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What's New in Indian Art : Canons, Commodification, Artists on the Edge

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The turn of the century produces an axial dynamic in the understanding of world phenomena. One amongst these is the influence, across the world, of the ideology and aesthetic of modernism. Reviewing art practice at this moment involves fresh interpretations of the modernist principle established round the turn of the 19th century, and gradually built up into the citadel of high modernism through the 20th century.

Indian views on such questions are triggered by momentous changes in the last decade: the liberalization of the Indian economy; the emergence of the hidden agendas of nationalism; the cultural continuities and final ruptures in the narrative of identity. These three contrary pulls in the business of self-representation complicate the status of modernity in India and make it once again polemical. Indeed they pull in the direction of postmodern cultural conditions where everything is up for grabs, and the centre does not hold.

What is new in Indian art is that its certified locus is under siege from all sides and its older canons do not hold.

Canons

The cluster of canons dominant in India during the century has had to do with Indian nationalism and its agenda of cultural reconstitution during the period of decolonization. The Indian national State, when it comes into existence in 1947, serves to realize the aspiration for a secular democracy and for a replete sense of sovereignty.

At this historical point, the first canon under consideration is the artist's symbolic sovereignty now delivered to the actual historical context of an independent nation. This is sought to be subsumed and reinvested into a responsible task of representation.

This representation includes figures from mythology, as well as saints, peasants, and the working class. It also includes varied personae of the artist's peers, patrons, and beloved(s) in the urban middle-class scenario. Here is an art that moves back and forth on the cusps between indigenism (classical and folk forms derived originally from the multiple traditions, by now eclectically assimilated); an adapted realism; and a modernism that is continuous with this realism and foregrounds dominant motifs of ethnicity, class, and gender.

The second canon is an exact counterpoint to this. The logic is reversed when the artist climbs to the apex of "his" sovereignty cutting clean beyond the civilization/national/communitarian pyramid. He simply flags the achievement of collective cultural creativity and goes on to convert this deducible identity into singular, authorial terms. What is peculiar in this self-designation is that the romantic version of the artist, cast in anarchist models of self, draws at the same time on indigenous, mystical models. It shades into a style that is compatible with but not identical to the lyric aspects of modernism.

These two norms give us the ideological context of the arts in India up to the post-independence decades. The artist community, replicating in a sense the national community, develops a peculiar notion of allegiance. Positions are plotted in a familial, filial style and some form of collective destiny is thrown up which exhorts artists not to exceed or supersede the national communitarian cause. Even the avantgarde initiatives have to respect a kind of group psychology which goes in the name of solidarity to the cause which is India. By continuous acts of containment, the historical logic of sovereignty is muffled; there is a denial of the painful force of breakthroughs.

If in the Indian cultural situation all negotiations with the world require something like a community sanction, it is not surprising that this should take on a more formidable form when they acquire State sanction and support. So that in fact what is communitarian can become bondage to national norms and Statist regimes.

This then is the trajectory of national/modern "high" art which has been in the making for nearly a hundred years in India. By the cumulative effect of national responsibility followed by State hierarchies, a peculiarly restraining moral aesthetic of a new middle class comes into play. What is remarkable is that this is easily transferred to a consumer scale when the art market, in tune with the overall move into marketism, develops from the national to the global level. At this juncture, a contained universe of symbolic imagery is the more amenable to commodification. I am suggesting that social conformism leads to market pragmatism in the late phase of a national culture.

Commodification

In the wake of India's economic liberalization policies beginning in the 1980s and fully publicized by the early 1990s, there has come into view an enormous, two-hundred-million strong Indian middle class. As part of its self-legitimizing process, as

part of its multinational corporate identity and, finally, as a result of its investment interests, there is now a fairly flourishing art market in India.

This is the upwardly mobile middle class that is, for the first time, testing its identity vis-à-vis the world. In addition to the middle class, the globalizing Indian bourgeoisie and the NRIs (non-resident Indians) have come into the picture and now constitute the largest section (ninety per cent) of the international buyers. All these categories of buyers need the national/Indian slogan to shore up their self-image, their consumer status, and cultural confidence. They need, moreover, the liberalized State to provide the infrastructure from which they can cream off, as it were, institutional advantages for the growing art and culture industry.

