Let’s begin with an essential question: Why turn garbage into art? What kind of mischievous operation is this? What assumptions underlie such an artistic strategy? What are its social, material, and conceptual effects? Several objections could be made at the outset regarding, for instance, the negation of the abject and the problem of aestheticization. Bringing garbage into the sanitized space of an art exhibition typically involves extinguishing its visceral sensory impact. From this perspective, the transformation of trash’s most repellent features—odor, filth, flies, grime—into artificial, lyrical, or glossy digital forms amounts to an elaborate gesture of sterilization. What kind of processing plant does the gallery space become? Doesn’t the materiality of actual garbage contain something beyond that which is recuperable? And isn’t garbage therefore fundamentally incongruent with the realm of aesthetics, making all such attempts seem rather frivolous in the face of the “real” environmental and societal crises related to the endless mountains of human waste we produce and deposit on the planet each day?

Countless artists from the Euro-American avant-garde—Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Cornell, Kurt Schwitters, Robert Rauschenberg, and Armand Arman, to name a few—embraced precisely these ambiguities and difficulties when they made the wager in favor of trash, devising truly ingenious ways to confront the degradations of value attached to
all that culture has expelled or discarded. Indeed, the project of making art out of trash has a very long pedigree within the aesthetic projects of modernity and postmodernity. Duchamp’s *Fountain* of 1917 is the well-established point of departure, a work that, in spite of its iconic status, remains axiomatic today. This is because the porcelain urinal that Duchamp signed as “R. Mutt” and submitted to the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York (only to be rejected by the committee) functions, in the words of Octavio Paz, as a question mark suspended permanently over the notion of artistic creation itself: its “meaning” rests fully in the puzzlement it creates. Following Duchamp’s provocation, artists throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have intervened in the structure of meaning-making either randomly or systematically by reintroducing objects and materials discarded from the cycles of production and use and asserting their worth in indeterminate ways. For the artist, the aestheticization of waste is therefore “an economic move, an attempt to invert value, to recuperate the negative,” and to disturb the implicit or hidden judgments in our culturally defined systems of discrimination and value. No wonder, then, that the redrawing of the ledger line between rubbish and art is a tactic that has been passionately pursued in every realm of aesthetic practice throughout the modern era, including literature, cinema, performance, music, and theater.

In his 2005–8 project, *Trash*, which used actual garbage from the megacity of Delhi as the basis for large-scale multimedia assemblages, Vivan Sundaram joined this long tradition of investment in the discarded form, while departing from its now-classic antecedents in a number of significant ways. For this project, comprising installation, video, and digital prints, the artist filled his studio with a sprawling cityscape made of debris gathered from the streets of Delhi with the assistance of a group of local “waste-picker” boys. Alternately playful, buoyant, disorienting, and dystopic, *Trash* seized the medium of waste to question notions of value and obsolescence within the conditions of consumer capitalism and to foreground the systems of reuse and recycling that are particular to a society such as India. In chapter 1, I examined Sundaram’s sensitivity to entropic forces—erosion, decay, dilapidation, ruination—in such projects as his 1991 series in engine oil and charcoal and his installation at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, *Black Gold* (2012), suggesting that the artist’s attention to such processes does not also imply acquiescence or resignation. In chapter 2, I turned to
Sundaram’s History Project (1998), which probed the themes of nationhood, collective memory, and subaltern belonging, and showed how strategies of installation and site-specificity helped to subvert, at least temporarily, the authoritative edifice of the memorial monument.

In this chapter, I will show how the multiple dimensions of Sundaram’s Trash do not only amplify and intensify some of these earlier concepts and strategies: for instance, the materiality of debris, the aerial perspective, the role of memory, and the theme of alterity. The project also lays the gauntlet for a new ethical confrontation staged at the meeting between human subjectivity and societal waste. This is the locus of reckoning implicit in the title of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s book Wasted Lives. The phrase does not refer to those who have “wasted their lives” through a lack of industry or willingness to work but signals instead a different moral alliance with the portion of humanity in the new millennium who have become casualties of economic progress. For Bauman, such people are the “surplus humanity” who most bear the consequences of globalization and who, deprived of adequate means of sustenance, are left with the daunting task of their own survival.

As I suggest in the pages that follow, the vibrant digital photographs of Trash, which play with false perspectives and modernist tropes, evoke the notion of the “kinetic city” as it constantly modifies and reinvents itself in response to these extreme conditions. As well, Sundaram’s provisional collaboration with the waste-pickers, involving an alliance with these marginalized boys and their local advocacy groups, underscores the social distance that separates the bourgeois artist from the labor of the menial worker. The social disparities of class and caste implicit in this association are further probed and complicated through the sculptural installation 12 Bed Ward (2005) and the single-projection video titled The Brief Ascension of Marian Hussain (2005). These two additional components of Trash are also free-standing installations, and they draw attention to the physical spaces of the informal economy and the built environment of the urban poor without resolving the contradictions that inevitably arise from the tension between stability and impermanence. Like Bauman, Sundaram’s investment in the vocabulary of waste to evoke the subjecthood of “wasted lives” should not be misconstrued as sentimental or fatalistic, or worse, as an irresponsible form of aesthetic appropriation. On the contrary, waste emerges dialectically—through tropes of dwelling, sleep, isolation, and work in both the video and the sculptural installation as a most intimate, inventive, and pro-
ductive category, “the midwife of all creation” in Bauman’s terms, one that opens onto both material and existential conditions and an indispensable feature from which to imagine alternative economies of societal consumption, expulsion, production, and design.7

Some viewers might see a parallel between Sundaram’s Trash and recent works by contemporary Chinese artists that present the perversities and altered realities of an Asian landscape morphed by globalization.8 Others might place it alongside some of the exuberant works of bricolage emerging from the dynamic contradictions and so-called informal economies of cities in Africa and Latin America.9 Still others might connect it to the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles in the United States, whose performances among janitors and sanitation workers in New York City in the late 1970s exposed the social prejudices around garbage and the marginality of its labor forms.10 My analysis, by contrast, further situates the project within a growing discussion around the city in South Asia as the locus for numerous urgent concerns regarding citizenship, democracy, politics, and the state.

