The Queer Archive in Fragments: Sunil Gupta's *London Gay Switchboard*

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The exhibition *Slide/Tape* was staged at Vivid Projects, Birmingham, England, from 5 October to 16 November 2013. Curated by Yasmeen Baig-Clifford and Mo White, the show attempted 'a fresh appraisal of an abandoned medium', tape-slide, as it was used by artists across the 1970s and 1980s (Baig-Clifford and White 2013: 2). As White writes, in her unpublished doctoral thesis, tape-slide was 'technically crude, cheap and eccentric': its technical assemblage usually consisted of one or two carousels of 35mm slides, with an accompanying audio cassette soundtrack (White 2007: 60). The progression of the slide images could be activated by hand or set to advance at a pace controlled by the cassette. Tape-slide's precarious form made it susceptible to disassembly, its material components easily scattered and lost. It was also materially delicate: individual images could be scratched or burnt, and audio tapes might snap or unspool. The instability and ephemerality of the medium contributed, in significant part, to a notable paucity of critical attention from historians and theorists. As White writes,

> Tape-slide has not offered itself up to be collected, archived or even adequately documented making the task of providing an accurate retrieval of its history difficult. [As the artist Judith Higginbottom notes,] the unpredictable nature of tape-slide led to much of the original material not surviving and that which did is difficult to access in archives. (2007: 60-61)

The Vivid Projects exhibition included work by Black Audio Film Collective, Nina Danino, William Furlong, Sunil Gupta, Tina Keane, and Cordelia Swann. Gupta's contribution consisted of 'fragments' – the curators' term – from his 1980 tape-slide project *London Gay Switchboard*. As the programme for the exhibition noted of Gupta's piece, 'The audio track remains missing, a reminder of the fragile nature of early slide-tape work' (Baig-Clifford and White 2013: 7).

The image – or 'fragment' – by Gupta used to illustrate his entry in the programme, and which also adorned its cover, was shot in the London nightclub Heaven. The gay 'superclub' was launched in 1979 and swiftly became an enormous hit. Gupta's photograph [Figure 1] provides a bystander's perspective, inviting the viewer to join patrons arrayed in clusters or standing alone around the edge of the dancefloor as

they watch and cruise. The visual focus of the image is located halfway down and just in from the left of the frame where, in the receding perspective of the shot, a man is dancing, the exposure catching him in a pose with his legs akimbo. A strong white-yellow light emanates from behind the dancer, rays strafing the space and drawing the viewer's eye towards him. On the right of the frame, three men bathed in red and purple light stand nonchalantly. The shortest of the three, dressed in slacks and a white shirt, faces away from the camera; one of the others seems to have spotted Gupta and his camera. On the left of the frame, a fey figure in black leans against a ledge, watching the dancer. In the centre of the photograph, five men are moving towards the dancefloor; the attention of some of these men also seems to have been caught by the dancer. The composition of the shot is formally rigorous, the use of light and colour vibrant and bold. The photograph has force and unity as a self-contained cultural text or object, a documentary record of a particular (sub)cultural space and its complex spatial and sexual dynamics. As a fragment of something larger, however – that is, as just one element of *London Gay Switchboard* – it tantalises. What was this larger work, one that now seems to exist only as a phantasm? How much of the shattered work remains? What would be achieved through its reconstitution, however partial or incomplete? And what might the work, splintered, reveal about the place of the fragment in the queer archive, and the queer relation to the archival fragment?

To theorise or engage with the archive, any archive, is necessarily to confront fragmentation and the fragment. For Carolyn Steedman, the archive is 'that prosaic place where the written and fragmentary traces of the past are put in boxes and folders, bound up, stored, catalogued'; it is also, more generically, 'a name for the many places in which the past […] has deposited some traces and fragments' (1998: 67). Encounters with archives, that is, inevitably involve confrontations with gaps and ellipses, with fragments and ruins, whether of primary materials, documented record, or surviving memory. Queer archives are no different, but their fragmentation is often exacerbated by a lack of institutional recognition. Queer historical materials, that is, are often scattered, unordered, filleted; they frequently reside semi-hidden in personal collections, buried in lofts or basements, stuffed into closets or under beds. This is not to disavow the extraordinary work being done in many countries across the world by formal and semi-formal organisations to archive queer history and

materials, nor to ignore the complex relationships between queerness and the institutionalising force of archives per se. (Derrida: ‘There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory’ [1996: 4]). It is, however, to acknowledge the allegiance between the queer archive and the counterarchive. As Tim Dean writes, ‘the term *counterarchive* refers less to a determinate place or archival content than to a strategic practice or a particular style of constituting the archive’s legibility. Less an entity than a relation, the counterarchive works to unsettle those orders of knowledge established in and through official archives’ (2014: 11, italics in original). My intention here is to explore the ways in which the queer archival fragment can activate those counterarchival relations or practices, using surviving elements of Gupta’s *London Gay Switchboard* as emblematic of such dynamics.