In this moment of transition from a mixed to a market economy, in the complicit relationship of the State and the market, the national is set up as a culturalist charade. Problems of identity, ethnicity, and religious (in)tolerance amalgamate into an ideology that compensates for an economy dismantled at the behest of global capital, mediated through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The economic and political choices of the centrist and right-wing parties in their period of power reflect this extraordinary double-talk of *swadeshi* (national self-reliance) and market liberalization (now topped by an aggressive rhetoric of nuclear weaponization).

The ruling taste at the beginning of the commodification of Indian art is still emphatically national and indigenous: peoples' traditions and their icons continue to be valorized. Imagist and discernibly sensuous painting is privileged above all. Iconographic repertoires of mythology and easy forms of mystical sublimation are exploited to make the image accessible. In the postmodern context this terminology also provides a marker of cultural difference, while simultaneously serving the taste for ethnology and for variegated forms of consumption.

At this point, when the opening up of the Indian market is catching world headlines, there is a judicious stepping in of international auction houses: Christie's holds its first auction of contemporary Indian art in 1987; Sotheby's in 1989. There have been auctions by these and other agencies every year since then. While international auction houses signal the growing buying power of the NRIs, the auctions have been the most important single factor in raising the market value of Indian artworks at home as well. A new breed of galleries and collectors make a coup in this period. There were around ten private and commercial galleries in the whole of India in 1990, there are around two hundred today. And the prices of a fairly broad range of artists have gone up by ten to twenty times during the last decade (although, it should be noted, these prices are still very much lower than what contemporary Euro-American, Japanese, or even Chinese artists fetch in the international art market).

Private galleries are interested to be seen to have a varied menu under the rubric of national art. As the doors of Delhi's National Gallery of Modern Art open to private collaboration, there is a similarity between the State and the market on aesthetic preferences. And there is a convergence on what is heavily pressed in matters of culture

– democracy -- which comes to mean something for everything in the commercial, suppliers' jargon.

To disrupt this converging purpose, there is pressure from the younger artists on the private galleries to diversify: selected gallery owners and independent curators have developed a small stake in the new and are showing what is manifestly unsaleable – found objects, photographs, installations, performance. This is particularly so in Mumbai, the most metropolitan of all the Indian cities. The new is competing in the market and media sectors and gaining critical attention.

With the galleries added to the State apparatus for the patronage of art, art production takes on the aspect of an organized sector. We know from the western experience that once art (and its claim to autonomy) becomes institutionalized, the actual choices in art practice are more prone to be critiqued and dismantled. Alternatives emerge and come to be positioned at opposite poles of the field. I will mention two very different movements that have attempted such a critique. The Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association grouped itself in Kerala during 1987-89 and attempted a cultural politics of the revolutionary commune which, in the light of even its limited success, makes the failure all the more tragic, and its political effect far-reaching.

Founded in 1989, SAHMAT, an all-India organization of artists and intellectuals forging an anti-fundamentalist and secular front, continues to expand its activities. SAHMAT works on the principle of a widely democratic participation of artists to oppose a hardening of the majoritarian view on Indian culture. It infuses a politically alert notion of plurality in the present conjuncture.

There is now a defined field of art production sporting full four generations of artists; there is an institutionalization of art activity and a commercial viability layered on top of national sentiments; there is a need for cultural reflexivity based on social disjuncture. Precisely because of that there emerges the key question -- what is the status of art as object?

It used to be asked why Indian artists are so sanguine, why they work according to rule, that is to say according to a mediumistic, quasi-formal aesthetic of modernism. Why they produce such good sumptuous art. There is an answer now. Art comes under scrutiny precisely when its wholeness and goodness and desirability come to be successful proposition in the market and the media. This produces the occasion for a cultural retake on the meaning of the artwork and with that on the linguistic twist that repositions it over the divide – in a liminal place – introducing a deliberate form of irony. Conceptual moves, where the practice of art is seen as one among other reflexive acts in a precise cultural/political context, come to be staged.

The 1990s: Artists on the Edge

Certain aspects of contemporary art, and certain artists, can be seen to be at the cutting edge in the last decade of the century. I select a few examples.

