A Fragile Inheritance

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When the viceroy, Lord Curzon, announced his plan for the Victoria Memorial Museum in Calcutta in 1901 in the grief-filled days following Queen Victoria’s death, he called for a building “stately, spacious, monumental and grand” where “all classes will learn the lessons of history.”1 If “memorial” evokes mourning and loss and “monument” signals greatness and valor, then they exist in equal measure here in Curzon’s ambitious imperial museum: it was one part a copy of the great Mughal-era memorial, the Taj Mahal; one part didactic history museum; and one part brute monument to British rule—triumphant, glorious, patrician, and great. The recipe, however fraught, nevertheless produced an inaugural moment in the genre of the modern memorial museum in India. But Curzon’s bid was like the last gasp of the Victorian era as it peered into the uncertainty of the twentieth century, and the building was not realized until 1921, after some two decades of construction delays. Indeed, his vision of British sovereignty in India would prove to erode much faster than the actual physical structure itself, which remains one of Calcutta’s most iconic landmarks today.

That the Victoria Memorial Museum has had a robust afterlife in the twentieth century is indisputable. The building and its expansive gardens seen in figure 2.1 continue to serve as an important public center for the present-day megacity of Kolkata, renamed as such by the state government in 2001 to reflect the original Bengali pronunciation. This
awesome urban landscape has sprawled in every direction and appears to be constantly redefining itself without ever eliminating its relationship to the peculiar memorial-museum-monument form standing at its core. I take as a point of departure this idea of the dynamic afterlife of things, the capacity of works of art and architecture to accrue meaning through invention and reinvention, in order to situate and critically consider the afterlife of Vivan Sundaram’s contemporary art project mounted inside the Victoria Memorial Museum in 1998.

Sundaram’s site-specific installation History Project, commissioned to mark the fiftieth anniversary of India’s independence from British rule in 1947, was part of the broader turn toward installation and site-specificity that transformed art practice during the 1990s, and it remains an exemplary instance of such experimentation in India, unprecedented in both scope and scale. The artist’s highly self-conscious installation, presented in figure 2.2, comprising some two dozen component parts, occupied the vast domed space of Curzon’s building with all manner of found and made objects—cabinets, vitrines, photographs, texts, and audiovisual media—in a way that firmly displaced the fixed taxonomies, grand narratives, and didactic paths of the latter. If Curzon’s memorial museum was defined by its rigid theatrics and moralistic tone, reflecting an imperial reality increasingly under threat, then Sundaram’s associational and multisensory infrastructure broke down its presumptions of self-importance from within by privileging impermanence and “openness” in the phenomenological sense.² In other words, the artist’s aesthetic strategy of porous and interconnected mini-conversations signaled a break from the building’s pre-
rious epistemological stance and had the effect of corroding, at least temporarily, the former foundations of the imperial site. And this raises the question of how site-specificity, which has been increasingly adopted by artists internationally as a method of engagement with museums, monuments, and other institutional sites, became the basis for a distinctly “counter-monumental” gesture at the heart of Sundaram’s ambitious work.

Sundaram’s sited intervention in urban Calcutta brings to mind many other contemporary art practices around the world that have prioritized site through institutionally specific work. History Project could be positioned, for example, alongside the transgressive acts performed by artists in Europe and America upon or against the institutions of display, whereby the relocation of the aesthetic project to a given symbolic site becomes a historical, aesthetic, and political provocation. These wide-ranging activist interventions launched by artists like Hans Haacke and Michael Asher in the late 1960s, and then reworked and reassessed in the 1980s by American artists like Andrea Fraser, Renee Green, and Fred Wilson, have come to be known, largely after the fact, as the aesthetic movement called “institutional critique.” Sundaram claims no direct connection to this tradition, even as he shares some of the social and political concerns of such artists, shaped by his own post-1968 avant-garde formation and four decades of a socially engaged art practice in India. At the same time, his gesture of intervention into the physical and intellectual space of modern Bengal departs in significant ways from the adversarial content of some of the earlier practitioners of institutional critique, who sought at times to confront, expose, and even embarrass or shame the high-powered players of the New York art world. His work also speaks to the inability of the first generation of these artists to understand the museum as a colonial form, and thus it exposes the limitations of institutional critique’s conception of “institution” in the broadest sense. And yet, the basic premise of this aesthetic movement—that artists and museums exist in an ambivalent yet dialectical relationship to each other—also underlies History Project and can serve to orient some larger questions emerging from Sundaram’s specific encounter. How did History Project engage and activate the interrelationships between such ideas as museum, monument, and memory, on one hand, and nation, public, and civic site, on the other? What happened to the museum, and its monumentality, under the conditions of Sundaram’s occupation? And what is at stake in revisiting

**Figure 2.2** (opposite, top) Vivan Sundaram, History Project, 1998. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist.