The photograph of Heaven described above is one fragment of a much larger work. Photographs themselves, of course, can be understood as fragments. As Susan Sontag noted in an interview, ‘photography comes in the form of fragments. The nature of the still photograph is that it has the mental status of a fragment. Of course, it’s a thing complete in itself. But in relation to the passage of time, it becomes that telling fragment of what is left to us of the past’ (Cott 2014: 57). Whole, yet also partial: the form of the fragment oscillates, refuses to settle. ‘Always’, writes Brian Dillon in his comments on written fragments, ‘there is this ambiguous shuttle between identity and dispersal, between formal, almost physical integrity and a fracturing or even pulverizing action’ (Dillon 2018: 68). Beyond this ontological plasticity, valuable for its resistance to reification, it is necessary to interrogate what the fragment can do. That is, to pursue a link of questioning proposed by Camelia Elias: ‘what is a fragment when it is not a matter of form or content but a question of function, a philosophical concept, a manifestation of a theory, or a self-labelled “thought”?’ (Elias 2004: 4)

Maurice Blanchot, in *The Writing of the Disaster* – a text written in fragmentary form – explores the political potential of the fragment. ‘The fragmentary’, he writes, ‘promises not instability (the opposite of fixity) so much as disarray, confusion’ (1986: 7) – disarray that is to be welcomed. The fragment ‘tends to dissolve the totality which it presupposes and which it carries off toward the dissolution from which it

does not (properly speaking) form'; it carries within itself 'the energy of disappearing' (60). Blanchot urges other writers to author fragments, as a process or strategy for undoing writing. Breaking the structures of language, he argues, can enable access to a silence which has the potential to affect and shape future forms of community. (An alternative version of the essay you are reading would have been written in fragmentary form; unfortunately, I am no Roland Barthes or Wayne Koestenbaum, to identify just two exceptional queer fragmentists.) Jasmine Wallace has nuanced Blanchot's argument, highlighted its omissions or lacunae. 'We forget', she writes, 'that fragmentation is not something we can all choose. We forget that fragmentary writing is, in some cases, symptomatic of fragmented histories' (2016: 299-300). For oppressed and silenced communities, Wallace advocates a process of reassembly of fragments, followed by a re-fragmentation. Before we can identify the value of the queer archival fragment, then, it is necessary to first try to reassemble the lost whole, before pulling that aggregate apart once more. Such a process strikes me as not only evidently counterarchival but also inherently queer: politically motivated, yet also riotously playful.

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Sunil Gupta's *London Gay Switchboard* is a work that can now only be accessed in fragmentary form. The original piece – an installation consisting of a 39-minute audio collage and dozens of slide images projected from two carousels – was staged once, in 1980, and has never been shown again. Over the years, its constituent components became separated, disappearing into the depths of Gupta's archive; as already noted, the audio track was seemingly lost. Gupta has included some visual components of the work in exhibitions and publications: five of the photographs, scanned in high resolution, were included in the handsome catalogue of his work, *Queer* (2011); a six-minute silent reconstruction, with new intertitles that attempted to give a sense of the project's form and intentions, was created for *Keywords* (Iniva, London, and Tate Liverpool, 27 March – 18 May 2013), an exhibition inspired by Raymond Williams' landmark text of the same title; slivers were shown at the *Slide/Tape* exhibition in Birmingham (also 2013). The public exposure of these shivers has the ability to cause a shivering in the spectator, the agitation of fantasy or reverie in which the potential of a lost and unobtainable entity is engaged.

Gupta made *London Gay Switchboard* as a student at West Surrey College of Art and Design in Farnham, England. Born in Delhi in 1953, Gupta moved as a teenager to Montréal in 1969. At college in the city in the early 1970s, he became involved in a local gay scene and its politics; his interest in photography started to become more serious. In the mid-70s he moved to New York, began and abandoned an MBA at Pace University, and studied photography at the New School for Social Research, where he was taught by Lisette Model, George Tice, and Philippe Halsman. Gupta moved to London in the late 1970s, taking up a place at Farnham soon after. In his second year at the College, he began looking for 'a subject that would lead me into a gay world in London.'[1] He was still relatively new to the city, but had a history of local gay activism from his years in Montréal, including working on a gay helpline. 'We got in touch with the local Samaritans who gave us training', he remembers. '[This was] 1972-73. The trainings happened in our flat. I just did the weekends and people would ring up and threaten to kill you or something' (Gupta 2011: 24). London's Switchboard was launched in 1974; by the end of the decade, when Gupta approached them with the idea of making a work about the organisation, it had around 80 volunteer staff contributing to its operations, and offered its services 24 hours a day.