Indian artists still undertake, in a far from exhausted way, representational subversions through direct iconoclasm and textual allegories. We have only to see K.G. Subramanyan's painterly idiom as it continues to tackle a great haul of figural motifs to recognize how the iconographic repertoire (with specific mythic features) of a contemporary artist can be rendered so remarkably volatile. We can then pick up an active history of quite provocative issues around representation with the amazing career of the painter, Bhupen Khakhar (died August 2003). Slowly pushing his art to the brink on questions of taste, he had developed a unique form of intransigence through sexual motifs. An intimate, nearly pornographic presentation of homoerotic and transvestite themes flowered into an understanding about gendering in the spiritual protocols of Indian culture. While finding a visual language through and beyond indigenism, he built an iconography which broadens the debate on contemporary figuration and suggests that there are representational conundrums still on hand. And that there must be actual privileging of marginal lives which include gender, caste and class identities, but also a quizzing of the male/modernist iconography in its heroic self-stance.

Younger artists like Atul Dodiya and Surendran Nair can be counted as heirs to Khakhar. In keeping with a feature that marks the best painters in the decade of the 1990s the world over, Dodiya and Nair construct complex pictures in terms of art-historical referencing. They give the high-modern vocabulary of images a layer of irony associated with postmodernism, but remain committed to the meaning within the postmodernist genre of the picture-puzzle. Both Dodiya and Nair work consciously to recast iconographies of mythic and historical figures in the Indian cultural context. In tandem they bring to the representational project a precise form of critical annotation. Thus it is as Indian artists that they make a particular contribution to the relation between the icon and narration – as when the figure of “Lord” Vishnu is variously invoked in the paintings of Surendran Nair followed by Atul Dodiya. But, further, as contemporary artists of a progressive turn, they translate the mythic into secularly coded allegories and these into a contemporary encounter. With their intertextual paintings of the intrepid figure of Mahatma Gandhi – the historical icon of the Indian nation needing to be recouped as a replete sign at the end of the 20th century – Dodiya, and then Nair, achieve ambitious possibilities for the vocation of painting in the present times.

Dhruva Mistry and G. Ravinder Reddy, then K.P. Krishnakumar and N.N. Rimzon make a dramatic entry into the art scene in the 1980s. Very different from each other, they position life-size figures (modelled in clay, cast in polyester resin/fibreglass) that refer to the entire range from popular to classical Indian sculpture. Breaking open the conventional use of modernist materials and forms, they establish the domain of figural, iconic (iconoclastic) sculpture in a manifestly theatric, at times provocative, setting.

Since the beginning of the 1990s Rimzon, in his archaic-classic mode refers to ascetic figures (“Inner Voice”, 1992, “The Tools”, 1993) who are also apostles of non-violence from the great heterodox legacy of the Jains and Buddhists. He makes possible a resurrection, and gives the act of sculpting in the present a life-consecrating significance.

In the 1998 sculptural ensemble, “Speaking Stones”, Rimzon makes a discreetly theatric presentation of private mourning in the public domain: a crouching figure sits barricaded by a circle of rocks pressing down news of communal violence. Rimzon’s profound concern with the archetypal subject advances the idea that the Indian artist’s grasp of his self is shadowed by, haloed by, the spiritual sense of community: living communities and communities of symbols; traces of community consciousness in archaic images where the unconscious works out its individual/collective dialectic. Rimzon’s work poses the question: how do these immanent features of a culture transform when reification is already on hand; how does cultural exile from within the surviving/stagnating communitarian structures condition the historical subject; what stance can hold such a body in place.

In the last two decades, the representational question has been tackled by women artists who take the bull by its horns and present a slew of alternatives. Indeed, Indian art has been characterized by women artists taking over the female body as their marked domain and handling its erotics to counter the carnal devourment and straitened forms of visual pleasure in male representations. Overlapping the beloved and the mother with the goddess image -- so powerful in the Indian psyche to this day – artists like Arpita Singh and Nilima Sheikh have pulled it away from the false deification in the male imaginary. Rekha Rodwittiya and Anju Dodiya proceed from a narrativization of the female subject to deal with the feminine as masquerade. The discourse on female representations now includes allegorical accounts of the female body, anthropological definitions of identity, neglected ambitions and self-mocking aplomb.

The photo-narratives of Pushpamala N. push the question of representation to ironical ends. With ingenious excess, the artist herself acts out a fantasy (shot in carefully construed black-and-white images by a collaborating photographer, Meenal Agarwal) of the masked lady. In “Phantom Lady or Kismet” (1996-98), the good-bad girl sets up the *mise en scene* in the style of film noir. In her more recent work of 1998, titled “Sunehre Sapne”, Pushpamala, dressed up to become a middle-class heroine dreaming her existence through the medium of cliches and stock scenarios, arrives at a set of hand-tinted photographs that are a perfect simulacrum – the copy of a copy, the original of which does not exist.

