

## Philippe Calia in conversation with Shristi Sainani

Philippe Calia (b.1985, Paris) is an artist, photographer and filmmaker.

His work has received several awards and has been exhibited in various museums, galleries and festivals across Europe and Asia. His first solo show, *Lēthē*, was held in 2022 at TARQ, Mumbai. Calia's practice so far follows a long-term documentary approach and revolves around two poles : the urban experience and the notion of memory. Maneuvering at the intersection of the still and moving image, as well as figuration and abstraction, his work often incorporates discarded documents and mundane visual material through gestures of quotation, collage or erasure.



Since 2013, Calia has been collaborating as a photo editor with PIX, a publication for contemporary photography in South Asia. Between 2015 and 2020, he co-directed BIND, a platform for photo books in India with a public library. For the past ten years, Calia has been commissioned by multiple agencies, cultural and media institutions. His photo and video works have been featured in publications such as *The New Yorker*, *Le Monde*, *Art India* or *The Indian Quarterly*.

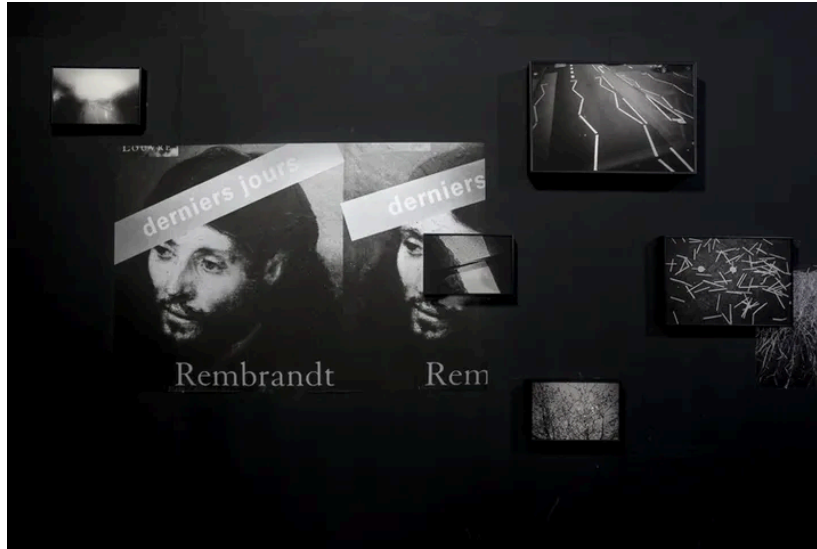
Philippe Calia has completed his Master in Comparative Politics in Paris, followed by a M.A in Photographic Studies in London. He is currently based in Bangalore, India.

[We have published selected bits of the conversation between Philippe and Shristi. Click on the link at the end of the interview, for an in-depth discussion.](#)

**Over the course of your practice we see a change in subjects, modes of display, narratives and of course, locales. Tell us a little more about your inclination to experiment, how does the inspiration come about?**

I'd say these changes partly reflect the evolution of the ecosystem in which I have been working, as an image-maker, a citizen or just an individual in the past decade or so. The visual culture in which we live in today is so different to the one I was surrounded by when I just finished my studies in photography in 2010. And I think there is a fine balance to seek, between a commitment towards the medium itself (that comes with its own, supposedly timeless, ontological questions) and the concern for relevancy of your message, or cultural production.

This said, I would not be able to single out specific channels of inspiration. Everything is interconnected in a web of encounters, experiences and concepts (which I tried drafting in a chart, see next page), keeping form and idea always in dialectic with one another. Experimenting and taking risks are essential to this process, not just from a personal point of view (i.e, to be in tune with the inner self evoked earlier), but simply because I see my practice itself as learning. This was precisely one of the layers of meaning at play in *Études* (literally "studies" in French) shown at 24 Jor Bagh (Delhi) in 2015.

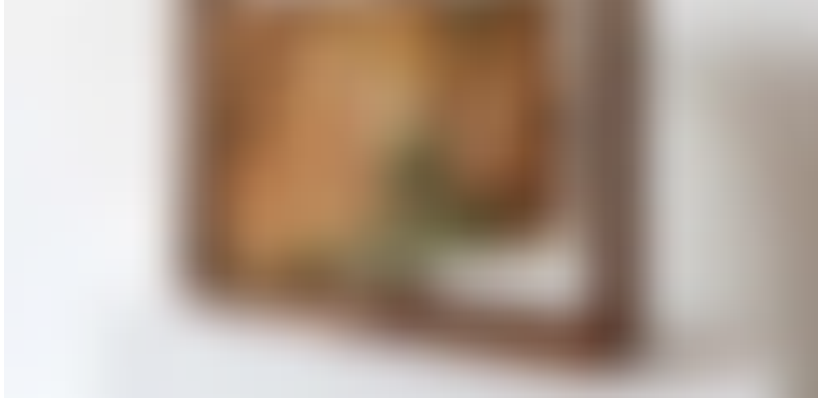


What excites you about the practice of photography currently?

