A Fragile Inheritance

Mathur, Saloni.

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The idea of a “desert trail,” with its associations of hiking and exploration along natural pathways of the land, may well be a by-product of the American imagination. We can trace it back to the myth-making effects of early Hollywood westerns, where a desert trail was essentially a wagon trail, as in the 1935 film The Desert Trail, which featured the iconic actor John Wayne as a rodeo cowboy. A desert trail, in this sense, is also a “gringo trail,” signaling the tracks of a foreign, Anglo presence in the landscape. Vivan Sundaram’s Desert Trail (1991) in figure 1.1, a diptych made with engine oil and charcoal on paper, is definitely a picture in the spirit of the latter. It depicts a material trail, in the form of archaeological remains and petrochemical debris, in the aftermath of the first American invasion of Iraq. We are presented here with spillage, wreckage, shrapnel, fumes, and shell-shocked desert creatures in a shattered food chain. It is a portrait of an ecosystem ravaged by war, a corroded landscape of toxic remains, where unexploded ammunition settles into the soil alongside bones and (future) blasted limbs. This is certainly not the rambling desert trail of the John Wayne-as-rodeo-cowboy sort. It is rather the hideous trail of a storm in the desert, or more precisely, the trail of Operation Desert Storm.

Sundaram’s diptych is part of a series consisting of forty-some works on paper in engine oil and charcoal undertaken by the artist in 1991 in response to the first Gulf War. Occupying a place in between drawing,
painting, and installation, these compositions, which were not exhibited outside of India until recently, mark a pivotal moment in the artist’s practice at a crucial historical juncture. Here, for the first time Sundaram abandoned conventional painting and allowed his pictures to slide out of their frames and off their walls to generate alternative forms and relationships to the gallery space. The series thus marks Sundaram’s transition to the installation, video, digital photomontage, and multi-media work that would define his art-making from 1991 on, a formal shift that was driven by several historical conditions of crises, namely, the international crisis of the first Gulf War, the collapse of the former Soviet Union, and the rise of communal violence in India, leading to the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya by organized gangs of Hindu extremists the following year. Moreover, the economic reforms implemented by the Indian government in 1991 marked the beginnings of a new era of liberalization in the country, leading to the simultaneous phenomenon of India’s neoliberal turn, which—for many—has had similarly cataclysmic effects. As Sundaram stated in response to these conditions in an interview, “Changed circumstances and new experiences required a new articulation.” Elsewhere he reflected, “I began using unorthodox media, and then I started the process of breaking out of the easel format, such as by stitching sheets of paper together, which allow[ed] one into a space outside the frame, allowing me a greater flexibility.”

In this chapter, I suggest that Sundaram’s engine oil works, and his understated search for “greater flexibility” in 1991, represent something of a major constellation, the kind of coalescent gesture that T. J. Clark once described in the context of modern French painting as “supercharged with historical meaning” around which significance clusters.
“The more we look and enquire” into such works, Clark stated, “the more facets of social reality they seem to touch and animate.” Situated at the vanguard of the formal experimentation that radicalized Indian art in the 1990s, Sundaram’s engine oil compositions were an important effort to grasp the new configurations and have proven to have an enduring relevance to the contemporary, even as they have refused to conform to the preservationist imperatives of archival conservation. The status of the materials in this project—oil, handmade paper, charcoal, and zinc—stands in marked contrast, for example, to those used by the British artist Richard Wilson, who also turned to recycled engine oil for his 1987 installation in London. Wilson’s site-specific work, 20:50, filled the gallery to waist height with petroleum to produce a perception-altering reflective sea and remained permanently installed in the Saatchi Gallery in a custom-built room for over two decades, in a sense, fully absorbed into the commercial gallery space. By contrast, several of Sundaram’s drawings with oil have become fragile artifacts in their own right, growing more brittle, discolored, and faded over time, reflecting the reality of eco-historical change that is itself of crucial concern in the work.

As I will show, the multiple and intertwined meanings of oil in Sundaram’s series—at once a geological resource, a global commodity, and a painterly medium with its origins in Euro-Western high culture—point to the interconnections between vastly different histories of oil (ecological, art historical, economic, and political) and present a powerful indictment of the violence generated by American militarism in the Middle East. On one hand, Sundaram’s images of falling bombs, cataclysmic explosions, and carcinogenic fumes work to expose the spectacular forms of military destruction unleashed by the “smart bomb” in two successive wars in Iraq and anticipate the expanded use of the aerial drone by the American military in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, and elsewhere. On the other hand, his mysterious oil-drenched images of fallen Babylonian soldiers and Akkadian kings point to a less visible, more elusive, and open-ended sense of devastation, a form of violence upon both culture and the land whose effects are distinctly linked to the passage of time.

The latter is a portrait of what literary critic Rob Nixon has defined as “slow violence,” that which “seeps long term into ecologies,” both rural and urban, and for generations to come, and whose hidden forces and protracted processes contrast sharply with the spectacle of high-speed
global capitalism in our era. For Nixon, slow violence involves delayed effects, deferred victims, and the microprocesses of erosion and erasure; it refers to the “long dyings—the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological that result from war’s toxic aftermaths” and penetrate the substratum of our planet. In what follows, I discuss how Sundaram’s turn to certain materials, motifs, and techniques in this series—in particular, his embrace of archaeological detritus, petrochemical debris, and oscillating underground and overhead views—makes legible these new regimes of violence and vulnerability and provides the basis for a critical perspective linked not to abstract universals but to the materiality and logic of the concrete. Moreover, the radical temporality on display in these works, linking a fossilized, geo-civilizational past to a technological present and environmental future, will come to define many of Sundaram’s later and more ambitious endeavors, for instance, the vast material landscapes composed from rubble and debris that form the basis of his project Trash (2005–8), which I analyze in chapter 4, and Black Gold (2012), which I discuss at the end of this chapter. I thus turn briefly here to lay some conceptual ground for grasping the persistence of this particular configuration in his work.