**Figure 2.3** (opposite, bottom) Vivan Sundaram, History Project, 1998. Glass case with picture frame and red plastic chair. Courtesy of the artist.
this project some twenty years after its making, given its deliberate and carefully crafted identity as a short-lived, ephemeral, and site-specific event?

Like the majority of readers of this book, I suspect, I did not see History Project during its three-month display in 1998, having visited the site only after its parts had long been disassembled and carted away. Fortunately, Sundaram’s impermanent installation, in the manner of a great deal of contemporary art, has also had an afterlife of sorts: first, in the form of the artist’s video about the project, Structures of Memory (1999–2000), and second, in the form of a volume of essays and photographs aimed at documenting, reexamining, and reinterpreting the event. These reproductions immediately challenge and throw into disarray the art historical requirement of a firsthand encounter with a thing, whose meaning rests in its immediacy and primacy and whose value resides in its presumed authenticity, the resilient legacy of Enlightenment thought. The ephemerality of History Project, by contrast, makes it stubbornly immaterial: it can no longer be visited as it once was; it is available only by means of memory and documentation; it survives solely through acts of mediation and representation. To revisit the work some two decades later is thus to enter the vertiginous field of historical and museological dilemmas that were thematized in the project itself: namely, that the past is linked to the materiality of things; that history becomes legible through replay, recall, records, and representation; and that all of this is subject to the mechanisms of distortion and the erosion of human memory over time. Sundaram’s History Project is thus simultaneously a historical work, one that has served to archive a range of historiographic and epistemological dilemmas, and a studied view of how history works; and the way these themes and issues echoed together off the soaring domed spaces of the Victoria Memorial Museum was surely part of its beauty and complexity.

In fact, the work of art called History Project actually included within its parameters a constellation of media and modes of address, including workshops, performances, video, photography, collaboration, dialogue, and adda—the Bengali institution of intellectual exchange—both before and after the ephemeral event, involving primarily the local intelligentsia, and often in situ in the city of Calcutta. Significantly, these activities and events are not the same as the artist’s “research” or “preparation” for the project, nor do they necessarily function to reify the primacy of the original work. Rather, this extended field of social
activity should be understood as formally constitutive of Sundaram’s practice, which points to a further redefinition of the aesthetic process, its goals, results, and ongoing effects. Here, the emphasis is moved away from the autonomy of the art object and toward an engagement with people, ideas, and communities of interaction; away from the aura of the original piece and toward that which can be gained from documentation, reflection, and intellectual exchange. In other words, at its core History Project was, and continues to be, a social intervention, envisioned by the artist as a catalyst for discussion, and it underscores Sundaram’s unique model of politically engaged artistic praxis.

As scholars have argued, site-specific art, which emerged in the wake of minimalism and other conceptual art movements of the 1960s, is a practice that is “discursively determined.” It is frequently more about process than product; it is “a movement, a chain of meanings and imbricated histories; a place marked and swiftly abandoned,” and it places Sundaram in direct correspondence with the broader response by contemporary artists at the global level to the conditions of late capitalism of the 1980s and 1990s. In what follows, I reflect on Sundaram’s method of engagement with the hybrid institution of the memorial museum and consider the specifically Indian contexts of colonial and nationalist consciousness for historical memory and the museum itself. I then locate several of his concerns in the project within a post-Marxist intellectual tradition in India, and the discussions within Indian historiography generated by subaltern studies, in particular. At the end of the chapter, I contrast Sundaram’s project with another site-specific project commissioned in 1998 undertaken in Europe—Hans Haacke’s installation at the Reichstag in Berlin—in order to consider more broadly the relationship of contemporary art to the expanding discourse of museums, monuments, and memorials and their increasingly spectacular forms and functions at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Colonialism’s “Edifice Complex”

