

Mapping the field of Indian art criticism: Post-independence

Progress Report, September 2010

Making a Detour: Examining art criticism via journals and art magazines

*"...Learning on art should not be like this. It is wonderful to be lone, heroic and pioneering but it would be nice to have a systematic body of knowledge that all of us can access."*¹

I begin with this quote of Mumbai-based art critic and curator Nancy Adajania because it states the perceived dilemmas of an art writer (working specially in the context of the post-1990s art world where the critics are pushed into the role of professionals operating within the art market) performing in the face of the lack of systematized learning and access to historical and contemporary materials. The project brings together a range of textual materials as a way of redressing this problem for myself, a necessary exercise for someone who is involved in the field of art writing. Even as I work with five individual art writers I am not interested in *only* recuperating lone, heroic voices. I really think of this project as a way of constructing a field within which art writing takes place – a space constructed by historical time, institutional mandates, artistic practices and a community of art writers.

Journals and art magazines become interesting spaces where all these positions are made somewhat visible. And even as an exhaustive study of the history of journals and art magazines in post-independence India is out of the purview of the present research, I have spent the last couple of months looking at *Marg*, *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, *Contra '66*, *Art India*, *Vrishchik* and *Journal of Arts and Ideas* as parallel published discourses that give a sense of the collective positions, projects and debates at different moments. Even as the writers I have chosen far exceed, in their writing careers, these forums, there are moments of overlap and they are particularly useful to contextualize the writers.

In some cases it is a direct connection – the short-lived *Contra '66* was started by artist- writer J Swaminathan and ran for exactly a year between 1966 and 1967. Swaminathan had, by this time, a long journalistic career at the *Link* where he wrote on South and South East Asian affairs and on art apart from designing the covers of the magazine.

But before we look at *Contra '66*, let us examine some of the early reviews the *Lalit Kala Contemporary* (LKC) carried on its own issues. The art critic Rudy Von Leyden, reviewing LKC 4 & 5, noted that what the magazine really needed was a "team of articulate writers and more controversy that would indicate real

¹ Nancy Adajania speaking at a panel discussion '*The Lives of Books: Critical Contexts of Art Publishing*', at The Park, New Delhi July 30, 2010.

participation. An art journal that does not stimulate (not to say provoke) controversy, isn't worth its salt"²

The statement carries the strains of the artists' ongoing battle with the journal's parent organization, the Lalit Kala Akademi. The institution was being pulled at both ends in its efforts to uphold principles of democracy and satisfying a range of practitioners that flocked to this state patron, and the artists demanding that the institution go beyond basing itself on the mandate of equal representation.

By 1959 matters came to a head when the Akademi split the exhibits from its annual National Art Exhibition into three sections – academic realist, oriental and modern. The judging committee of 1959, consisting of Gopal Deuskar, KCS Paniker, K H Ara, Madhava Menon and Prodosh Das Gupta, defended this move by stating that many members of the General Council felt that the work belonging to academic and oriental styles did not get adequate representation. By 1960 the modernists were staging what they termed an 'aesthetic satyagraha' against the National Exhibition and held a separate select exhibition titled *Trends in Modern Indian Art* (a gesture that was commented upon in Parliament as well). There was also talk of artists setting up an independent all-India body of Indian painters and sculptors. "The judges were not keen to establish or defend the best but rather to give regional or stylistic representations to all kinds of art. This policy was an imitation of the policy current in political life – with its linguistic provinces and special protection for minorities. The idea that selection or judging should be democratic is, I suggest, basically foreign to art," noted Jaya Appaswamy, editor of LKC, looking back at that period.³

The stage is set for *Contra '66* whose opening issues are also reviewed in the same issue of LKC and referred to as an "oppositional artist's voice to the establishment"⁴. The magazine worked as a polemical space for consolidating Swaminathan's own position as an artist as he critically reviewed the history of modern Indian art, proclaimed himself as the heir to the surrealist tradition and lambasted state institutions. It was quickly aborted when leading artists told Swaminathan that it was "unethical" and that "he had no right to both paint and write on other people's work".⁵

Contra '66 thus is a short-lived moment that shines light on the coming of age of the confrontational artistic stance of J Swaminathan and his contemporaries (Group 1890) against an earlier generation of Progressive artists, and the growing institutional critique of the Lalit Kala Akademi which reaches its height by 1971.

One can work out another equation between the *Marg* publications, begun in 1946 by Mulk Raj Anand, and the writings of W G Archer – mainly in their relationship to the past and to discipline of art history.

² Leyden, Rudy von. 'Review of LKC 4 & 5', in *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, no. 6, 1967.

³ Appaswamy, Jaya. 'Art of the 1950s', unpublished paper presented at 'Seminar of Modern Painting and Sculpture, Old Myths - New Myths', Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1968.

⁴ Leyden, Rudy von. 'Review of LKC 4 & 5', in *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, no. 6, 1967.

⁵ Swaminathan, J. "The Cygan An Auto-Bio Note", *Lalit Kala Contemporary, Special Issue on J Swaminathan*, no. 40, 1995.

There is a sense of mission that Mulk Raj Anand shared with art historians like W G Archer and M S Randhawa, with political leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and equally industrialists like J R D Tata around the notions of progress and progressivism⁶. And it is as much a Nehruvian vision that Anand followed as much as his own to go out and 'discover India' through the pages of *Marg*. The early issues of the magazine place the question of Indian art and modes of writing history at the centre of the discourse even as it carried articles on modern architecture, urban planning and contemporary art practice.