The Rubric of Ruination

In recent years, artists and intellectuals across the humanities and social sciences, often drawing upon the seminal insights of the German critic and theorist Walter Benjamin, have turned to the tropes of ruination, rubble, waste, and debris to reflect on the contingency and fragility of certain sociohistorical configurations associated with modernity. In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin famously posited progress as a storm that “keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage,” leaving “a pile of debris” in its wake. Writing on the eve of the Nazi genocide of the Jews during the Second World War, the philosopher was drawn to these signs of material excess, accumulation, and decay to develop his critique of the ideology of progress and the forward march of European civilization. In his account, the romanticized classical and neoclassical topoi of the ruin, representing the rise and fall of glorious empires, came to signal a disenchantment with modernity and its myths of progress and civilizational glory. The account has
helped to stimulate, as anthropologist Gastón Gordillo has explained, a shift away from the type of ruins studied by classical archaeology, “such as vestiges from an ancient past or sites associated with heritage and tourism, and toward modern, contemporary, industrial forms of decay and destruction, the physical and social detritus created the world over by capitalist, state and imperial projects and conflicts.”

Benjamin saw in ruins ambivalent “allegories of thinking itself,” providing the basis for an expanded, more paradoxical, and less sentimental approach to ruination as a critical analytic for the modern era. The recent turn by anthropologist Ann Stoler to ruins as “epicenters of renewed claims, as history in a spirited voice, as sites that animate new possibilities, bids for entitlement, and unexpected political projects” is an impassioned effort within the social sciences to activate such a critical imagination.

Sundaram’s turn to the physicality of detritus—to engine oil figured as petrochemical spill, to archaeological rubble in his installation Black Gold (2012), or to actual garbage from Delhi in Trash (2005–8)—involves a similar rejection of the grand narratives of civilization and a purposeful reappropriation of the materiality of debris. In these projects, as we shall see, refuse is simultaneously a hazard and a resource, a framework for historical understanding, and a powerful lens onto human subjectivity, for it defines those subjects who must survive its proximity and whose vulnerability and marginality are bound up in that fact. In Sundaram’s art, ruins are left in the wake of wars and sectarian conflict; but they also result from other kinds of societal processes, for example, the excesses of consumption and accumulation arising from rapid and uneven urban expansion and growth. In the ruin-landscape of Black Gold (2012), moreover, a large-scale model composed of 2,000-year-old terra-cotta shards, there is no singular culprit or agent of destruction. Here, the more elemental processes of time, wind, and water lead to sunken places and forgotten pasts, as temporality intersects with human activity, and the aerial perspective summons not the mechanisms of imperial surveillance but a more abstract fantasy of history itself. Equally important in Sundaram’s oeuvre, however, is that such motifs of degradation and decay are simultaneously images of renewal and regeneration. In other words, a productive dialectic between the material and the social is opened up through these frameworks of ruin and repair. This chapter thus investigates how three interlocking themes introduced for the first time in the engine oil series—the sophisticated semiotics of oil and debris; the place of archaeology, landscape, and
the ruin; and the visual optic of the aerial perspective—converge in a powerful portrait of our human ecology in crises that is more relevant today than ever before.

**The Epistemology of Oil**

Figure 1.2, titled *Land Shift*, an exemplary piece from the series, depicts twelve pieces of paper stitched together—beginning on the wall and stretching onto the floor—in front of which is a flat zinc tray containing a small black pool of engine oil. The dark swirls make the work distinctly geological; it is like a profile cut from the substratum of the land depicting a microecology of indiscernible processes. Here, accumulations of oil point to an elusive dynamics of metabolic exchange. We sense movement, mutation, and disruption as petroleum insidiously mingles with earth. But what is the nature of the “shift” in *Land Shift*? Is this a picture of a “natural” mineral deposit in the soil bed being subjected to processes of sedimentation and flow? Or is it a portrait of an unnatural thing—that speaks to the formlessness and terrible irrevocability of the hazardous leak or toxic spill? Here, as fossil fuel meets the fossil record, we sense an ambiguous new ecological order where chemicals are literally inseparable from the soil and where it becomes difficult to discern what is unjust or out of place. At the same time, a number of associations with oil are established: “oil” is simultaneously an artistic medium, a geological entity belonging to the land, a commodity that is dredged from the earth (hijacked, collected, and contained), and a substance released back into the land as industrial waste or hazardous spill.

Another picture shown in figure 1.3, titled *Approaching 100,000 Sorties*, reveals that oil in Sundaram’s series is also at the contested center of American militarism in the Persian Gulf. The phrase in his title, like that of *Desert Trail*, highlights the cruel vocabulary produced by the American political elite by playing on those perverse sets of military euphemisms like “Desert Storm,” “Enduring Freedom,” “Shock and Awe,” and the “War on Terror,” designed to conceal the violence inherent in their operations. Like the previous work, this one also constructs a profile of a landscape, but now as a series of explosive collisions or—as the title suggests—as an act of violence on the landscape of Iraq. These and other images mimic explosions, or more accurately, they propel you
FIGURE 1.3 Vivan Sundaram, Approaching 100,000 Sorties, 1991. Stitched paper on wall and floor with engine oil in zinc tray. Courtesy of the artist.
into the moment of an explosion: we are presented here with a formation of bombs dropped from above, a swirling cloud of black smoke, vortexes, chaos, and general fallout and debris. On the floor again is the zinc tray of engine oil, this time like a miniature boat docked in front of this great picture of destruction, or—as you move closer to the piece—like a black glass mirror through which the viewer adds their reflection to the whole alienating scene. It is the voracious historical appetite of modern warfare for petroleum, the deadly complicity between oil and war, that these oil-saturated images of combustion and destruction evoke in a particularly haunting way.

