A PHOTOGENETIC LINE

A 100-foot long branching sequence of cutouts, drawing from the photo archives of *The Hindu*, a 140 year old newspaper based out of Chennai.

Cutouts are a way of reframing existing photographs as new organisms; not to remove their background environments, nor to frame heroic figures, but to create a new boundary or border for the image. A border, interior or exterior, that leads us to the next image.

The sequence evolves by following one or more of these basic rules:

a. People in the images grow older, or younger.
b. Things in the background come into the foreground, or vice versa.
c. Two photo captions refer to each other.

The line thus created traverses a series of perceptual (shape), historical (time) and geographic (political) boundaries. Here, like in cinema, the cut is not a brick wall but an invitation: for increased traffic at any border.

This work was first shown at the Chennai Photo Biennale 2019, supported by *The Hindu*.

A tall man, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan aka Frontier Gandhi stands at Lahore station in 1957 with the Karachi-based Gandhian Choitham Gidwani and behind them an unknown porter at the train door.

Three years later, Khan is inside the train surrounded by people among them a young full-turbaned Sikh and someone at the edge of the frame holding a hat whose inside says, "Good Luck".

At an unknown Frontier location, Khan is surrounded by members of the Non-violent Army he mobilised known as the Khudai Khidmatgars or Red Shirts which they dyed a brick red.

In 1969 an older Khan is seen in a painted photograph breaking a fast next to Jayprakash Narayan or JP who would soon be a key anti-Congress figure.

16 years later, his knees are up as he sits in the Congress Centenary celebrations in Delhi.

A day earlier he was in a wheelchair being received by a delegation at Palam Airport including a dark-suited man named Rajiv Gandhi.

In October 1992, a cutout of Rajiv Gandhi in more traditional clothes fell in Bangalore seriously injuring one person.

We realise this is after Rajiv's death which took place in May 1991.

A day after his death here is the forensic scientist Chandra Shekharan showing how Rajiv's body lay after the bomb exploded.

One month after that Chandra is seen testing a lie detector on a colleague.

Twelve years later, he is finally ready to publish his investigation on the Rajiv Gandhi Assasination case as seen by the powerpoint on his desktop.

Meanwhile daily life appears at the gate of the Forensic Science Labs in Madurai.

While computers appear in more and more places --

As an object of interest to forensic investigators with a light bulb.
As a gift given by the Dalit Panthers of India.

As a new way to generate your kundali, or astrological future.

In the background, the light bulb appears as part of a prehistory of the computer age where telephone numbers had to be found manually in linedexes, by mostly women operators.

By now computers can be used for rescuing youth from militancy and making them collect Freedom CDs instead.

Here is Mehbooba Mufti inaugurating a computer lab in Anantnag in South Kashmir sitting on a plasticked chair.

That chair in the back is being repaired with plastic wire.

Those five below are being carried by a BSF jawan.

While those four are flying in the air on a Srinagar street

which also contains a small cloud of teargas that grows bigger when the body of a Nisar Ahmed is being carried in a photo taken by the photojournalist Nisar Ahmed.

The faraway gate behind the chairs-carrying jawan becomes Aman Setu
a bridge between neighbours
in a photo taken by the journalist Shujaat Bhukhari
who was shot dead in Srinagar in 2018.

A teargas explosion occurs on a lawn in Hyderabad's Osmania University

next to men lying spreadeagled on another lawn in Hyderabad

and women in Chennai's Police Commissioner's office lawns.

A meadow grows where a village once stood, in Jammi.

Also in Jammi, an old Banyan tree is on fire for unclear reasons

the same reasons why a shady tree is cut on a Saturday in April in Chennai.

Subramanya Bharati's cartoon of flightless birds cowering in the impossible interior of trees is from the vast collection of Tamil documents at the Roja Muthaiah Library.

Whose founder died of poisoning from the chemicals he used to preserve them.

Unlike Swaminatha Aiyar, Muthaiah doesn't have his own cutout looking over the library patrons.

The Jaffna library hosted about 97,000 pieces of Tamil literary history when it was burned to a shell in 1981 one of the sparks igniting civil war in Sri Lanka.

Claims on Tamil as a language go far back into shapes on rocks.
How far back can this go?

Dancers painted on rocks and one covered in plastic, at FTII.

When people gather in Trivandrum at a kiss against fascism protest as audience or as kissers.

Nearby there are professional cameras cameras sold as commodities and amateur ringside cameras.

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EXPERIMENTER- Hindustan Road

April 13, 2019 - July 15, 2019

An amateur cameraman and two kids laze on a slow Ranji day

When in 1958, Paynter of England plays an odd shot

The second day's play between India and West Indies at Eden Gardens in 1967
is disrupted by a crowd burning chairs.

A crowd of farmers gathers on Anna Salai in Chennai surrounding a seated Periyar.

Who we see being painted black by a Dravidar Kazhagam member in 2018.

The newspaper caption depicts Periyar as an 'obstruction to traffic'
But it was also a deliberate caste-politics move, to install him in front of The Hindu's office.

Inside an auto, a would-be bride laughs after
a police complaint by the groom.

A tree planted 20 years ago by an auto-driver looms tall.

While nearby another tree falls onto a three-wheeler
during cyclone Vardah.

In North Arcot in 1979, the structure of a bus is seen
only after its collision with a tree.

A structure that will hold a cutout is put up
before assembly elections in 1991.

In 1985 a giant cutout of MGR is seen next to
a poster depicting famine in Rayalseema.

Jayalalitha's cutout blows in the wind
while Panaiswami still namaskars
from one that was taken down by court order.

A wooden hi-rise scaffolding is used to practice
for future fires, in 1952.

An old man in Delhi's winter burns wood with a
warming flame

while a makeshift hi-rise rescue is needed from
fire at Ansal Towers in Delhi.

A fire burns a sightscreen
revealing its structure.

A fire destroys an RTI office inaugurated by
"Ten Dannels from Ten Districts"
in Guwahati.

A crane makes holes in walls after a fire
leaving the structure intact.

And another old man collects flagsticks
from an INTUC protest as firewood.

The artist group Sahmat protests in favour of the film Fire
in Delhi.

The Hindu office in Chennai catches fire in 2013.

Its interiors are blackened
and computers wet.

"Farmville is a game all about ploughing,
sowing and harvesting a good crop online"

Its pink houses have some resemblance to those built
for internally-displaced Muslims in Mannar, Sri Lanka.

The roofs of fire-hit huts are missing,
in front of Cheiputt station in Madras.

Forensics and police investigate a hole
cut in the roof of the Egmore Express
through which 5.38 crores of goods were stolen.

A policeman in shorts watches as graduation day
unfolds in the Senate House at Madras University
where this work was first shown in March 2019.

Three policemen guard a Hindu temple in Karachi
after the storming of the Babri Masjid.

The Senate House was built in a Indo-Islamic style
by a British architect in 1879.
In 1980 the road in front seems impossibly empty.

A 1966 scooter accident nearby upends unidentified
bottles on the road.

A 2014 protest by relatives of a woman
set on fire by her husband blocks it.

It turns out that this smiling traffic policeman
in Bangalore has no shoes, or feet.

Shaji John the dancer does.

His pose has something to do with that of Kamala Devi's
hidden behind the table
as she lines up her shot in 1955.

And in close up, 40 years later in 1995.

Finally, Mr. Duke of Kashmir shows
that we can also play blindfolded
and prepares
to send us back down the line.