Departing from an earlier era of intellectual interest in the nexus of the Indian village, exemplified by the rise of post-independence “village studies” in the field of social anthropology and, later, the preoccupation with the peasantry within the framework of subaltern studies, the current “urban turn” in South Asia invokes a broad spectrum of knowledge practices.11 What its participants and interlocutors share is an overriding concern with the extreme social disparities of the post-industrial city resulting from economic liberalization. Sundaram’s approach to the city in Trash can be situated within these interdisciplinary discussions among scholars, activists, architects, and urban practitioners about the megalcity and its staggering complexities. Further, several strategies in the project relating to form, media, and aesthetic process actively intervene in the different heterogeneous discourses of the city and facilitate a self-questioning of knowledge frameworks across the spheres of planning, architecture, housing, and urban theory, to name a few of the relevant arenas of inquiry. In other words, contemporary art itself functions here as a practice of urban history and analysis and emerges as a vital form of discourse about the city and the built environment. Moreover, the “vertical collaboration” between the bourgeois artist and the waste-picker boys expresses the ethical and political necessity that Arjun Appadurai has called “deep democracy,” involving new kinds of alliances between intellectuals and the poor, as well as a “de-
mocratization of research” and thought. Trash thus expands upon the impetus to forge an interface between artists and the urban matrix from the radical position of the “subterrain of the city,” a parallel formulation conceived by Kapur at the time, both an urgent zone of democracy in crises and a powerful space of collective imagining with immense interpretive resources.

Post-Landscapes

My own relationship to Sundaram’s Trash began in 2005 with a visit to the artist’s studio located in the former village of Aya Nagar, now part of the outskirts of Delhi en route to Gurgaon, a locality that has been mutated in the past two decades by outsourcing, call centers, mega-malls, and a real estate boom for the Delhi middle class. The journey to Aya Nagar from the affluent, gated suburbs of south Delhi, according to Chaitanya Sambrani in his contribution to the Trash exhibition catalogue, “is like a constantly unfolding time capsule of the city’s engagements with modernity.” Delhi today is an exemplary megacity, a place where the dreams of urban planners meet the chaotic excesses of relentless municipal development, and where the uncertainties of citizenship caused by migration and overcrowding call up the massive displacement of people resulting from the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947. As the writer Rana das Gupta has argued, the traumatic past of Partition continues to haunt the physical and psychic spaces of the city and is inseparable from the “eruption” of capitalist excess that has transformed urban experience there in the wake of the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s. Similarly, the proliferation of low-cost media and technology, which spread like wildfire through Delhi’s urban fabric during the same period, produced a largely illicit culture of mediated experience built through systems of waste, piracy, recycling, and appropriation. This “wild zone of piracy” or “pirate modernity,” in Ravi Sundaram’s terms, signals both innovation and survival on the part of the urban poor and a new era of uncertainty for the city itself. Crucially, it is not merely Vivan Sundaram’s studio in Aya Nagar but more fully his life and art practice over the past five decades that bears an umbilical connection to this place. The frenzied urban expansionism of Delhi; the palimpsest of its modern and premodern past; its unreconciled legacies of Partition; its dazzling culture of resilience; its human
casualties and sheer brutalities: as I will argue, these are the elements of urban experience that get thematized, indeed theorized, in the multiple components of Trash.

At the artist’s studio in 2005, I had been invited to observe—along with some hundred others at an open-studio event—a vast indoor built environment composed entirely of garbage that had been locally collected with the assistance of the waste-picker boys. The assemblage was an immense urban landscape, or rather a “post-landscape,” in cultural theorist W.J.T. Mitchell’s terms, signaling less a genre than a medium of exchange, not a product but a cultural process, something more of a verb than a noun.17 Sundaram’s recombined garbage city consisted of a multitude of materials, relationships, forms, and scenes, visible in figure 4.1. There were towers of tin cans taped together, high-rises of recycled metal and cardboard, freeway flyovers of discarded synthetics, fields of undulating deflated plastic bags, and dense communities of junked plastic utensils. Dozens of playful vignettes could be detected at the micro level, for instance, a football match of toothpaste-tube players being cheered on by a group of onlooking recyclables. At the macro level, the impression was that of ordered chaos, with separate but distinct zones of patterned materials.

And yet, the scale most crucial to Sundaram’s trashescape was arguably the unit of the neighborhood. This is where order, structure, and identity resided and where mounds of otherwise meaningless debris acquired a particular character or look. If the neighborhood is the locus of “place-making,”18 the activity of inhabiting and transforming a place through mundane interactions with others on a daily basis, then Sundaram’s emphasis on the neighborhood, as something that is patterned through reiterative practice, presents us with a kind of morphology, a portrait of how the city is produced. Sundaram’s depiction of the urban order, as we shall see in his large-format digital print, Master Plan (figure 4.6), is therefore the opposite of high modernism’s planned social vision. Those great utopian schemes privileged the future at the expense of the past like “large altars dedicated to progress,” as James Scott has argued in his far-reaching critique of modernist planning’s imperialist ethos.19 What Sundaram presents instead is a kind of micro-sociology from below, a dynamic arena of mixed-use disorder, an “informal” economy to the formal master plan. How the artist prioritizes this dialectic between formality and informality using the aesthetic strategy of
FIGURE 4.1 Vivan Sundaram, Prospect, 2005-8, digital print. Courtesy of the artist.
the overhead view, and in relation to both the past and the present, are
issues to which I will shortly return.

