

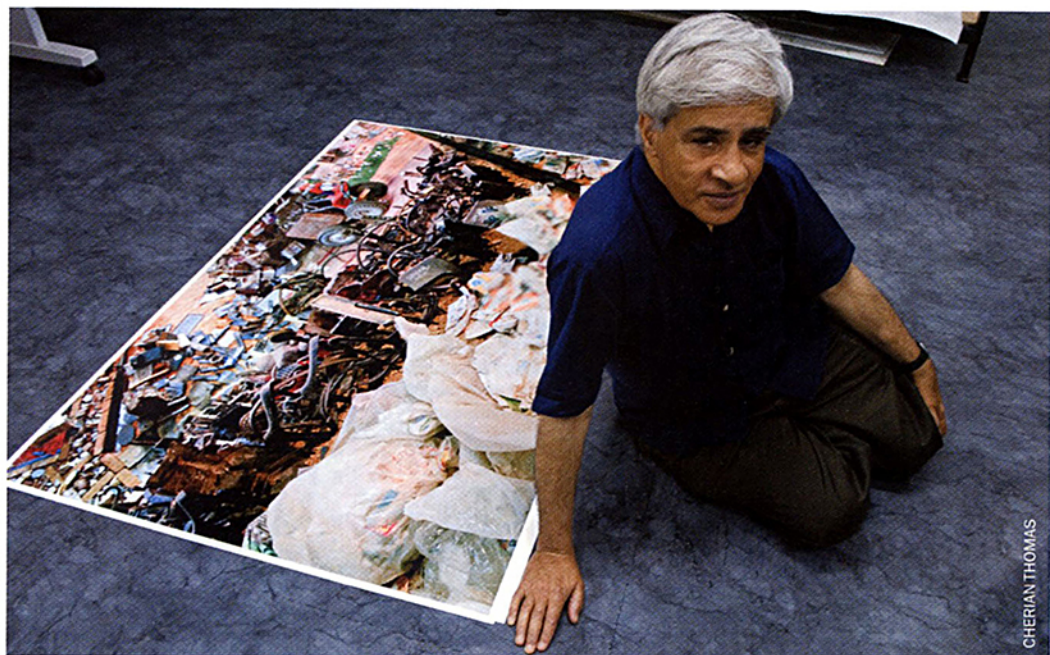
## Waste land

Vivan Sundaram makes you wonder whether our cities are garbage, says **Deepanjana Pal.**

Performance artist Inder Salim held an impromptu auction for his last show at Live '08, a festival of live art that was organised recently by Khoj. Salim was auctioning photographs he had taken of Suraj, a cobbler, whose worldly possessions would mostly be considered trash by those of us who float far above the poverty line. The audience was invited to place bids that started at Rs 5,000 and all proceeds from the auction would go into buying a house for Suraj and his family. One of the most enthusiastic bidders was artist Vivan Sundaram. Late in the auction, Salim showed an image he described as "essential Marxism". It was of Suraj working on a shoe that was serendipitously red. No one bid for this particular photograph. Salim looked around and said, "Vivan has left. The hardcore communist is gone, so there is little hope."

The activist tag is something Sundaram – painter, sculptor, photographer, installation and video artist – has taken seriously since he was a student. "The influence of art in terms of a larger social fabric is very marginal," Sundaram told us. "But it makes loose collectivities come together and raise issues which can enable it to make more impact. Art has to have its own internal generative movements. If you have a cynical viewpoint, you won't make any change."

Perhaps Sundaram's idealism comes from what he witnessed as an inhabitant of a newly independent country, grappling with riots, famines and wars. He was born two years before Partition and studied painting as an undergraduate at MS University in Vadodara in the early 1960s, a period that saw crises like the Sino-Indian War and bitter food shortages. He spent two years in the mid-1960s in the then politically charged atmosphere of London, completing a



**Mind over matter** Vivan Sundaram

diploma from the Slade School. In the 1970s, he was a key figure in the Artists' Protest Movement in

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Delhi and rural India, strongly advocating art that dealt with local issues. He began the Kasauli Art Centre in 1976 as a forum for art workshops. Sundaram is also one of the founding members of SAHMAT, the platform for socially and politically conscious performance art that takes its name and inspiration from Safdar Hashmi.

Sundaram's interest in conceptual art led to him turning away from painting and towards installations and new media in the 1980s. Long before *An Inconvenient Truth*, Sundaram looked at the changing natural environment with shows like *Signs of Fire* (1981) and *Collaboration/Combines* (1992). The attack on Babri Masjid

inspired the installation "Memorial" in 1993. The politics of what is defined by the word "home" was explored in *Shelter* (1999). History and the construction of identity were central themes of *Re-take of Amrita*, a series of works about his aunt, Amrita Shergil, and *His Misery and his Melancholy*, an exhibition of photographs by Umrao Singh Shergil, Sundaram's grandfather.

Since 2006, though, Sundaram's art has literally turned to garbage. That year, in *Living.It.Out.In.Delhi*, Sundaram decided to create a room out of recycled garbage after attending meetings of Chintan, an NGO that works with ragpickers. *Trash*, which is showing in Delhi this fortnight, was born in that room. Using photographs, videos and installations, Sundaram has created an imaginary city out of garbage. While doffing his cap to Marcel Duchamp's readymade sculptures, Sundaram is also critiquing the idea of a global view of urbanisation.

He is suspicious of the Indian aspiration to cities that have Manhattan- or Shanghai-like sky-

lines. "I thought no one could destroy Dharavi (in Mumbai)," said Sundaram. "I thought the sense of solidarity of the working class would prevent it. But so much of our cities, particularly the disorganised sectors, are constantly under threat."

His city is a melancholic one that is under different kinds of attack. An installation of beds made of the soles of discarded shoes could be a hospital room or a torture chamber. "Tracking" leaves the viewer wondering whether the woman in the video is being attacked by the man or not. Another video piece shows a massive installation of a landscape being destroyed. "You perceive urbanisation from your own vantage point," said Sundaram. "In order to have more space, you have to destroy a productive social fabric." Using music and the artistic practices of video and photography, Sundaram transforms the devalued into something invaluable. He also forces the viewer to confront things that she would turn a blind eye to by labelling it as waste.

See *Photoink in Exhibitions.*