

Mapping the field of Indian art criticism: Post-independence

Introduction

This project is an attempt to survey the field of art criticism in India, especially in the context of critical and artistic practices post-independence. I have undertaken this task keeping in mind the usefulness of such an empirical and analytical exercise for both the Asia Art Archive, which is archiving materials on art practices across Asia with great seriousness, and for myself, as someone who has been closely involved in the contemporary art scene for a decade but not necessarily with critical distance and reflection.

I delineate this history of art criticism via five individual writers to delimit my area of enquiry but I am not interested in *only* recuperating lone, heroic voices. I think of the 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 writers and thinkers.

In this somewhat truncated version of the history of art criticism, the chosen five writers – W G Archer, Richard Bartholomew, J Swaminathan, Geeta Kapur and Ranjit Hoskote – represent a mainstream trajectory that moves from the time of independence to the present. These are critics writing and working in the metropolitan contexts of Delhi and Bombay/Mumbai (with the exception of Archer who was stationed in London) and equally writing in different forums and to different ends – from journalism to specialized journals, from independent scholarly publications to exhibition and museum catalogues.

I begin my account with scholar and museologist W G Archer who was positioned between colonial and independent India, and was involved, along with others, in delineating the disciplinary contours of art criticism alongside art history and anthropology. With Richard Bartholomew we see the emergence of an art critic working in the public domain of the print media, forming an interface between artist and uninitiated audience in a newly independent nation. J Swaminathan is an instance of a polemical artist-critic voice, among a generation of artists that began to articulate its positions through writing from the sixties onwards. The late sixties and seventies saw the appearance of the independent critical voice, Geeta Kapur, formed in close contact with artists and then asserting its autonomy to move in the direction

of theorizing on art and cultural practice by the eighties. And finally, with Ranjit Hoskote there is a return to the more immediate role of criticism in a one-to-one relation with art practices and artists, under the changed conditions of a liberalized India with a buoyant art market providing support structures.

It is important to note that even as I see writers emblematic of certain time periods and positions, their writing careers extend these configurations. They overlap with each other, given the relatively short time frame of sixty years. But they also signify certain relationships to art criticism and writing, and allow for this mapping via their practices.

Background

The project merits a beginning with my personal location in the contemporary Indian art scene. Upon completing my Masters in Art Criticism from the Faculty of Fine Arts, M S University I moved away from academic spaces to take on more professional roles – a brief stint as an art reporter for a national daily and a longer ongoing role as a curator working at a private art gallery in New Delhi. Watching from close quarters the dazzling ascendancy of the Indian art market, my colleagues at the gallery and I have been involved in using this momentum to extend the role of private art galleries. We set up Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art in 2007 to explore the possibilities and limits of this institution taking on the role of public organizations – addressing different kinds of audiences as well generating vibrant discursive spaces around art practices. FICA provides grants and support to young artists, writers and public art projects, as well as develops outreach and educational modules within art spaces. It has been an interesting experience to stage a writing workshop in a gallery space where art works become available for pedagogical exercises, to set up a small public access library on contemporary art and to run a long-term programme bringing school children and artists together in order to develop creative approaches to education.

Whatever academic research I have undertaken, in the meantime, has been looking at national art institutions like National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) and Lalit Kala Akademi (LKA), both centralized organizations that came up in the early fifties, in the heyday of newly

independent India. Set up only six years after independence, they preceded such institutions in many other post-colonial nations by at least three decades.¹

While the setting up of these institutions is an evidence of the state's commitment to the values of modernity and modernism, their actual workings point in another direction. Both NGMA and LKA have struggled, many times unsuccessfully, to balance the contending claims of various artist groups and cliques. The NGMA retracted into an insular historical institution suffering, especially in the first two decades, from a lack of direction in building a national collection and equally the lack of public interface via exhibitions. The LKA, on the other hand, given the task of making sense of the contemporary art movements and providing infrastructural support to artists, became an embattled site.

“This has nothing to do with art,”² K G Subramanyan stated categorically when I asked him about the 1971 artists' protests against the functioning of Lalit Kala Akademi. He was, of course, speaking from his perspective as a long-standing pedagogue, writer and artist, having spent his life within the nurturing environment of the art school, and foregrounding issues of art making, the relationship of the artist to the local environments and to living traditions.³ But I could empathize with his position. Especially as the scant material left behind on the institutional space is limited to artists and critics of various cliques and 'art worlds' (to use Howard Becker's term) trying to stake their claims on these organizations, cancelling each other's decisions, complaining about policies and programmes, budget allotments, exclusions and inclusions in exhibitions, among other things. It is also amply clear that the modern art institutions have very specific histories and are not laden with the same kind of symbolic vision of a museums dealing with historical artworks, like say the National Museum.⁴

¹ Equally the hosting of an international Triennale by LKA in 1968 to provide a common platform to any Asian and other non-aligned countries, as noted by its architect Mulk Raj Anand, was two decades ahead of such initiatives that seized cities in Latin America, Africa and Asia from late eighties onwards.

² Personal interview with the artist at his residence in Vadodara, October 2010.

³ Born on 15 February, 1924, in Kerala, K G Subramanyan studied under the tutelage of Benode Behari Mukherjee, Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij at Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan, graduating in 1948. Alongside his seminal art practice and art writing, Subramanyan has been a committed teacher. In 1951 he joined the Faculty of Fine Arts, M S University, Baroda, and continued his association with the institution until 1979, taking on various roles from lecturer in the painting department to becoming the Dean between 1968-74. In 1980 he joined Santiniketan as a professor in the painting department and taught there until his retirement in 1989. Many of the essays in his publications are compilations of lectures that he gave students.

⁴ One can see the emblematic role the National Museum played for the newly emergent democratic republic. And from 1912 onwards, archaeologists, political leaders and policy makers make an urgent case for it. It was instituted somewhat hastily in 1949 and in the early years of independence its symbolic potential became evident in how it mirrored the strained centre-state relationship. It ensured the power of the former by regaining control over art objects in private hands and princely collections and casting them as national heritage,

A top-down state version of modern art institutions, which has its place in post-colonial countries, only presented me with a partial picture, one that could be fleshed out if set in relation to the discourses being produced in other spaces like art criticism. It would be more productive to allow for, as Tapati Guha-Thakurtha points out in her book *Monuments, Object, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, a kind of dialectical relationship to emerge between institutional and textual discourses.⁵

The project thus opens up the space for me to embed art criticism within a larger system of publications, patronage and institutions, and equally extricate the institutional spaces from their common perception as irrelevant, failed interventions. While they do not have the authority and grand histories of European and American art institutions, the impress of individual and collective imaginaries remains. These institutions have been shaped, in whatever diluted way and however briefly, by a plurality of voices and texts.

In a Critical State

If the institutional space has been designated as inconsequential and peripheral, the discipline of art criticism has only fared marginally better in the eyes of the art community. There are innumerable references to the incompetence of the art critic – in a 1952 article on the ‘The Artist and the Critic’, sculptor and the principal of the Madras College of Arts and Crafts, D P Roy Chowdhury, complained about the latter’s lack of knowledge on artmaking techniques “crucial to analysis”⁶ and in another instance writer Mulk Raj Anand lamented about the critic’s lack of historical sense, taking recourse to “half baked opinions which are likely to mislead people and artists.”⁷ K G Subramanyan, on his part, lambasted the entire criticism scene in his book *Moving Focus*, manufactured by what he called “non-specialists.” He listed their weaknesses: a lack of background of scholarship or aesthetic sensibility, lack of criteria for judgment, lack of perspective on the complete scene in the country and feudal allegiance to particular sets of artists. The body of art criticism generated by them was,

and equally by establishing central control over the institution of the museum which has more or less been passed into the hands of the states in the period of Viceroy Curzon (1899 – 1905).

⁵ Thakurtha Tapati Guha, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New York, New Delhi: Columbia University Press Permanent Black, 2004). The book investigates the formations of the disciplines of archeology and art history in colonial and postcolonial India. Through case -studies, the author investigates the categorisation of art works and archeological sites by both institutions and scholarship, and the far-reaching political impact these classifications have had in contemporary India.

⁶ Chowdhury, D P Roy. ‘The Artist and The Critic’, *Roop-Lekha*, vol. XXII, nos. 1 & 2, 1952, 62 – 65.

⁷ Anand, Mulk Raj. Public lecture on the ‘Aesthetics of Contemporary India’ in 1956, reported in *Art News Bulletin*, vol. IX, no. 10, October 1956.

according to him, “bland, colourless, uninformed, embarrassingly pretentious and prescriptive.”⁸

Today there is a well entrenched worldwide debate around the growing obsolescence of art criticism – James Elkin in his much publicized essay *What Happened to Art Criticism?* talks of the crisis within the discipline which seems to have grown exponentially in terms of the sheer number of publications and yet yielding very little in terms of the intellectual and critical discourse.⁹

This perspective was reiterated during a panel discussion on the current state of Indian art writing at a recent seminar at School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, New Delhi.¹⁰ The panelists Kavita Singh and Abhay Sardesai variously labeled current art criticism as extravagant, adjective-laden utterances produced in close proximity to artists, which in some cases threatened to over-interpret the art works. As the final speaker Geeta Kapur, while also acknowledging the crisis, set the record straight on one crucial matter – that the lineages of critical writing have always been weak in India in contrast to its energetic art production. The present globalized art market with its homogenizing art discourse, its diverse audiences, its high speed demands and tailor-made roles for art writing, art works and artists from ‘other’ contexts, have only added other dimensions to an older problem – that of an underdeveloped critical discourse on art.

What emerges thus is an art scene, where the complexity and diversity of art production and practices has not been developed sufficiently into both critical and institutional discourses. But perhaps we can move away from these discourses of lack, even as we acknowledge them. While we can rightfully accuse Indian art criticism of developing only a partial perspective, we must also be aware of the fragmented perspectives we have of the careers of various art writers themselves. Few have followed in the footsteps of Geeta Kapur who has constructed consciously her voice as an art critic and cultural theorist, collating her writings and publishing them in a systematic manner from the late sixties. K G Subramanyan began writing actively from the mid-sixties (more sporadic writing appears from 1961 onwards) and it was only in 1978 that his articles were compiled together and published as

⁸ Subramanyan, K G. *Moving Focus Essays on Indian Art* (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1978): 54.

⁹ Elkins, James. *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press LLC, 2003).

¹⁰ Panel discussion ‘Researching, Writing, Curating’ with speakers Dr Kavita Singh, Abhay Sardesai and Geeta Kapur, as part of the workshop *Figuring the Curator*, organised in conjunction with the Visiting Professorship of Prof Thierry de Duve, at School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, New Delhi, September 18-19, 2010.

the book *Moving Focus*. Subsequent publications like *Creative Circuit*, *Living Tradition* and *Magic of Making* have reached us via Seagull Books and give us a more complete picture of his writings. For some others consolidated publications are now beginning to emerge – we will soon have published set of writings by Richard Bartholomew and J Swaminathan. Gulammohammed Sheikh, who began writing on art in 1958 in Gujarati and subsequently in English, is also underway with such an overview publication on his writings. The more recent writers have come to us in a flurry of books since the nineties and have enriched the field without doubt – you have important monographs by art historian R Siva Kumar on the Santiniketan artists and its contextual modernism, as well the writings of Ranjit Hoskote, Nancy Adajania, Deepak Ananth and Gayatri Sinha, among others.

Perhaps this sense of lack has another resonance for my generation. Our feeling of being in a post-historical moment, of navigating through a void, is tied to the dilemmas of an art writer working in the context of the post-nineties art world where critics are pushed into the role of professionals operating within the art market. We work with compressed time and feel the pressure to produce hagiographic texts without any kind of institutional support for research. I realize that this is a sentiment the older generations do not necessarily share; one can see a sense of connect they have with available material. Sheikh, for example, spoke of his self-initiated project of visiting the libraries in Baroda and making extensive bibliographies for his students¹¹ or the building of the archives at the Art History Department at Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda¹² by Ratan Parimoo and Sheikh and making everything as publicly accessible as possible.

I thus return, via this project, to different moments of history and to the selected writers who have played an important role in shaping the art scene. Of course, there are others who are equally important and it is only to contain the scope of project that I have limited myself to these five figures. I have to confess at the outset that my writing has something of an earnest, descriptive tone – it marks a return to critical engagement after a long hiatus. This is also because the emphasis of this project has been on collecting materials and not necessarily resolving some of the issues I raise on the relationship between the institutional

¹¹ Personal interview with the artist at his residence in Vadodara, October 2010.

¹² For more information on the history and rationale of this institution, please see Kabir Parvez, 'An Archive Remembered: Presenting the Image Archive of the Art History Department, Faculty of Fine Arts, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda.' Paper presented at 'The Subject of Archives', a one-day symposium organised by Asia Art Archive, and hosted by the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) on 26 February 2011 in New Delhi. Online version http://www.aaa.org.hk/newsletter_detail.aspx?newsletter_id=995.

and textual spaces in this introduction. I hope it can be viewed as a foundational revisionary exercise that an aspiring writer must undertake in order to prepare the ground for the work that will be done in the years to come.