“Petroleum resists the five-act form,” Bertolt Brecht stated in his 1929 response to a play about the effects of an oil strike in Albania. “Today’s catastrophes do not proceed in a straight line but in cyclical crises.” Brecht’s comments, emerging from the fraught conditions of modernity in Weimar Germany, express the necessity of grasping modernity’s catastrophic effects in a nonlinear, dialectical way and speak to the difficulty of presenting oil’s industrial realities within the conventions of traditional aesthetic forms. “Petroleum creates new relationships,” he argued, which are immensely complicated and “can only be simplified by formal means” (emphasis in original). The formal challenge of representing the twentieth century’s oil experience was similarly the subject of a short essay by the Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh, titled “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel” and published in 1992, a year after the start of the first Gulf War and Sundaram’s own formal experiments with oil. Ghosh’s essay was a review of the “immense significance” of Jordanian writer Abdelrahman Munif’s Cities of Salt, the first of five novels in Arabic dealing with the history of oil, and it questioned the lack of creative writing on the subject and decried the “barrenness” and “imaginative sterility” that had characterized this epic story until then. For Ghosh, the history of oil, with its principal protagonists—America, on one side, and the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf, on the other—had been a devastatingly painful story, “a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic.” The world of oil, he argued, with its “bafflingly multilingual” communities “lived out within a space that is no place at all,” is “intrinsically displaced, heterogeneous, and international” and challenges the novel’s comfortable relation to the settled boundaries of nation-states; “it tends to trip fiction into incoherence.” Ghosh’s account pointed toward the dispersed spatial, temporal, and geopolitical
coordinates of the twentieth century’s experience with oil, and it emphasized—in contrast to Brecht—the specifically postcolonial character of this slippery terrain.

In recent years, numerous scholars, reflecting a transformed environmental awareness based in the urgent effects of carbon emissions and the depletion of fossil fuels on a planetary scale, have embraced Ghosh’s text as marking the beginnings of a new interdisciplinary formation dubbed “eco-criticism” or “energy humanities.” These scholars have sought to confront the history and cultural centrality of oil over the last century—it is “not just a commodity; it is the commodity,” according to one writer—and have called for fresh intellectual and political imaginaries to confront oil’s slippery status and terrible ubiquity in our late-capitalist industrial modernity. The cultural theorist and Left activist Imre Szeman, a leading critical voice in these discussions, for instance, has positioned the question of “how to know oil” as a crucial challenge for “energy epistemologies” and political futures. For Szeman, the significance of oil is both in its material realities and in the cultural narratives that shape our understanding of it, hence the value of an interdisciplinary approach integrating art, literature, and cultural studies. One consequence has been the proliferation of a new vocabulary (though not always precise), marked by numerous neologisms that begin with “petro”—like “petro-fiction,” “petro-modernity,” and “petro-melancholia” (the sense of loss and grief that comes with the end of humanity’s love affair with oil). Accordingly, scholars have begun to articulate oil’s relationship to a vast spectrum of topics: issues of carbon emissions, climate change, and global warming, on the one hand, and the escalation of militarism, the rise of political Islam, and the will toward democratization embodied by the 2011 uprisings of the Arab Spring, on the other.

Sundaram’s images represent an early instance of Szeman’s call to know oil differently, and they appear to support his account of oil as a “periodizing” substance, a material that can absorb and reflect the major conditions of crises of our times. Land Shift provides an unusual vision, for instance, of a status that the oil industry has implicitly denied: the state of crude petroleum beneath the surface of the earth. This rather basic fact about oil—that it remains largely invisible in its subterranean form—is at the heart of Timothy Mitchell’s approach to the phenomenon he refers to as “carbon democracy.” Mitchell, a political theorist and scholar of Egypt, argues that because oil (unlike coal)
comes to the surface by pressure and pumps, its workers remain entirely aboveground, disassociated from the physical attachments and earthly ecology of the liquid form. These conditions provide the basis for the unusual labor politics of the oil industry and for its elusive material realities of production and distribution. Those working with oil do not descend into the ground, an encounter that produced decisive advancements in the history of labor and major works of literature and art—from Émile Zola’s classic novel about a French miners’ strike, Germinal (1885), to Steve McQueen’s contemporary exploration of the claustrophobic conditions of a South African mine, Western Deep (2002). Sundaram’s embedded geological portrait of oil represents, by contrast, a strictly imaginative encounter that defies and departs from this figural tradition of depicting human industry and work. At the same time, the little zinc tray recalls the relative fluidity and lightness of oil, the properties that have made it a uniquely seaborne fossil fuel. In this way, Sundaram dispenses with the archetypal image of labor embodied by the figure of the coal worker in favor of a more Mitchell-like focus on extraction and transportation. Drilling, pipelines, oil tankers, export, blockade, shortage, war, militarism, and spills: these are the associations in Land Shift that form the basis for the radical complexity of oil’s politics and situates its democratic potential within an international arena.

The series bears a strong affinity, in this sense, with Allan Sekula’s Fish Story, the American photographer’s exploration into the elusive spaces of a networked global economy undertaken at a parallel moment, between 1989 and 1995. Sekula’s photographic investigation of the global circuits of shipping, simultaneously panoramic, expansive, claustrophobic, and bleak, was similarly concerned with ports and harbors, with the phenomenon of transport and “containerization”—which he described memorably as the “victory of the rectangular solid over the messy contingency of the Ark”—and with a micro and macro view of an interconnected world. Growing up in a harbor surrounded by supertankers and container ships, Sekula stated that he developed a heightened awareness of “the primacy of material forces.” Far from a sentimental perspective, “this crude materialism is underwritten by disaster. Ships explode, leak, sink, collide. Accidents happen everyday. Gravity is recognized as a force.”

Although there are clearly formal differences between Sundaram’s intrepid experiments with oil and Sekula’s efforts to revitalize the tra-
dition of documentary photography, both artists sought a materialist engagement with the emerging effects of globalization in the 1990s and a renewal of a Left perspective to this end. And yet, Sekula’s masterful maritime portrait, involving years of research and travel, steered clear of the ports of the Persian Gulf, even as he acknowledged that such locations exist as “fulcrums of history,” more powerful and unpredictable than others. Nonetheless, Fish Story—as Benjamin Buchloh argued—strove for “the possibility of understanding history in the age of electronic media” and the new contingencies of visual information, in particular, the “fallen facticity of the world,” the forms of concealment and clandestine cover-ups that belong to the operations of capital but never quite cohere into a graspable whole. Several of the images in Sundaram’s series, as I will elaborate, reveal a similar challenge to the changing forms of consciousness of the digital era and an attempt to grasp the new configurations through “the primacy of material forces.”