Monuments, memorials, and museums are slippery, convergent, and at times interchangeable categories, as the very name “Victoria Memorial Museum” suggests. For the American art critic Arthur Danto, the distinction between them was related to the question of intention: “We erect monuments,” he wrote famously, “so that we shall always remem-
ber, and build memorials so that we shall never forget.” Danto’s emphasis on these didactic functions is what links the monument and memorial to the museum: together they represent “a species of pedagogy” given to the instruction of posterity about the past. The body of interdisciplinary scholarship that emerged in the 1990s under the banner of the “new museology” has privileged this pedagogic role in its extensive account of the connection between the emergence of museums and the rise of the modern European nation-state. But it has largely ignored, by comparison, the unique pedagogic conditions and historical formation of the museum in colonial and postcolonial societies.

In India, when the British introduced the first museums at the beginning of the nineteenth century (in 1814 in Calcutta, followed by those in Madras, Lahore, and Bombay, respectively) it was to support their plans for “cultural improvement” of the colony. Colonial museum builders sought to replicate, for instance, the model of the British Museum, with its didactic survey approach, in their efforts to spread civility and rationality to the ranks of the native population. If these efforts were frustrated from the outset by a perceived failure on the part of the recalcitrant Indian masses, who often refused to follow the museum’s cultural script—by touching, worshipping, and bowing to objects, for instance—then the role of the museum in the civilizing mission was besiegged by a larger sense of crises: it failed, in the eyes of colonial officials, to replicate the Victorian pedagogic project of its metropolitan counterpart, and it failed to create a loyal population out of a generally thankless subject society.

If a sense of failure continued to haunt the members of India’s so-called Museum Movement in the decades following independence in 1947, it was related at least to the era of decolonization and different kinds of epochal problems. The challenge for these enlightened nation-builders, who inherited—as the writer Mulk Raj Anand once complained—a “bunch of half-dead warehouses from the British,” was to “confront the stranglehold of an obsolete system” and to reassess the museum’s responsibilities to its newly formed national public. Although they rejected the lavish, costly model of museums designed, according to Anand, for “showing off the might of the nation, with domes and minarets to overawe the people,” and called instead for a “new functional attitude” toward museums, the visions of this first generation of museum professionals in India, as in Europe, were constrained by their unself-conscious consolidation of a bourgeois public sphere.
What Sundaram’s Victoria Memorial project exposes is thus not merely the tired edifice of the museum’s imperial performance, in this case, the archaic and already empty space of Curzon’s pretentious last-gasp bid. The more significant focus of History Project is Indian nationalism’s usurpation of the colonial project, a battle staged partly on the museological front, as Sundaram’s superb selection of site reminds us, through the operations of memory put into play through collections, archives, and material display. In other words, an important difference in Sundaram’s work, one that distinguishes History Project from other site-specific museum works, is that it stimulates and critically engages both the history-making echoes of the colonial museum and the way in which history was remade through Indian nationalism’s epic response to the latter.

Reframing the Monument

At the entrance to Sundaram’s exhibition inside the space of the Durbar Hall, a huge picture frame, one of numerous frames throughout the installation, announced to the viewer that the artist’s eye was on the historical frame itself. There, on a rather unimpressive pedestal apparent in figure 2.3, Sundaram had placed a red plastic chair, a kind of anti-throne, presented to the viewer behind a large glass pane bearing a shadowy image of the former empress upon it. This peculiar arrangement stood in stark contrast to the actual monumental statue of Victoria, shown in figure 2.4, mounted on a massive stone pedestal at the entrance to the building. Originally commissioned from the British artist George Frampton (1860–1928) to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of 1897, and later incorporated into Curzon’s project, that statue of the aging Victoria is the very definition of an aggressive bulk. Upon its arrival in Calcutta in 1902, it was unveiled amid a grand military ceremony on the open plaza featuring hundreds of soldiers on horseback. Years later, it would assist in securing for the sculptor, Frampton, another symbolically resonant commission: the imperious pair of recumbent lions that guard the north entrance to the British Museum. In an act of dematerialization one hundred years later, Sundaram’s diminutive counter-statue seemed almost to vaporize the stubborn presence of the original into something of a ghostly trace.