In its give and take of dreams, photographic kitsch is an exemplary artefact; it is a symbolic thing but it also initiates an empty enigma regarding the image. Photography-based art works, now appearing in India, return the openly masquerading artist to a mock-innocence whereby one can conduct, as if from ground zero, a retake on the arts of representation.

We have already, in these references, arrived at the changing status of the object (of art) in relation to material practices and forms of installation. Alongside we have seen that there is a substitution of full-bodied cultural metaphors with disembodied signs. There is a starting anew -- sometime with debris – to reverse the norms of visual culture and to question the basis of art production. Artists like Navjot Altaf and Sheela Gowda

resignify the importance of social production in a community context and simulate a ritual reconstruction of everyday life-processes.

An ethics based on collective creativity has informed Navjot Altaf's practice. As she works her way through a received orthodoxy about Marxism, she goes on from working with school children and women's groups to living and working with tribal artisans and ritual image-makers in the interior of the Bastar region. The project, started in 1997, includes setting up something like an artists' collective.

The first factor in the work produced in the process is an "earthing" of the image: in her own consciously primitivist sculptural style of truncated, totemic, female figures, she has amalgamated the elements of innocence, fertility, and transgression. In the 1998 installation, this earthing involves a choice of materials – notably wood and brick and fabric – that are basic to tribal economies and cultures – while adding to them the materials of modernization – long pvc pipes and plastic bags. The jointly/discretely made forms hug the ground and clutter the surface and shoot up as totem poles declaring their material and magical value. The artist enacts her belonging/unbelonging in the theatre of this environmental work. The premise is shaky, but what she seems to suggest through this work and related texts in a semi-confessional mode of contemporary anthropology, is that we live through an astonishing continuum of symbolic attitudes and it may be an affirming thing to traverse and test this passage. Further, that in the charade this entails for the metropolitan artist, the risk is worth taking if questions of identity are to be plumbed.

Sheela Gowda's commitment to the material existence, environmental concerns, and women's labour in rural India, makes her choose materials like cowdung which she treats and combines with oil, *kumkum* (auspicious red powder), on occasion gold leaf, arriving at a malleable sculptural material that is replete with meaning and properly signified in the realm of environmental/cultural ethics. Recently she has turned to another kind of labour-intensive art work. In "Tell Him of My Pain" (1998) she passes through the eye of the needle hundreds of feet of thread, then adding blood-red pigment she glues together these threads to make a thick cord. Great coils of disembowelled innards – umbilical cord, intestines, veins, nerve fibres, arteries – festoon a large room. Hung and laid out as loosely looped arabesques, they become the body's extension/abstraction in longing. The rope-end is tasselled by the clutch of needles that have performed their meticulous task and now droop and glisten like prickly ornaments or miniaturized objects of torture. This particular visceral route takes Sheela Gowda's concern with the ethics of (female) labour into an act of doing, nurturing, being. The woman's body is erotically signified through its absence, the work entangles you through the enticement of her labour that is also a narcissistic self-designation as artist. She gets up a symbolic theatre, tantalizing you by pulling out yards of her wound/womb, and the very arterial system that pumps blood to the heart.

In a similar vein there is a sublimated cruelty with limb and form in the velvet-covered sculptural work of Anita Dube who dismembers and then consecrates the private

object of desire on erotic ground; who triggers a fantasy of the resurrected body through the indexical magic of a handcrafted object.

I spoke above of the fetish. This form of coded desire deflects both the alibi of objective representation and the myth about material well-being. With the women artists mentioned above, there emerges a definite stand against high culture and high purpose; together with male artists like Sudarshan Shetty and Subodh Gupta, developing their seductive and critical forms of commodity-fetishism, what comes to be questioned is direct forms of political address. In its place, other, subversive, relationships with the Real – albeit more declaredly compromised than in surrealism proper -- are introduced into the vocabulary of contemporary Indian art under the sign of postmodernism