Oil, Painting, Politics

What makes Iraq special, stated the neoconservative hawk Paul Wolfowitz flatly when he was deputy defense secretary in the second Bush administration, is that “the country floats on a sea of oil.” Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to recount the history of American involvement in Middle East oil, Wolfowitz’s statement is a powerful reminder of the role of this history in defining the agendas of the various “petro-politicians” in or close to the White House in our time: Dick Cheney, the former CEO of the energy giant Halliburton; George W. Bush, a former CEO of his own oil and gas company in Texas; and Rex Tillerson, the CEO of ExxonMobil and short-lived secretary of state in the Trump administration. Their identities appear to derive in part from the mythic heroism of American oilmen at the beginning of the previous century, the heyday of economic and political expansionism for America, embodied by the triumph of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. That event brought the promise of advanced technology, mass consumption, and economic prosperity to its spectators—the roots of the American dream—and consolidated the nation’s vision of itself as the vanguard of social, cultural, and civilizational progress. Significantly, the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 was also the space where the “high” arts of Western oil painting were separated from...
the “ethnographic” exhibits of painters from the colonies, establishing oil at the center of yet another social hierarchy, also implicit in Sundaram’s work. It was there in Chicago that Raja Ravi Varma, for example—the first professional artist in India to adopt the Western techniques of oil and easel, and widely acknowledged as the father of modern Indian art—received two gold medals for his “well-executed portraits” of Indian women, launching his success on the international stage and further cementing his popularity in India. However, Varma’s paintings did not make it to the venerable fine arts pavilion at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. Instead, his pictures, along with those of the Indian photographer Deen Dayal, were relegated to the ethnographic section, not admired as works of fine art but rather commended by judges for their “ethnological value” and held up as evidence for the continued success of the British civilizing mission in India.35

Although the medium that Sundaram employs in the series is burnt or used motor oil (it has actually been run through the engine of a car and is preferred by the artist for its dirt and discoloration effects), the material with its murky impurities evokes some of the prejudices and enduring hierarchies confronted by the first generation of oil painters in India. The example of Varma represents some of the paradoxes that have resulted from oil painting’s complicated journey to the Indian subcontinent: the medium was introduced to Indians in the eighteenth century by Europeans, promoted by the British throughout the nineteenth century in their museums and art schools as part of the so-called civilizing mission, rejected by nationalists in the early twentieth century as a “foreign” medium belonging to the colonizer, and then seized by modern artists throughout the twentieth century with varying degrees of ambivalence, mimicry, appropriation, and/or subversion, often at the same time.

It is significant that Sundaram is both personally and professionally linked to these emblematic moments of modernism in India: as previously noted, he is the nephew of the charismatic female painter Amrita Sher-Gil, who went to Paris in the 1920s to train in post-Impressionist circles before returning to India in the 1930s. I have argued elsewhere that Sher-Gil’s extraordinary 1934 painting titled Self-Portrait as Tahitian, where her own nude body occupies the romantic space of Gauguin’s Tahitian females, is a fascinating subversion of the dominant tropes of Western primitivism and an expression of the entanglements of Indian painters within modernism’s powerful representational dilemmas.36
Similarly, Sundaram’s return to the hybrid and cosmopolitan legacies of his famous aunt in the digitally manipulated photomontage series Re-take of Amrita discussed in my introduction exposes the stylish, yet distinctly melancholic, mix between European and Indian social milieus within which oil painters in India, like Sher-Gil, confronted the perennial problem of “Indianness” in their art (see figure Intro.2).37

From such a vantage point, oil is not an innocent art historical material but one that is dredged through a long history of power and infused with inescapable paradoxes and predicaments. And it is the multiple meanings of oil in Sundaram’s images, as I have suggested, that point to these several different historical phenomena simultaneously: the perception of oil as both commodity and contaminant, the connection between oil and imperial violence, and the postcolonial consciousness brought to oil as an artistic medium with its origins in the West. Such a “politics of the palette”38 may not belong exclusively to artists from the formerly colonized world; critical perspectives on the history of oil can derive (and have derived) from a range of physical locations and material practices. But it is not surprising that at the same time that the formal consideration of the relationship between oil as an artistic and geopolitical commodity, which Sundaram undertook at a time of war, emerged from an artist so critically positioned within the intertwined histories of West and non-West, and across the power differentials of the first and third worlds. I will return to elaborate these structures of inequality shortly by way of a particularly forceful image, From the First World/ From the Third World, in addition to other examples from the series, which provide a view of discrepant experiences in an inextricably connected and intertwined world.

Archaeology, Politics, and the Iraq Museum

If Iraq “floats on a sea of oil,” as Wolfowitz noted, it also sits on a bedrock of antiquities, since there are more than 10,000 known archaeological sites in the country, of which barely one-fifth have been excavated—making essentially all of modern Iraq an archaeological site. Moreover, the story of archaeology in the country begins at approximately the same time as the story of foreign interest in its oil: at the height of European imperial expansion in the nineteenth century, when Western nations believed it was their right to possess the raw materials
and cultural property they uncovered in the non-Western world. By the early twentieth century, however, both oil and archaeology became inseparable from the cultural and economic nationalism emerging in Iraq at the time and became important arenas through which Iraq’s anti-colonial struggle was staged. One of the greatest challenges for Iraqi nationalists in the early decades of the twentieth century was to regain control of the resources, both natural and cultural, being extracted from the new nation-state.

One can imagine how the world was stunned in the 1840s when British, French, and German archaeologists first encountered, rather suddenly and unexpectedly, the vast ruins of the Assyrian empire and its capital city, Nineveh, in the northern part of what was called Mesopotamia, as well as the great walled city of the Babylonian kingdom to the south. True, Mesopotamia had long been an exotic referent for European culture, perhaps best embodied by Eugène Delacroix’s famous painting of 1827–28 depicting the fall of the Assyrian king, Death of Sardanapalus. However, the survival of its material culture, which represented for Euro-Western audiences the physical proof of events depicted in the Bible, was indeed a momentous revelation. In fact, for over a hundred years, from approximately 1810 to 1910, almost all excavations in Iraq by Europeans and Americans were conducted at pre-Islamic sites like Babylon and Nippur, a source of fascination because of their relation to the Bible, while Islamic sites—not to mention the contemporary Islamic inhabitants of the area—were largely overlooked.