Research Process and Output

Much of my research was carried out at the libraries of National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society (AIFACS), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Lalit Kala Akademi (LKA) in Delhi; Chandigarh State Museum and Department of Art History, Faculty of Fine Arts, Vadodara, and to a minor extent the Nehru Memorial Library and National Archives in Delhi. Even as some of these public libraries go into a slow decline, they hold important records of the art scene. I have great empathy for these institutions that are about public access despite their bureaucracy and want to restate their importance as productive sites for research. The FICA Reading Room has also been helpful for its collection of the more contemporary publications which these libraries lack.

The other part of the research has been conducting interviews with a number of people from the art community. I travelled to other cities in India – Kolkata, Mumbai, Vadodara and Bangalore – and had discussions with 19 writers, artists and scholars from different generations. The interviews, some formal and others more conversational, have been very instructive because it provided me with a palimpsest of voices and different approaches to the field of art writing. Many of them like Geeta Kapur, Gulammohammed Sheikh and Ranjit Hoskote were generous enough to share key texts with me.

I spoke to artists about their relationship with critical writing: Baroda-based artist Jyoti Bhatt lovingly reminisced about the vernacular writings of his mentor Ravi Shankar Raval on the entry of modern art in Gujarat and the poet artist Gieve Patel described his interest in texts that were directly engaging with actual practice. K G Subramanyan narrated a telling anecdote on the exclusion of the Santiniketan artists from the pages of the popular *Illustrated Weekly of India* because of their refusal to lend original works for reproduction purposes and how this affected their reception among a general public in post independence India.

I spoke to art historians interested in specific time periods on the kind of discussions taking place then. Tapati Guha-Thakurtha spoke about early twentieth century formations in the context of Bengal where there was both a maturing of the discipline of art history and the

early emergence of art criticism. Annapurna Garimella introspected on the forties and fifties to explore the terms of modernism's recovery of India's art historical past. R Siva Kumar spoke of his practice as an art historian and writer in very modest terms, as a way of locating himself in the immediate local context of Santiniketan.

Finally I spoke to young writers on how they see their role in the contemporary context: How they assess the work of their predecessors, how they negotiate with the available spaces of publishing and construct suitable contexts for their writings. The interviews also provide information on areas that I have not addressed in the course of the research, for example on Cholamandal artists or on vernacular writings, which is doubly useful.

To give a sense of the material output this project has generated: In the course of the year I collected around 375 texts by and on the above-mentioned writers as well as others like K G Subramanyan, Rudy Von Leyden, Mulk Raj Anand, L P Sihare, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Nancy Adajania, etc. I gravitated towards texts found in art magazines and journals like *Marg*, *Lalit Kala Akademi*, *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, *Art India*, *Vrishchik* and *Contra '66* as well as other publications like *Thought* and *Design* because they located the writers' concerns within collective positions, projects and debates alive at particular times.

A complete inventory of the texts collected has been made available alongside a more general bibliography on Indian art. The important bibliographic resources referred to in the course of this compilation include 'Modern and Contemporary Asian Art, A working Bibliography, 2009 version', By John Clark & Thomas Berghuis, Ann Proctor, Phoebe Scott, Gabrielle Ewington, Martin Polkinghorne; *Bibliography of Contemporary Art in Baroda*, edited by Gulammohammed Sheikh, Tulika, 1996; *Bibliography of Modern Indian Art*, D C Ghose, Lalit Kala Contemporary, 1980; *Arts of Transitional India - 20th Century, Vol. 1 & 2*, Vinayak Purohit, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1988; among others.

Finally there is a timeline which starts as early as 1838 (when the first art organization, Society for Acquisition of General Knowledge, was founded in India in Bengal) to point at artistic and critical discourses in pre-independence India. The chronology presents parallel information on art institutions, on publications and important texts, and biographical details of key writers and artists, against the backdrop of changing political, social and economic scenarios of India.

W G Archer: Loneliness of a Long Distance Historian

Neither British nostalgist nor Indian nationalist could account for a man like Verrier Elwin, writes historian Ramachandra Guha, in his sensitive biography of the British self-trained 'anthropologist at large' who lived and died among the tribals of central, east and northeast India between 1927 and 1964. Elwin immersed himself in the lives of the Muria, Baiga, Gond tribal communities, among others, famously marrying into them and painstakingly documented various aspects of their lives in his many publications. A controversial figure who traversed the India of the Raj and the India of Congress, he arrived in the country as a Christian missionary, then converted to Hinduism and became a Gandhian, fell out with the Indian nationalists over what he perceived as the hasty assimilation of the tribals within the Indian nation-state and finally became a government official as an advisor on tribal affairs for north-east India.¹³

William Archer, an ICS officer who lived in India between 1931 and 1947, was no Elwin and yet there are many interesting parallels between the two. Archer, too, was an anthropologist, trained at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. A poet, Archer modeled himself on Herbert Read by choosing a career in the civil services while aspiring for an intensely creative other life steeped in art, poetry, literary and art criticism. Archer came to India in 1931 as Assistant Magistrate in Shahabad District, Bihar, "to be stimulated by a new culture."¹⁴ By this time the national struggle was at its height. His wife, the art historian Mildred Archer, who specialized in Indo-British history and paintings, described his conviction in the role he would play to "help India achieve independence as rapidly and smoothly as possible."¹⁵

W G Archer (1907 -1979) anthropologist/ art historian/ museologist

*Trained as an anthropologist at School of Oriental and African Studies, London.

* Arrived in India in 1931 as Assistant Magistrate, Shahabad District, Bihar. Left India in 1947.

* Research areas included tribal art, poetry, miniature traditions, folk forms and modern art - a self motivated scholar learning tribal dialects of Uraon and Santali, documenting folk forms and surveying art scene.

* Returned to England in 1948 and became Keeper, Indian Section at Victoria & Albert Museum. He spent the next decade cataloguing its collection of Indian art.

* Published extensively culminating in his magnum opus *Indian Paintings from the Punjab Hills* in 1973.

ARCHER'S POSITION

* Placed at the cusp of colonial and the post-colonial moment.

* Seeking the contours of the disciplines art history, anthropology and art criticism.

* Working from the position of authority - a museologist/ historian involved in canon formation.

* How does one construct a modern self? This is predicated on the relationship with the past, recouped as resource and muse.

¹³ Guha, Ramachandra. *Savaging the Civilised Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Archer W.G. and Mildred. *India Served and Observed* (London: British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia, 1994).

¹⁵ Archer, Mildred. 'Passion for India', *Roop-Lekha*, Vol L1 nos. 1 & 2, Dr W G Archer Memorial Number, All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, New Delhi, 1979-80, 17.

India Served and Observed, the Archers' combined autobiography published in 1994, gives us a breathless account of their years in India - the wondrous encounter with primitive sculptures of the Ahir community in Shahbad district, the Maithil wall paintings in Madhubani, the love songs, marriage dialogues, sermons, riddles of the Uraon and Santhals, the vernacular poetry of the Hos, Mundas and Kharias. Archer collected and compiled materials, swiftly learning tribal dialects like Uraon and Santali. Together with Elwin, he took over the editorship of the anthropological journal *Man in India*¹⁶ between 1941 and 1949, and changed to some extent the thrust of the magazine towards the artistic, poetic and aesthetic explorations of tribal communities. In a letter to Elwin, Archer reminisced of "those glorious years from 1940 to 1946, when we were running neck and neck and there seemed no end to tribal poetry which one or the other of us would suddenly reveal."¹⁷

It is important to remember that Archer began his own writings only after returning to England in 1948. The texts before this were mostly translations and compilations of tribal songs and poetry apart from a book on primitive sculpture titled *The Vertical Man* which appeared in 1947. It is noteworthy that one of the first projects Archer assisted with on his return to London was Robert Melville's *Forty Thousand Years of Modern Art* that took place in 1948 at the newly set up Institute of Contemporary Art, London.¹⁸

Art historian David Thistlewood in his analysis of the exhibition writes that it, "presented modernism as an attempt to engage universal creative principles, which had been potent in prehistoric times and lost in the cul-de-sac of Renaissance naturalism, but which had survived in the primitive and were capable of emulation in current practice."¹⁹ Archer was conditioned by this strand of cultural primitivism that was thriving in Europe, the worldview

¹⁶ *Man in India* is a bi-annual journal on anthropology which began in 1921. It was launched by Ranchi-based lawyer S C Roy, who is often referred to as the father of Indian anthropology. After his death in 1941, W G Archer and Verrier Elwin took over the editorship of the journal. From 1951 to 1972, it was edited by the noted anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Bose. It is still in publication, and focuses on original writings in biological and socio-cultural anthropology, archaeology, linguistics and folk-culture.

¹⁷ Guha, Ramachandra. *Savaging the Civilised Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999): 282.

¹⁸ The Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), founded by Roland Penrose, Peter Watson, Herbert Read, Peter Gregory, Geoffrey Grigson and E L T Mesens in London in 1946, was envisioned as a meeting ground for artists, scientists and writers away from the confines of traditional institutions like the Royal Academy. Penrose organized the first exhibitions in ICA – *40 Years of Modern Art* and *40,000 Years of Modern Art* – to reflect his interest in primitivism and to draw links between the ancient and modern art. The exhibitions generated a positive climate for modern art among the general British public.

¹⁹ Thistlewood, David. 'The MoMA and the ICA: A Common Philosophy of Modern Art' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 29, no. 4 (Autumn 1989): 323.

that connected seamlessly the tribal, the folk and the modern in one continuum and sensibility.

In 1964 Archer reviewed Elwin's autobiography *Tribal World of Verrier Elwin*²⁰, describing the book as a handsome tribute, highlighting Elwin's research into the role of love and sex in tribal life and his translation of tribal songs.²¹ But his unpublished notes on the same subject, which Guha reproduces, provide us with another perspective – Archer's disappointment with Elwin's telling of his life story, which he describes as “not a declaration of genuine belief but just a bit of propaganda for his continued support by the Indian government.”²² Archer posed questions, perhaps to himself as much as to Elwin, on the relationship between a writer and his material, on the methods and ethics of a freelance do-gooder. He asked why the book lacked personal reactions on issues and people, on what made him tick, on how he saw himself and what made him write. Above all he questioned whether an Englishman can ever become truly Indian.²³

For Guha, these particular opinions, “a strange mixture of insight and invective”,²⁴ are useful points to investigate in his reworked version of Elwin's life. For me, they become instead a way of looking at the career and life of W G Archer.

Through Archer, we examine the particular trajectory of an art writer, positioned between the colonial and post-colonial phase of Indian history, and his relationship to the variety of materials that he unearthed, from the past and the present. He tackled these with various disciplinary tools of anthropology, history, art history and art criticism, delineating the contours of each discipline in the process. He worked from a position of authority, the venerable and equally vulnerable museologist and scholar involved in consolidating history and ultimately forming a canon or a master narrative.

Archer engaged with the past bringing to bear on it his own particular modernist subjectivity

²⁰ Verrier Elwin's autobiography, *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin*, was published posthumously in 1963 and won him the 1965 Sahitya Akademi Award in English Language.

²¹ Archer, W G. 'Converted by India', *Review of Tribal world of Verrier Elwin*. Reproduced in Guha, Ramachandra, *Savaging the Civilised Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999): 310. Originally published in *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 October, 1964.

²² Archer, W G. Undated notes by W G Archer in Mss. Eur. F. 236/266, IOL. Reproduced in Guha Ramachandra, *Savaging the Civilised Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999): 311.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid. Guha Ramachandra. *Savaging the Civilised Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999): 311.

while undertaking exacting research with empirical precision to allow for as precise dating and periodisation as possible. This was not an easy task given the lack of materials and many times the periodisation occurred through stylistic analysis, as in the case of Kalighat paintings. Later scholars like Dr Jyotindra Jain, while acknowledging the importance of Archer's path breaking work, have raised issues with his methodology and the history he constructed of a single homogenous style with a beginning, middle and end.²⁵

The relationship of the past to the present was an important part of this equation and by this time we have already a substantial history of the nationalist/orientalist response to the biased Eurocentric perceptions on Indian art. The ideologues E B Havell and A K Coomaraswamy had spent the early part of the twentieth century approaching ancient Indian art with new insights and transferring this vision to the role of art in present-day Indian society. There was the twin process of on one hand discovering and rewriting art history and on the other, prescribing a normative space for modern art and life in newly independent India.²⁶

The magazine *Marg* gives us a good sense of how central the question of Indian art and modes of history writing were to the current discourse even as it looked at modern architecture, urban planning and art practice.²⁷ The literal beginnings of this journal took place when Mulk Raj Anand returned from London in 1945 having completed his PhD from Oxford. In the same year he wrote *Apology for Heroism*, which while delineating his own journey, put forth the claim for humanism with faith in the creative imagination of man to transform himself and the world around. The core group of *Marg*, consisted of the Sri Lankan architect Minnette de Silva and her elder sister, the theatre activist, journalist and publisher, Anil, along with other writers, artists and intellectuals. The journal was supported by industrialists like J R D Tata and prime political figures like Jawaharlal Nehru. It saw itself

²⁵ Jain, Jyotindra. *Kalighat Painting Images from a Changing World* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt Ltd, 1999).