For one project in Bombay I resumed recently, it is definitely the process that is the most exciting. Part of it consisted in making small interventions in the street, through displacement of various objects<sup>7</sup>. This led me to interesting situations, playful collaborations, encounters and conversations. In this exercise, the camera recedes in the backdrop, clearly serving its function as a tool for documentation. And so this felt like I was doing a kind of "street / straightforward photography" after many years, but on a less fleeting and extractive basis.

Even for the first chapter of The Shape of Clouds, which was more of a studio-based project, it was the process that was the most rewarding : process of research on digital technology and infrastructure, neurosciences, minerals and mining, physics theory...but also process of learning new printing techniques, of looking for beautiful rocks and cutting them to build stands for my images. basically all this process of experimenting with making and with craft.

So I would say that as far as photography is concerned, what excites me the most currently is to manifest these images, to give them form and a materiality. And all this while experimenting. As for the joy of the process, it guess it applies to any creative / artistic practice in general.



**You have moved between exhibiting in both, institutions as well as commercial gallery spaces, with your work showcased in Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg this year and your recent solo Lethē at Tarq Gallery, Mumbai was a major feat. What are some observations you've had, points of difference or intersections between the two that you would like to share.**

Meanings will keep varying depending on context, but I hope that the institutional versus gallery distinction is not a defining binary. What matters is whether there is a strong curatorial voice or not. And if this voice emerges from your own work ; or if your work is more of a piece that helps building a larger discourse.

In terms of spaces, I would rather distinguish informal spaces where you can make a proposition that is really contextual. In my experience, this was the case when I showed at 24 Jor Bagh, where I was free to break the walls, paint on them, engrave words... Likewise, the work I showed recently at Sassoon Docks as part of The Mumbai Urban Arts festival was printed on the cheapest possible paper and simply pasted with glue. This pushes me to reconsider aspects my practice as an image maker ; and to see how much that "manifestation" of the image (which I alluded to earlier) does not only come through matter and form, but also through viewership and relations to an environment.

Eventually geographical, or rather cultural context, is of utmost importance to my practice. I consider that I am myself operating between two cultures, and consequently, that my work operates at the intersection of two systems of references. A Visitor's Book is a good example of that. While multiple narratives are deployed within it, the more local layers will get lost to the non South Asian viewer. There is however an acknowledgement of the position of the author, a "visitor" himself. And this importance of positionality always pushes me to establish multiple entry points to my work, with some of them being more universal and accessible, independently from context. So I would say that overall, one can find in my practice an attempt to re-examine the mechanisms under which universalism can operate.



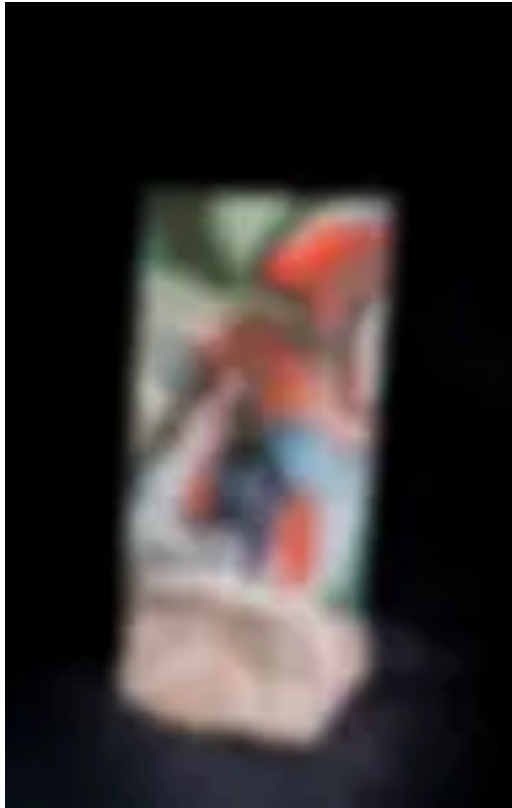
**If it wasn't photography then what would you be doing?**

I hope I already get the chance to experiment with various forms of image-making in

general. But in another life, I'll be happy with music I think.

**Who are some photographers you look upto?**

It is a difficult one to answer. Maybe those who practiced photography not as their main medium, such as Agnes Varda, Chris Marker, or Abbas Kiarostami ?



**What are you looking towards next - are there specific projects you are looking forward to realising in the near future which you would like to share with the readers?**

This summer I have been invited to showcase work in France, as part the Discovery Award at Les Rencontres d'Arles Festival. I am really looking forward to this : not only, as it is the first time that I am given such platform to show work in my country of origin ; but also because this festival has tens of thousands of visitors for each edition. To know that my work about museums and viewership in India will be displayed in a church in France to such a wide audience is definitely one of the most beautiful "[mise en abyme](#)" I could have expected.

Click [here](#) for an in-depth to the discussion.

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