Upon further scrutiny, the reflection of Victoria through the large
glass pane—simultaneously transparent, palimpsestic, and refractive—recalls the legendary treatment of these perceptual quandaries by Marcel Duchamp in his inscrutable 1915–23 work, titled *The Large Glass*, or *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. For Duchamp, in this immeasurably complex piece from the heyday of the historical avant-garde, these materials and motifs spoke to the question of desire, the boundaries of its attainability, and the abstract forces involved in human sexuality, and they connected, in his words, to “the rehabilitation of perspective.”

However, if Duchamp’s “bride” was the one who controlled the encounter and left her suitors frustrated by an array of obstacles, contrary to the purposefully deceptive title of the piece, then Sundaram’s “bride”—the Victorian empress—is, by contrast, more literally “stripped bare,” her physical form reduced to a spectral and powerless presence.

Sundaram’s deliberately suspect shrine thus formally acknowledged the exhaustion of a Victorian memorial practice of figural representation in favor of an antiheroic, more ironic encounter by placing the
frame in the service of a range of different mnemonic functions. The reference also reveals Sundaram's own identification with the politics of the historical avant-garde by recalling the space of critical reflection first opened up by the Duchampian maneuver and the spirit of disruption and intervention associated with this aesthetic tradition. At one level, the recurring motif of the frame, seen again in figure 2.5, serves to remind the viewer of the essential function of the frame as a receptacle or container for memory. Here and elsewhere, Sundaram's frames did not claim to serve a single historical reality; they were emptied of their indexical capacity, and they pointed to “the structure of memory,” not its content per se. At another level, they evoke Jacques Derrida’s seminal investigation of the frame in his collection of essays The Truth in Painting, perhaps the French philosopher’s most significant contribution to discussions in the visual arts.

It was in this text that Derrida skewered the tradition of Kantian formalism and, more broadly, philosophical discourse which grounds itself in absolute principles, “from Plato, to Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger,”14 by dispelling the idea that truth and beauty are somehow intrinsic to the work of art. For Derrida, the problem lay in the presupposition that we can rigorously distinguish between inside and out-

**FIGURE 2.5**
side, between that which is internal and external to the object, between the *ergon* and the *parergon*, in Kantian terms. Derrida’s redefinition of the *parergon*, as something that “comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon*, the work,” acting from the sidelines but not wholly outside, connected to and cooperating in its operations, thus served to denaturalize the work of the frame and make it complicit in the construction of meaning: “There is no natural frame,” but there is framing, and framing “always supports and contains that which, by itself, collapses forthwith.” If, for Derrida, philosophy had failed to examine this “truth” about the frame, that it “puts everything to work in order to efface its effects,” then deconstruction could at least make this visible through its subversive method of rhetorical undercuts, linguistic puns, and vertiginous wordplay.

Sundaram’s frames in the Victoria Memorial are thus *parergonal* in the Derridean sense. They subvert the essential truth value of art and dramatize the hierarchies through which signification works to naturalize and privilege certain discourses over others. Here, the contrarian techniques of Dada are deployed to achieve what Derrida described as “a certain repeated dislocation,” one that “makes the frame in general crack” through the corners of its angles and articulations and dissolves its internal and external parameters. The correlations between the Derridean and Duchampian frameworks, although separated by some fifty years, have been embraced by a generation of artists and thinkers, who have found in the density of their challenges to linguistic and pictorial truth a radical relation between images and texts, or between works of art and their discourses.

Sundaram’s method in *History Project*, his overall conceptual and material approach, lies somewhere deep in the folds of these critical lessons and philosophical discussions and in the creative possibilities they present. To enter this work is to enter into an arena of serious and sophisticated play, deconstructionist and Dada-esque in spirit, whereby the artist has seized command of the signs in order to undercut, pun, collide, and contradict in versatile and often destabilizing ways. What we leave at the door of the Durbar Hall is the comfort of a legible, unambiguous text or the certainty of a linear historicist path. Instead, the installation’s distinctive spatial format glimpsed in figure 2.6, involving corners, domes, distortions, echoes, and the interplay of all these effects, presents a diversity of devices for breaking up the traditional and time-honored structures of meaning, knowing, and representation.
itself. What Sundaram sets out to dismantle is no less than the entire conglomeration, simultaneously philosophical and material/architectural; his target is the “edifice complex” in this widest possible sense.