When British administrators first drew up the boundaries of modern Iraq in 1918–19, it was not an accident that they included the ancient sites of Sumer, Akkad, Babylonia, and Assyria within the new geopolitical entity. The British had deliberately followed the contours of these long-dead ancient cultures, which was easier than outlining the current realities of the region with its Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, and Turkish speakers and its mixture of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian populations. This was at the heart of the paradoxical project of establishing a new nation-state in the ancient space deemed the “cradle of civilization.” Gertrude Bell, one of the most famous Englishwomen in the British empire, who established the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, served as Iraq’s first director of antiquities and assisted in drawing the boundaries of the new nation, reflected upon this paradox at the time: “History,” Bell wrote, “suffers an atmospheric distortion. We look upon a past civilization and see it, not as it was, but charged with the signifi-
cance of that through which we gaze, as down the centuries shadow overlies shadow, some dim, some luminous, and some so strongly coloured that all the age behind is tinged with a borrowed hue.”

The distortion of modernity’s view of the past was perhaps best embodied in the particularities of the museum inaugurated by Bell in 1923—the Iraq Museum, conceived in part to help protect the archaeological remains of Iraq from the insatiable appetite of the Western museum. Paradoxically, Bell had also implemented antiquities regulations during these years that allowed for extensive exporting of artifacts based on assumptions about their “universal” significance and the Western museum’s rights to ownership. Bell nevertheless promoted the institution tirelessly in its early days: she organized makeshift displays, coordinated lectures from visiting archaeologists, and eventually managed to find a permanent space. “It will be a real museum rather like the British Museum, only a little smaller,” she stated with pride in 1926.

Although Bell’s model may well have been the grand institution of the Victorian metropolis, the museum she created in Baghdad was an altogether different event. It did not boast an imperial collection or a “universal art survey” like its European counterparts; nor did it emerge from the impetus or initiatives of Iraqis themselves. On the contrary, it was the British who saw the necessity of a national museum for their nation-building efforts during the indirect rule of the Mandate period, a new identity created by the League of Nations for a country still unable to “stand alone” requiring the tutelage of the “advanced nations.” Nevertheless, by the time of Bell’s death in 1926, the museum had moved to a new location in northern Baghdad, and its collection consisted of some ten-thousand-plus objects. With inexplicable optimism (in view of her suicide shortly afterward), Bell wrote to her father, “I burst with pride when I show people over the Museum. It is becoming such a wonderful place.”

That Bell’s museum reflected a European imaginary somewhat at odds with the politics of the new nation would become increasingly clear. Sati al-Husri, the nationalist leader who replaced Bell as Iraq’s director of antiquities by the 1930s, did not include, for example, visits to the museum in the pedagogy of the new Iraqi school curriculum. He focused instead on the arrival of Islam in the region from the seventh century AD and on, generating a collection of Islamic objects for the museum through large-scale excavations of Islamic archaeological sites, like the great mosques and imperial architecture of the Umayyad
and Abbasid Caliphates, 661–750 AD and 750–1258 AD, respectively, or the second Abbasid capital at Samarra (836–892 AD). One result was that the museum continued to grow, acquiring a new role for itself as a nationalist repository of a shared relationship to an Islamic and a pre-Islamic past for Iraqis.

As many scholars have argued, the museum in general as a cultural institution has long helped to consolidate the “imagined communities” of the modern nation-state, from its earliest inception in the post-Enlightenment era to its contemporary expressions in a multicultural world. The tragic destruction of the Iraq Museum resulting from the unchecked frenzy and violence of looters—who pillaged government buildings and businesses after the fall of Baghdad and, for several days in early April 2003, also targeted the museum—cannot be viewed therefore as a marginal aside to the real battlefield of the US-led invasion, as the Bush administration and the mainstream media repeatedly attempted to claim. We might recall Donald Rumsfeld’s dismissive response to these events: “Stuff happens,” he said at a press conference, shrugging. “Freedom’s untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things.” Visibly irritated by the media’s “exaggerated reports” of the damage, Rumsfeld stated at the same press conference, “It’s the same picture of some person walking out of some building with a vase and you see it twenty times. And you think, my goodness, were there that many vases?” He paused before delivering his punch line: “Is it possible that there were that many vases in the whole country?” Rumsfeld’s hubris and flat indifference toward the products of culture and humanity in Iraq was unacceptable for many reasons; for our purposes, it expressed a contemporary imperialist ethos in which the material reality of violence was connected to the symbolic materiality of the archaeological past. To understand this kind of cultural violence as a specific form of destruction in the present, in contrast to generalized clichés about “culture-in-ruins,” I return once again to Sundaram’s art.

An Artist’s Vision

When the drill bore down toward the stony fissures and plunged its implacable intestine into the subterranean estates,
and dead years, eyes of the ages,  
imprisoned plants’ roots  
and scaly systems  
became strata of water,  
fire shot up through the tubes  
transformed into cold liquid,  
in the customs house of the heights,  
issuing from its world of sinister depth,  
it encountered a pale engineer  
and a title deed.

PABLO NERUDA, excerpt from *Standard Oil Co.* (1940)

There are strong correspondences between Pablo Neruda’s anti-imperialist poem of 1940, which condemns the international oil companies for the “drill that bore down toward the stony fissures” plunging its “implacable intestine” into the ground, and Vivan Sundaram’s engine oil works undertaken by the artist a half century later. The Chilean poet’s sense of violation to the “subterranean estates” of the earth, which manifest the “eyes of the ages”—namely, the collective experience of human history—resonates with Sundaram’s visual renderings of deep petroleum deposits and sunken ancestral figures, as in *Soldier of Babylon I*, figure 1.4. Similarly, Neruda’s reflection on the moment when the substance breaks through the surface of the earth and meets, unhappily, “a pale engineer and a title deed,” conveys the spirit of Sundaram’s Gulf War critique of foreign oil interests and the enduring imperial paradigm of possession in Iraq. The resonances further call up a much earlier project by Sundaram, *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* (1972), which was inspired by Neruda’s epic poem of the same name. In a gesture of homage to the Marxist poet and recent winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, that series of twenty-four ink drawings on paper included a portrait of the stylish Neruda depicted in his signature beret.  