The recuperation of the past was an important part of this discovery – a corrective lens was called for to move away from ideological commentaries on art and the use of religion as a basis of understanding its form. A call was made in favour of formal and sensuous qualities of the artworks based on the "humanism rooted in the soil"⁷. There was a space being created for a modernist interest in history as a resource and a muse, as well as an internationalism and universalism that allowed for direct response of the eye to the art of the past and of another culture. If Anand saw *Marg* as a kind of populariser of the new authentic research being conducted in the discipline of art history in a manner to suggest aesthetic values to contemporary artists, then Archer, among others like Karl Khandalvala, Moti Chandra, M S Randhawa, was the scholar carrying out that research.

Archer started writing seriously on art when he took on the role as Keeper of the Indian Section at Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in 1949. Before this his work was more anthropological in the direction of collating Uraon poetry and studying primitive Indian sculpture. Archer, in his biography *India Served and Observed*, pointed to the many public and private collections of Pahari paintings that came into the market in the forties when princely collections began to get liquidated. As these private collections reached the V&A, Archer began to study and periodise them with 'empirical' soundness. Through the fifties he produced small monographs on the different schools of Pahari paintings from Bundi, Kotah, Garhwal and this finally culminated in his two-volume magnum opus *Indian Paintings from the Punjab Hills* in 1973.

I am particularly interested in this 'discovery' and reception of the Pahari paintings as much as folk forms of Kalighat in the writings of Archer and what they represent to him as well as to Anand. Given that Mughal and Rajput paintings had already been theorized within a strong nationalist framework by A K Coomaraswamy, the Pahari paintings seem represent a freer space to relook at the question of painting (which artists like Amrita Sher-Gil animate) as well as to bring into discussions elements of the erotic and the poetic.

The categories under which Archer analyses the works of the four modernists Rabindranath Tagore, Amrita Sher Gil, Jamini Roy and George Keyt in his book *India and Modern Art* – of the unconscious, romance, primitive and the village – overlap with Anand's concerns. I am really keen to map Archer and *Marg's* project of modernism and how it relates to the past and the discipline of art history in the process.

⁶ This point was brought up in my discussion with art historian Annapurna Garimella who has, among other things, edited *Mulk Raj Anand*, Marg Publications, Mumbai, 2005.

⁷ Anand, Mulk Raj. "Editorial, On the Study of Indian Art", *Marg*, vol. 1, no. 2, January 1947.

In the case of Geeta Kapur, her writings appear in three journals/magazines over a period of time – her Masters thesis titled “In Quest of Identity: Art and Indigenism in post-colonial culture with special reference to Indian Painting” which was serialized in the artist magazine *Vrishchik* (1969 – 1973), edited by Gulammohammed Sheikh and Bhupen Khakhar; her role as founder-member and contributor to the *Journal of Arts and Ideas* (1982 – 1999) and finally the column ‘Turning Point’ written for *Art India* between 1999 and 2001. In *Vrishchik*, an artist-run magazine presenting the dissenting voice of the artist and the articulations for a political understanding of art, you have Kapur working with politically charged terms like identity, indigenism and post-colonial culture, borrowing, as she pointed out, from critical vocabulary developed in Latin America because there is not enough theoretical material to draw upon in the Indian discourse.

The Journal of Arts and Ideas arrives in the early eighties, started by a group of left-oriented practitioners, to theorise on practice as well as construct an interdisciplinary understanding of cultural forms. Kapur contributes seminal articles on modern Indian art and cinema, some of which are republished together in her seminal 2000 publication *When was Modernism Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*.

And finally there is *Art India*, an art magazine that started in 1995 and used more popular journalistic writing to construct a space for contemporary practice by bringing in different voices of collectors, curators, gallerists, artists and writers who set themselves apart generationally. Kapur here contributed with essays on individual artists like Sheela Gowda, Rummana Hussain and Ranbir Kaleka locating them within practices like installation, performance and video, apart from articles on rethinking the possibilities of internationalism given new regional groupings in Asia, among other things. Here she explores new media, the newer contexts of globalization and internationalism and the avant garde practices of contemporary artists. Of course, Kapur’s writings far exceed these forums but they work as three interesting contexts within which her writing and critical concerns at different moments are made visible.

Project Update

So apart from these instances of the kind of possibilities that the journals offer me to understand the positions of the writers, here is a quick update on what else I have been doing.

I have a list of articles published between 1958 to 1962 from *Link* magazine, found on microfilm at the Nehru Memorial Library in Delhi. The articles, as was the norm then, do not carry by-lines but they can be attributed to J Swaminathan as he was working in the newsmagazine as an assistant editor as well as reviewing art exhibitions in these years.

Also of particular interest are the scrapbooks found at the Art History Department Archive, Faculty of Fine Arts, Vadodara. There are books on Rudy Von Leyden and Nissim Ezekiel as well as general clippings on art from the seventies onwards.

To provide an update of the interviews, I have travelled to Mumbai, Chandigarh and Bangalore). I will be

visiting Baroda and Kolkata in the coming months. My interviews in Delhi are ongoing and will carry on until the end of October. The interviews conducted so far have been with Nancy Adajania, Ranjit Hoskote, Abhay Sardesai, Sudhir Patwardhan, Gieve Patel, Girish Shahane, Annapurna Garimella, Shukla Sawant, Geeta Kapur and S Kalidas. I have a few others scheduled for the remaining months with Tapati Guha Thakurta, R Sivakumar, Jyotindra Jain, A Ramachandran, Krishen Khanna, K G Subramanyan, Gulammohammed Sheikh and Jyoti Bhatt.