In his first year at Farnham, Gupta had some nuts-and-bolts film training; he learned how to edit to a metronome, and the value of having an editing beat in a film. He was introduced to the medium of tape-slide by staff at the college: they 'liked you to try and use the technology that they [thought was] all new and exciting; they want[ed] the students to do something with it.' He was interested in the combination of distinct elements that tape-slide would allow: in Montréal, he had made '24 November 1977', a series of photographs of an almost-naked man on a bed, accompanied by poetic, diaristic annotations, and has subsequently gone on to produce other series which combine text and image, such as *Exiles* (1986). Gupta also has a long-standing love of cinema: he grew up with Bollywood, a formative influence; Chris Marker's work is a touchstone for his own practice. 'I am just a kind of frustrated filmmaker at heart',

[1] All unattributed quotes by Gupta in this essay come from interviews with the artist conducted by the author on 23 July, 17 December and 18 December 2019.

he told me. Gupta has in fact worked with film and video a number of times over the decades, including making a short piece on the artist Alan de Souza for the British lesbian and gay TV series *Out on Tuesday* in the late 1980s, and the thirty-minute film *(A World Without) Pity* (2003) about HIV/AIDS in India. At Farnham, Gupta chose to use tape-slide as 'a poor man's film'.

Tape-slide was used not only by artists but also in educational settings. One early evangelist for the format's use in schools and colleges compared it to cinema: 'With a stereo tape recorder, an automatic slide projector, and a tape-slide synchronizer, it is possible to create an instructional programme that will rival a sound motion picture. Even though still pictures are used, a well-planned programme can move along with movie-like realism' (Laun 1964: 173). In fact, he advocated for tape-slide's use over cinema, due to its simpler technological set-up, faster speed of production, and easy duplication (ibid). As a format, tape-slide has been situated in relation to cinema by more than one theorist. Mary ('Mo') White frames the use of tape-slide by artists in the 1970s and 1980s in relation to Laura Mulvey's theoretical analyses of the workings of cinema. Exploring both tape-slide and photo-text approaches, White proposes that the 'meshing of photographs and text as much as the commandeering of an otherwise educational and presentational tool, the slide-projector, led to a moment when avant-garde art practices explored the separation of photographs and text, and images and sound' (2007: 58). Drawing on commentary from the period by authors including Victor Burgin and Griselda Pollock, White argues that the artists who used photo-text and tape-slide 'were responding to a legacy of ideas formulated in [film studies journal] *Screen* in the 1970s, including Mulvey's' (ibid). For artists, tape-slide served as an alternative to film, an adjacent technique for bringing images and sound into juxtaposition.

It is vital to recognise that tape-slide had distinct affordances and benefits that heightened its appeal for artists. It was a more affordable form than video: as Katy Deepwell notes, 'the means to make the image and the tape were within most artists' reach' (2018: 13). In contrast, 'when artists hired, borrowed or loaned video cameras in the 1970s, video editing was largely only accessible for most artists in art school or as they joined or created new film and video co-operatives and associations' (ibid). Through the 1970s and into the 1980s, tape-slide was also a preferable

alternative to evolving video technologies due to the superior quality of its separate channels. Video cameras at that time, Michael Archer writes, ‘were substantial, and the resultant image remained distinctly lo-fi’; 35mm slides, in contrast, ‘gave a dense, tonally rich, sharply detailed image able to retain quality when projected at size’ (Archer 2018: 6). Analogue audio tapes, similarly, were ‘of higher quality and greater dynamic range than anything that could be recorded on videotape’ (ibid). ‘With tape/slide’, Archer summarises, ‘you could make something visually sumptuous and audially striking relatively cheaply’ (ibid).

For some educators and artists, one of the strengths of tape-slide was the possibility it allowed for images and sound to work abrasively against each other. ‘Cinema’ was splintered into its two constituent channels, enabling a dismantling of – and commentary on – the ways in which movies create their meanings and effects. Maggie Humm used tape-slide in an educational setting to enable students to develop hands-on experience of assembling ‘cinema’ in a crude form. She has argued for the political value of the technique: tape-slide, she claims, ‘offers a great flexibility and potential for dislocating existing regimes of political representations and for constructing new multiplicities of knowledges’ (1994: 152-3). She initially situates the form against cinema, with the latter understood as ideologically suspicious:

> Unlike film, tape-slide inherently carries a hostility to commercial representations, by, for example, often disrupting cause-and-effect narratives and privileging everyday experience. Tape-slide *makes* the viewer think about the sequencing of events and the viewer’s place in similar events. The disparity between sound and image highlights the message that the personal is not being smoothly *re*-presented to *us*, but is part of a process we create. Thus sound can dominate more than vision. Revealing disjunctions in address, tape-slide’s anti-seamless process can be a visual politics. (147, italics in original)

Ultimately, however, she suggests that it could be ‘fruitful’ to ‘establish tape-slide as a film form operating within socially and historically produced visual processes, since the principle of juxtaposition at the heart of tape-slide is similar to the principle of montage in the cinema’ (154).