Sundaram created the Macchu Picchu pictures at another important conjuncture: upon his return to India after his political awakening as a student in London, also the year before Neruda’s death in Chile. The drawings testify, in part, to the lively reception of Neruda by intellectuals and artists on the subcontinent at the time as a model for revolutionary thought, third world politics, radical consciousness, and aesthetic ideas. By 1976, Sundaram had established the Kasauli Art Centre at
his family’s hill station home in Himachal Pradesh, which held artist residencies, workshops, seminars, and performances throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, and became an important site for the evolution and advancement of these discourses of Marxist aesthetics. Sundaram has said about his work from the early seventies that he “tried both to illustrate the Marxist position and to find formal equivalents for the ideological struggle.”52 Accordingly, in The Heights of Macchu Picchu, the artist followed Neruda’s journey into the ruins of the ancient Incan city and juxtaposed—as the poet did—the beauty and splendor of its stones with the tragic fate of its bones, in the form of the forgotten bodies of the Incan slaves that toiled and perished on the site. The series, as Ajay Sinha has described, “traces the topography of human ruins inch by inch. In one, dead men and women, drawn like little notations, tumble forth to evoke trenches with piles of dead bodies in Hitler’s Germany. In another, a monolithic image of Marx seeps from a swarm of root.”53 Generally viewed as belonging to a youthful, more polemical, phase of Sundaram’s career, the series contains, I suggest, a number of themes that cannot be dismissed as merely ideological. The sediments of the ancient past; the ecology, topography, and memory of ruins; and the

![Figure 1.4](image_url)

living, breathing geology of the earth: these tropes all return in the engine oil work and will persist throughout the artist’s career.

First exhibited in India in 1991, the engine oil compositions were in part inspired by a visit to Iraq two years earlier, when Sundaram participated in the Second International Art Exhibition in Baghdad and won one of the five gold medals that were named after Saddam Hussein and awarded at the time. But Sundaram also traveled during this 1989 trip to a number of historical and archaeological sites that have since been either looted or destroyed. Indeed, the extent to which his 1991 series anticipates the crisis of civil society and threat to archaeological heritage in Iraq by 2003—or the ongoing wars in Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, and elsewhere with their devastating impact on ancient ruins, like Palmyra—is a tragic thing to have witnessed in the new millennium. Sundaram could not have predicted, for example, that the iconic press photo of a beheaded sculpture lying amid the rubble after the looting of the Iraq Museum would render so literal the carnage he envisioned a dozen years earlier in his majestic portrait of heroic tragedy depicted in figure 1.5, *Death of an Akkadian King*.

This diptych and others appear to foreshadow the events of the sec-

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**FIGURE 1.5**

In these images, we see not the contemporary people of Iraq but rather the great figures of an ancient civilization lying executed on the floor, bound or buried, limbs distorted or dismembered, heads tilted back, eyes closed in death, shrouded in angry clouds of black and gray. In figure 1.6, Mesopotamian Drawing II, the outline of a house and other timeless imagery (a camel, a Babylonian figure, a woman, and a palm tree—reminders of the once fertile crescent) appear together on paper stained with oil, presented as if in a dense veil of smoke. Here, oil’s blackness and slimy fecal qualities open onto a realm of abject associations. The substance thickens and becomes, in the words of a former Venezuelan president, “the devil’s excrement,” connected to foul smells and suffocating forms, the embodiment of evil itself.54 “The representational problem oil presents to the committed artist,” Stephanie LeMenager stated in her book Living Oil, “has to do with oil’s primal associations with earth’s body, therefore with the permeability, excess,
We might view Sundaram’s response to this problem in his play with the indeterminacy of the medium itself. Newly liberated from painterly formats, the artist’s experiments with the slippery material are anything but slick; they produce dense ecological and organic associations, at times with unpredictable effects.

The Aerial Perspective: Sundaram’s View from Above

The images of “techno-warfare” that were first promoted by the US military during the first Gulf War in 1991 depended upon a view from afar. As Susan Sontag wrote, those televsual images of “the sky above the dying, filled with light-traces of missiles and shells,” served to illustrate America’s absolute military superiority over its enemy. The so-called smart bomb—a bomb with a camera attached to its front—allowed the television viewer to participate directly in the military triumph and in effect constituted the television screen and its viewer as an extended apparatus of the bomb itself. Sundaram is acutely conscious of these disembodying visual acts, the kinds of involvements and detachments they enable and permit, and their role in the construction of the Western viewing subject. In several pictures he constructs a CNN-type aerial view that tends to obscure the specific details of a scene into a vague or blurry haze—in figure 1.7, for instance, the outline of a human figure is smudged into the fallout. We see forms that transmute and metamorphose as the present seems to explode the past: elsewhere, as in figure 1.8, old cuneiform-like shapes are smeared and eroded, and new ones have not yet acquired their shape.

The series was no doubt shaped by another set of Sundaram’s drawings that deal thematically with the Second World War, a series that the artist created in 1988 after visiting Auschwitz and Birkenau for the first time. In those dark charcoal sketches, reminiscent of William Kentridge’s drawings of apartheid South Africa, the artist confronted the destruction of the Holocaust through landscapes of loss and social devastation. But it is the aerial or overhead view, along with the radical transformation of waste into medium—burnt engine oil repurposed as paint—that marks the biggest difference between the two series and anticipates the increasingly sophisticated organization of aerial perspectives over landscapes of debris in subsequent projects like Tracking (2003–4), Trash (2005–8), and Black Gold (2012).
Sundaram’s frequent use of an aerial optic or overhead view contrasts sharply with what the writer W. G. Sebald viewed as a lack of engagement, the ominous silence, that characterized Germany’s relationship to the massive aerial bombing campaigns of the Second World War. The war in the air, Sebald stated, was “war pure and undisguised.” This was because the strategic leveling of some 131 German towns and cities by the Allied forces represented a wholesale annihilation of the enemy aimed at “his dwellings, his history, and his natural environment.” Such a reality of total destruction, “incomprehensible in its extremity” according to Sebald, led the German people “to overload, to paralysis of the capacity to think and feel,” resulting in a kind of collective amnesia or shell shock that epitomized Germany’s condition of material and moral ruin following the war. Sebald was thus concerned with the dialectics of devastation and denial, in particular, Germany’s failure to produce a literature that responded to the suffering caused by the air wars. Throughout his writing, Sebald, following Benjamin, turned to the image of the ruin as a sort of master trope for the traumas of the twentieth century, a material form through which to grasp precisely what was most unassimilable for humanity.

