

Box 951549, Los Angeles, California 90095-1549  
phone 310/825.4288 fax 310/206.7007  
www.fowler.ucla.edu

**Rowanne Henry**  
rowanne.henry@arts.ucla.edu  
310/825.4288

For Immediate Use

March 16, 2015

### ***The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in India since 1989***

April 19, 2015–August 2, 2015 | Opening Reception: Saturday, April 18, 2015, 7–9 pm

*Group exhibition explores India's culture wars, adds new chapter to the global history of activist art*



Prasanta Mukherjee, *Aftermath*, 2001

In 1989, playwright, actor, and activist Safdar Hashmi was fatally attacked by political thugs while performing a street play outside of Delhi. His death led to the founding of Sahmat, a vital platform for contemporary art in India and the subject of a new exhibition at the Fowler Museum at UCLA. Through a mix of art and ephemera, *The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in India since 1989* (April 19, 2015–August 2, 2015), organized by the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, uniquely situates two decades

of contemporary Indian art within the political sphere while meditating on art's capacity as a force for change.

“For the American viewer it may help to see these works in the context of the ‘culture wars’ as they are playing out in India,” said co-curator Ram Rahman. “Sahmat’s projects also reflect the camaraderie and community spirit of the Indian art scene, where artists of different generations and philosophical outlooks still have a close-knit sense of community and purpose.”

Sahmat is both an acronym for the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust and the Hindi word for “in agreement.” Based in Delhi, the group pursues a mission of resistance against the forces that threaten “the essentially pluralist and democratic spirit of creative expression in India.” To this end, Sahmat has engaged a broad base of collaborators—from celebrated artists and scholars to writers, musicians, and rickshaw drivers—to create and present works of art that defend freedom of expression and battle intolerance within India’s often divisive political landscape. The exhibition will introduce Sahmat to the United States by examining key projects from 1989 to the present day, including street-based mobile shows, large cultural sit-ins, performances, and conceptual exhibitions. In addition to surveying

Sahmat's multifaceted history, the exhibition will assess the impact this unique—and sometimes controversial—collective has had on contemporary Indian society and artistic practice.



Safdar Hashmi performing in a Janam street play, ca. late 1970s.  
Photo courtesy Janam archive

### **Safdar Hashmi and the founding of Sahmat**

Safdar Hashmi (1954–1989) was a political activist, actor, playwright, poet, and founding member of the street theater group Jana Natya Manch, or Janam (“birth”) for short. Like many of his generation in India, he was deeply committed to secularism and egalitarianism—principles that drove the nation’s struggle for independence from British colonial rule. He helped build Janam into a forum for democratic and accessible theater aimed at political change.

On January 1, 1989, Hashmi and Janam were violently attacked while performing the play *Halla Bol! (Raise Your Voice!)* during municipal elections outside of Delhi. Hashmi died of his injuries the next day. His death aroused a nationwide wave of revulsion against political violence and led to the founding of Sahmat.

### **Exhibition themes and sections**

In the more than twenty years since Hashmi’s death, Sahmat has drawn on India’s secular heritage and an expansive group of collaborators to produce a series of projects that engage in political and social debates through both traditional and less conventional forms of art.

*The Sahmat Collective* is divided into a twelve case studies of key themes and projects: Sahmat’s Beginnings (1989); Children’s Books (1989–1990); Images and Words (1991–1992); Slogans for Communal Harmony (1992); Ayodha: the Demolition of the Babri Masjid and After (1992–1993); Tribute to Gandhi (1994–1995); Gift for India (1997); Art on the Move (2001); Ways of Resisting (2002–2003); Reasserting Secularism (2004–2007); Free Speech and Defending Husain (1996–ongoing); and Performance (1989–ongoing).



**Left:** Ram Rahman, *Gandhi March*, 1995, photo for *Postcards for Gandhi*  
**Right:** Rummana Hussain, *Untitled*, 1997

These projects are defined in part by their consistent stance against the threat of religious fundamentalism and sectarianism—known in South Asia as “communalism”—in public life. Collaborations have cut across class, caste, and religious lines and have involved artists, performers, scholars, and a wide array of other participants, such as the Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim auto-rickshaw drivers in the contest “Slogans for Communal Harmony.” Projects also have sought to counter political distortions to India’s history, most notably in Sahmat’s multifaceted response to the demolition of Babri Masjid (Babur’s Mosque) in Ayodhya. In other cases, Sahmat has sought to celebrate India’s cultural diversity and democratic ideals, engaging artists to create work that responds to ideas of national history and individual identity.

### **Related exhibition**

The Fowler presents *Making Strange: Gagawaka + Postmortem* by Vivan Sundaram (April 19, 2015–September 6, 2015) featuring recent works by the Delhi-based artist, who was a founding member of Sahmat and one of the leading artists working in India today. *Making Strange* brings two striking bodies of work by Sundaram together for the first time in North America. The first project, *Gagawaka*, is comprised of twenty-seven sculptural garments made from recycled materials and medical supplies to evoke a playful yet subversive relationship to fashion, haute couture, the runway, and the brand. *Gagawaka* represents Sundaram’s own fictional brand and line of “strange” haute couture with highly inventive garments fabricated out of foam cups, surgical masks, x-ray-film, hospital bandages, foil pill wrappings, and more.