Tape-slide is, I would suggest, quasi-cinematic. During the years that it was being used by a variety of artists and educators, film and video were also available as technologies, but tape-slide offered alternative opportunities and so sat alongside them. Tape-slide is not quasi in terms of being ersatz, inferior, or minor – though there is perhaps an interesting argument to make, following Patricia White's exploration of the resonances between 'minor' and 'queer', for tape-slide as a Deleuze-and-Guattarian minor cinema, 'making use of limited resources in a politicized way' (2008: 413). Rather, I would posit tape-slide's quasi-ness in terms of its adjacency, its besideness. Less cinema's next-door buddy, more its brittle and caustic neighbour, the queer potentiality of tape-slide is wrapped up in its quasi-ness – indeed, the format invites us to interrogate the queerness of the quasi. Contiguous to cinema, rather than cinema per se, tape-slide's fractured and disruptive form enables a critique of seamlessness, homogeneity, tidiness.

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Gupta was given free reign to take photographs at Switchboard: 'I tried to make as much as I could out of the place. They gave me a lot of access. They didn't care what I took pictures of.' At the time, the organisation was housed in a small space above Housman's bookshop at 5 Caledonian Road in Islington. During his visits, Gupta took images of the cramped and cluttered location. On one wall, a map of London was dotted with coloured and annotated pins marking the whereabouts of key queer venues; one small central area of the map, dense with socialisation opportunities, was afforded its own magnified section, layered on top of the bottom right of the main map. Pinned to the wall around this map were others, including a transport map of London. Shelves in alcoves on either side of these documents were used for mail, lever arch files, and other paperwork. The back of one door, painted white and taupe, had a few hangers for jackets and coats. Wall space was used for posting up hand-written lists and charts, clippings from newspapers, minutes of meetings, membership information, notes to staff. Gupta photographed a clipping of two short condemnations of William Friedkin's *Cruising* (1980): '"Cruising" Sucks' and 'Gays Curse "Cruising"'. A whiteboard was used for topical developments. In Gupta's image of the board, this included a short list of venues that were 'recently deceased' (including Beagles, Country Cousins, and the George and Dragon), a

note warning ‘Beware the Gay Sun Club – a [Roger] Gleaves outfit being investigated by the police’, and guidelines for one venue (‘No leather jackets should be worn – denim, western, uniform only’).

Gupta also took photographs of some of the eighty-odd volunteers who worked at Switchboard as they answered calls, handled paperwork, or otherwise occupied the space. Almost all of these volunteers were white men in their twenties and thirties: as we looked through some of the photographs together, Gupta raised an eyebrow as an image of a Black man, around thirty years old, appeared on his computer screen (‘oh look, a non-white face’). He would take full reels of shots of a particular individual, shooting quickly, with an awareness that projecting these images in quick succession would enable an approximation of the cinematic, allow him to ‘fake a movie with stills.’ Sequences of these images give a sense of the tenor of the calls the staff were responding to when photographed: Lisa Power, her black bobbed hair in a blue alice band, shot in close-up through a hatch that separated rooms in the venue, laughs while talking on a yellow telephone; Gus Cairns, in medium-shot framing, looks considerably more serious and concerned as he deals with another caller [Figure 2]. The limited scope and variety of the photographs Gupta was taking concerned him, however: ‘they’re on the phone, that was the activity. The other activity was that they had meetings above a pub in very bad lighting, where they had arguments about policy. So I did some of that.’ For instance, Gupta documented a Switchboard Annual General Meeting that took place on Sunday 13 April 1980. ‘And then I thought I’ve got to expand this.’ He supplemented the portraits of Switchboard volunteers at work with images of them in their homes, where he would also interview them, recording their conversations.

He also started to photograph London’s gay scene beyond Switchboard, the community context within which the organisation was operating. ‘A huge percentage of the calls [they received] were about “where shall I go, I’m in London.”’ Gupta selected venues from Switchboard’s map and photographed their exteriors: The Boltons, its shabby frontage graffitied with a doodle of a large-nosed figure; the more salubrious Salisbury; a sunlit Princess of Prussia; The Coleherne; The Sols Arms. These images, plainly framed, reveal the nondescript and unremarkable aesthetic of the exteriors of these queer venues, the extent to which they were hidden in plain

view. Gupta took a series of images of performers on the South London drag scene, in glitzy and trashy incarnations, from one rake-like individual dressed smartly in a Weimer-era *Cabaret*-emcee outfit to a larger-bodied queen in ill-fitting tan tights, rollerskates, and a bright red wig [Figure 3]. In addition there were the images of Heaven, a sizeable series that serves as a cohesive body of work in its own right, a detachable fragment of the whole. In the club, Gupta photographed solitary men loitering, propped against walls and cruising the space. He shot staff working behind the bar; punters parked on low seating around tables lit by candles; men playing pool. The main focus, however, was the dancefloor, shot from a variety of angles and distances. In some images, the space seems quiet, but this was due to the exposure length Gupta had to use, and the lighting available: 'I had to shoot one second [exposure], so if you were moving quickly you disappeared. It was lit by the strobes.' Looking back at these images in the wake of the AIDS crisis – HIV being discovered in 1981, the year after *London Gay Switchboard* – the ghostly presence/absence of many of the dancers takes on added resonance.