Significantly, this rubbish-scape studio installation from 2005 was
not intended for posterity. It served instead as an ephemeral stage-set
from which the final product, including two videos, the sculptural in-
stallation called 12 Bed Ward, and a series of digital photographs, was
derived. One week after the open-studio event, Sundaram destroyed
the entire constructed landscape and documented the destruction in
a fourteen-minute, single-channel video, titled Turning (2008). In the
video, the camera gradually zooms in and out of many intimate spaces
and details, which are increasingly subjected to disturbance by wind
and other forces, recalling the unnerving moments before a terrible
storm. As the flight of a toy plane and bird become more and more fran-
tic, the viewer senses the impending carnage. Incorporating citations
of verse from the thirteenth-century Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi, the
video focuses on destruction as a distinctly un-spectacular fate, some-
thing that occurs through precarious and wobbly forms of disconnec-
tion and collapse. The whole idea, Sundaram stated, was to highlight
that “in poor countries, huge amounts of population live with an im-
mense sense of instability; from moment to moment, they do not know
when they will be destroyed, when their houses will be demolished.”

Turning thus captures the reality of “place-breaking” alongside the
processes of urban “place-making” by enacting gestures of erasure and
displacement that are common features of city life. The discipline of
planning has many words for this, according to urban theorist John
Friedmann—“people removal, squatter eradication, slum clearance,
gentrification, rehousing, redevelopment—some terms more benign,
others more brutal, but in the end, the results are the same.” This is
the immense human cost of the demolition of place, large and small,
as both physical dwellings and patterns of human relationships are de-
stroyed in the name of capitalist development. If garbage represents
here the teleological endpoint of a merciless consumer society—that
which is devoured and discarded, leaving others precarious and un-
stable—then Sundaram’s ambitious salvage operation, his recovery of
an entire urban economy from its debris, also points to the proliferat-
ing forms of human ingenuity and the systems of survival and creativity
that have been forged in response to our late-capitalist era.
The anthropologist Mary Douglas was one of the first to observe in her classic study, *Purity and Danger*, that if garbage is, by definition, that which is thrown “out,” then the very existence of garbage implies some hidden understandings about the boundaries between inside and outside. In a similar way, Sundaram’s interest in garbage as a medium is to highlight the boundaries and barriers, both physical and cultural, that separate insiders from outsiders and demarcate spaces like the slum or the ghetto from the gated communities or freeway flyovers designed to avoid them, not just in India but in most cities today. “I suggest that the urban middle and upper classes, rather than turn away from the garbage they generate,” the artist has said, “must face the reality of the urbanscape and the people outside of their gated colonies.”

These ideas about living inside and outside the spaces of a city like Delhi were also embodied in the peculiar title and punctuation points of Sundaram’s exhibition when it opened at the Lalit Kala Academy in Delhi in 2005: *living.it.out.in.delhi*. His large-format digital prints bearing the word “barricade” in their titles portray these divisions explicitly (see figures 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4). In this series, the barrier is marked against other elements of the landscape, for instance, *Barricade (with mattress)*, *Barricade (with red beam)*, and *Barricade (with props)*. Playing with false perspectives, sharp angles, and close-up views, these landscape pictures of dark gorges, crowded horizons, and disorderly yet delineated fields result in a kind of hyperreal frontier, as far from a “natural” terrain as possible. They present instead the deeply unnatural quality of such boundaries, revealing their reprehensible artificiality and exclusionary acts.

They also call up the long history of investment in such barriers by nineteenth-century urban planners like Baron Haussmann in Paris, or the modern concern with their social consequences by his famous interlocutor Walter Benjamin. Indeed, Sundaram’s work forces the latter’s account of the modern city, with its emphasis on the display of images and commodities, and its impact on the viewing subject into confrontation with a new set of extreme conditions. The shift in focus is not merely from the Benjaminian preoccupation with the activities of consumption to the domain of disposal and waste; it is also from the site of the first-world city to the urban realities of the so-called third world, or from the experience of the nineteenth century to the unfold-
ing crises of the twenty-first. In other words, it is the classic ideal of the city as the embodiment of civil society and the production of “high” cultural values and good taste that Sundaram’s overwrought garbage city—his unwieldy trashopolis—seems to relegate to the waste heap once and for all.25

What, then, is the theory of urbanization being offered here instead? Tania Roy has argued that Sundaram’s project “moves across genres” of landscape art, surveillance, the archaeological survey, and the archive to construct “a supplement to the dominant representational practices involving the megacity.”26 Sambrani has similarly suggested that the artist puts forth “an alternative ecology, an other system of ordering that foils the dreams of undiminished progress.”27 Their acute percep-

FIGURE 4.2
Vivan Sundaram, Barricade (with Mattress), 2008, digital print. Courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE 4.3
tions point to the nature of the urban thesis that lies at the center of Trash, and foreground the problem of representing “the urban” as a discrete and bounded form of human settlement. The relentlessness and increasing ubiquity of our urban condition has made it almost impossible to pin down, as the urban theorist Neil Brenner has noted, presenting a radical challenge to the knowledge practices that strive to contend with urbanization’s ever more amorphous forms. For Brenner, urban theory lacks a proper “cognitive map,” a theoretical and cartographic orientation that can decipher the emergent realities and potentialities of cities in the midst of the “deep phenomenological dislocation” of our times. Sundaram’s images mark this sense of dislocation through their often playful rendering of coordinates across dystopic space and time. In the digital print *Fly* (2008) shown in figure 4.5, for example, a superhero soars over the landscape through a cloudless sky, recalling the bypasses and elevated flyovers which sanction speed and agility for some and debilitating stillness and immobility for others. The picture points, in this sense, toward the phenomenon described elsewhere as chronopolitics—namely, the presence of new kinds of relationships between haves and have-nots based in extreme forms of temporal displacement and the crisis of radically unsynchronized space.