Sundaram’s repeated use of the aerial perspective in multiple regis-
ters and formats suggests a similar consciousness of the catastrophic effects of militarized violence unleashed from above. In his hands, however, the format of the overhead view also invokes new scopic regimes, in particular, the forms of subjectivity, surveillance, and spectatorship associated with the age of “precision” warfare and late twentieth-century aerial technologies like the smart bomb and the drone. Even Sebald, who died prematurely in a car accident shortly after 9/11, may not have imagined the more ominous modalities of aerial violence introduced in the digital age and the expansion of warfare in the twenty-first century through means of what the US State Department calls “unmanned aerial vehicles” (or uavs).61 The novelty of such aerial technologies, increasingly part of everyday life in the form of navigational devices like GPS and Google Earth, is countered by the paradoxical invisibility of the violence resulting from uavs deployed in Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf, and North Africa, where the US government has continued to expand its controversial drone warfare program in “undeclared wars.” It is this dramatic tension between vision and obfuscation—the perception of the world through Google Earth, on one hand, and the terrible secrecy of the covert operation, on the other—that Sundaram’s furtive oil smudges and blurred contours (as per figure 1.8) anticipate in an uncanny way.

In his dual projection video of 2003–4 titled Tracking (included in the New York exhibition of Trash in 2008), Sundaram elaborated upon these new conditions of perception and control in the period of America’s response to the 9/11 attacks. In the video, a spotlight hovers over a mysterious geography of moving shadows and indiscernible forms, vaguely illuminating what appear to be clandestine spaces and unfamiliar acts. Here, the mythology of precision in a remote-controlled war is countered with ambiguity, dimness, and shadows. Secrecy and concealment lead to an ominous sense of fear; strategies of surveillance produce existential unease. Tracking can be connected to the work of several radical artists—for example, Trevor Paglen, Hito Steyerl, or the late Harun Farocki, who have sought to denormalize the phenomenon of “drone vision,” the unnerving perspective of the automated drone, which fatally constitutes subjects as targets through (inexact) processes of algorithmic recognition. “The view from above,” as the German artist and filmmaker Steyerl has asserted, “is a perfect metonymy for a more general verticalization of class relations . . . seen through the lenses and on the screens of military, entertainment, and information industries.
It is a proxy perspective that projects delusions of stability, safety, and extreme mastery onto a backdrop of expanded 3-D sovereignty.”62

What kind of human agency is possible within the “proxy perspective” of these new visual conditions of high-tech warfare? And what kinds of practices of observation could help counter the chilling sense of alienation and lack of empathy that emerge in the shift from horizontal to vertical war? While artists like Steyerl often seize the new technology using, for instance, web-based platforms, GPS navigation apps, and social media such as Instagram and Twitter to forge a counter-politics in the public sphere, Sundaram returns us ultimately to the land, and to the traces of human history in the land, as the location from which to address the crises and politics of perspective itself. The way in which these preoccupations further intersect with the materiality of the ruin is best seen in yet another of Sundaram’s major projects, his installation Black Gold, a site-specific work for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, India’s first international biennale of contemporary art held in Kerala in 2012.
Separated by more than two decades, the engine oil series and *Black Gold* resonate with one another in more than just name. The latter represents a mature point in a formal process that dramatically expands the scale, medium, and perspectival techniques first witnessed in Sundaram’s Iraq war series. The black gold here refers not to oil but to another legendary commodity—pepper—well known for its central historical role in the ancient spice trade in India, and Kerala in particular. “Pepper it was that brought Vasco da Gama’s tall ships across the ocean,” explained Salman Rushdie’s narrator in the novel *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, a saga about four generations of family who claimed “wrong-side-of-the-blanket descent” from the famous Portuguese explorer, the first European to reach India by sea. The location of the biennale in the southern state of Kerala, known both for its ancient spice trade routes and its radical Left politics in the modern era, was thus especially significant for India’s first effort at an international survey exhibition of this sort. Cofounded and curated by the artists Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu, the biennale sought to harness “the historical cosmopolitan legacy of the modern metropolis of Kochi, and its mythical predecessor the ancient port Muziris,” said to have been destroyed by flooding in the fourteenth century. The event brought together some eighty artists from India and the rest of the world for several months to display their work in various venues and dispersed sites, among them the historic warehouses of Aspinwall House and Pepper House, names that evoke the circuitry of past colonial trade. There is by now a degree of consensus within the intense discussions surrounding the biennale phenomenon that the form has emerged as one of the most significant platforms for contemporary art in the past three decades. The success of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in India, soon approaching its fifth edition, is that it seized the well-known flexibility and strengths of the biennale format—its orientation toward site-specificity, intercultural dialogue, local publics, and non-market forces—in ways that have proven to redefine and reinvigorate the platform for both local and international audiences once again.

Sundaram’s *Black Gold* installation at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale was a vast physical landscape, in his words “an imaginary habitation,” composed of discarded terra-cotta shards from an actual archaeological excavation near the biennale’s coastal site. It depicted, more precisely, the mythical topos invoked by the biennale’s co-organizers, the
ancient port city and trade center of Muziris. The obtainment and deployment of archaeological shards, defined as prehistoric fragments, usually broken pottery or stone—like the artist’s use of engine oil—carried rich semiotic effects. The etymology of the word “shard,” from the Old English sceard, is connected to the idea of breakage, but a shard’s existence is paradoxically related to resilience—to its resistance to forces of destruction over time. Sundaram gathered these potent symbols of ruination, fragmentation, and survival into a large-scale accumulation: a multi-perspectival, three-dimensional landscape that could be apprehended from different angles and viewing positions around the installation. The result was a large-scale “rubble model”; whether it was seen from above or at eye level, the viewer encountered a complex terra-cotta terrain, as seen in figure 1.9, of patterned swirls, pseudo-architectural forms, and whimsical details with seemingly infinite horizons. Part relic, part memorial, part fantasy, part ruin, it depicted the endless social relations encoded into the built environment rather than an actual city per se.