²⁶ Ernest Binfield Havell (1861–1934) was an influential British arts administrator and historian. He came to India as the Superintendent of Madras School of Art between 1884 and 1894. He then became the principal of the Government School of Art, Calcutta, for another decade. He combined forces with artist Abanindranath Tagore to develop art practice and art education that looked at Indian sources and art history, and this was the start of the Bengal School of Art. Together with Ceylonese oriental scholar A K Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) and social worker and nationalist figure Sister Nivedita (1867–1911) they developed the doctrine of cultural Swadeshi, foregrounding the spiritual India as a counterpoint to European materialism. Partha Mitter in his meticulously researched book *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850 - 1922, Occidental Orientations* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1994) speaks of how the three constructed this doctrine from different vantage points of the aesthetic (Havell), metaphysical (Coomaraswamy) and moral (Sister Nivedita).

²⁷ The quarterly art magazine *Marg*, literally translated as pathway, was first published in 1946, with noted writer, Mulk Raj Anand as its founding editor. The magazine was funded by J R D Tata of the Tata Group at its inception, and later, until 1986, it was mostly funded by the Tata Group companies. Mulk Raj Anand remained the editor until 1981 and more recently the noted art historian Pratapaditya Pal has taken over as editor.

as “answering the felt demand for the discussion of those problems of reconstruction in the actual building of India which had never been thought out before.”²⁸

If Anand saw *Marg* in the early years as a kind of populariser of the new, ‘authentic’ research being conducted in the discipline of art history in a manner which would allow contemporary artists to access enduring aesthetic values, then Archer, along with Karl Khandalvala, Moti Chandra and M S Randhawa, was the scholar carrying out that research. In an early editorial Anand wrote about his interest in using “art history as a tool of objectivity, outside biases and prejudices ... in search of a scientific outlook to the study of the past.”²⁹ A corrective lens was called for to move away from ideological commentaries on art and the use of religion as a basis of understanding form and turn the attention to the formal and sensuous qualities based on the “humanism rooted in the soil.”³⁰

The 1947-48 ceremonial exhibition *The Arts of India and Pakistan* at Burlington House, London and its subsequent version *Masterpieces of Indian Art*, at Government House, New Delhi in the winter of 1948 became a defining moment for this change in perception.³¹ Rudy Von Leyden reviewed the exhibition extolling praise on the curator K de B Codrington’s “direct aesthetic critical approach”³² to Indian art.

There is a space claimed for a modernist interest in history as a resource and a muse, as well as an internationalism and universalism that allowed for the direct response of the eye to the art of the past and of another culture. *Marg*’s reproduction of writer Adlous Huxley’s critical piece on the Taj Mahal is a classic example of this kind of gaze. Huxley described the

²⁸ Fisher, Marlene. *The Wisdom of the Heart, A Study of the works of Mulk Raj Anand* (New Delhi, Sterling Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1980): 185.

²⁹ Anand, Mulk Raj. ‘Editorial, On the Study of Indian Art’, *Marg*, vol. 1, no. 2, January 1947.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The much-publicized exhibition *The Arts of India and Pakistan* was organized by Royal Academy of Arts, London and held at Burlington House, November 29 – February 29, 1948, to mark the independence of India. The art historian and Victoria & Albert Museum curator, Kenneth de Burgh Codrington, was instrumental in bringing the exhibition together, which had artworks on loan from governmental and private collections in India in addition to works in British collections. Another version of the exhibition *Masterpieces of Indian Art* was held at Government House in New Delhi in 1948. Organised by V S Agarwala, it became, as Tapati Guha-Thakurta noted, “an enactment of the theme of a national art history – which ran from Indus, to Maurya, Sunga, Kushana, Gupta, Chola bronzes and medieval sculpture” and formed the nucleus of the National Museum. For more information on this historic exhibition please see Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. ‘Marking Independence: The Ritual of a National Art Exhibition’, in *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, no. 30-31, 1997, 89 – 114.

³² Leyden, Rudy Von. ‘The Crystal and the Fruit, Some Critical Notes on the Sculpture of Western India’, *Marg* vol. 5, no. 2, 1951. Here Leyden describes a new moment in the writing of Indian art history – no longer would the work be obscured by “the smokescreen of spiritualism”, that A K Coomaraswamy advocated. He praised the curator K de B Codrington’s position of “art before iconography” and noted that it had won more friends for Indian art in Britain than the ‘literary approach’ of the orientalist.

monument as a “disappointment” that speaks of “inordinate costliness... elegance of a very dry and negative kind.”³³ It was used strategically by Anand, even as he acknowledged Huxley’s biases against Islamic architecture, to stress the need for “sincere and objective criticism [that] might reveal flaws in certain old monuments which we have begun to accept blindly as sublime works.”³⁴ In the later editorial in 1969, Anand retracted from his earlier support of Huxley’s opinion, reconciling to the monument’s aesthetics, from “a process of maturity and without being bluffed by other people’s admiration or denigration.”³⁵ He ended the article by saying, “I am not content to look but I want to see.”³⁶

Despite Anand’s public self-pedagogy in the art of seeing, the visual experience of the past is very much premised on ‘looking’ in the early fifties. There was an interesting overlap in this direct confrontation with the erotic, foregrounded in both Archer’s writings, and *Marg*. Archer, the historian, is dazzled by the sculptures of Konarak and Khajuraho³⁷, which he notes were omitted in both E B Havell and Vincent Smith’s accounts of Indian history (“Of the erotic and sensual there was not a word.”³⁸). There are also the photo-essays of Raymond Burnier³⁹ and the exploration of Hindu erotic sculpture by Alain Daneilou⁴⁰ in the early issues that provide the viewer with a similar vision. The art historian Tapati Guha-Thakurtha has done some important research on the decades of the thirties and forties to look at positioning of the sensual female body at the centre of the Indian art tradition, and the larger repercussions this had on issues of art and morality in the cultural and political landscape.⁴¹

³³ Huxley, Aldous. ‘Aldous Huxley on Taj Mahal’, *Marg*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1950. There is already an established discourse on Taj Mahal by this time. It embodied an idealized vision of the ‘East’ for the colonial rulers, in particular Viceroy Curzon. The British administrator, who was in India between 1898 and 1905, cared deeply about Indian monuments and revived the Archeological Survey of India. He personally supervised the renovation of Taj Mahal, a massive project that was completed in 1908, and is even said to have stopped in Cairo on his return to England to procure a properly ‘Saracenic’ lamp to hang above the tomb chamber.

³⁴ Editorial comments on ‘Aldous Huxley on Taj Mahal’, *Marg*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1950.

³⁵ Anand Mulk Raj, ‘Shah Jehan: Architect or Lover’, *Marg*, vol. XXII no. 3, June 1969.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ The Sun temple in Konark, Orissa, was built in the 13th century and the Khajuraho temples were constructed over a span of 200 years (950 – 1150 AD) in central India. There was a renewed interest in these medieval temple complexes for their erotic sculptures in the forties and fifties. For more information on historical development of erotic motifs in ancient and medieval India, see Devangana Desai, *Erotic Sculpture of India: A Socio-Cultural Study*. New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1975.

³⁸ Archer, Mildred and W G. *India Served and Observed* (London: BACSA, 1994).

³⁹ The *Marg* vol. 2, no. 1 (February 1948) carried Raymond Burnier’s photographs on Konark, in arrangement with The Archeological Survey of India.

⁴⁰ Daneilou, Alain. ‘An Approach to Indian Sculpture’ in *Marg*, vol. 2, no. 1, December 1947.

⁴¹ Guha-Thakurtha, Tapati, ‘Art History and the Nude: On art, obscenity and sexuality in contemporary India’, in *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New York, New Delhi: Columbia University Press Permanent Black, 2004).

Meanwhile there was Archer's encounter with the more courtly style of Pahari miniatures in 1941. He writes on this period, "...we had just shifted to Patna. I was young, resolute and opinionated. I was excited by Cezanne, Picasso and Negro art, by the modern and primitive as against the classical and refined, I tended to scoff at what was exquisite or figurative. ... To miniatures I believed I was firmly allergic."⁴² Archer's actual experience of them when he saw the P C Manuk and G M Coles collection was quite different. "The Pahari pictures were an exact equivalent in Indian painting to English love poetry. In states of Kangra and Garhwal, painters employed flowing rhythmical line to convey nobility of love. They showed men and women in various states of love and portrayed with quiet tact the supreme moment of romance, 'the meeting of eyes'. Yet their treatment- and it was this that fascinated and intrigued me – was essentially poetic."⁴³

While the area of Rajput paintings had been opened up with the publication of A K Coomaraswamy's pioneering essay on the subject in 1916 and his subsequent catalogues on them for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the twenties, it was only in the forties that other researches began to appear. This had to do with the entry of the Pahari miniatures into the market, partly because the supply of Mughal miniatures been reduced to a trickle and also because the descendants of former ruling families of Punjab Hills began to liquidate their collections. It was an intensely competitive period of discovery as scholars like Karl Khandalvala, Moti Chandra, M S Randhawa, among others, began to investigate these paintings.

If the Kalighat paintings, a nineteenth century folk tradition, was for Archer so modern and yet so Indian, "produced by the influence of British culture and the rise of Calcutta as an industrial city",⁴⁴ these miniatures were untouched by any of these parameters – they belonged to feudal India, to the past. Archer was struck by their idealizations of romantic love and saw them as wish fulfilling expressions so that Indian feudal society could maintain its moral code. "They represented Rajput need for extramarital love, for love as romantic

⁴² Archer, W G. Introduction, *Visions of Courtly India, The Archer Collection of Pahari Miniatures* (Washington D C: International Exhibition Foundation, 1976-78).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Archer, W G. 'Kalighat Painting,' *Marg*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1951, unnumbered.

Also see Archer William, *Kalighat Painting* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1971) for more information on his position regarding Kalighat paintings. Archer was struck by the "bold simplification of form and powerful rhythm" of the folk form and it presented him with a powerful example of the successful integration of local tradition and modern art. His emphasis on the British influence on genesis of the style created controversy and was countered by historians like B N Mukherjee who argued that it was an indigenous style.

passion rather than love as experienced within strict frameworks of arranged marriages.”⁴⁵ The Pahari paintings seem represent a free, unrestricted space to explore the sensual, the poetic and the question of painting itself (which artists like Amrita Sher-Gil animate). Archer also found in them “many of the principles of distortion and simplification seen in modern art.”⁴⁶

Proceeding from this personal predilection, Archer created and fulfilled an art historical mandate as a museum curator when he took over the Indian collection at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Here in the role of Keeper between the years between 1949 and 1959, Archer fleshed out histories providing chronologies and background information on the paintings and works towards the cataloguing them, while striving for empirical exactitude. Through the fifties he produced small monographs on the different schools of miniature painting from Bundi, Kotah and Garhwal. Working as he did with scant material, Archer made critical studies based on stylistic and inscriptional grounds as well as patronage patterns. With his two-volume magnum opus *Indian Paintings from the Punjab Hills* in 1973, Archer assumed a position of authority on the subject, with the book providing an overview of the various styles practiced across 38 princely states.

At the time of the book’s publication, contemporary artists were reworking their relationship with indigenous pictorial traditions. In the issues of the artist magazine *Vrishchik* (1969-73), edited by Gulammohammed Sheikh and Bhupen Khakhar, there was an evident impatience with Archer’s modernist engagement and ambition to chart a definitive history. For the artists-writers this kind of engagement was problematic because it did not really account for the contemporary location from which these appropriations of the past were being made. Historical empiricism was also distrusted because the new materials that were being unearthed rendered the art historical claims shaky. For example, in the case of Archer, his formulations on state styles were undermined by findings of the young art historian B N Goswamy. Goswamy pointed to Archer’s obsession with discovering new schools of painting and naming them after patron cities without having the necessary convincing material. He placed counter-evidence on the family as the basis of style.⁴⁷

Amidst all this work on Pahari paintings, Kalighat style and tribal art, Archer published his

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Archer, Mildred and W G. *India Served and Observed* (London: BACSA, 1994).

⁴⁷ B N Goswamy first published his findings in ‘Pahari Painting: The Family as the Basis of Style’, *Marg*, vol. XXI, no. 4, September 1968.

singular book on Indian modern art in 1959. The book interestingly deals with the history of the first modern movements in Indian art – from the end of the nineteenth century until independence. In the early fifties there are few publications like *Modern Indian Painting* by Ramachandra Rao that looks at the regional contemporary art developments in areas like Indore, Madras, Calcutta, Bombay etc, but these are not substantial expositions like the one Archer developed on the works of four artists. He ordained them precursors to modern Indian art – Amrita Sher-Gil, Rabindranath Tagore, George Keyt and Jamini Roy.