In order to assemble his tape-slide work, Gupta needed hundreds of images. To all of the material he had shot of Switchboard, its staff, and venues across London, he also added an array of black-and-white documentary images of London that he had been taking as a relative newcomer to the city. He then started to complicate the form that he was using: as he now acknowledges, 'I was trying to be very structuralist and disruptive about the documentary part of it.' This began with the addition of images by other, renowned photographers. 'I had been developing a gay photographic history that hadn't been taught to me, but I had been making my own personal collection of it. So I included [images by] Arthur Tress and Robert Mapplethorpe – I had the cock on the slab, for example [Mapplethorpe's *Mark Stevens (Mr. 10 ½)*, 1976].' He also inserted slides featuring text: 'reversed-out typewriter, Courier, white-on-black, just a few lines, a bit like intertitles. I had quotes that I was getting from, I don't know, Duane Michals or Susan Sontag, whoever I was finding that was sort of relevant around the idea of "picture making and gay" and [related to the topic of] deconstructing documentary.' For example, quotes by Dennis Altman - 'the price of solidarity, whether for blacks, women or gays, is separation' – and Allan Sekula – 'I'm arguing then, for an art that documents monopoly capitalism's inability to deliver the conditions of a fully human life' – appeared on

separate slides, their authors identified, though not fully referenced or clearly attributed, in end credits slides (Altman 1993: 238; Sekula 1978: 883).

In order to make sense of Gupta's 'structuralist and disruptive' inclusion of a number of provocative quotes and of images from his personal gay archive, it is useful to acknowledge the influence of Anne Williams, one of Gupta's tutors at Farnham (on Gupta's tutors, see Wallace 2011: 132). Williams, along with fellow Farnham tutor Karen Knorr, was taught by Victor Burgin at the Polytechnic of Central London, and both seem to have absorbed and adopted what John Roberts has called Burgin's 'framework for photography from which to attack the political credentials of the documentary tradition' (Roberts 1998: 152). Gupta's deconstructionist approach to *London Gay Switchboard* evidences the impact of the critical and theoretical perspective taught by Williams. It also makes clear that Gupta had identified a particular capacity of tape-slide: what Maggie Humm (to repeat a fragment of a quote used above) called the medium's 'potential for dislocating existing regimes of political representations and for constructing new multiplicities of knowledges' (Humm 1994: 152-3). Indeed, Gupta's 'structuralist and disruptive' tactics served to fracture the work, to fragment any false unity that the bulk of the content might be seen to gesture towards.

Deconstructionist tactics can be identified throughout Gupta's oeuvre, in variously subtle or substantive forms, from the previously mentioned text/image relations of his series *Exiles* (1986) to the riffs on art historical references in the *Sun City* project (2010). As Natasha Bissonauth identifies, Gupta's 'practice has been committed to decoding and recoding documentary photography as a way of calling out the medium for objectifying minoritarian lives, especially the lives of those at the intersections of race and sexuality' (Bissonauth 2019: 101). Race and ethnicity remain largely absent as topics of interrogation in *London Gay Switchboard*, the work offering instead a substantive and sustained engagement with the lesbian and gay culture and politics of its time. The project's purview extends far beyond the official voice of the volunteer-run organisation named in its title, seeming to acknowledge that a telephonic switchboard enables mediated access to a plethora of people, to a variety of geographically dispersed locales, to numerous dissenting and contradictory perspectives. That dissent is registered in *Switchboard*'s rupturing and

fragmentation of the documentary format itself, its questioning of the limitations of still images and sound as media for capturing and contributing to an archival record of minoritarian subjectivities, spaces, and cultural creativity.

As noted at the start of this essay, the programme for the 2013 exhibition *Slide/Tape* claimed that the audio track for *London Gay Switchboard* 'remains missing.' In my first substantial interview with Gupta about *Switchboard*, he maintained this position, commenting on the dispersal of the work's components within his own archive, a dispersal compounded by the age of the work. On the train home to Edinburgh from London, however, my phone buzzed: an email from Sunil. 'Found some original audio tapes…' read the message, accompanied by a photograph of a plastic tray of audio cassettes, one of which – a TDK SA-C90 – was clearly labelled 'LONDON GAY SWITCHBOARD BY Sunil GUPTA' on the spine. The box of around thirty miscellaneous tapes contained several featuring lengthy interviews with Switchboard staff: Gus Cairns, Val Bott, Bob Harris, Peter Scott, David Seligman, Keith Mason.