Mike Davis’s influential portrait of a “slum ecology” and the con-
conditions of planetary crises characterized by “super-urbanization” represents another possible vocabulary for some of the processes we see in Sundaram’s art. For Davis, “super-urbanization” is defined by population growth regardless of economic growth, overcrowding, unprecedented levels of urban poverty, and life-threatening destruction to the environment. Davis’s account of how the world’s mega-slums have spread and hardened like some new tectonic plates into the earth’s existing geology of mountains, rivers, highlands, and valleys to constitute “our planet of slums” is indeed a powerful portrait of urban underdevelopment at the planetary level. And yet, his map of human vulnerability embedded in such material conditions, which overwhelmingly belong to the global south, has proven insufficient for grasping the dynamism of systems of reinvention and repair and the specific forms agency and subjectivity connected to such processes. Sundaram’s images, by contrast—as I have suggested—expose the dialectics of inside and outside, boundaries and neighborhoods, accumulation and implosion, that suffuse such landscapes with resilience and contradiction while giving them the appearance of structure and coherence. In other words, the very notion of a discrete and bounded urban form is revealed through art to be an ideological effect. Moreover, by adopting multiple visual scales and perspectives, and a historically situated optic of the local—as I elaborate in the next section concerned with a single image, Master Plan—Sundaram presents an account of modernist space that, although constructed from above, has been equally subjected to radical reinvention from within.

**Master Plan**

The theme of urban squalor and filth that is uncomfortably equated with the idea of the slum has, in fact, had a long history in representations of the subcontinent extending back to the middle of the nineteenth century, the heyday of British imperial rule in India. The Victorians responded to the ever-present dirt, disorder, and chaos of the place as if it were a nightmare, against which the clean, orderly world of the European was established. And yet, this classic imperial trope—of the colony as the embodiment of filth—is not a perception that we can fairly think of as “Western.” As Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown, the reflex of disgust at India’s squalor is equally present in Indian writers,
from those in exile like V.S. Naipaul or Nirad Chaudhuri to nationalist leaders like Mahatma Gandhi.32 “I feel feverish when I think of slums,” Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, was reported to say, revealing his impatience with the challenges of overcrowding, hygiene, and sanitation in India’s cities.33 Nehru’s slum anxiety was widespread among the English-educated Indian intelligentsia and political elite, who occasionally linked the problem of filth to the failures of domestic servants or—in the case of Gandhi—to the absence of a civic consciousness on the part of the Indian masses. The perception of the country as filthy was therefore, in Chakrabarty’s terms, part of the “language of modernity,” reflected in both imperialist and nationalist projects of social reform directed at that societal body in India variously seen as dirty, ignorant, “backward,” or non-modern.34

The nationalist vision of planned development that would serve to “clean up” such unruly space—often with a heroic ruthlessness that sought to wipe the slate clean—is the theme of Sundaram’s huge digital print, rather inadequately portrayed in figure 4.6, a majestic composition titled Master Plan (2005–8). The trope of the master plan, with its aerial view inviting surveillance and control, was, of course, the preferred model of celebrated urban planners like Haussmann in Paris, whose utopian aspirations had profound implications for the urban environment. Sundaram’s image recalls the classic episode of this in the Indian case: Nehru’s commission to Le Corbusier in 1951 to build the
new capital city of Chandigarh in Punjab, the northern Indian state still reeling from the bloody violence and refugee crisis of Partition a few years earlier.

Nehru wanted a modern city, a future-looking landscape, as he stated, “unfettered by the traditions of the past, a symbol of the nation’s faith in the future.” “You can rely on us at 35 Rue de Sèvres to produce the solution to the problem,” was Le Corbusier’s famous response. “Your capital can be constructed here.” Inspired in part by Lutyens’s imperial plan for New Delhi, but also by the architect’s iconic United Nations building in New York, completed a few months earlier, Le Corbusier’s “master plan” for Chandigarh was a vast landscape project that was ultimately, in his words, a “question of optics,” involving “harmo-
nious dimensions” achieved through the town-planning principle that he called “sectors,” defined as the unit or “container of family life.”

Although much more can be said about this legendary encounter, for our purposes, if Le Corbusier defined his mission as defining a “truly modern Indian architecture,” then India in turn gave Le Corbusier the largest project of his career.

But Sundaram’s master-garbage-plan evokes another, less well-known story within this story: that of Nek Chand, a humble villager from Punjab whose family was uprooted by the trauma of Partition and who eventually found work through a refugee settlement program in construction for the new city of Chandigarh. As a low-level bureaucrat in the Department of Public Works, Nek Chand’s duties from 1955 on included supervising the city dump, which put him in touch with much of the debris from the twenty-six villages that were demolished to make room for Le Corbusier’s landmark project. Nek Chand began using this debris—broken pots, metal scrap, oil drums, cracked bottles, bulbs, electrical fittings, chinaware, and twisted pipes—which he had stored in a secret clearing in the woods, not far from Le Corbusier’s High Court building, to create a small kingdom of primordial sculptures. What began with things like monkeys made from cement poured over bicycle handlebars expanded over the years to include gardens and theaters of broken crockery, walls of clay pots and discarded electrical outlets, and vibrant armies of humans and animals made from the colorful glass bangles worn by Indian women (see figures 4.7 and 4.8). In figure 4.9, Sundaram’s image Barricade (with Coils), with its unusual arm-like forms, recalls the iconic figures Chand made with such bracelets. Here, the “barricade,” made of stacking coils and helixed loops, seems...
FIGURE 4.8
less a barrier than a flexible threshold, as the precedent of India’s greatest sculptor-recycler, not to mention the militancy of the “outsider artist,” appears to be acknowledged in an unstated homage.