**Modern Bengal: Nationalist Imaginings**

These heterogeneous and open-ended formal strategies come to converge on the particular sociohistorical event of Indian independence in multiple and (perhaps inevitably) uneven ways. For instance, next to the hologram-like throne in the hall was a tall and bulky mass of materials that contrasted sharply with the dematerializing visual effects of the former. Here, Sundaram had installed hundreds of heavy jute sacks of grain, each inscribed with the dates and descriptions of various moments in Bengal’s labor history—peasant uprisings, workers’ strikes, and the people’s insurgencies of modern Bengal. The significance of this jute bag barricade, visible in figure 2.7, and its gesture toward a subaltern history of the period, will become clearer as we encounter the wider network of themes and interactions that Sundaram mounted elsewhere in the space, and I will return to it shortly. For now, a large wall of five hundred file boxes, each dedicated to an individual involved in India’s freedom struggle, presented the weighty materiality of an archive; elsewhere a Victorian cabinet with many drawers evoked the history of collecting. All of these forms pointed to an abiding concern with history, or more precisely, with history’s acts of legibility: that is, how history is made through the collection and storage of material records, how it is written, archived, and given material form. The writing desk and library of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, one of the preeminent poetic voices of Bengali nationalism, announced further that Sundaram’s theme was India’s response to imperial history, in particular, the rejection by nationalists of James Mill’s audacious bid to render the entire subject of Indian history “a portion of the British history.”

Thus, a central theme that emerged in the exhibition was the place of Bengali culture, represented by the arts, literature, theater, cinema, and photography, within the battle for the appropriation of India’s past. Around the apse of the Durbar Hall, Sundaram had mounted various landscapes and figural paintings by the legendary artists of Santiniketan, recalling the great experiments with wall murals in Bengal, a preferred genre for national self-imagining. On the ceilings were pas-
sages of translated poetry by Rabindranath Tagore and Jibanananda Das in a graceful nod toward the heavens and the sky. Figure 2.8 shows the neon phrase Joto moth, Toto poth in Bengali and in English (“many views, many paths”) by Ramakrishna Parahamansa elevated above, as a pluralist, even utopian, ideal. Down below, an elegant old printing press placed the emphasis on the role of print culture in disseminating the literary and political writings of the period (see figure 2.7), and clay mannequins in theatrical poses, inscribed with prose from Bengali theater, offered a kind of mini-performance on the ground (see figure 2.9).

The national figures being commemorated here—if indeed these disparate quotations, artifacts, and oblique references amount to “commemoration” in any conventional sense—are not the usual generals and statesmen who get honored in public sculpture, and whose sad fate, as Andreas Huyssen has noted, is “to be toppled or to become invisible.” Instead, History Project directs us to poets, thinkers, writers, and intellectuals and celebrates the unsung (or less sung) history of Bengali ideas. One might expect the format of “words on a dome” to point toward a transcendental narrative, but Sundaram’s inscription-plus-neon mix, in the manner of the glowing neon sculpture of the American minimalists of the 1960s and 1970s, suggests a more radiant,

FIGURE 2.7
open, or immanent horizon. Like the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn’s fugitive street altars to philosophers, or “anti-monuments,” Sundaram’s memorial gestures to various Bengali intellectuals are intimate, partial, impermanent, and selective. They do not “explain” the importance of the figure being honored or impart to the viewer some predetermined truth. Instead, they offer ideas and thoughts for interaction rather than reverence, designed to feed into an ongoing discussion or to become part of a larger chain of meanings and symbols. Together, these invocations of a specifically Bengali intellectual history return us repeatedly to the question of language, and to the space of a vernacular Bengali tradition in particular, a paramount and principled concern of Sundaram’s, a non-Bengali speaker who nevertheless elected to grapple with the problems of access, interpretation, and translation this presented.