Archer offered his own perspective while providing an overview to the discussions around art and nationality under way in the early twentieth century. “No modern Indian painting, it was seen, could possess contemporary validity unless it was both strongly modern and strongly Indian. But what kind of art, in actual practice, could possess these vital requirements? For the painter two courses were open. He might adopt modern art and then rely on his Indian nature to adjust it to Indian aims. Or, starting at the other end, he might employ an Indian style and confident that he was modern in outlook, remold it to his private purposes. In one case he would interpret India via modern art. In the other, he would use Indian art to be modern.”⁴⁸

Having made this rather open proposition to the Indian artist, Archer went on to say that with the artist no longer a unit in tradition, he was free to use whichever style that expressed his innermost feelings. This was the time powerful role models were being suggested to the artists – Mulk Raj Anand proposed his notion of ‘artist as hero’⁴⁹ and the art critic Rudy Von Leyden talked of the ‘artist as a fighter/rebel’.⁵⁰ The model of the artist that Santiniketan presented –working within a *gurukula* system in a self effacing style – was rejected. The prerequisite for a modern Indian artist was “confidence, a determination to cultivate original sensations and responses, and courage to express a personal ideal.”⁵¹

In an unpublished letter to Mulk Raj Anand dated 23 January, 1959, Archer wrote, “My book *India and Modern Art* is being published in February and I am sending you a copy. I am afraid it is bound to be rather controversial and may arouse displeasure in certain quarters. I have felt it necessary to delegate the neo-Bengal Abanindranath school to a rather lowly place but I am convinced what I have done is in accordance with what most modern-minded

⁴⁸ Archer, W G. *India and Modern Art* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1959).

⁴⁹ Anand, Mulk Raj. ‘The Artist as Hero’, *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, nos. 7 & 8, 1968: 1 – 6.

Anand wrote this on the occasion of the First Triennale in 1968.

⁵⁰ Leyden, Rudy Von. ‘The Age of Confusion’, *Design*, vol. 1, no. 10 (October 1957): 9 - 12, 23.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 35.

people think. I have also included a chapter on George Keyt which may not altogether be relished by those who take a rather narrow view of Indian national culture.”⁵²

Archer looked at the works of Rabindranath Tagore under the rubric of the unconscious, Amrita Sher-Gil for her redolent imagery of village India, Jamini Roy for his relationship with the primitive via his use of folk forms and the evocation of romance in the works of George Keyt. Time and again Archer returned to the angular geometry, the phallic images, the strong vertical lines in the work of the three male artists and seconded the disdain that Amrita Sher-Gil felt for the ‘weak, emaciated lines’ of the Bengal school. In the four artists, he found the suitable robust style and personality of the modern artist. Art historian Partha Mitter in *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850 - 1922, Occidental Orientations*, cudgels Archer’s methodology for reviewing the works of modern Indian artists. Archer, he noted, draws up a ledger of European influences used by the Indian artist and works his critique around what Mitter calls a set of ‘external considerations’.⁵³

In every aspect of his work, whether it is the miniatures, modern art or folk paintings, Archer has the mandate of a museum curator working towards the formation of the canon by historicizing and periodising art works. The modern art museums in India have not been able to fulfill this task of canon making, and yet there is the brief period in the early history of National Gallery of Modern Art, set up in 1954, where such an exercise does occur. Archer’s artists, with the replacement of Sri Lankan artist George Keyt with Indian cubist Gaganendranath Tagore, are enshrined as the first modernists of Indian art in the museum. I have discussed this in detail in my paper on the National Gallery of Modern Art⁵⁴ about how this happens, as much by design as default, when 96 paintings of Amrita Sher-Gil are partly donated and partly acquired by the nation in 1948. Archer’s configuration made its way into India’s first modern art museum, the four artists were emblems of a modernist practice that was progressive, cosmopolitan and in conversation with an international modernism. In 1954, when commissioned by the Ministry of Education to conduct a three-month survey of national, state and art galleries and provide suggestions for their better administration, Archer was full of praise for the Sher-Gil collection which he described as “a superb

⁵² Archer, W G. unpublished letter to M S Randhawa, 23 January 1959, in ‘File Correspondence with Dr W G Archer, May 1953 – 1959’, 301.16 R19C Chandigarh State Museum Library.

⁵³ Mitter, Partha. *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850 - 1922, Occidental Orientations* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁵⁴ Shivadas, Vidya. ‘Museumising Modern Art, NGMA: The Indian Case-Study’, to be published in upcoming volume tentatively titled *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: Museum Cultures of South Asia*, ed. Singh Kavita and Mathur Saloni, Routledge.

achievement, giving the Gallery a solid core of greatness.” At the same time, he stated candidly, “It has to be remembered that the actual number of living artists whose works really deserve to be represented is probably small and it takes a great deal of courage to recognize originality.”⁵⁵

W G Archer, the lone scholar was estranged from his beloved India in body but connected with it intensely and anxiously through his mind. His work in anthropology and art history has remained pioneering in the kind of first-hand research he undertook. But his positivist vision was tempered by a particular lens. Marlene Fisher, in her biography of Mulk Raj Anand, shares the writer’s predicament on his return from London in 1945, when he realized, “his hatred for imperialism was bound with his disgust for the cruelty and hypocrisy of Indian feudal life, with its caste, creeds, dead habits and customs, its restrictive religious rites and practices.”⁵⁶

The modern intellectual needed to create another space – an oasis of sensual experience away from both the colonial and the nationalist spiritualist discourse to reconcile modern India to the body. Taking his cue from the European avant-garde artists, he found it in the ‘love soaked’ Krishna paintings and in the marriage songs of the Gods and passed this message on to a generation of modern Indian painters.

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⁵⁵ File on W G Archer’s letter to Ashfaque Husain, F.3-112/54 – A.2, National Archives, Government of India, 1954, unpublished.

⁵⁶ Fisher, Marlene. *The Wisdom of the Heart, A Study of the works of Mulk Raj Anand* (New Delhi, Sterling Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1980): 35.

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Richard Bartholomew: Critic among Friends

"I have been looking through the negatives of Ram's [Kumar] paintings from 1956 to a little after 1963. These are little pieces of celluloid that hold the message of a man's expression over these years. I have some fifty of them and I am glad they are with me. In a sense possessing them is an expression of my belief in Ram's work."⁵⁷

There is this often circulated image of Archer travelling through the Kangra valley, with his close friends and colleagues M S Randhawa and Mulk Raj Anand, venerable middle-aged men in suits (Mulk Raj Anand in the Indian version of the *bandgala*) inspecting and surveying their materials, making careful notes on the landscape, the private collections, costumes, the folklore and the people. Compare this with the photographs of Richard Bartholomew, recently reproduced in *A Critic's Eye*,⁵⁸ of himself and his artist-friends M F Husain, Ram Kumar and Biren De. We are now no longer in the world of the specialist, the scientist/aesthete/investigator, who travels to far away regions in search of his materials. We are now in the midst of a generation of young men, some thoughtful and melancholic, and others cocky and confrontational, living, breathing and making modern art. "And as art was himself, always,"⁵⁹ wrote Bartholomew in his touching obituary on the artist Sailoz Mookherjea⁶⁰. The critic is very much part of this generation, a self-reflexive renaissance man, who paints, writes poetry and takes photographs apart from writing the most insightful art reviews in newspapers and journals.

Richard Bartholomew (1926 –85) Poet, photographer, painter, art critic

- * Came to India from Burma in 1942.
- * Wrote art criticism in important national dailies like *Thought*, *The Indian Express*, *The Times of India* from 1958 onwards.
- * Co-authored the monograph *Husain* with Shiv Kapur in 1971.
- * Published book of poems *The Story of Siddhartha's Release* in 1972.
- * Took on Institutional roles from the sixties:
 - 1960 – 63 Director of Kunika Art Centre, New Delhi.
 - 1966 – 73 Curator of the first museum of Tibetan Art, Tibet House, New Delhi.
 - 1977 – 85 Secretary, Lalit Kala Akademi.

Bartholomew's Position

- * Spoke to a newly independent nation.
- * Writing in print media, mediating between high art and the lay reader.
- * A functional critic –constructive criticism to "condition the expression of the artist, so that personal value is metamorphosed into form."
- * Part of the ethos that supported the modern movement and made an urgent case for it.
- *The support played out in the public sphere – of the print media and state institutions – marking a privileged space for modern within the national.

⁵⁷ Bartholomew, Richard. 'The Abstract Principle in the Paintings of Ram Kumar,' *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, vols. 19 & 20, 1973, 9 – 14.

⁵⁸ Sen, Aweek and Pablo Bartholomew. *A Critic's Eye Richard Bartholomew*, New Delhi: Photoink, 2010. The publication accompanied an exhibition of Richard Bartholomew's rarely-seen photographs.

⁵⁹ Bartholomew, Richard. 'The world of Sailoz Mookherjea', *Roop-Lekha* (reference missing).

⁶⁰ Sailoz Mookherjea was born in 1907 in Kolkata. He was hailed as an important mentor by Delhi artists like J Swaminathan and Ram Kumar. He taught at the Sarada Ukil School, New Delhi (1945-7) and at Delhi Polytechnic (1948-60). Mainly a colourist, he was known for his landscapes. He died in 1960.

In an interesting editorial on present-day art criticism that appeared in *Marg* in 1951, the European art critic and co-editor of art periodical *Quandrum*, J P Hodin⁶¹, laid out the role of the modern art critic – best exemplified for him by a generation of men like Roger Fry, Herbert Read and Herwarth Walden who were *fighting* for modern principles in their own countries. Dismissing the need for objectivity, Hodin noted that these critics made a passionate case for modern art among the broader public.

From the late nineteenth century, there was already a nascent trajectory of art criticism that arose with the establishment of the art exhibitory circuit, the salons and art societies in Simla, Bombay, Calcutta etc with newspapers like *The Times of India* carrying exhibition reviews. It might be useful to begin by looking at the writings of Bartholomew's immediate predecessor, the Austrian critic Rudy Von Leyden⁶² who immigrated to Bombay in 1933 and began to review in *The Times of India*, also contributing cartoons to *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. For Leyden the art critic's writings are poised between engaging the emerging patronage system of the state and the market, as well as fulfilling a larger goal of acculturating uninitiated audiences into modern art and, by extension, modern life. Leyden's reviews are an interesting mix of the exhibitory circuits – which in Bombay were limited to Bombay Art Society Annual Exhibitions, the Sir J J School of Art exhibitions and the more newly opened Bombay Art Society Salon – and reviews of artists' works. Thinking back on his three decades of writing, Leyden stated in an interview with Eunice D'Souza in 1978, "When I wrote reviews it was with a definite bias for new talents, trying to give them the benefit of constructive criticism while I just reported other exhibitions. This got me many enemies among established artists and the public.... I think the reviews, the talk about art, the writing about art, the war effort, the one-man shows all came together and stimulated a new atmosphere. I think we educated the public by sustained art criticism."⁶³

The exhibitory space was of great consequence to Leyden and keeping this in mind, he scrutinized exhibitions. He was critical of the democratic principle of hanging every entry

⁶¹ J P Hodin (1905 – 1995) was a critic based in England who introduced German artists like Emile Nolde, Max Beckmann and Paul Klee to the British public. He won the 1954 international prize for art criticism at Venice Biennale for his work on surrealism and Francis Bacon. Publications include *The Dilemma of Being Modern*, 1956.

⁶² Rudy Von Leyden was the chief public relations officer at Volkart Brothers, a Swiss trading company based in India, and arrived from Vienna in 1938 to escape Jewish persecution by the Nazis. Along with German émigrés, Walter Langhammer and E. Schlesinger, he was instrumental in activating the Bombay art scene and mentored the Progressive Artists' Group. Rudy and his younger brother, the sculptor A R Leyden, founded The Artists' Aid Centre in 1950 as a meeting place for artists and art lovers with regular exhibitions, lectures and film screenings.

⁶³ Leyden, Rudy Von. quoted in 'Early Bombay Art Scene' by Eunice De Souza, *The Times of India*, March 15, 1978. Reproduced in Dalmia Yashodhara, *The Making of Modern Indian Art: The Progressive* (New Delhi: Oxford, 2001): 62.

regardless of merit in the Bombay Art Society Annual exhibitions. He remedied this while serving on the selection committee of the exhibition in the late thirties-early forties by rejecting 1200 entries. In the controversy that ensued, the jury was accused of cheating the artists and being partisan, and finally an exhibition of rejected pictures was staged (which Leyden promptly reviewed calling it the 'chamber of horrors'!⁶⁴).