Scholars who have studied Nek Chand, often through the lens of folk or outsider art, have also noted the rather poignant fact that his project was a self-stated attempt to re-create the ancestral village he had lost through Partition. The response Nek Chand received when he revealed, after fifteen years, his secret sculpture garden to the chief architect of Chandigarh in 1969, four years after Le Corbusier’s death, was perhaps even more heart-wrenching. The architect M. N. Sharma was overwhelmed by what he saw but also terrified. “His fantasy world,” Sharma recalled, “was on Government land,” next to Le Corbusier’s great landmark buildings: it was not part of the master plan, and thus unauthorized and illegal. “I did not have the heart to go by the rules and I advised him to continue his work in secret,” Sharma wrote later. Nek Chand did precisely this, and it was not until the 1980s that his covert and obsessive salvage operation received public recognition and official sanction.

What is known today as Nek Chand’s “Rock Garden” is thus simultaneously many things: a mini fantasy world within Le Corbusier’s kingdom built over decades out of its rubble and debris; a clandestine archaeology of the past against the wishes of Nehru’s modernist vision, who wanted Chandigarh to be a complete break from the past; an ex-

FIGURE 4.9
Vivan Sundaram, Barricade (with Coils), 2008, digital print. Courtesy of the artist.
traordinary aesthetic achievement in its own right, usurping some of the fame of Le Corbusier’s host city; and a poetic violation of the master plan, through a tenacious, lifetime practice of recycling and the stub-
born materiality of debris. There is no reason to expect that Le Corbus-
ier, who was in James Scott’s terms, “visually offended by disarray and confusion” and driven to distraction by “the physical environment that centuries of urban living had created,” would have allowed the project to exist had he somehow lived to see Chandigarh’s future. What Sund-
aram’s image thus evokes are these two incommensurable relation-
ships to the environment, the utopian authority of the master plan, on
one hand, and the lived economies of reuse and self-invention, on
the other—two utterly discrepant histories of the modern which never-
theless coexist, and always have, in the cities of South Asia and, more
broadly, in the resilient human geographies of the postcolonial world.

Notable in size and scale, Sundaram’s Master Plan also possesses the
uncanny ability to summon the past while pointing simultaneously
toward the present and future. In particular, the wrecked circuit boards
and broken gadgetry that become visible in the details of the print
call up more recent technological narratives of the city and the spe-
cific forms of urbanization that have resulted from the digital era. In
Delhi, for example, as Ravi Sundaram has shown, the emergence of cel-

dular networks and digital media in the metropolis during the late 1980s
led to a complete transformation of the fabric of the city, dispelling
the hopes of rational planning once and for all. What emerged was a
vast spectrum of “minor practices” on the ground that either bypassed
the normative legal structures envisioned by government and corpo-
rate elites or ignored them altogether. The result—a “volatile mix of
urban expansion, random violence, media explosions, and accelerating
consumption”—was a “wild zone” of piracy, according to the author,
which turned the city into a predatory and high-speed arena of “kinetic
shock experiences,” creating new kinds of crises for its inhabitants.

Meanwhile, Delhi’s latest Master Plan 2021, the third in the history
of the city, following those of 1962 and 2001, was recently unveiled with
much fanfare by the government—and met with equal criticism by the
public and media. The plan, authored by the Delhi Development Au-
thority (DDA), the civic authority of the country’s capital, envisions a
“global metropolis and a world-class city, where all the people would
be engaged in productive work with a better quality of life,” for the
projected population of 23 million in the city by 2021. The plan advo-
cates “solutions” to numerous problems that currently plague greater Delhi—traffic chaos, power shortages, water scarcity, and insufficient housing—by privileging business, industry, and transportation, the presumably rational sphere of the formal sector, with little attention to the implacable reality (or historical existence) of the informal economy. For Delhi activists, the plan’s argument that commercialization and privatization can resolve the city’s problems is nothing but an ideological ruse; they argue that its neoliberal logic places the principle of planned development and its top-down perspective into radical question yet again.

Delhi’s millennial master plan departs from its Nehruvian predecessors in its embrace of the idea of the “world-class city,” both a vague signifier and powerful ideological device that somehow clarifies what does and doesn’t belong. Thus, freeway flyovers and shopping malls are projected as world-class; slums and squatter settlements are not. The discourse of the world-class city culminated in Delhi’s fraught experience of hosting the Commonwealth Games in 2010, which saw an acceleration of changes in the name of clean-up and beautification. As the urban geographer Asher Ghertner has argued, Delhi’s new planning regime is thus based more than ever before on a politics of the gaze that often prioritizes the criteria of visual presentation over issues of access and social inequality: what matters most is the appearance of being “world-class” defined in visual terms.43

World-classness is thus an aesthetic project and a mass dream that, alas, belongs to many, even those whose needs are excluded from its aspirational vision. “Who participates in the aesthetic imagination of the future,” Ghertner writes, “and how the capacity to participate in such politics is cultivated among those historically excluded are perhaps the key political questions confronting India’s increasingly urban future.”44 The practices of art, fueled by passionate engagement and creative experimentation, can intervene in important ways in the new regimes of visual culture that Ghertner has described. Seizing indirect address, encoded propositions, and subtle signs of dissent, artists can point toward more democratic options within the hierarchical field of the city’s visual culture. In Sundaram’s case, the paradigm of salvage further provides the basis for real and symbolic moments of inclusion, pointing to the need for broader participation in the discourses of the city and an expansion of the expressive practices related to citizenship and political solidarity.
Subalterity and the Operations of Salvage

The failures and fallacies of the modernist imagination and the unfulfilled social promises of the postcolonial nation-state provide an important subtext for the digital photographs in Trash. But how does this relate to the recycling operation that filled the artist’s studio with debris? How should we evaluate, in particular, the pronounced gestures of social outreach and collaboration that were a constitutive feature of Sundaram’s “salvage paradigm”? As noted earlier, the artist had collected the garbage at ground level with the assistance of a group of low-caste waste-picker boys. Sundaram had met the boys through the Delhi-based NGO Chintan, which promotes the human rights of the waste-pickers, often women and children from dalit (or untouchable) castes or slum-dwellers who are outside the protection of any sort but who labor within a massive informal economy. Waste-pickers are the most marginal figures in India’s unique kabadi economy, a home-grown system of grassroots recycling that is acclaimed for its efficiency at the societal level but based in archaic systems of caste exploitation, whereby entire segments of society, viewed as ritually polluted, are required to perform the task of waste collection by hand. In an interview, Sundaram described the structure of his collaboration in some detail:

For over a year, I had been attending meetings every other Sunday with Chintan (the NGO). I’d sit in for two to three hours and listen to their problems and established some relationship. Once I got this idea, I asked the kabadiwallahs for 100 kilos of this and that—three tempos [small pick-up trucks] arrived at my studio, during the monsoon, it was filthy. We had to fumigate the material (thousands of flies died!), lock the studio, let the fumes settle and come back the next day. Waste pickers are constantly picking through things, and that’s what we did next. We sorted through it all, laid everything out in different areas, and then made a six-inch mud base and started building our city.45

The inclusion of the waste-pickers in the project through the intermediary work of Chintan calls attention to the daunting nature of collecting garbage by hand; it also serves to highlight several crucial urban processes connected to the “informal economy.” The informal sector is the uneven geography, famously fluid and infinitely variable yet always precarious and threatened by annihilation, that structures the very fabric of
urban life. In the discourses of urban planning, informality is plagued by the problem of representation: for example, how does one specify this zone of informality when it is by definition invisible, subterranean, and yet absolutely essential to the ways our cities function today? And who is left inside and outside of citizenship itself within the hierarchies that structure these unsanctioned spaces? As Ananya Roy has argued, the question of urban informality is thus always a politics of representation, bound up in the transnational historical discourses of first and third world development and the epistemologies and problematic legacies of social science paradigms for poverty, inequality, and subalterity more broadly. Policy discourse today, she adds, is “rife with tales of self-sufficient squatter settlements,” “thriving women’s cooperatives,” and instances of “heroic entrepreneurship.” Thus, as the pendulum has swung from idioms of crisis toward a more utopian celebration of grassroots movements, there is a greater need for a reexamination of language, representational tropes, and theoretical models across the disciplines.

These issues and dilemmas are deftly confronted in two final components of Trash: a two-minute-and-twenty-second looped video projection, The Brief Ascension of Marian Hussain (2005), and a freestanding installation, titled 12 Bed Ward (2005). Both directly address the plight of the waste-picker and navigate the often strict separation between artistic practice and the discourses of policy. Not only are Delhi’s waste-pickers today degraded by social stigma and abject working conditions, but their livelihoods are increasingly threatened by the privatization of municipal waste management, a situation that places the new “formal” economy in direct conflict with the “informal” economy. This damaging collision is a prime example of the phenomenon identified as “eviscerating urbanism,” a set of processes transforming Indian cities like Delhi, Bombay, and Bangalore into congested, overwhelmed landscapes or “hazardscapes,” whose victims are the immense numbers of urban poor that are effectively rendered superfluous.

In a still from the video in figure 4.10, the viewer perceives one of the waste-pickers, Marian Hussain, sleeping peacefully amid a small mountain of garbage, being ignored by numerous passers-by. Initially, one fears that the figure is a corpse because it is hard to imagine how such a mound of trash could produce the conditions to sustain human life. And yet, the figure is protected by sleep, both a public act and a technique of necessity for exhausted, homeless, or indigent bodies.
For the very poor, as Appadurai has argued, public sleeping is actually “the sole form of secure being,” providing respite, however temporary, from harassment, hunger, or eviction. This encounter with the liminality and vulnerability of the sleeping figure recalls a series of nocturnal photographs by a younger Delhi-based artist, Dhruv Malhotra, aptly titled Sleepers (2008–present). Malhotra’s long exposures of the city at night present anonymous rickshaw drivers, migrant laborers, and other tired protagonists in different crumpled postures of sleep—on overpasses, sidewalks, benches, and public lawns. Like Sundaram, the photographer’s eye in this series is on the relation between the sleeping figure and the urban landscape in which he or she slumbers, in a way that draws out the isolation and vulnerability that define such tenuous relationships to the city.

As the young protagonist in Sundaram’s video slowly awakes from this ambiguous state of passive (in)security, he proceeds to stretch into a ballet-like extension from his perch atop the garbage heap (see figures 4.11 to 4.13). The video thus moves, as Sambrani has described, “from the material to the ethereal, from squalid earthliness to a transcendent (future) realm that remains to be (fully) defined.” If the looped footage of Marian Hussain’s ascension offers painful, hopeful, and even elegant escape, the creaky mechanical sound of the audio is a reminder that such an existential transcendence is also fraught and inevitably “brief.” Although beautiful, the boy’s flight does not lead to a permanent resolution or offer the means of (neo)liberal redemption. To be sure, there is no slum-dog-turned-millionaire deception or false
Vivan Sundaram,
resolution offered here. Instead, garbage becomes a meaningful site for the archiving of trauma or pain and a potent means for rediscovery or transformation. Drawn into the service of beauty, it becomes a way to reorganize a past that has been marginalized or buried and to “re-assemble the pangs of history in an oddly resilient form.”