What is significant is that *at the same time* political intervention by artists takes on more elaborate strategies. I have already mentioned how, since a couple of decades now, a good part of the cultural discourse turns on the problem of subjectivity positioned by women in the public domain; and on the way this takes a reflexive turn so that feminism itself can come to stand in for the larger question of the *politics of representation*. In the last decade, Nalini Malani has elaborated her engagement with the identity of the female as victim/as subaltern/as principal mourner in the theatre of tragedies. She invokes the psychic horrors worked out in mythological structures in her 1993 installation for the enactment of Heiner Mueller's "Medea"; in the reified realm of the labour market where she collaborates in the visualization of Brecht's story, "The Job" (1997); in the biological and environmental degradation of the body and its traumatized visage in her "Mutant" series (1994-97). The threat of global destruction finds its culmination in her 1998 video installation titled "Remembering Toba Tek Singh" after Saadat Hasan Manto's famous Partition story. This is Malani's end-of-the-century contribution to contemporary art featuring twelve video monitors relaying scenes of religious terror/ethnic conflict. On three walls there are large video projections: on the largest wall in front, a video montage shows simulated images of the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with an animation film by Malani where she draws, animates, and bleeds humanoid figures into the terrain of a guilt-ravaged universe. The work is occasioned by India and Pakistan adding to the global stockpile of bombs and producing dire ideological effects along the subcontinental borders.

Continuing with the question of feminism and the politics of representation, Rummana Hussain (who died in July 1999) attempted successive modes of historical self-inscription: in her installations, "Home/Nation" (1996) and "The Tomb of Begum Hazrat Mahal" (1997), she chose forms of masquerade about the fictional/historical, real-life Muslim woman. Constructing an overlap of the female body (subject to affliction, intrusion, aggression); historical sites (Ayodhya, and Bombay, recently violated); and prayer strung up as wish-fulfilling objects, she laid out part-for-whole narratives about a Muslim woman's identity in India. Representing her as marginal, she arranged the installations to arrive at a kind of immanent meaning so that while she spoke of loss, she confirmed the intricate patterns of a syncretic culture to which she belonged and to which she contributed – suturing the wound and offering social reparation. In her 1998 performance piece, "Is it what you think?" she asked

crucial questions, as if from a crucible of Islam, but only so as to reach a transcendent state of doubt about what is now too easily theorized as ethnic identity/female subjectivity.

Through the 1990s Vivan Sundaram has developed a succession of installation sites as (dis)placements of the historical motif. The 1993 “Memorial” to the dead man on the street, victim of the Bombay carnage against the Muslim population, is one such documentary/allegorical account of the contemporary. In his ambitiously public project titled “Structures of Memory” (1998), he recapitulates the modernizing process in India through a site-specific installation in the white marble monstrosity that is Calcutta’s Victoria Memorial. Sundaram disembowels the imperium by installing contradictory trajectories from floor to dome – as for example an eighty-foot narrow-gauge railway track that cuts through the middle of the Darbar Hall and turns this ceremonial meeting place into a railway platform. In this space, each relayed element – spanning a vast range of modern manufacture – is notated and signified: raw materials, empirical data, displayed texts, voice-over, and video images. The synchronous nature of the encounter prods the viewer to translate the materiality of the exhibits into evidence of labour that resonates in the public space and makes possible the recovery of historical meanings. Though seemingly without authorial presence, this theatre of repeated encounters construes the active spectator. Thus, prefigured in the very design of the complex exhibit is a normative designation of the citizen who reconstitutes himself/herself through participation in the institutions of knowledge (an archive, a museum) and converts these into sites of social production.

In Conclusion

There is, as we have seen, the appearance of an ironical aesthetic that drives a wedge between the artists and art market, between art market and the State institutions. Heterodox alternatives – secular, non-canonical, restlessly poised, interventionist art works – have multiplied to offer a conceptual shaping of social energies in their transformative intent.

There are what might be referred to as postmodern enactments of tradition through the means of quotation, allegory, and spectacle – as there is an increased theatricality in the making and presentation of art. It is interesting that all of these are further subjected to a relayed critique that questions the tenets of postmodernism itself. Indeed, the testing and critique of the postmodern by the critically positioned postcolonial artist has become the occasion of furthering discourse in contemporary art history.

The point I want to emphasize is that while there is some ambitious and passionately committed painting being done in India, there is at the same time a presentation of archaeological evidence, of anthropological critique. This is a much more process-based and situational art practice; it often takes the form of installations where the artist, using familiar objects, can overlay different modes of cognition and structure and offer what I have elsewhere called a poetics of displaced objects. Further, as against this very foregrounding of material, there is a determined resort to conceptual distancing.

We know that it is in the moment of disjuncture that an avantgarde names itself and recodes the forces of dissent into the very vocabulary of art .

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