At the heart of Sundaram’s treatment of language, and the prominence given to Bengali in the installation, is the question of the relationship between language and imperial power. In what the theorist and historian of South Asia Ranajit Guha has called “the shotgun wedding between language and colonialism,” we know that an Anglophone education became synonymous with prestige and social importance, while the indigenous languages, and Bengali in particular, marked a signifi-
cant and in some sense autonomous domain of creative possibility. As Guha has stated, the Bengali language “grew up” in a way through its encounter with English; every semantic slide, every nuanced linguistic acrobatic generated by the needs of translation, was evidence “not only of what Bangla could not do, but also of what it could.”\(^\text{23}\) In other words, the intrusion and assimilation of English into Bengali could not be mistaken for mere “Westernization.” The Bengali language, as a sign of the culture itself, was involved in far more complex strategies of adaptation and innovation, which gave rise to a struggle often waged at the limits of translatability into Euro-Western concepts and codes.\(^\text{24}\) Sundaram’s representation of the nationalist struggle was thus inseparable from the question of language; History Project depicted how resistance was staged in part through the mechanisms of language, the expressions of a shared linguistic tradition, and the idioms for conceptions of self and society drawn from outside the realm of colonial authority and reason.

What emerged from the installation, in short, was a dynamic encounter with the culture of modern Bengal as it led the struggle for Indian independence. And yet, “modern Bengal,” as Arindam Dutta has noted, is really “a topos in the cultural politics of Indian nationalism, a term redolent with both pleasant and noxious aromas,” like the way

**FIGURE 2.9**
the phrase “antebellum Low Country” marks the American Deep South or “Louis-Philippe furniture” summons nineteenth-century France. It evokes, in other words, a field of associations that were simultaneously historically very significant and drenched in the structures of gentility and class privilege. The new society of progressive thinkers that Sundaram’s work was at pains to acknowledge was composed of the native elite. And while they ushered in a robust intellectual culture of debate and dissent, powered by a revolution in print culture, the era was plagued by repeated famines, agrarian poverty, and a relentless exploitation of the laboring poor.

One contentious feature of Sundaram’s installation was the way it sought to respond to this particular dilemma, which returns us to the jute bag barricade seen in figures 2.3 and 2.7. The representation of this alternative history of political resistance places the entire project into conversation with contemporary efforts to rethink the historiography of nationalism by a host of Bengali intellectuals and their interlocutors in South Asia and beyond. What was omitted from the nationalist response to imperial history, taken to task by Ranajit Guha as an “unhistorical historiography,” was “the politics of the people,” the disruptions and generative forces that lay beyond the parameters of bourgeois consciousness and the representational practices of the indigenous elite. The challenge to recuperate that elusive space of subjectivity and political consciousness—the “subaltern”—has become, as we know, a powerful intellectual constellation and the basis for a great deal of ongoing debate within the arena of postcolonial theory and criticism. But it is unusual to witness these ideas take form within the realm of the visual arts in quite this way and, more significantly, within the space of a public art project.

Sundaram’s attempt to reveal, instead of conceal, the social distance between elite and subaltern and between women and men, as well as the structures that have erased these inequalities in the archive within the context of a civic monument, points to an understanding of public space itself as a radically heterogeneous and intersubjective arena. This is not to say that the project was by definition more democratic or emancipatory because it repositioned art in a public locale; on the contrary, the installation pointed to a greater uncertainty about the issue of art’s democratizing effects. Rather, the work presented social inequality in modern Bengal as a condition of democratic public space, not as the basis for its ruin or demise, and it refused to indulge in the fiction of a
harmonious collective unity. The artist asked of us instead, “Who is the public?” and “How do its unequal constituencies lay claim to collective identity and history?” and then called upon the viewer to “imagine community” through a self-conscious engagement with its ruptures and pluralities.

We should ask, however, a critical question: Did Sundaram’s piece ultimately paint a heroic portrait of the ascendance of the Bengali bourgeoisie? Or did it abide by what Guha called “the lack of heroism” of this class, its “failure to measure up to the heroism of the European bourgeoisie in its period of ascendancy”? Guha’s reference is to what Marx also called, perhaps paradoxically, the “revolutionary” aspect of the bourgeoisie, their role in driving industrial expansion, their cosmopolitanism, the enormous transformations they made to society, which were also the basis of their own demise. For Guha, the Indian bourgeoisie, born as they were out of colonialism itself, lacked this heroic relationship to society; they were instead “pliant and prone to compromise,” and therefore represented a caricature of the vigorous democratic culture that came with the formation of capitalism in Europe. The result was, in Guha’s powerful formulation, “dominance without hegemony,” a structure which generated for India a much greater failure, that is, the “failure of the nation to come into its own.” Did Sundaram lose sight of these critical insights, related to the ongoing conditions of failure and crisis in the postcolonial nation-state, in his homage to the pioneering contributions of modern Bengal? Or stated differently, for our purposes, what prevents an engagement through site-specificity from affirming or resanctifying a given institutional site? How and where do we draw the line between a reverential remembering and a presumably more radical historical interpretation, and for whom?

