. 1 of the home or household or family affairs. 2 of one's country, not foreign or international

In 1987 **Biswas** returned to India for the first time in twenty-one years, visiting among other places the cave temples of Ajanta and Ellora, and the temple sculptures of Orissa and Khajuraha. She also visited the town where she had been raised as a young child. It was during this visit to India that she took slides of the temple sculpture, buildings, landscapes and people, images that were later to appear in *Synapse*.

In *Santineketan*, among the belongings of her grandmother who had died before **Biswas** could see her, she found an image of *Kali*. The tunic was exactly the same as the one in her 1985 painting. 'The thought of having carried this information in my subconscious from such early infancy was bound to have repercussions in my work.'

This is a vivid literal example of memory imprinting; and imprinting is shortly to become a major theme, visually and metaphorically, for **Biswas** in her art.

Imprint n. a mark made by pressing or stamping a surface: *the imprint of a foot, a footprint.* *Imprint* v. to impress or stamp a mark on.

To be imprinted upon, to have a mark stamped upon  
passive

To imprint the surface, to make a mark  
active

The imprinting of spaces

Space(s)

reflective and meditative

real and metaphorical

spiritual and secular

public and domestic

cultural and personal

The spaces in Indian towns, temples and landscapes, and in English, American and Canadian galleries

The space of my Berkeley home in which Biswas and I are to meet

16–19 November 1991. Visit of Sutapa Biswas

She has brought the *Synapse* project with her. As we unwrap the works and spread them out informally on my living-room floor, we talk about the history of their evolution.

Biswas had returned from her 1986–87 visit to India with several hundred slides: 'The transparencies were both records of memories and potential raw material. I was very conscious that I didn't want to use them in any nostalgic way. In 1989, with this archive of slide transparencies, I began to work with screen prints. I was drawn to the physical and aesthetic qualities of the litho film used in the screen-printing process. I was drawn to the idea of being able to see either side if one held them up to the light – in this sense, they were membrane-like. I was trying to reinvent a way of using a photographic material, allowing the viewer to experience it but shifting the context:

In 1989, two years after her Indian visit, Biswas created *Infestations of the Aorta – Shrine to a Distant Relative*. In the first version of this in England, three litho transparencies of an Indian woman and child (Biswas's aunt and her daughter) were hung suspended some three feet in front of the gallery wall – which provided, as the artist stresses, 'enough space for viewers to pass between, their own shadows becoming part of the dynamics of the piece'. These transparent photographs were lit so that their images were imprinted on to a large photograph of the Buddha's mouth mounted on the wall. 'The Buddha's mouth both speaks to us and simultaneously conceals. It becomes an obvious site for exchange, and in its sumptuousness reminds us of a desire to kiss.'

The following year Biswas created the installation piece *Sacred Space*, in which she continued to experiment, metaphorically and literally, with the physical installation space. Halogen lights installed outside the room's window cast the shadow of

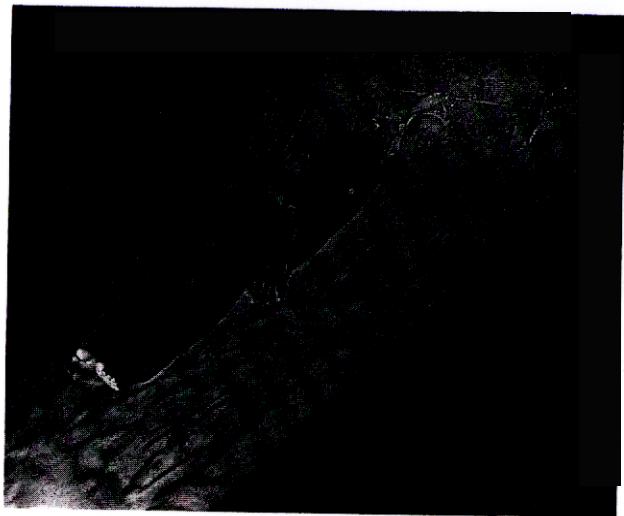
this intervening window into the room itself, reminding one of both the outside and inside. The interior revealed two walls flanked by pastel and line drawings: three on one side, one above the other altogether measuring some eighteen feet. On the other side were two large drawings similarly arranged. Placed between were a series of ten small photographic litho films revealing ritualistic imprints of feet treading sand. Sand itself is symbolic of eroded rock, also shifting in nature.