*Gagawaka* is presented in dialogue with *Postmortem*, a collection of haunting sculptural objects comprised of mannequins, tailor’s dummies, wooden props, and anatomical models. *Postmortem* questions the spectacle of *Gagawaka* with a wider set of commentaries about the human body and social concerns related to aging and illness.

## **Public Programs**

### **Opening Day Celebration**

Saturday, April 18, 2015

6 pm Opening Program: Vivan Sundaram and the Sahmat Collective

This program provides an introduction to two major exhibitions of contemporary Indian art on the occasion of their opening – *The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in India since 1989* and *Making Strange: Gagawaka + Postmortem* by Vivan Sundaram. UCLA Art History faculty and co-curators of *Making Strange*, Saloni Mathur and Miwon Kwon, will host Delhi-based artist and longstanding member of the Sahmat Collective, Vivan Sundaram for a conversation about his art practice and his involvement with India's most influential collective in contemporary art. Co-presented as part of *The Arts of Bandung Humanism* Conference for more information about the conference go to [www.fowler.ucla.edu/bandung](http://www.fowler.ucla.edu/bandung).

7-9 pm Opening Reception:

Join us for a preview of *The Sahmat Collective* and *Making Strange* exhibitions, light refreshments, and music. Members' Lounge cocktail hour from 5-6 pm. RSVP by April 10: [fowlerRSVP@arts.ucla.edu](mailto:fowlerRSVP@arts.ucla.edu).

### **Arts of India Festival**

Sunday, May 17, 12:30 pm–4:00 pm

In conjunction with *The Sahmat Collective* and *Making Strange*, this afternoon festival celebrates Indian arts and culture through a variety of activities and performances that highlight social awareness, collaboration and creativity for all ages. The day begins with family yoga at 12:30 pm on the Museum's beautiful outdoor terrace followed by Indian music and dance. Inspired by a popular form of body art in South Asia, a henna artist will be available throughout the day to paint visitors with designs that emphasize peace, acceptance, and justice.

Afterwards, let your imagination go wild in a *Making Strange* art workshop for all ages. Using Vivan Sundaram's inventive sculptures and garments as a jumping-off point, participants can adorn mannequins with messages related to themes of environmental preservation and global health, and create their own spectacular garments made from recycled materials. At 3 pm, the day's centerpiece—the fashion show *Gaga-walk-a!*—invites the public to strut its stuff and showcase the wearable works of art they created in the workshop or at home. Participants of all ages can enter in the following three categories: Recycled/Unconventional Materials, Creative Consciousness, and Avant-Garde. Wearable works of art may not include perishable materials. For more information and to register for *Gaga-walk-a!* go to [www.fowler.ucla.edu/indiafestival](http://www.fowler.ucla.edu/indiafestival).

### **Kids Muse Summer Camp: Make it, Build it, Wear it**

Session 1: July 20–24, 9 am–4 pm. Ages 6–8

Session 2: July 27–31, 9 am–4 pm. Ages 9–12

Cost: \$230 for Fowler Members / \$275 for non-members

Create art robots, crazy costumes, and forts in this action-packed, art-filled camp inspired by *The Sahmat Collective* and *Making Strange* exhibitions. With fieldtrips and scavenger hunts all over the UCLA campus, this camp is not to be missed. Reserve a spot early!

### **Exhibition catalogue**

*The Sahmat Collective* is accompanied by a substantial, full-color publication that offers new interdisciplinary perspectives on Sahmat as well as investigations into India's history, politics, and culture from scholars, members of Sahmat, and other specialists. It includes interviews with artists and organizers of various Sahmat projects, reprints of original articles, essays by cocurators Jessica Moss and Ram Rahman, and contributions by musician and scholar Madan Gopal Singh; art critic and historian Geeta Kapur; economic philosopher Prabhat Patnaik; art historian and anthropologist Karin Zitzewitz (Michigan State University); and anthropologist William Mazzarella (The University of Chicago); and art historian Rebecca Zorach (The University of Chicago). The book will be available in the Fowler Museum Store. It is distributed by the University of Chicago Press.

### **Curators**

*The Sahmat Collective* is curated by Jessica Moss, Smart Museum Associate Curator for Contemporary Art, and Ram Rahman, photographer and independent curator.

### **Support**

*The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism since 1989* is organized by the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago. *The Sahmat Collective* is made possible by The Smart Family Foundation; Helen Zell; the Efroymsen Family Fund, a CICF Fund; The Joyce Foundation; and the National Endowment for the Arts.

**The Fowler Museum at UCLA** is one of the country's most respected institutions devoted to exploring the arts and cultures of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Americas. The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$12 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310/825-4361 or visit [fowler.ucla.edu](http://fowler.ucla.edu).