In the Canadian photographer Jeff Wall’s painstaking construction of the subterranean dwelling of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the marginality of the black man is, in part, transacted through the excess of junk that surrounds him. The same is true for the heap of trash that both shelters and threatens Marian Hussain, the boy with the Muslim name. Part fallout shelter, part survivalist pod, part bunker against an unlivable world, this highly ambiguous architectural form evokes the broad spectrum of insecure housing practices—slums, pavement dwellings, squatter settlements—that is the built environment of the urban poor. It also points to the link in Indian cities between the politics of space and ethnic fear, a “macabre conjuncture,” in Appadurai’s terms, that has turned Muslims into the targets of sectarian conflict and discrimination, resulting in their systematic exclusion from housing or the outright destruction of their dwellings and neighborhoods. The dwelling at the center of the video thus symbolizes the challenge of “spectral housing,” a constellation that refers to the dynamics of “shortage, speculation, crowding and public improvisation” that shapes the new swollen realities of cities on the subcontinent today. For Appadurai, writing about Bombay in particular, spectral housing marks the space somewhere in between the fantasies of urban planning, on one hand, and “bodies that are their own housing,” on the other. Marian Hussain’s dwelling is properly “spectral” in this sense. It represents the accumulation of such forces of excess and lack, which are amassed, quite literally, into a pile of trash. Moreover, the creative encounter between artist and subject transforms that structure into a space of improvisation and, with the regenerative force of a compost heap, makes possible new lines of inquiry and alternative approaches to alterity itself.

In this project, Sundaram thus forces a confrontation with radical forms of social difference and the politics of representation of the informal economy, while negotiating the impasse within policy discussions that Roy has referred to as the “seduction of the squatter.” This is the gaze that looks toward the space of the squatter with fear, contempt, and disgust, at one end, or a desire for subjectivity that runs the
risk of romanticization, at the other. Roy thus asks, how do we “gaze” at structures like the squatter shack, the favela hut, or the shanty-town shed? Similarly, how should we view the figure of the waste-picker, Marian Hussain, whose subjecthood is linked to the sphere of detritus in the most literal and existential of ways? And how should we assess the work of the bourgeois artist as he embraces this difficult, indeed overdetermined, field?

Gayatri Spivak’s signature, but often misunderstood, essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” first published in 1985, remains a prescient point of entry into these dilemmas, as a recent book-length reconsideration of her intervention suggests. Spivak’s account of the ethically charged double meaning of representation itself—the difference, in her terms, between “speaking for” as in politics and “re-presentation” as in philosophy or art, in short, between a “proxy and a portrait”—surely remains one of the most rigorous intellectual engagements with the mechanisms of “othering,” drawn as it was from a powerful synthesis of feminist, post-Marxist, and poststructuralist threads. By explicating the discontinuities between subjectivity and agency and the “globe-girdling” relays of appropriation and reinscription, Spivak insisted on a theory of the limits of representation and the radical challenge of irreducible alterity. “All speaking, even seemingly the most immediate, entails a distanced decipherment by another, which is at best, an interception. That is what speaking is,” she argued.

For Spivak, the point was not to resolve the aporia, which continues to challenge the basis for equality and common ground, but to approach the problem of asymmetry through acts of imagining, to “somehow attempt to supplement the gap.” “Imagining” here is not the same as escape; it is rather an intellectual faculty that engages with difference and bespeaks a certain social responsibility. Here, then, is a way to grasp the contribution of the “semionaut” artist within the fraught arena of representation’s double bind: he seizes the creative challenge of representation and refuses to shy from the epistemological impasse it presents. The Brief Ascension of Marian Hussain is more than merely a “sweet escape fantasy,” as the critic Holland Cotter somewhat hastily declared. The video does not cancel the fact of waste’s harmful materiality, its hazardous toxicity, or its role in producing sickness and death. Instead, the project sustains the contradiction between waste as a productive and creative category on the one hand, and its injurious and degenerative capacities on the other. Similarly, there is no attempt
to make “the subaltern speak” but rather a will to mark the space of that subjectivity, as Spivak stated, “with something other than silence or nonexistence.” In the end, the infinite difficulty and irresolvability of such tensions belong to the dialectical space of the city itself—a site of continuous hope and despair, shelter and brutality, refuge and trauma, alternating between dreams and nightmares. For Marian Hussain, the air-born protagonist of the video, there is no guarantee of a soft landing here. The same can be said for the viewer in search of the security of a (false) resolution: instead, within the forces of inequality lies the possibility of a modest awakening and the urgent necessity of not forsaking the subject-position of the radically other.

The Immortal Soles of 12 Bed Ward

A final component of Trash, the isolated installation titled 12 Bed Ward, departs formally from the video and digital photographs and imbibes Sundaram’s engagements with garbage with a different kind of affective force. It was the British sculptor Tony Cragg, similarly known for his experimentation with discarded forms, who observed with a certain dissatisfaction that “thousands and thousands of materials are called trash.” We are reminded that a full accounting of Delhi’s waste would require detailed consideration of its multitude of forms—sewage, industrial waste, electronic waste, biomedical waste, construction debris, abattoir remains, and so on. In 12 Bed Ward, Sundaram approaches this problem, presented by garbage’s almost infinite forms, on the one hand, and its high degree of particularity, on the other, by moving away from the umbrella signifier of his title and toward a more focused and specific contemplation.

In this stark installation (see figure 4.14), the viewer enters a dimly lit room and encounters twelve steel single-bed frames, their sleeping surface made of “reincarnated soles.” These are the worn rubber soles of Delhi’s sneakers, sandals, shoes, and chappals (or slippers), which are painstakingly recovered by waste-pickers and separated from the discarded shoe, because of their value within the kabari economy. The row of uninviting beds, the starkness of the overhead bulbs, the menacing presence of an overseer’s chair—as Sambrani has suggested, these elements link 12 Bed Ward to the sculptural installations of Mona Hatoum, whose similarly threatening domestic forms evoke violence, conflict,
and state authority, with specific reference to the Palestinian experience. At once calling to mind a hospital ward, an interrogation room, a refugee camp, and a police precinct, 12 Bed Ward is a “paradigmatic space of abjection,” in Sambrani’s terms, a room that threatens of social persecution and conjures, in the broadest sense, the humanitarian crises wrought by our political modernity.