In the fall of 1990, following an invitation to take up a fellowship at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, Canada – where she was to stay for four months – Biswas began the *Synapse* series by turning to the slides taken in India. She set up a studio space in which she projected particular images on to a paper screen, experimenting with them, and finally engaging in what was essentially a private performance mode – the literal interaction of her self with the projected slides. The resulting work, a documentation of this, is moved from a private to a public context, that of the gallery space. In this public space we are confronted by a woman's body that crosses into an imaginary projected space.

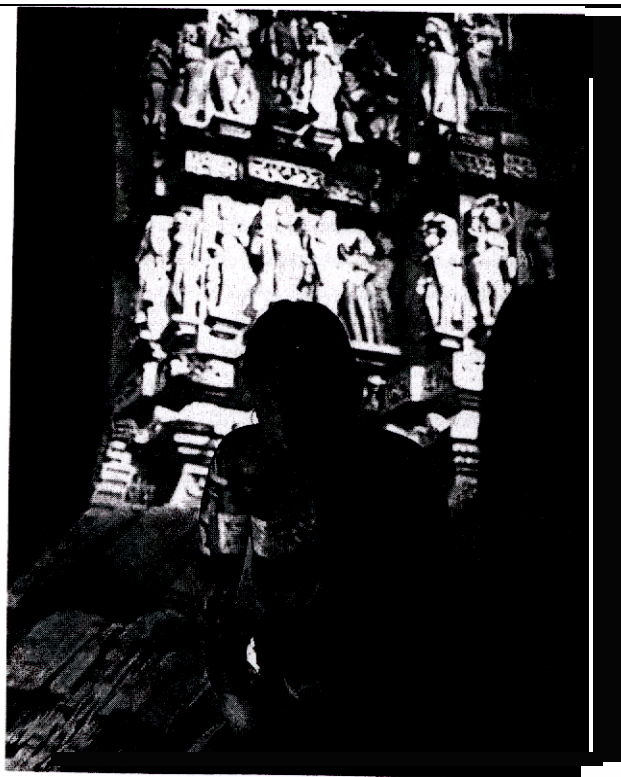
In her original conception of the installation, Biswas had thought to employ more representational references to maps. She had toyed with collaging map fragments on to a drawing, but after much consideration decided that it was the concept of mapping, as opposed to the literal transfer of information, that was significant. 'In this, it is close to the concepts behind the early religious and socio-geographic Indian maps.' What resulted, in lieu of an image more literally representing the topography of her psycho-geographic journey, was a huge line-and-graphic drawing of a woman on nine assembled sheets of sumptuous handmade cotton-rag paper. The woman appears to float rather than lie upon the white space of the paper. Her face and weighty figure, with its strong breasts and thighs, are meticulously drawn, while her arms and lower legs are faintly outlined. What is so extraordinary about this woman is that her eyes are open, her gaze fixed. She is unabashedly, comfortably and formidably present: she appears also quite unknowing of our gaze. Her powerful body has begun to emerge from the paper just as the body of Biswas appears to emerge from or sink into the various projections. In no way do any of the figures recall the formidably long tradition of the prone female nude by the likes of Titian, Rubens, Ingres, Manet and Matisse. The female nudes they might recall are either by women artists – Frida Kahlo and Käthe Kollwitz – or in Indian sculpture.

The nine photographs are large (52 × 44 in). They astonish me with their scale and the richness of their blacks, the subtleties of their surfaces, their lights and shadows.

In several of the *Synapse* series we see a recurring motif, a certain stone statue of an armless female figure. Biswas is not bothered by the particulars of which goddess the figure represents: indeed she prefers its anonymity. The goddess sits comfortably in a narrow stage-like space framed by two columns, and towards the bottom of the image we experience a fluid sense of the projection, which reminds us of its impermanence. In some of the *Synapse* series there is the traditional contrast of flesh and stone: at other times the stone is soft and the flesh solid.



7 SUTAPA BISWAS *Synapse II* (No. 2 of 2 images). Black and white photograph, 1992



8 SUTAPA BISWAS *Synapse III*. Black and white photograph, 1992

But **most** strongly of all, I feel and **see** the body, the literal **female** body present in the **work**. Always there is **the** body of **Biswas**: sometimes whole, **some-**times close-up parts—the belly, the hands — as **she** stands, extends herself length-wise or sits **on** her knees. Only once do we fully catch her gaze. In this particular image, her seated figure is half immersed in **an** almost black shadow that **plays across** her body and face — indeed, we can only see one of her eyes. On the lit side **of her** body **are tattoo-like** striations created by the projected patterns of the sculptured temple **façade** behind **her**. (Significantly, **the façade** is **from one of** the famous **Khajuraho** temples **in** central India, temples rediscovered by the British in the nineteenth century.) Her **fierce** gaze and her centrally **placed** body in the **front** plane, **together** with her **shadow** which looms to **her** left and **the** water-like blurred **reflections of the** building to her right, block out **access to the illuminated** world of the temple behind her.