In a letter to the editor printed as a rejoinder, one of the anguished artists wrote, "Criticism today is really a combine and has become a sort of organised affair. A cultured critic is one who guides public opinion in the realm of art. Unfortunately for us though, we have several so-called art critics in this country... I should like to know how many there are who could be considered capable and cultured, and upon whose criticisms one [the artist] can build."⁶⁵ Even as he supported individual artists, K H Ara⁶⁶ in particular, who for Leyden represented a striking example of the proletariat talent waiting to be unearthed in this country, and groups like Young Turks and Bombay Progressives Artists' Group, his reviews carried criticisms of them as well. For example he made note of F N Souza's lack of discipline and his reliance on temperament and quick inspiration, and K K Hebbar's oil paintings that revealed a lack of exposure to a cross-section of art. The great spiritual problem for artists in India, Leyden remarked, is the problem of orientation, belonging and the ability to negotiate between tradition and modernity.⁶⁷

As an aside one must also mention the role of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* from the fifties onwards, first under the editorship of the Irishman C R Mandy and then A S Raman, as an important forum for the dissemination of modern Indian art, publishing reproductions of art works from all over India. In Delhi, there was also the more congenial Charles Fabri, who having moved from Lahore in 1947, where he was pursuing a career as an archeologist and a museum curator, wrote art and dance reviews in *The Statesman*. Fabri's attention was focused on building a sound art audience: "Every cultured citizen ought to know something

⁶⁴ Leyden, Rudy Von. 'Art Exhibitions, What Use – What Purpose?', *Trends*, June 1946. Reproduced in Dalmia Yashodhara, *The Making of Modern Indian Art: The Progressive* (New Delhi: Oxford, 2001): 264.

⁶⁵ Rao, 'Letter to Editor', *The Evening News*, March 8, 1940. In scrapbook Rudy Von Leyden at Archives, Department of Art History, Faculty of Fine Arts, M S University.

⁶⁶ K H Ara was a founder-member of the Progressive Artists' Group, Bombay, along with F N Souza, M F Husain, S H Raza, S K Bakre and H A Gade. A self-taught artist who started out as a car cleaner, Ara was known for his long engagement with the female nude. He held his first solo exhibition in 1942 and received the Bombay Art Society's Gold Medal in 1952. He was a member of the managing committee of the Bombay Art Society and served on the selection and judging committees of the Lalit Kala Akademi.

⁶⁷ Leyden, Rudy Von. 'Artists in the New Republic', Republic Day Supplement, *The Times of India*, January 26, 1950. Reproduced in Dalmia Yashodhara, *The Making of Modern Indian Art: The Progressive* (New Delhi: Oxford, 2001): 285.

about the arts and monuments of the past and no person who deserves to be called a man of culture to whom art is completely a closed book.”⁶⁸ He shared a special affiliation with artists like Satish Gujral, B C Sanyal, P N Mago and Amrita Sher-Gil who were known to him in his Lahore days. He continues reviewing until his death in 1968, in *The Statesman* but also in a host of other publications like *Indian Culture, Design, Illustrated Weekly of India, March of India* and *Rhythm*.

We return to Bartholomew – also an émigré critic, this time from Japanese-occupied Burma, who arrived in New Delhi in 1942. India became his home as he studied English literature at St Stephen’s College and began his career writing reviews for *Thought* magazine from 1955 and then becoming the art critic for *The Indian Express* (1958-1962) and *The Times of India*. If Leyden was postulating both for the need for stringent self-criticism and external criticism necessary for artistic growth in the forties, then Bartholomew pitched the category of functional criticism – “...valid constructive criticism that will condition the expression of the artist, so that personal value is metamorphosed into form”⁶⁹ – for the generation of the fifties and sixties.

Thierry De Duve, while paying homage to Clement Greenberg, the critic, notes, “To write ‘true’, for an art critic, is perhaps above all to interject this quality of frankness, emanating from a style which, while blending factual information and value judgments in the same breath, still stresses the heterogeneousness of the registers with crystalline clarity, using none of those falsely modest provisos such as ‘in my opinion’....”⁷⁰

Bartholomew perhaps comes closest to this kind of art criticism that took over the public domain of the newspapers, practiced by stalwarts like Clement Greenberg, Andre Malraux and Harold Rosenberg, among others. There is no hard sell, no excesses of language, only a much needed conversation among equals - the critic, artist and reader – about the process of painting as it is taking place. This deserved attention because, as Bartholomew asserted, “Contemporary Indian painting is something we ought to be proud of – because it belongs

⁶⁸ Fabri, Charles. ‘Art Appreciation for India,’ *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, no. 6, 1967.

⁶⁹ Bartholomew, Richard. ‘Criticism and Contemporary Indian Painting – I.’ *Thought*, June 15, 1957. Reproduced in *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, vol. 34, 1987, 36 – 39.

⁷¹ Bartholomew, Richard. ‘Modern Indian Painting and its Dilemmas,’ *Cultural Forum*, vol. 1, no. 1, September 1958, 53 – 65.

uniquely to this generation. ...For here is recorded the sympathy, the social criticism, the discerning vision of a generation of people who grew up with the critical and liberal years."⁷¹ There is a great sense of pleasure in reading Bartholomew's text, of belonging to that utopian moment in the nation's history. It presents one with the sense of immediacy – of standing in front of an art work, of looking at it closely, of being present in a time. "I knew one thing then, intuitively – that art criticism to be real had to live a life of words.... he [Sailoz] knew that painting to be real had to live the life of an inner necessity,"⁷² continues Bartholomew in his homage to Mookherjea.

From his vantage point of writing in the 1950s, Bartholomew dealt with the charge of derivative-ness made against Indian artists by invoking what Homi Bhabha theorized as the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same but not quite)⁷³. "No painter today can be ignorant of the trends in the West without being poorer... To go through the essential paces he must repeat something of the achievements of the Europeans. It is a question of necessity, not of design,"⁷⁴ he writes, in a matter of fact manner, stressing the need for this transitional moment that would make way for a diversity of practices beyond the strictures of national and traditional.

Thus he explained the artists' use of expressionist figurative painting of the late forties as a strategy to break the association between the figure and its representational meanings, which was a pragmatic response to the current situation. The artists, according to Bartholomew, used the figure as a kind of symbol, which was dropped by the sixties when there was no longer any need to hold on to it while continuing a kind of expressionist symbolist language. Gulammohamed Sheikh, while speaking on the impact of Expressionism on the Progressive Artists Group at the Lalit Kala Seminar in 1976, agreed that the movement provided Indian artists with a form and style that they adapted eclectically. Given the climate across the country, 'looking outward' was perhaps their only alternative.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Bartholomew, Richard. 'Modern Indian Painting and its Dilemmas,' *Cultural Forum*, vol. 1, no. 1, September 1958, 53 – 65.

⁷² Bartholomew Richard, 'The world of Sailoz Mookherjea', *Roop-Lekha* (reference missing).

⁷³ Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994): 86.

Bhabha's use of the term 'colonial mimicry' which he defines as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite".

⁷⁴ Bartholomew, Richard, 'On Modern Indian Painting,' *Thought*, August 18, 1956. Reproduced in *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, vol. 34, 1987, 47.

⁷⁵ Sheikh Gulammohammed, Unpublished paper 'Impact of Expressionism on Progressive Artists Group', presented at Lalit Kala Akademi seminar *Expressionism and its Impact on Modern Indian Art*. The two-day seminar was in collaboration with National Gallery of Modern Art, which was hosting the exhibition *Original*

Bartholomew was without doubt a partisan. He was prejudiced against the Bengal school and clearly made a case for modernist artists like M F Husain, Ram Kumar and Satish Gujral. Medium was an important determinant for him. In the twenties the ideologue of the Bengal School, Sir James Cousins⁷⁶, lodged the essential difference between the spiritual East versus the material West in the kind of materials used – oils versus watercolours. He supported the Bengali artists for their choice of colour, form and small format work in the context of finding their spatial universe. Bartholomew's distaste for the school was precisely because of these qualities and he even faulted Rabindranath Tagore for not painting in oils which would have added further to the spectrum of painting. The materiality of oils was an important part of the modern experience for Bartholomew, an abiding metaphor for depth and tangibility.

In the sixties, like the other committed modernists, Bartholomew became immersed in the issue of abstract art – its validity and place in the modern scene. Already by 1959, there was a movement towards abstraction among practitioners with the artist Ambadas organising the first-ever group exhibition of non-representational paintings in Bombay. This is followed by the formation of Group 1890⁷⁷ in 1962, consisting of artists like Jeram Patel, J Swaminathan, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Raghav Kaneria, Himmat Shah, Jyoti Bhatt, among others. In the sixties and seventies, Indian artists also come in contact with American Abstract Expressionism, via the J D Rockefeller III Fund that made scholarships available to them for residencies in New York. This culminated with the official exhibition of modern American paintings titled *Trends in American Painting* which travelled to India in 1967. Organised by MoMA, the exhibition also brought noted modernist critic Clement Greenberg

German Expressionist Graphics, March 11-April 9, 1976. The seminar included speakers like L P Sihare, Krishen Khanna and S K Sharma. Over the years, Lalit Kala Akademi has held regular seminars on a wide range of issues – Art Education (1956), Architecture (1959), Modern Painting and sculpture – Old Myths and New Myths (1968), Exhibition Policy of Lalit Kala Akademi (1976) as well as artists' conferences. Much of these discussions provide the editorial content for the journal *Lalit Kala Contemporary*.

⁷⁶ James Henry Cousins (1873 –1956) was an Irish writer, playwright, actor, critic, editor, teacher and poet. Influenced by the teachings of Madame Blavatsky, Cousins made his way to Madras in 1915, on the invitation of Annie Besant, and became the President of the Theosophical Society. He was closely associated to the advocates of the Bengal School and travelled all over India assessing the cultural situation, mobilizing artists and the public to set up art institutions. He was appointed art advisor to the Government of Travancore and was the force behind the Sri Chitra Art Gallery, Trivandrum that opened in 1935.

⁷⁷ Group 1890, comprising of Jyoti Bhatt, Raghav Kaneria, Himmat Shah, G M Sheikh, Ambadas, S G Nikam, Jeram Patel, Eric Bowen, Rajesh Mehra, Reddeppa Naidu, Balkrishna Patel and J Swaminathan, was formed in Bhavnagar, Gujarat, in August 1962. These artists, led by J.Swaminathan, were interested in an abstraction that emphasised gestural mark-making and the numinous image. They experimented with unconventional materials.

to India and at a symposium he spoke rather bluntly about the 'lack of exportable art in India!'⁷⁸

The *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 7 & 8 presents us with a lively figurative versus abstract art debate among artists and critics. There are artists like Sankho Chowdhury, J Sultan Ali and Jehangir Sabavala who argue for the figurative, while others like Geeta Kapur locate its ascendancy within a historical moment in European art, which would, at some point, be superseded by another such art movement. Most others sidestep the debate either arguing in a generalized manner about all art being abstract and figurative, or positioning it particularly, like in the case of K G Subramanyan, as a refusal to be drawn into the ideological polarities prevalent in the western art world and, to align, instead with indigenous worldviews that made use of both principals.⁷⁹

On his part, Bartholomew wanted to rid viewers of the rigid classifications and categories operating within modern art in general, and the rise of abstract art presented him with such an opportunity. In his essay on Ram Kumar he wrote, "Abstract painting is neither more profound nor more complex than naturalistic or expressionistic painting. One has to read an Indian miniature from top to bottom, and diagonally to be able to see that though the meaning may be literary, the significance that we derive from seeing the storm sky, the flight of the herons, or the groves of blossoming trees, for instance, is only part of the total vision that we experience. The colour scheme and the arrangements of form etc., are factors and qualities which constitute the theme and which the theme, as such, articulates. The 'memorableness' of the miniature is, in fact, an aesthetic experience which is fundamentally and essentially abstract."⁸⁰

Bartholomew made note of the growing distance between the progressives and the subsequent generation of artists, who primarily belonged to Group 1890, which had burst on to the scene – "one having become set (in hierarchy) and the other getting set (for revolution)."⁸¹ He was convinced that the new generation had more in common with the predecessors than they would care to admit and he looked more for continuities than

⁷⁸ J Swaminathan. 'The New Promise', reproduced in *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, no. 40, Special Issue on J Swaminathan, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, March 1995, 19.

⁷⁹ See 'Figurative Art Since Independence - Figurative to Abstract and Beyond', *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 7 & 8 (1968).

⁸⁰ Bartholomew, Richard. 'The Abstract Principle in the Paintings of Ram Kumar,' *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 19 & 20, 1973, 12.

⁸¹ Bartholomew, Richard. 'The Baroda Boys,' *Thought*, September 24, 1966.

disjuncture. In a beautiful review on J Swaminathan, Bartholomew described the maverick artist's predilection for mystical and aesthetic propositions while the works pointed in another direction of painterly resolution. Describing the current state of Swaminathan's works, which had come to be through a close study of V S Gaitonde's method of roller painting, Bartholomew noted, "I see his struggle. His implied mysticism does not trouble me... The paintings don't say this or that – they are Swaminathan in one cycle of his being, of being a painter here and now."⁸²

Even as his writings were very much hinged on the formal incursions made by the artists, Bartholomew's reviews provide one with a keen sense of the larger exhibitory and institutional contexts. In his article on the art scene in Delhi, he painted a colourful picture of art societies like AIFACS and Delhi Silpi Chakra and discussed the importance of the exhibitions of Nicholas Roerich, George Keyt and M F Husain in the late forties-early fifties for their seminal pointers to artists on how to rework associations with the literary and the pastoral in a new and modern idiom.