The technique of the aerial view was apparent in yet another component of the Black Gold installation: a multichannel video projected onto the floor, which showed the rubble model, along with accumulations of black peppercorns, being relentlessly subjected to the forces of the sea. Here, the viewer could further inhabit, by literally stepping onto, the abstract rendering of a forgotten place. The projection resembled a marine oil spill, but it was also a portrait of sluggish erosion: the viewer is reminded not of sudden catastrophe but of the way that natural forces like wind, water, or time itself can also gradually undo human achievement or weaken the edifice of civilization. Once again, as in the engine oil series, landscape and the materiality of debris (now terra-cotta remains) converge with the aerial view to allow us to reflect on the past and to imagine the possibility of unknown futures. They also point to Sundaram’s preoccupation over decades with a certain microeconomy of ruination and repair, with sunken spaces, exploited lands, nameless victims, and forgotten pasts. The point of Black Gold’s relationship to the “fallen city” (it is literally a mock-up of this archaeological conceit) is not to evoke the memory of former greatness but to build a different economy out of its rubble. And if the ruin, undoubtedly a thing of beauty that has been romanticized for hundreds of years, cannot escape the problem of aestheticization, it is nonetheless, in Sundaram’s hands, also a supple trope for self-reflection and awareness.
FIGURE 1.9 Vivan Sundaram, Black Gold, 2012. Detail of installation with ancient terra-cotta shards. Photograph by the author.
Conclusion: Ruination and Inequality

Ann Stoler, in considering the Caribbean poet and Nobel laureate Derek Walcott’s account of “the rot that remains,” observes that the writer’s language is poetic, but what he looks toward is not. Sundaram’s non-verbal discourse of debris is similarly beautiful, even elegiac, but focused on that which is most difficult to grasp. What the artist depicts, to borrow Stoler’s words, are “intimate injuries that appear as only faint traces, or deep deformations and differentiations of social geography that go by other names.”67 Figure 1.10 presents a final image from the engine oil series, titled From the First World/From the Third World, as a powerful closing example. It is a Rorschach-like composition, which seems at first glance more abstract: the top contains the phrase “from the first world,” the bottom bears the label “from the third world.” Yet implicit in this hierarchy of forms (are they figures? bodies of water? landscapes?) is a strong political message about different and unequal worldviews. If they are landscapes, they are not the kind of landscapes in oil that dominated European art history in the nineteenth century, a genre that was itself bound up in the discourses of imperial representation and the “imagined geographies” it charted.68 Instead they are the kind of landscapes that make visible the processes by which culture and geography are inflected in the self and by which competing social identities are shaped. Like the Manichaean separation between the settler and the native in Fanon’s formulation of the colonial city, this is a world cut into two compartments: these “first and third world” views exist unequal and apart; they do not converge or mix; they dramatize in short the politics of global space.

Does this image, then, convey the same polarities as Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” or America’s infamous “you’re with us or against us” statements on the world stage? Does it stage, in other words, the irreducible division between “us” and “them” in pictorial terms? It is important to recognize how it does not, and to distinguish such strategies of the Left from the Right. What Sundaram depicts is not a universalist account of primordial cultural difference, nor a moral “clash” between good and evil, itself a symptom of the self-righteous religious thinking that has typified the discourses of the Right. Nor is it a simple demonization of the other, so pervasive a strategy at times of war. It is, rather, a positioned and geopolitical response to a different set of stakes altogether: to the unequal distributions of global power.
today, the realities of third world social and political struggle, the histories of colonial humiliation and injustice, and the continued problems of underdevelopment in spite of (and because of) economic globalization. It is therefore not merely the connection to antiquity, or the particular relationship of belonging to an ancient past that India and Iraq appear to share, that gives this series by Sundaram its critical charge. It is, rather, the shared experience of subjugation within empire, in particular the modern formation of the British Empire, through which the most powerful connections between India and Iraq are foregrounded in the work.

Gertrude Bell was, in fact, repeatedly drawn to the lessons and experiences of British imperial rule in India, and she visited the subcontinent in 1903 to attend the viceroy Lord Curzon’s Delhi Durbar—a “gorgeous fantasy” in her view. After all, the British were interested in Mesopotamia because of its strategic position as a corridor to India. However, by the time Bell was sent to “pull things straight between Delhi and Cairo,” the contradictions, failures, and prejudices of empire had been increasingly exposed to its participants and observers. Bell was both concerned by what she called “Britain’s colonial arrogance and vision of supremacy” and driven by the larger, ill-fated project of the late-Victorian “civilizing mission.” Similarly, Lord Curzon, the enthusiastic promoter of traditional Indian art, who argued that “it is equally our duty to dig and discover [antiquities], to classify, reproduce and describe, to copy and decipher, and to cherish and conserve,” concluded his career as the chief architect of the Anglo-Persian agreement of 1919, which cemented the interests of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later British Petroleum) in Iraq. As Curzon stated at the time, “we possess in the south-western corner of Persia great assets in the shape of oilfields . . . which give us a commanding interest in that part of the world.” Oil and antiquities were thus perceived as assets within the broader benevolence of the civilizing mission for the first generation of modern empire-builders like Curzon. And, as Sundaram’s images serve to make visible, such perceptions and equations continue to shape the deadly strategies of the Western powers today.

Some may argue—as indeed Donald Rumsfeld did—that against all the other disasters of war, the destruction of an art object or an archaeological site is a trivial matter, a frivolous concern of intellectuals alone. But the archaeological record, like oil, is a non-renewable resource, and violence upon the historical memory of a place, as we know in the
case of Native American populations, is directly related to the scale of human suffering and to the crises confronted by future generations. By using elemental, indeed ancient, materials (oil, handmade paper, charcoal, zinc), Sundaram’s work returns us to the land as a kind of bedrock in which oil, antiquities, and the past reside—and upon which economies, nations, and wars are built—and it reminds us of the devastating impact of war on the physical and historical environment of a region. But his images are neither wholly apocalyptic nor entirely pessimistic in the end. They point instead toward the utopian possibilities that emerge from the dialectics of fragmentation and repair. “Somewhere within this annihilated world,” he has stated in another context, “there is this ground plan of nature, somewhere underlying this uprooted terrain there is a need for order.”73 Sundaram is not alone in searching for a basis for a less unjust world or in responding to our new era of perpetual and undeclared wars; he is of course accompanied in this enterprise by countless other artists in India and around the world. But his experimentations with form, his historical consciousness, and his assertion of a specifically situated identity within the contemporary contours of global power offer us a picture of the beleaguered present that it is no longer possible to ignore.