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

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 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 Boll (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.

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: Gagowaka + 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.

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.

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.

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**

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**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.