He keenly followed the activities of the Lalit Kala Akademi, set up in 1954 as an autonomous art organization governed by artists, scholars and government nominees.⁸³ He urged the institution time and again to take a position regarding the art scene. In 1959 when the Lalit Kala Akademi split its annual exhibition into three sections – academic realist, oriental and modern – arguing for adequate representation, Bartholomew wrote a vociferous critique. Reading it as a conspiracy on the part of the traditionalists to take over the Akademi, he noted, "There is each year a self-conscious attempt on part of the judges and on part of the selection committee to present specimens of neoclassical styles of painting despite the fact that Bengal school has been dead for over a decade."⁸⁴ He asked for judges to make their selections more transparent by submitting a detailed report. He lamented that with the thousand pieces of art at their disposal, the judges ought to use the forum to comment on the trends, tendencies and influences on art practices, instead of just representing diversity. He added that if plastic arts in this country had to progress, an annual diagnosis by scholars, historians and creative artists had to be made. He concluded that by patronising all and sundry, LKA had upset values and confused the picture of contemporary art in India.

⁸² Bartholomew, Richard. 'The Swaminathan Cycle,' *Thought*, May 14, 1966.

⁸³ LKA had a wide-ranging set of mandates – organising exhibitions and equally bringing foreign exhibitions to India, a publication programme, thematic and artist seminars as well as a project to copy murals and survey the conditions of indigenous craftsman. The annual National Exhibition of Art began in 1956.

⁸⁴ Bartholomew, Richard. 'The Akademi and Contemporary Art,' *Design*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1959.

From the sixties onwards he too was absorbed into art institutions – first as the director of a private gallery Kunika Art Centre between 1960 and 1963, and later as the Secretary of Lalit Kala Akademi from 1977 until his death in 1985. The intermediate years were spent as the curator of the first museum of Tibetan Art at the Tibet House, New Delhi.

In 1973, he decided to test out this proposition of the exhibition as an evaluative text and a space for diagnosis, and took on the role of one-person committee for the National Exhibition of Art. He made the difficult choice to work from within the institution, because he noted, that the only way of ending the politics and factionalism would be to “define the true status of art and a finely selected national exhibition presented one such concrete possibility.”⁸⁵ It is another matter that the exhibition did not develop this way with senior artists demanding that the Akademi restructure the competitive nature of the exhibition and drop the awards.

In another curated exhibition of Indian art in the same year, organised by Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) to commemorate India’s 25th year of Independence at multiple venues in the US, Bartholomew faced a critical and condescending American press. His carefully selected exhibition, which he described as international in idiom and unmistakably Indian in sensibility, bought modernists F N Souza, Tyeb Mehta, S H Raza and M F Husain in the same exhibitory platform with younger practitioners like Jeram Patel, A Ramachandran, G R Santhosh and J Swaminathan. Geeta Kapur, in a newspaper article evaluating the American response to the exhibition, made note of the oversimplified viewpoints of the American critics, who either tried to pin down Indianness to the ‘obvious symbolism’ of G R Santosh’s neo-tantric imagery or reviewed the works as part of a modernist tradition but in a derivative manner. She pointed to the need to re-evaluate contemporary art on “terms derived from our context and consciousness.”⁸⁶

It was clear that the abiding faith in modernism and internationalism of the previous generation was now replaced with post-colonial discourse. The stage was set for a politically charged debate among the art community and the site of this struggle would not be lodged within but often against the benign equivocal arbitration of the state institutions. It is tragic that Bartholomew spent the last few years of his life trying to reform the LKA but ended up

⁸⁵ Bartholomew, Richard. ‘Prospects for a National Exhibition’, *The Hindustan Times*, August 11, 1973

⁸⁶ Kapur, Geeta. ‘Foreign Response to Indian Art’, source missing, July 1 1973, From Press Clippings at Archive, Department of Art History, Faculty of Fine Arts, M S University.

embittered by its unending politics and bureaucracy.

While discussing the time perspective required on the critical scene, K G Subramanyan recounts Abanindranath Tagore's insights on the matter. Tagore, in his Bageshwari lecture titled *Mat O Mantra*, points to the two fundamental kinds of art writing – *Mat* or dogma which is time-bound and *Mantra* which are timeless, fundamental insights.⁸⁷ How does a piece of criticism fit into both these registers? In case of Bartholomew, the critic compatriot, by belonging firmly to a moment, even as it outran its time.

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⁸⁷ Subramanyan, K G. *Moving Focus Essays on Indian Art* (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi: 1978): 49.

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J Swaminathan: In a State of Constant Revolution

“Now we were getting a little fed up with this kind of crap. We already had Raza and Padamsee talking of the centrality of Paris school and Gujral fulminating against easel painting itself and upholding mural art as the only thing after his sojourn in Mexico as a student of Siqueiros. Now New York was being added to the list. Some of us thought that it was time to call a halt to such nonsense and rethink the scene and situation.”⁸⁸

In the ideologically charged decade of the sixties, the stage was set for protracted discussions on the relationship between art and identity, where the search for authenticity and cultural essence took on urgency in the face of a growing third-world consciousness and other political developments of world-wide students’ unrest, the Negritude movement etc. Geeta Kapur notes that the polemics around Indian-ness and modernity and internationalism had moved away from the earlier chauvinistic modes and there was a “readmission of the quest at a subtle level [which] has opened up the potential for new organization and uniqueness in contemporary Indian art.”⁸⁹

The churning of the sixties would fructify into what Kapur in the early seventies would define as indigenism - the imperative struggle for the assertion of “a nation’s history, tradition, its surviving culture and its environment” in a post-colonial context.⁹⁰

It was a proliferating scene with artists receiving international exposure but also equally seeking replenishment from Indian sources – J Swaminathan was turning to indigenous sources like Indian miniatures and tantric and tribal images to understand their approach to space and symbolism, K G Subramanyan was aligning with the craft traditions of India

J Swaminathan (1926 – 1994)
painter, critic, institution builder

- * 1943 – 1953 Political activist, member of Congress Socialist Party and Communist Party of India.
- * Art critic for *Link* from 1958 onwards (writing on and off).
- * Instrumental in forming the artist collective *Group 1890* in 1962.
- * 1966 – 67 Editor of short-lived magazine *Contra '66*.
- * Received the first Nehru Fellowship for his project *The Significance of Traditional Numen to Contemporary Art* in 1968.
- * Set up the Roopankar Museum, at Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal in 1982.

SWAMINATHAN’S POSITION

- * From the vantage point of the ideologically charged sixties.
- * Artist as critic/ ideologue: moving from criticism into self-criticism.
- * Personality and positionality made visible through practice and writing at a time when national – modern relationship was being recalibrated.
- * Staging rupture - oppositional mode taken into the institutional and discursive realm.
- * Countering idea of modern with notion of contemporaneity, envisioning an institution around this.

⁸⁸ Swaminathan, J. ‘The Cygan An Auto-bio Note’, in *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 40, Special Issue on J Swaminathan (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995): 10.

⁸⁹ Kapur, Geeta. ‘In Quest of Identity: Art & Indegenism in post-colonial culture with special reference to contemporary Indian painting,’ *Vrishchik*, Ed. Gulammohammed Sheikh and Bhupen Khakhar, Baroda: 4 Residency Bungalow, University Office Compound, 1973.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

in terms of techniques, processes, materials and language, Bhupen Khakhar was mining the vast resources of popular culture and K C S Paniker was referring to calligraphy and the format of traditional manuscript scrolls.

This was also a generation of artists that would turn to writing to supplement their positions, arguments and polemics. Gulammohammed Sheikh, already a Gujarati poet of repute (for his early use of free verse and common parlance), began to write from 1958 onwards, beginning with a series on the history of art for the Gujarati cultural magazine *Vishwa Manav*, edited by one of his literary mentors, Bhogilal Gandhi. There was also K G Subramanyan who was articulating his position through lectures, articles and reviews which would be compiled together in publications from the late seventies onwards. The sixties was also a time for artist magazines - Paniker began *Art Trends* from his visionary institution Cholamandal in Madras and Sheikh and Khakhar collaborated to edit *Vrishchik* from Baroda.

There was also J Swaminathan, artist, ideologue, art critic and later institution builder, who began his career as an art critic for the weekly magazine *Link* in 1958 and went on to edit, among other things, the highly controversial and short-lived artist magazine *Contra '66*. Bartholomew's position of the necessary division between the artist and the critic – the former concerned with the 'pragmatics' of practice and the latter concerned with the theories of and in art – was done away with by this sparkling, combative and contradictory artist voice. He was interestingly located – in terms of age being closer to the Progressive Artists yet, given his late start as a painter. Ideologically he sided with the next generation of artists, that he banded together to form Group 1890 in 1962. Swaminathan used his polemical writings to challenge prevailing art practices, discourses on internationalism, modernism and tradition, and demolishing and equally building art institutions.

Stepping out of the hermetic space that the Bombay progressives earmarked for art in their revised manifesto of 1949 (absolute freedom to realize 'pure intrinsic art'), Swaminathan's 1962 manifesto for the Group 1890 foregrounded the artist's self at the heart of the creative process. In the tradition of the Surrealists, he declared the creative act as an unfolding of the artist's subjectivity. Geeta Kapur notes that "the attraction to material/occult/ritual signs [of

the members of the group]... came to be situated with peculiar aptness in a visual culture of iconic forms still extant in India.”⁹¹

In Swaminathan’s writings, as in the early writings of Geeta Kapur, you see the influence of the Mexican poet and Ambassador to India (1962 – 68) Octavio Paz. A great friend and mentor of Group 1890, Paz wrote the introduction for the group’s first and only exhibition in 1963, which was opened by none other than Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. It was Paz who encouraged Swaminathan to publish *Contra ’66*, given his own interest in publishing art and political magazines *Plural* and *Vuelta* through the seventies and it was Paz’s brilliant book *The Labyrinth of Solitude* that proved crucial in providing frameworks for the indigenist movement here, by offering the parallel case study of the splintered Mexican identity and the need to relate to the past, to history and to cultural origins, so that one could inhabit the present with confidence and an understanding of our place. The past was no longer a modernist muse but interlinked to and actively shaping the present.

Perhaps it was Swaminathan’s initial years, steeped in politics as a card holding member of the Congress Socialist Party and later Communist Party of India (1943 – 53), that made his writings bristle with rhetoric. In any case by the time of the 1959 exhibition *Trends in Modern Indian Art*, organised by a group of 20 artists to protest against the Lalit Kala Akademi’s National Exhibition, Swaminathan was convinced that the progressives were showing signs of fatigue and were stuck in craftsmanship. Apart from the works of Biren De and Ram Kumar, he wrote of most exhibits as a “rehash of what modern western art has created in the last half century.”⁹²

His sympathies clearly lay with the younger artists and he took the other critics to task for not recognizing the promise of artists like Arpita Dutta (later Singh) when she showed as part of the first exhibition of *Unknowns* in 1962, or bypassing the works of Rajesh Mehra, Katiyal and Raj Jain in a Silpi Chakra exhibition for the ‘repetitive’ works of Ram Kumar and K S Kulkarni. It was also not possible, for Swaminathan, to imagine that a critic could be sympathetic to the works of both generations for their aesthetics, as he described it, were at total war. And it was up to art writing to create the sense of disjuncture.

⁹¹ Kapur Geeta. *When was Modernism Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000): 307.

⁹² Swaminathan, J. ‘Trends in Modern Indian Art, 1959, Neither Here Nor There’, *Link*, February 1, 1959. Reproduced in *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 40, Special Issue on J Swaminathan (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995): 36.

But the cudgels with the progressives was merely strategic, a clearing of the stage to speak for another generation to emerge. Swaminathan's real grouse, like the progressives, lay with the Bengal school artists and what he termed "the stifling pall of eclecticism that they had unleashed in Indian art."⁹³

This is the same time that K G Subramanyan was patiently working out, both in his writings and through his pedagogy, modes of interaction with various folk traditions. Working against Swaminathan's evaluation of the Santiniketan experiments with language as chauvinistic revivalism, Subramanyan conducted a reappraisal of the work of his mentors Ram Kinker Baij, Benode Behari Mukherjee, and Nandalal Bose. He pointed to their negotiation with tradition as a "complex of situational factors", or what he termed "work-circuit."⁹⁴ Holding up the essential difference between an insider and outsider's view of tradition, Subramanyan stressed the former's right to access and work imaginatively through its impulses. Inverting the axis of tradition from a vertical linear formation to a horizontal field, Subramanyan described the contribution of the artist in "how he orchestrates these together for his own purpose and give them a kind of irresistible life."⁹⁵

Group 1890 was formed in Bhavnagar in 1962 and in its manifesto the emphasis remained on 'unfettered creative expression' as a direct manifestation of the artist's personality, inner life, on experimentation and exploration of materials and experiences, away from the stranglehold of the intellect. Jeram Patel's paintings, tortured scorched pieces of wood, became the emblem for its contrary aesthetics. "The images are like primeval deities, strangely calm yet ominous, casting their totemic spell on the viewer, disturbing, threatening, pulling him inexorably into the world of impulsive responses, releasing him of fetish of reason and releasing him into the realm of sensations,"⁹⁶ wrote Swaminathan on Patel's work from his 1962 exhibition.