The 90-minute interview tapes had a particular format: on one side, Gupta would ask the sitter questions about London Gay Switchboard, their role at the organisation, lesbian and gay politics, and so on; on the other, he probed them about their personal life and experiences. 'I would ask everyone the same questions: really about coming to London, and how it was for them, and why they were at the organisation – a little potted history of lesbians and gay men at that time. [Most of them were] between 25 and 30; there were some who were a bit older, but it was a particular generation.' The next time he and I met, we set aside two days to work through the tapes. Gupta's two cassette players were rather old; the first tape that he attempted to play – the interview with Gus Cairns – snapped immediately in the worn cogs. I think I was more concerned about this than Gupta, the sensitivity of the archival researcher to the fragility of objects of study triggering an overly cautious attitude, whereas the practicing artist approaches the same materials as operational or exploitable malleable components which, if necessary, can be repaired. After borrowing a couple of Walkmans from one of Gupta's neighbours, and linking one up with a jack to a decent amplifier, we began to listen through the tapes. I was anticipating aural wobble, but the sound was surprisingly sharp and clear. After

listening to tapes of one male and one female interviewee, we inserted the Switchboard audio tape and pressed play.

The audio-collage component of *London Gay Switchboard* kicks off with a blast of punk music: an excerpt of around fifty seconds of Buzzcocks' 'I Believe', taken from the middle of the song. The track provides a bracing blast of nihilism, vocalist Steve Shelley barking and repeating its single-note chorus/manifesto, 'There is no love in this world anymore'. This was, perhaps, a surprising choice for the start of an audio-visual work setting out to explore the politics and dynamics of a supportive and humanitarian NGO – an organisation dedicated to providing care for the lost and lonely. According to Gupta, he chose the track because one of his interviewees, Cairns, was in a punk band. In retrospect, the opening lines of 'I Believe' (which do not feature in *Switchboard*) echo Gupta's 'structuralist and disruptive' plan for his tape-slide work: 'In these times of contention, it's not my intention to make things plain / I'm looking through mirrors to catch the reflection that can't be mine'. Although many of the elements of *Switchboard* operated in combination to provide a multifaceted map of the organisation and the wider cultural and political context in which it operated at the time, Gupta's additional components (including this invigorating Buzzcocks excerpt) rendered that map somewhat opaque, hampering its legibility.

The first collage of voices lasts for nine minutes. It opens with a male voice describing the purpose of Switchboard: to give help and information to homosexual men and women, to provide details on the whereabouts of gay bars and clubs, to serve as someone to talk to when your lover of four years has just left you, and so on. The variety and volume of callers – 160,000 every year – is identified. A second and a third male speaker enter the audio collage admixture. The founding of Switchboard in 1974 and its establishment of a working structure is mentioned. Scepticism is expressed about the ability of certain professionals, especially psychologists, to handle lesbian and gay concerns adequately. The third speaker spells out why he puts in the hours for Switchboard: 'I do it out of a continuing sense of anger and frustration and sadness [about the] oppression of gay people.' Val Bott, the only female voice included on the audio track, introduces the topic of gender by discussing whether a women-only version of Switchboard would be useful. Val and

one of the male voices put forward their views of the different pressures faced by women who call the helpline: ‘It’s very much more difficult for women to escape from the prescribed heterosexual lifestyle’, he says; ‘Women are very programmed to get married’, Val states.

A musical interlude follows: one minute and forty seconds of Bette Midler’s high-camp disco belter ‘My Knight in Black Leather’ (taken from her 1979 album *Thighs and Whispers*). The song’s intro, first verse and chorus are included; a cut removes a verse and jumps to a repeat (with slight modification) of the chorus. ‘Knight’ casts Midler as a cruising gay man: ‘I was just a pilgrim in the hot pursuit of love / Wandered from disco to disco, that’s all my life was.’ The object of pursuit is a romantic ideal, as well as a fetishized one: ‘Oh my knight in black leather / Hold me tight and love me forever / Rings on your fingers, love in your heart / Knight in black leather, we’ll never part.’ The second collage of voices that follows this lasts for around seven minutes: appropriately, following the Midler track, the first voice talks about his ‘less rigid’ ideas about gender, and gay male culture’s investment in a performative masculinity. Val’s comments on gender continue: ‘it’s easier for a man to be gay than it is for a woman to be gay.’ A male interviewee talks about Switchboard’s staff needing to identify callers’ differing needs: ‘What we have to spend a lot of time doing on the phone is sizing up the person on the phone […] and refer them to the best place for them.’ Particular bars – The Coleherne, The Salisbury – are criticised by different speakers. It is suggested, by a male interviewee, that police should not be raiding public toilets where cottaging takes place; rather, the cottagers should be given advice on other places that they can go.