The *Synapse* installation **marks** a confluence **of what is the definite**, indeed defiant, **presence** of the women characters **in Biswas's** earlier paintings and the metaphorical **spaces** of the 1989–90 installations. It is **an** intriguing set of sequences. First, she **sets out** in paint **the** active, powerful and highly tangible



9 SUTAPA BISWAS *Synapse IV*. Black and white photograph, 1992

presence and voice of the women. Second, she employs oblique lightings and projections **to** create the literal spaces of *Aorta* and *Sacred Space* in which the imprints of the sacred **are to be found**. Third, in *Synapse*, her own body becomes a **sort** of lightning-rod, a touchstone for **memory**. Only now does she herself enter **the** sacred space. Yet we do not witness a live performance but rather the traces of such: the photographic representation of the artist's body enmeshed with the projections. Dreamlike, these images represent a complex psycho-geographic journey in which the **language** of representation is contested'

### 22 November 1991: Postscript

**Biswas** has returned to **Canada** to prepare **the** installation in Vancouver. Her work **is** no longer here, only the ghostly resonances of its images and the echoes of the conversations between **us**. For me, **the last** two months have been a journey of increasing immersion in **Biswas's cultural** and **visual** worlds. Equally, I have explored my own worlds. I **have** re-immersed **myself** in **my English background**, and for **the** first time have begun, despite the particularities of my b&ground, upbringing and shift of homes, **to** acknowledge the inescapable impact of colonialism on my **own** cultural 'imprinting'. I have been immersed not only **in Biswas's** art but more broadly in speculating about **the** role it may play in the **cultural** debates that are currently taking place internationally, including **in England**, the United States and Canada She has much **to** contribute **to these** various debates. **Biswas's transcultural** perspective **encourages/allows** her **to** return unabashedly, yet with elegant theoretical complexity, **to** the subject of a **woman's** body, **conflating** her body with those of Indian goddess sculptures. To represent **the woman's** body with such presence is highly **unusual** these days, given the charged critical debate **around** the politics of such a representation **Biswas's** entrance into **this** contested territory suggests that it may well be artists like **Biswas – rather than** critic-historians – whose new ways of representing the body **will allow us all** to **re-enter** the space of **the** body and female sexuality, which belongs to **us** as women. In this arena **as** in others, **Biswas** is mapping old **lands** that need fresh topographical surveys, **as well** as foraying into new lands. It is in these terrains that we **will** be able **to** expand **our** exchanges, **in** the context of art-making, about **the** ways **culture**, race, gender, class **and** memory help **share** our identities. It is within these imprinted spaces that **we** may be able **to** speak with **more** freedom **to** one another about our shared **future** in **this** world of ours.

### Notes

Several people have read various versions of this essay and I am particularly indebted to the suggestions of Whitney Chadwick, Lucy Lippard, May Stevens and Diane Tani. I am also grateful to Rupert Jenkins of Camerawork, as it was in this gallery's exhibition, 'Disputed

Identities', that I first saw Biswas's work, and at that time also met her. Above all I would like to thank Sutapa Biswas herself for her art and friendship and for the productive intensity of her recent visit, during which this essay was completed.

- 1 Judith Wilson, 'What Are We Doing Here? Cultural Difference in Photographic Theory and Practice', *SF Camerawork*: 17, 3, Fall 1990. Biswas's statement is drawn from 'Reworking Myths: Sutapa Biswas' by Yasmin Kureishi, in *Visibly Female: Feminism and Art Today*, ed. Hilary Robinson, New York, Universe Books, 1988.
- 2 Gilane Tawadros, 'Beyond the Boundary: The Work of Three Black Women Artists in Britain', *Third Text*, 8/9, autumn/winter 1989, p. 145.
- 3 Biswas draws this term, 'psycho-geographic', from the Situationists. In an essay entitled "'Everyone will live in his own cathedral": The Situationists, 1958–1964', Christopher Gray writes: "'Psychogeography" was the study and correlation of the material obtained from drifting. It was used on the one hand to try and work out new emotional maps of existing areas and, on the other, to draw up plans for bodies of "situations" to be interlocked in the new Utopian cities themselves'. (*The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International*, translated and edited by Christopher Gray, Free Fall Publication, 1974.)