His little magazine *Contra '66* appeared in 1966-67 and its opening issues were reviewed in issues of *Lalit Kala Contemporary* by Rudy Von Leyden as the "oppositional artist's voice to

⁹³ Swaminathan, J. 'Birth of a Movement', *Link*, September 1, 1962. Reproduced in *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 40, Special Issue on J Swaminathan (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995): 29.

⁹⁴ Subramanyan, K G. *The Living Tradition, Perspectives on Modern Indian Art* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 1987): 9.

⁹⁵ Ibid. Introduction

⁹⁶ Swaminathan, J. 'Painter with Blow-Flame', *Link*, December 30, 1962. Reproduced in *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 40, Special Issue on J Swaminathan (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995): 28.

the establishment.”⁹⁷ 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. Here he printed a rejoinder to Ram Kumar’s accusation that the new generation had not matured as quickly as the artists of the forties and fifties, with his use of the term contemporaneity to reiterate that the present generation’s interest was in the now. *Contra* ’66 was equally quickly aborted when leading artists told Swaminathan it was “unethical” and that “he had no right to both paint and write on other people’s work.”⁹⁸

In 1968, Swaminathan was the first Indian artist to be awarded the two-year Nehru Fellowship for his project *The Significance of Traditional Numen to Contemporary Art*. He shifted his attention from the contemporary art scene to construct what Geeta Kapur termed the ‘idealized other’ in the tribal artist. It is the *adivasi* that now is valourised and placed side by side with the contemporary artist to challenge the modernist exclusions. Rejecting the nature-culture dichotomy, Swaminathan saw the latter as an expression of the former and the unity between them was best achieved by the tribal artist. Swaminathan’s interest in tribal and folk art was part of a larger generational concern, developed from the fifties onwards, especially in Baroda, which in turn was part of the Santiniketan legacy that artists like Subramanyan and Sankho Chaudhuri inherited and transmitted to their students. Here artists like Haku Shah, Jyoti Bhatt and Raghav Kaneria undertook painstaking research, documenting and studying tribal and folk art forms closely, while others like Chaudhuri and Subramanyan joined bodies like the All India Handicrafts Board and worked closely with craftsman to innovate on designs. In 1971, Chaudhuri curated an exhibition of *Folk and Tribal images of India* at Lalit Kala Akademi to mark Gandhi Centenary celebrations.

Swaminathan carried all these interventions forward when he placed folk, tribal and modern art together (in separate wings though) at the Roopankar Museum of Art at Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal in 1982 to realize his idea of ‘contemporaneity’. A precursor to Swaminathan’s curatorial choices can be seen in an exhibition organised by art critic George Butcher in 1964 titled *Art Now in India – Contemporary Indian Art* shown at Newcastle. Spending 28 months in India, Butcher painstakingly put together works of Indian artists alongside folk art, popular material like hand-painted signs and traditional toys, all produced in the last three years, to

⁹⁷ Leyden, Rudy Von. ‘Review of *Contra* ’66 issues 1 & 2’, in *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, no. 6, 1967.

⁹⁸ Swaminathan, J. ‘The Cygan An Auto-bio Note’, in *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 40, Special Issue on J Swaminathan (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995): 10.

reproduce the rich, simultaneous visual worlds of India. In 2002, Gulammohammed Sheikh made similar alignments when he curated *New Art from India (Home, Street, Shrine, Bazaar, Museum)* at Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester, UK.

Roopankar's collection of tribal and folk art was bought together with the help of 30 art students who travelled through Madhya Pradesh, the state with the largest tribal population in India, and bought back works of art along with questionnaires that covered basic information like the names of rural artists, communities to which they belong, medium and significance of art works, in a rudimentary form. While idealizing their artistic visions and the potential they held for their aesthetic value, Swaminathan also raised questions on the real problems faced by these communities around issues of caste and poverty, their hasty assimilation into mainstream society and the problem of historical time that divided them from us. In the end he hoped that like African and Oceanic art that shook the foundation of modern western art, the tribal arts of Central India would also result in an unsettling of the hierarchies of modern art and modern India.⁹⁹ Swaminathan's methodology of material collection is in many ways reminiscent of Archer's charged anthropological surveys through Central and Eastern India, seeking revitalization for modern art and modern existence through contact with these other cultures. But coming as it did at the end of an entire generation engaging with folk and tribal art, Swaminathan's polemical gesture had political value. Sadly it could not be sustained and in 1990, Swaminathan left the institution owing to the change of government in the state to Madhya Pradesh and subsequent reduction in funding to the museum.

Talking about his disenchantment with Marxism to artist Gieve Patel, Swaminathan noted that there were always people who wanted to stabilize the system after the revolution. Few remained committed to a state of continued revolution.¹⁰⁰ Swaminathan, on his part, definitely was such a figure, moving between being the voice of the establishment and being an anarchic bohemian. Decidedly situating himself against history and statist politics, Swaminathan was able to institutionalize the shared worldview of the tribal, folk and modern artist at his museum. The radical import of this act needs to be acknowledged especially in light of the kind of formations that took place in NGMA around the same time.

⁹⁹ Swaminathan, J. *The Perceiving Fingers* (Bhopal: Bharat Bhavan, 1987).

¹⁰⁰ Patel, Gieve. 'An Interview with Swaminathan', in *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 40, Special Issue on J Swaminathan (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995): 24-25.

Here under the directorship of L P Sihare¹⁰¹, the neo-tantra art movement¹⁰² was enshrined as the harbinger of the national modern. Sihare's search for the nationalist version of abstraction settled on the neo-tantra movement that explored pre-modern esoteric doctrines and became India's chief export item through the Festivals of India of the eighties. There is an irony to this deification because of the widespread criticism this stereotypical, overly Indianised solution received. It did not account for the complex negotiations Indian artists had made with their surrounding cultures and traditions to arrive at their own pictorial modes. Swaminathan's institutional model, with all its problems, was better equipped to address these complexities.

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¹⁰¹ L P Sihare became director of NGMA in 1971 and continued in this role until 1984. Armed with art criticism and museology degrees from the Faculty of Fine Arts, M S University, Baroda and a PhD from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York, Sihare arrived at the museum with a specific academic position and distinct ideas on how to apply his theoretical knowledge within the institutional space. His doctoral thesis on *The Oriental Influences on Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian 1909-17* played a determining influence on his outlook and led him to adopt a classical modernism from early 20th century Europe as his paradigm and to seek stylistic affinities and equivalences in the Indian context. He became the Director of National Museum between 1984 and 1990 and was instrumental in setting up the National Museum Institute in 1991.

¹⁰² The neo-tantra movement had artists like G R Santosh, Biren De, Om Prakash who explored the formal, spiritual and metaphysical qualities of tantra. The school gained momentum from Ajit Mookherjee's publications *Tantra Art* in 1967 and *Tantra Asana* in 1971, in which he brought to prominence the esoteric religious practices developed by both Hinduism and Buddhism of the medieval period. Tantric religion had developed complex visualizations and meditational aids in the form of mandalas and symbolic diagrams whose coded meanings were embodied in combinations of geometric elements. To many modern Indian artists, tantric diagrams offered an 'Indian' visual vocabulary that resonated with international trends of abstraction in art. How quickly the neo-tantric school gained prominence on the Indian art scene can be gauged by the fact that a whole issue of *Lalit Kala Contemporary* was devoted to it in 1971. L P Sihare further institutionalized this movement at NGMA in the eighties. It was almost as though pushed by repeated criticisms over his prescriptive imposition of the categories of modern western art on modern Indian art, he supported this overly Indianised, traditional interpretation of abstraction. The move was in many ways reminiscent of E B Havell's emphasis on the transcendental and spiritual as key markers of Indian identity.

8. *Contra '66* nos. 1 -6, October – March, ed. J Swaminathan, Hem Chandra, no. 12 Housing Society, NDSE, Part I, New Delhi, 1966 – 67
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Geeta Kapur: In the Interventionist Mode

If Swaminathan was interesting in foregrounding the anarchic artist voice which strategically used art criticism to stage a rupture from the previous generation of artists, then he has a counterpoint in the critic Geeta Kapur who in her 45-year-long career has developed, almost singlehandedly, the critical voice and staked a successful claim for its autonomy. Taking forward Swaminathan's category of the partisan critic, Kapur sees her role as an interventionist art critic and curator. Steering clear of the nomenclature of art historian even as she has used the tools of the discipline, her practice, as she describes it, is one that intervened theoretically, ideologically and in actual interaction with practice.

Kapur completed her Masters in Fine Arts and Art Education in New York in 1964 at a time when movements like the Beat Generation and student movements were gaining ground in Europe and America. She returned to India soon after and became so immersed with the varied art practices and ideological battles taking place here that she did not return to finish the PhD for which she had enrolled.

She went, instead, to the Royal College of Art, London in 1968 (a watershed year in terms of the worldwide revolt led by students against educational and cultural institutions, and bourgeois values in general) to study under the Marxist artist and art historian Peter De Francia and produced her seminal text *In Quest for Identity: Art and Indigenism in Post-colonial Culture*.

In Quest for Identity can be seen as one of the first attempts at theorizing the location and practice of post-colonial artist within the framework of nation and identity, and the very early use of the word 'post-colonial' in the Indian context. Making apparent her commitment to the space of the national within which much of her

Geeta Kapur (B 1943)

art critic/ curator/ cultural theorist

- * 1964/ 1970 Completed her MA in Fine Art/Education, New York University, New York and also at Royal College of Art, London.
- * Curated *Pictorial Space* in 1972.
- * Published *Contemporary Indian Artists* in 1978.
- * Wrote the essay for exhibition *Place for People* in 1981 and was a member of the artist group.
- * Became founder member of *Journal of Arts & Ideas* and part of its editorial collective, started in 1982.
- * *When was Modernism; Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* published in 2001.
- * Curating exhibitions around the thematic of the city most notably at Tate Modern (2001) and House of World Cultures, Berlin (2003).
- * 2011 upcoming publication *Ends and Means: Critical Inscriptions in Contemporary Art*.

KAPUR'S POSITION

- * Modernism into the Postmodern
- * Critical voice emerging from the academia and also in close alignment with practitioners.
- * Autonomous and ideologically positioned.
- * Formulating a theoretical field on cultural role and location of practitioners in India, accounting for the historical conditions of decolonization, third world solidarity and postcolonial identities.
- * Committed to the national modern discourse and the role of intelligentsia in sufficiently historicising it. Moving to critically engage with post national/global contexts.
- * Looking at her writings as a corpus to be consolidated into publications.

writings, Kapur spoke of the role of the intelligentsia in evolving a contemporary culture which required a re-evaluation of history and tradition.

Describing indigenism as an imperative for colonial people, she writes, "...at an initial stage it is a means for claiming one's dignity and one's liberty; at a more complex level it is an instrument for the reappraisal of the morass of values that survive colonialism, by an understanding of history and tradition in terms of contemporary needs. And finally it is a means of establishing creative relationship with one's natural and cultural environment."¹⁰³

Not finding enough theoretical tools from within the Indian context, she turned to the post-colonial discourse in Latin America, most specifically the writings of Octavio Paz, and developed her arguments using the example of Mexican art of the twenties. The text, which was serialized in the artist magazine *Vrishchik*, also challenged the authority of so-called international art which was the, "only relevant point of view for those of us who are not an organic part of western culture but bound to it by historical contingency."¹⁰⁴

This opposition was played out rather myopically in the art scene when Mulk Raj Anand chose the same moment to organize the first Triennale at Lalit Kala Akademi, inviting world art to India in 1968 and by the time of the Second Triennale in 1971 the artists were staging boycotts, questioning the rationale behind having an international exhibition, apart from airing grievances on other issues like the selection of the Indian section and the increased bureaucratization of the institution.