A bombastic burst of opera by Berlioz lasting two-and-a-half minutes is followed by a twelve-minute collage of voices. This largely cohesive block concentrates on the workings of Switchboard: its structure and constitution; the nature of the shift work; its general meetings and the ways responsibilities are devolved to groups; how new volunteers are recruited and interviewed; what is required from a member of Switchboard staff (‘they should have a lot of gay zest, in other words they must feel positive about being homosexual’); different types of calls (the ‘information call’ and the ‘chat call’). Judgements of other lesbian and gay organisations are made: the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) is praised; the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE)

is criticised for being ‘very middle class, very cliquey, cater[ing] to a very narrow area of personalities.’ An excerpt from Diana Ross’ ‘Love Hangover’ starts, and runs for three minutes. A last minute of audio collage provides final statements or stories by individual speakers. A male interviewee talks about being sent to a psychiatrist by his family, but the medical professional refusing to believe homosexuality could be treated or cured; Val Bott argues that ‘just because we’re gay doesn’t mean we have things in common’; a male speaker states that ‘being gay is as much about the emotional life, about making friends, about honesty, truth and support’. A gentle piano piece by Bach fades in, lasts for about three minutes, and marks the end of *Switchboard*’s audio track.

I outline the content of Switchboard’s audio collage in detail here partly as a record for posterity, but also to give a sense of its density. The fragmentation of the audio track is of a different nature to that of the slides. It is located partly in the DIY editing that results in distinct aural textures suddenly abutting each other; partly in the interruption of relatively formal accounts of an organisation’s mechanics by personal anecdotes and views (‘What I hate most about England is the errant hypocrisies in life; it’s not just homosexuality, it’s sex period, it’s feelings’); and partly in the affective rifts caused by the musical choices. Despite Gupta’s attempts to provide some cohesive narrative to the piece through editing (‘I basically cut them together so that they told this sort of story’), the disjunctions between opinions are marked – as evidenced, for example, by the final few voices and the variety of topics they cover. What cannot be known is how the images and sound – two assemblages of fragments – operated together in the completed work; in the absence of a written guide, only speculation is possible. Bette Midler may have soundtracked the drag photographs; Donna Summer the Heaven series of images. But this is to presume that these groups of pictures were projected together in sequence, whereas they could have been dispersed across the full 39-minute run of the work. ‘I didn’t even attempt to have matching sound and picture’, Gupta told me. ‘I thought I would start off with matching – so the first time you heard the voice [of a particular speaker] you might be looking at the person, and thereafter I let the voices [mix].’

As identified, Gupta only staged *London Gay Switchboard* once, in 1980. He knew that he would need to show it to the volunteers at the organisation, after working

alongside them for a number of weeks, and after a number of the staff had allowed him to interview them. ‘There was some pub night and I brought it with me. And they were quite startled. It wasn’t what they were expecting. I think they were expecting a kind of feel-good NGO fundraising “this is their work” kind of thing. As it went on they were gasping.’ One female volunteer objected to having a male voice soundtracking images of her at work. Gupta realised ‘it couldn’t go anywhere. It was killed before it got off the ground.’ At Farnham, he ran into further problems. At 39 minutes, *Switchboard* was too long to be accommodated into a scheduled crit tutorial, which were usually about 15 minutes in length. ‘It was way too long for the convention of the time, the way it was set up.’ In addition, he was hauled in front of the college administration, who were concerned about him working on a gay-themed project. The age of consent for gay men in England was 21 at the time, and the average Farnham student was younger than this; the administration accused Gupta of proselytizing to the underage. After this negative experience, he chose in his final year to redirect his focus, attempting a project that ambitiously explored ‘why certain people are poor in India.’

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Despite the poor reception of *London Gay Switchboard* by the members of the organisation – a reception that seems to have been partly responsible for the work’s subsequent dissolution and neglect – Gupta did experiment for a second time with tape-slide as a format. After leaving Farnham, he moved to the Royal College of Art for postgraduate study. Gupta discovered that the RCA ‘had a much posher version’ of tape-slide, with twenty-four projectors linked to the audio track; he realised that ‘you could make an animated [work], like an actual movie.’ (The artist Nina Danino remembers that tape-slide ‘was available in the department of Environmental Media at the Royal College as an art medium alongside the Sony Portapak and a very well-equipped sound studio. The work in the department was cutting edge performance, projection, expanded sculpture, audio, and forms that were very experimental. Slide-tape there was part of this experimental avant-garde’ [quoted in White 2018: 24]). Gupta decided to make a shorter piece about Hampstead Heath, a large and notorious gay cruising ground in London. The work was anticipated to last for approximately twenty minutes. As he recalls, ‘the audio was a married guy who talks

about why he goes there and what goes on. The visuals were the Heath in the daytime. I didn't go at night. I went to photograph the ground, the aftermath.'