Ultimately, such doubts and ambiguities are left unresolved, even as they are made more urgent in a final component of Sundaram’s installation: the train tracks and eerie railway wagon that composed, according to the video, the “spine” of the piece. In figure 2.10, we see the great symbol of industrial progress—the Indian railway—take the form of a haunted and rusty old phantom. Here, the narrative of linear progress was disrupted; the tracks led to an unpleasant dead end and seemed challenged by the ominous rope above, evoking perhaps the knots and entanglements of the historical field, or worse, the fatal specter of a noose. More than anything else in the show, this disquieting picture of rails and derailment caused worry. It seemed to suggest, at best, a dead
end, or at worse, a more calamitous result: the reference to Partition through the symbolism of the train and the layers of human suffering generated by this event became audible, immediate, and most palpable here. In this way, the artist forced us to confront the grimmest implications of India’s “journey toward freedom”—namely, the ongoing instability of the social field produced by nationalism and the distance between the utopian visions of the intelligentsia and the much bleaker realities of the Indian populace who inhabit the so-called freight-car classes.

**Contemporary Art and the Memorial Monument**

By way of conclusion, I wish to consider Sundaram’s project alongside a more widely discussed site-specific work, also commissioned in 1997–98—namely, the controversial installation at Berlin’s Reichstag building by the New York–based German artist Hans Haacke. For this proj-
ect, Haacke, a leading figure in the aesthetic movement that has come to be known as institutional critique, had installed a large rectangular cast in the courtyard of the Reichstag, the German Parliament building that had a democratic history before it was famously appropriated by Hitler’s regime. Inside the box, he placed the words “DER BEVÖLKERUNG” (The Population) in neon letters. The box was then filled with earth brought by German MPs from their constituencies and allowed to overgrow, as seen in figure 2.11. The phrase referred to the bronze inscription “DEM DEUTSCHEN VOLKE” (To the German People) that was placed on the exterior of the building in 1916 (figure 2.12). This sign, as Haacke’s work uncomfortably revealed, had been made by a Jewish family of craftsmen in Berlin whose members all perished under the Nazi regime. Haacke’s project thus staged a dialogue with an existing monument—the Reichstag—and raised questions about the models of national unity represented by the building, with the garden replacing the notion of a “pure” German people with an evolving and organic population, the seeds, if you like, of a new collectivity.

The project also launched a vigorous discussion about the culture of memorial monuments in contemporary Germany (for instance, was this a Holocaust memorial?) and stimulated an inevitable comparison to Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s 1995 wrapping of the Reichstag in polypropylene fabric, a more ambiguous spectacle, according to Andreas Huyssen, revealing a “Wagnerian blending” of history, myth, beautification, and packaging within its antimonumental stance. Among other things, these debates in the German context foreground the relationship of architectural monuments, whether imperialist or fascist, to the historical violence they were built to serve. They also focus, for our purposes, some other pertinent questions: How might such monuments and memorial museums take part in not only remembering but also actively transforming the historical injustices of the modern past? And what can or should be the role of contemporary art in relation to these discourses of national public memory?

There are many differences between Haacke at the Reichstag and Sundaram at the Victoria Memorial, notwithstanding the textual/linguistic emphasis that is clearly central to both installations. For instance, the materials and strategies deployed by each artist could not seem further apart. Haacke’s work was not a temporary installation but a permanent and organic structure that acquired its meaning through change over time. Moreover, the Reichstag is not a memorial museum
but rather an edifice constructed to house the German Parliament, although its identity, according to some critics, was permanently altered by the British architect Norman Foster, whose 1992–99 refurbishment project transformed the original structure into a museological object by literally placing it under glass. Interestingly, Foster’s “Crystal Palace paradigm” was criticized for its unchecked continuity with Britain’s imperialist museological past, which places the Reichstag post-renovation into an unexpected kinship with Curzon’s building in Calcutta.31 That each monument is distinguished by a magnificent dome serves as a further point of resemblance. As Haacke reflected later, “Many aspects of Foster’s refurbished interior building I do not care for, but his dome is absolutely spectacular, a tourist attraction of the first order.”32