At another level, however, the spectral presence of the rubber shoe soles is a harsh reminder of the specific subterranean circuits and invisible value chain that determine the so-called informal economy and implicate the lives of waste-pickers like Marian Hussain. The room is equally reminiscent, for example, of a kabari shop in Delhi, the cornerstone of the system of informal recycling where “raw” waste is purchased, sorted, reprocessed, and resold. The urban geographer Vinay Gidwani, who has studied such unwelcome spaces, describes the latter as “a dingy, poorly lit, one-room establishment tucked away in a bylane in a slum, an old city neighborhood, the corner of a colony, or in one of Delhi’s numerous urban villages.” Increasingly threatened by the corporatization of waste collection, such kabari shops are now doubly displaced, often located in nondescript spaces on the outer margins of the city. Visiting one such place, called Mundka, in west Delhi, one of Asia’s

**Figure 4.14**
largest recycling markets, Gidwani describes a grim Dickensian world where the shoes are burned in hot ovens and open vats with “belching acrid grey fumes.”70 “As the soles heat up,” he explains, “along with the adhesive that binds them to the body of the footwear, plumes of noxious grey smoke waft into the air. The smoke catches the back of the throat,” making it impossible to breathe without coughing.71 For the people, mostly young women, who have no choice but to seek work in these appalling conditions, the resemblance with the gas chamber is all too real, as a number of these questionable spaces, including Mundka itself, have been destroyed by fire and acts of arson in recent years.

Thus, while 12 Bed Ward summons the generalized experience of modernity’s political and human cost, the specificity of the found object—here, the tragic status of the reincarnated “sole” visible in figure 4.15—signals the grim realities and material spaces that facilitate the afterlife of Delhi’s trash. It is a well-known fact, as Gidwani states, that without these intricate circuits and physical places, largely invisible to most city dwellers, a city like Delhi “would soon choke under the weight of its waste.”72 The artist’s installation, through its logic of selection, inclusion, and material support, offers a radical disruption of this value chain, one that lays bare recycling’s own contradictions and makes visible its most suffocating effects. In other words, by turning to the immortality of the “sole,” a superb homonym for garbage’s cycles of life and death, Sundaram invites us into a compassionate alliance with the material and existential reality of the waste-picker and to feel, as it were, the marginality of this sole/soul.

The Endgame of Garbage

With Trash Vivan Sundaram undoubtedly joins a long history of modern artists who have critically challenged, subverted, and appropriated the codes surrounding the status and reception of objects within consumer capitalism, from the “ready-mades” offered by the dadaists and surrealists in prewar Europe to the pop-art silk-screens of Andy Warhol in New York, evoking especially those artists who link such strategies to environmental or ecological concerns.73 But I have suggested that what Sundaram brings to the question of garbage is not only a critique of the excesses of contemporary capitalism, or an environmental sensibility about reuse and recycling, however important these may be. What is
also at stake in this work is a social and ethical consciousness emerging in part from the distinctive constructions of the human environment that the hierarchies of caste in India have produced, entangled as they are with issues of class. Here, the modernist history that has equated garbage and filth with poverty and “backwardness” gets exposed as a paradigm rooted in the colonial past but equally present in the conceit of postcolonial modernizers like Nehru and Le Corbusier, who sought to produce a new consciousness for Indians through a rigorous reordering of civic space, in architectural terms, through a “master plan.”

The capacity of Indians to frustrate these colonial and nationalist calls to discipline public space is, of course, legendary—embodied in the extraordinary subterfuge of a figure like Nek Chand, whose violation of Le Corbusier’s “master plan,” through assemblages of Chandigarh’s debris, constitutes one of the most poetic responses to the master of modernism—a story that would border on the mythical if it weren’t for the fact that the feisty Nek Chand, until his recent death at the age of ninety, continued to supervise the expansion of the Rock Garden throughout his life, in between public battles with Indian bureaucrats bent on claiming his work as “national heritage.” I have also suggested that the poetics and politics of a counternarrative like Nek Chand’s, and the methodological challenges of bringing it into visibility, are at the heart of the urban problem of formality and informality and the representational dilemmas of the subaltern in South Asia. It may be that I have piled too many issues onto Sundaram’s already large assemblage of garbage; but when it comes to the interlinked problems of modernity, globalization, and urbanization in the postcolonial societies of the global south, we are dealing unquestionably with a large, odorous heap.

I conclude with a final point concerning the nature of Sundaram’s “salvage paradigm,” a term that historically positions—among other things—the hierarchical discourses of the other. It is well known that in the history of anthropology, the desire to preserve and collect vanishing cultures by an earlier generation had damaging, if not deadly, consequences. That impulse to salvage what the forces of modernization destroyed at the beginning of the previous century (namely, an “authentic” cultural other) was linked to misguided benevolence, imperial gestures, and fatal acts of possession. Anthropology’s salvage paradigm was so thoroughly connected to death, evoking the dusty, suffocating basements of ethnographic collections and the museum as a mausoleum, that—as Virginia Dominguez argued by the 1980s—“salvage”
symbolized “a set of intellectual, aesthetic, and institutional practices that we seek to bury rather than preserve.” “Beyond the Salvage Paradigm” was thus the subtitle of an important discussion among scholars engaged in a rethinking of the identity of anthropology in the new geopolitical arrangements of the late twentieth century.

Some three decades later, Sundaram’s Trash presents a model of aesthetic practice that does indeed go “beyond” the residual traces of this ideological complex. Although salvage here remains bound up in the hierarchies of representation, it also signals a set of alternative practices in the arts—linked not to death but to the forces of life—involving collection, recycling, creativity, and renewal as part of an investment in the production of culture. These gestures of salvage are no longer static and wholly appropriative acts but rather akin to techniques of composting, an active process by which detritus and waste are gathered to create the conditions for future change. For Sundaram, salvage in response to the challenge of waste involves listening, archiving, storytelling, and play, alongside collection, collaboration, and connection to place. Trash makes history, labor, and trauma visible through its radical retake on the discarded form. Paradoxically toxic and yet as vital as oxygen itself, this material in the hands of the artist provides the basis for our collective survival.