The slides for this work are in Gupta's archive; the whereabouts of the audio is unclear. Many of the images are devoid of human presence, featuring shrubs, detail of trees and ferns, and close-ups of richly-textured bark. The photographs were evidently taken during autumn months: fallen leaves, russet, ochre and yellow, silt the ground. Dry bracken, turning a golden hue, meshes messily with straw-like strands and angular twigs. Pockets of dead leaves lie in the hollows between twists of grey tree roots. A number of compositions concentrate on natural elements that are aesthetically striking: a tree branch damaged, split open, and beginning to rot, the split revealing the grain of the wood; an angular division in a trunk's growth, the bark a mottled pattern of light green and silver; a thin, solitary tree rooted in a tangle of dried grass. In one image [Figure 4], a green rhododendron-like bush occupies the right half of the frame; on the left, a tree trunk has been graffitied, in white, with a schoolboy-simple outline of a cock and balls, and a shape that looks a little like a pair of angel wings, but could equally be a spread ass. Knowing that this work is about Hampstead Heath, the viewer scans the images for evidence of cruising and public sex. Is the phallus graffiti a vandal's lark, or a code, perhaps identifying the location as a rendezvous?

Indeed, a substantial number of the images that Gupta took for *Hampstead Heath* do feature people. There are documentary pictures that capture people using the park: families at play, groups of friends socialising, couples and solitary figures strolling. Gupta asked two friends, a gay male couple, to do a bit of modelling for him, and staged a number of images featuring them walking on paths, and framed in more static close-ups. One sequence, for instance, features several photographs of the couple's shoes, tan and dark brown loafers, and the bottom of their dark blue bootcut jeans, against grass peppered with small brown leaves. Frame by frame, the shoes move closer together, their physical proximity intimating what is happening above the frame border. The intrusion of this staged component into the Hampstead Heath photographs affects the others: images of solitary men, or of men in a couple or group who seem distracted, their gaze looking out of frame, become records of

cruising activity; shots of dense, dark undergrowth away from the paths seem devoid of human life, but perhaps feature furtive activity taking place in their depths.

The *Hampstead Heath* tape-slide installation was never shown to Gupta's tutors at the RCA, and has never been publicly staged. As Gupta states, he went searching for the 'aftermath' of cruising: 'I was looking for evidence, so [in some of the pictures] on the ground there's some debris.' As noted, some of his photographs of the Heath featured families, with children of various ages. Gupta noted a challenging juxtaposition: 'there were these kids playing and there were condoms, remains of sex, on the ground, in amongst the grass.' Technicians at the RCA saw elements of the work as it was developing, and had negative reactions to the admixture of queer themes and practices, and images of children. The piece's production was shut down. Once again, Gupta ran up against the age of consent and its impact on artistic practice: 'I was so involved with being a gay man looking at autobiography; [I learned that] you can't look at childhood. All of our stories [at the time] start[ed] at 21. You can't have a kid in the picture.'

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In concept and shape, Gupta's *Hampstead Heath* was a more cohesive work than *London Gay Switchboard*, seemingly taking less advantage of the disruptive possibilities afforded by tape-slide. Indeed, had *Hampstead Heath* been exhibited, the use of the RCA's more superior technology would have brought the work closer to cinema than *Switchboard*, edging it away from the queer potential of the quasi-ness of more rudimentary forms of tape-slide. *Switchboard*, in contrast, exploited the fragmentary nature of the medium, assembling together a fragile smorgasbord of visual and audio delights. Although I have attempted here to provide an account of the work's multiple textures and materials, the aim was never to enable a full reconstruction, but rather – counterarchivally – to gesture towards, and then cast asunder, an imaginative process of reconstruction. There is the possibility that *Switchboard* could be fully rearticulated in the future (the images were all scanned in February and March 2020). However, I would suggest that to do so could limit its potential as a work composed of fragments, could fail to harness and exploit what Blanchot called the fragment's 'energy of disappearing'. For Blanchot, the fragment

can be used to open a space for contemplating future forms of community. *Switchboard*'s vivid fragments – including images of a group of like-minded individuals forging a queer networked politics of support, bold political slogans about using art to confront the stifling forces of capitalism, perceptive audio snippets of provocative opinions about social and legal restrictions on queer life, bursts of music that hymn anarchic visions of social life – fail to cohere. In isolation, in clumps, in sequences, in contrast, however, they record and throw into discordant conversation a variety of models of queer community being considered at the time of their making. The uncovering of queer archival fragments enables a registering of the tendency of much queer history and culture to be fragmented, to exist only in traces; it promotes a contentment with the partial, and a sceptical attitude towards the attainment of a reconstituted lost whole; and it enables a re-engagement with lost visions, however circumscribed, of how the queer future could be.

Contributor note

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Endnote

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