In the end, these site-specific projects by Haacke and Sundaram, oriented as they are toward radically different societal structures and histories, with many points of difference and similarity, nevertheless converge upon a single, rather subversive thread: both present a powerful challenge to the rise of an “official” memorial culture that rests increasingly in the hands of the nation-state and its incessant drive toward the branding of identity and redemptive versions of the national past. The proliferation of the phenomenon of memorials, part of the “global rush to commemorate,” has led to a boom in the business of memorial museums within the landscape of official national heritage.33 As several writers have argued, historical consciousness at the beginning of the twenty-first century has increasingly taken museological form; everywhere, we seem to be placing monuments, museums, pillars, and memorials to commemorate the traumas of our twentieth century, a process that has led, paradoxically, to greater normalization, amnesia, and forms of forgetting and resulted in excess, saturation, even “memory fatigue.”34 The apparent globalization of the Holocaust paradigm seems to have reached its point of ideological overload in Daniel Libeskind’s proposed master plan for the reconstruction of the World Trade Center site in downtown Manhattan. Libeskind, the architect of the acclaimed Jewish Museum in Berlin, was roundly criticized for his proposed “Freedom Towers”: monumental, triumphant, sentimental, and grand. In short, memorials have today become spectacles, institutions fashioned for scripted experiences and manipulated into ever more curious shapes, which returns us full circle back to Curzon’s foundational vision for the Victoria Memorial in 1901.

Sundaram’s site-specific project helps interrupt this cycle of his-
torical overdetermination and works against the ego-driven excesses of the builder by seizing in the most intimate fashion the forms, materials, and conditions of his site. In this way, History Project dramatizes the seminal role of contemporary art within the shape-shifting museological landscape of today, which appears increasingly susceptible to the “inflation of memory” and the memorial monument’s triumphal return. If the spectacular memorial culture inaugurated by Curzon’s part-museum, part-memorial, part-monument configuration has indeed found a new lease on life, then the boundaries that once separated our understanding of these categories have also become more fluid, porous, and difficult to grasp. It is here, in this zone of ambiguity and uncertainty that runs counter to the hegemony of the branded vision, that the artist performs a discrepant negotiation with memory through the “recalcitrant materiality” of physical forms. Sundaram’s frames, photographs, vitrines, and file boxes, like the contents of the museum itself, are indeterminate and inconclusive, presenting—in Hal Foster’s terms—“enigmatic prompts for future scenarios,” and they ultimately raise more questions than answers for even the initiated viewer. However, if the national appetite for self-agrandizing gestures is matched increasingly by the skepticism of contemporary art, then, as James Young has suggested, it may well be that the future of memorialization lies in this place of perpetual irresolution. For, as Young has explained, “only an unfinished memorial process,” in contrast to the finished monument or the stasis of a completed script, can ensure the life of memory itself.

Let us return, then, to my earlier question: What is the role of contemporary art in relation to the discourse of memorials, museums, and monuments in South Asia? History Project gives us one possible answer to that question. Sundaram’s project—polyphonic, dynamic, enigmatic, and antididactic—was a challenge to both the ethics and aesthetics of the memorial museum in its modern form. The piece refused to reify or enshrine the memory of India’s history as a nation, to turn it into a spectacle or cliché, or to partake in the folly of “unlocking the past.” It troubled the space of a settled institution and brought a familiar, if overlooked, public monument into significance and dissonance in an entirely new way. It presented the nation not as a stable foundation but as a precarious formation shaped through a history of ideas. It offered an image not just of a nation’s triumph but also of its liabilities and future responsibilities. It was an experiment with the opening, rather
than the foreclosing, of history, undertaken through acts of outreach and inclusion. If memorial culture in the modern era has been usurped by the needs of the nation-state, then the role of the artist is to enter this space in the forceful manner of the “advance guard,” to find within its corners and arches the room for more creative expression, to shape a living landscape for memory itself, and to reinvest history with the project of the future.