Following a short monograph on M F Husain, which is published in 1968, Kapur's book *Contemporary Indian Artists* was published in 1978. The same year K G Subramanyan's *Moving Focus* was also published. While a major part of Subramanyan's book is a reevaluation of Santiniketan artists Benode Behari Mukherjee, Abanindranath and Rabindranath Tagore and Ramkinker Baij as well as Amrita Sher-Gil along with other essays on the relationship of modern Indian art to the West, to the socio-cultural context and to religion, Kapur's book focuses on contemporary practice through the lens of six individual practitioners. Positioning herself between the two generations – progressives like M F Husain, Ram Kumar, F N Souza and Akbar Padamsee and the subsequent generation

¹⁰³ Kapur, Geeta. 'In Quest of Identity: Art & Indegenism in post-colonial culture with special reference to contemporary Indian painting,' *Vrishchik*, ed. Gulammohammed Sheikh and Bhupen Khakhar, Baroda: 4 Residency Bungalow, University Office Compound, 1973.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

represented by J Swaminathan and Bhupen Khakhar; between the artists living in India and abroad; between their stylistic affiliations with western art and indigenous idioms, the book follows the somewhat conventional model of charting artist biography and chronology, followed by the critic's interpretation. Even as Kapur would emphatically break away from this kind of writing which used the artist voice and life as the central point of interpretation, the book was seminal for its meticulous collation of material, its charting of dates and artistic phases, and the bringing together of all these details with the full use of the critic's interpretive and insightful mode of writing. And it went beyond individual artistic journeys to form a picture of modern Indian art, moving between the individual and collective grappling with questions of identity and Indian-ness, something that the American critic Suzi Gablik (who lectured in India in 1978) appreciated in her review of the book even as she ungraciously noted Kapur's "generosity towards the culturally hybrid and multi-derivative forms of modern Indian art."¹⁰⁵

The seventies was the decade when artists and critics organised exhibitions, donning the role of curators even before the term was used. The exhibition and the curatorial text became a primary site for making artistic and ideological positions visible, much before the role of the curator was discussed in the Indian context. In some cases, they happened in tandem with public institutions – like the Amrita Sher-Gil exhibition of 1972, where the large public collection and the private collections of the artist's work were shown simultaneously at NGMA and LKA. A committee, comprising of Gulammohamed Sheikh, Vivan Sundaram, K. G. Subramanyan and Geeta Kapur provided a sound exhibitory context for her works by displaying her letters, articles, photographs alongside publishing an important *Marg* volume on the artist. The exhibition was able to successfully reconfigure Sher-Gil from a much-eulogized 'national' artist into a young artist who struggled intelligently with linguistic and representational dilemmas. She thus represented a process with which the generations of artists that followed could identify. There was also Gulammohammed Sheikh's exhibition *New Contemporaries* in Bombay in 1978, which provided an overview of the young artists and their diverse responses to the local environment and the shift of focus to the particularities of their immediate world.

Building on her thesis on artist's identity mediated and made visible via the exigencies of language, Kapur turned to the artist's use of image and symbols, deployment of pictorial

¹⁰⁵ Gablik, Suzi. 'The Disoriented Orient', *TLS*, November 10, 1978.

elements and structuring of pictorial space as the key points of investigation. It is the last point that is elaborated in her exhibition *Pictorial Space* at Lalit Kala Akademi, tantalizingly subtitled a 'Point of View on Contemporary Indian Art', in 1977. The linkages between the metaphysical and real worlds are drawn in the diverse ways artists handled the problem of syntax and space: "Pictorial space is at once an implied metaphysical proposition, and the syntax for a transcription of the given world into Form. It is a clue to a particular orientation, the world view of the artist, or community, or culture."¹⁰⁶

In 1981 Kapur, along with artists Vivan Sundaram, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Sudhir Patwardhan, Jogen Chowdhury, Nalini Malani and Bhupen Khakhar, organised the groundbreaking exhibition *Place for People*. The exhibition has its precedents in the seventies where an alliance between the Bombay and Baroda artists with leftist affiliations was made around a renewed interest in Realism and its worldwide reassessment. It was developed through the annual art workshops organised by Vivan Sundaram at Kasauli from 1975 onwards.

The text, written by Kapur, which could have taken on the tone of an artist manifesto, took on larger discursive quality as it looked back at the historical evidence of importance of human figure in Indian art and its narrative content which had been negated to some extent by orientalist and nationalist art historians like A K Coomarswamy. "This means the symbolist aspects have come to the fore and appears to perform merely magical meaning... The occultist properties of the icon and the more abstract or diagrammatic images gain priority when in fact the art tradition is teeming with depictions of everyday life... The problem was equally compounded by the modern western appropriation of these other traditions, which could not grasp or willfully ignored the depictive aspects of those cultures."¹⁰⁷ In this configuration of indigenism and ideology, the artists were militating against the limits of abstraction, which they saw as "lapsing into formalism when transferred to capitalist contexts."¹⁰⁸ The exhibition demanded a re-entry of "people into the pictures... to tell their stories must indeed merit the name of radicalism."¹⁰⁹

The Kasauli workshops, while incubating this artist movement, also gave rise to the *Journal of Arts & Ideas* following from the conference 'Marxism and Aesthetics' that took place in

¹⁰⁶ Kapur, Geeta. *Pictorial Space, A Point of View on Contemporary Art*, (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1977).

¹⁰⁷ Kapur, Geeta. 'Partisan Views about the Human Figure', in *Place for People*, New Delhi and Bombay, 1981.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

1979. Coming in the wake of the lively artists' magazines *Vrishchik* and *Contra*, the journal enlarged the scope to a more expansive theoretical discourse.

From the sixties onwards, one sees a growing worldwide interest in formulating art theory and a moving away from the more immediate responsiveness of art criticism. The journal was an important initiative in the Indian context, in building a theory around practice and relating it to ideology, undertaken by artists, literary and art critics, theatre and film specialists. There were disciplinary crossovers with the later issues exploring new art history, popular culture and film studies. Kapur, on her part, wrote some key texts on Indian cinema. It is significant to note that the journal preceded the formation of the discipline of cultural studies in Indian universities by almost a decade. It finally folded in 1999.

Some of the texts developed in the journal were published in Kapur's magnum opus *When was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, in 2000. In 1994, Kapur made a curatorial detour with her exhibition *100 Years: From the NGMA Collection to construct*, what she calls, "a revisionist art history that she would explore more fully in the book"¹¹⁰, through the limitations of the NGMA collection which was at her disposal.

The title of the book alludes to Raymond Williams' text *When was Modernism* written in 1987, where the Marxist scholar questions "the highly selected version of the modern which then offers to appropriate the whole of modernity."¹¹¹ When Williams asks for the readmission of the "neglected works left in the wide margin of the century", Kapur holds up the contemporary cultural practice in India and the third world and makes a forcible case for the need to "view modernism along its multiple tracks."¹¹²

The book, a collation of Kapur's essays written through the eighties and nineties, is divided into three sections, the first two of which look at issues of representation and subjectivity through artists and artworks, and the structuring of narratives in film and examines the relay they make between selfhood, nationalism and cultural heterogeneity. The final section looks at theoretical issues at hand around the modern in the Indian context. Kapur feels the need

¹¹⁰ Ginwala, Natasha. Interview with Geeta Kapur, *Art & Deal*, Issue on Curation: And/ In Contemporary Art, vol. 7, no. 2, 2010, 25.

¹¹¹ Williams, Raymond. 'When was Modernism?' *New Left Review* 1/175, May-June 1989.

¹¹² Kapur, Geeta. *When was Modernism Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000) xiii.

to “critically engage and retrieve the national/modern from the imbricated discourse of post-colonial/postmodern.”¹¹³

In the essay ‘Detours from the Contemporary’ Kapur examines the terms of tradition, modernity and role of the intelligentsia in “sufficiently historicizing” them so as to “notate a radical purpose in the cultural politics of the third world.”¹¹⁴ Stressing on tradition as invention, “an ambivalent and culpable sign in need of constant historical interpretation”¹¹⁵, she points to its different interpretations by Coomarswamy, Rabindranath Tagore and the artistic mediations of Raja Ravi Varma and the Bengal school. Equally the political import of modernism as it evolves in conjunction with the anti-colonial movement is brought into the discussion. She remains committed to examining the interplay of the modern with the national in the face of global multicultural discourse and its valorisation of difference which she sees as subject to similar essentialisations as the universal modern. The Indian modern “can evolve with its own set of canons and serve to signal in the direction of the western modern but also encourage living traditions to flourish as well.”¹¹⁶ She moves towards periodising the Indian modern as it emerged from its own social and historical experiences. The last three chapters of the book turn their attention to the configurations of new internationalism, globalization and, after her encounter with the Havana Biennale of 1989, the third world avant-garde. *When was Modernism* thus ends by moving beyond the framework of the nation as a key point of reference for contemporary Indian artists.

In the early 1990s Kapur was interested in exploring the possibilities of other solidarities being made visible in emerging biennales of Asia and Africa. She particularly singled out Havana Biennale, Asia Pacific Triennale and Johannesburg Biennale as having radical potential in staging dialogues and exchanges away from the mediations of the Euro-American art scene. “These are sites where a range of art forms within a chosen region have been brought face to face in order to highlight internal difference and thus redefine the received categories of ethnography and art history, ritual and theatre, material object and concept.”¹¹⁷ The ‘city’ provides the framework for her international curatorial projects – the 2001 exhibition ‘Bombay /Mumbai 1992-2001’, in *Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis*’ at Tate Modern, co-curated with Ashish Rajadhyaksha, and ‘SubTerrain:

¹¹³ Ibid, xiii.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 267.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 267.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 293.

¹¹⁷ Kapur, Geeta. ‘After the Magicians,’ in *Indian Summer*, catalogue of exhibition curated by Henry-Claude Cousseau, Deepak Ananth and Jany Luga, (Paris: Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-arts): 82.

Artworks in the Cityfold', in *body.city: new perspectives on India*, at the House of World Cultures, Berlin in 2003. *Century City* focuses on Bombay in the decade of 1992–2001. The communal riots of 1992 following the destruction of the Babri Masjid was a watershed event and its political and social repercussions were explored by an entire generation of artists.

Kapur and Rajyadakshya looked at the specific artistic strategies the political situation threw up, where artists engaged with popular culture or inhabited the public sphere positioning art as a 'witnessing act'. They ended their essay on a cautionary note – that the “current post-modern celebration of visual culture, often a simple fusion of art history and popular culture, needs a minimum political intent to bring cultural creativity into a new phase.”¹¹⁸

Her recent writings are collated in the soon to be published *Ends and Means: Critical Inscriptions in Contemporary Art* and in a discussion she noted that they marked a renewed interest in the formal and linguistic shifts that the artists have been making. Focusing in part on lens-based works, they deal with the emergence of new subjectivities as well as engage with the mediatic aspects of works of art. “In the earlier part of my writing I was looking for the emergence of a new context and that was related to a particular phase in development of modern and contemporary art in India... At some point the art scene established itself and acquired its own self articulation. I think I was interested in formal and linguistic shifts that the artists were making and both of these have led me to an interest in newer art forms, breaks and ruptures and new propositions in the art work itself.”¹¹⁹

With Geeta Kapur one sees the articulation of an autonomous, critical voice that is nurtured by the academia but also has a direct bearing upon the art scene. It makes alignments with certain kinds of art practice and yet is able to construct, from this engagement, a theoretical field of critical thinking on cultural practice in India. It reflects as well as brings reflection on the various historical junctures in a nation's history – of decolonization, third world solidarity and post-colonial identity – via the work of its cultural practitioners. It consolidates larger narratives on the formation of the national modern and critically engages with the present articulations of post-national, global identities. And it remains sharply attuned to both the artist's and its own workings through the interstices of language. Above all, it remains

¹¹⁸ Kapur, Geeta. 'Bombay/ Mumbai: 1992-2001' (co-authored with Ashish Rajadhyaksha), in *Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Iwona Blazwick, Tate Publishing, London, 2001.

¹¹⁹ Geeta Kapur at the panel discussion 'Researching, Writing, Curating' with speakers Dr Kavita Singh, Abhay Sardesai, as part of the workshop *Figuring the Curator* organised in conjunction with the Visiting Professorship of Prof Thierry de Duve, at School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, New Delhi, September 18-19, 2010.

committed to the context from which it emerges, constantly relaying and testing formulations in relation to the specific formations and histories in the Indian context.

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Ranjit Hoskote: Art Critic as Spokesperson

We now turn our lens to the post-eighties situation when the art market began to take centre stage amidst a proliferating art scene. In this field over-determined by the artist figure other players like gallerists, collectors, critics and auctioneers, and the curator a little later on, suddenly began to appear.

By the mid-nineties there was a state acknowledgement of the private sector with the government launching the National Culture Fund¹²⁰ and allowing for private-public partnership. The NGMA, on its part, organised a spate of retrospectives of senior artists in collaboration with private galleries, doing away with its somewhat absurd rule of not holding solo exhibitions of living artists! The secondary market also began to establish itself with the first auctions of Christie's and Sotheby's taking place in 1995¹²¹ and prices of artworks become public knowledge.

Even a cursory look at the *Art India* magazine gives one a sense of the burgeoning scene and the staging of the contemporary that is taking place. In the pages of this magazine, started in 1995, collectors speak of their commitment to contemporary art practice or different members of the art community provide a collective assessment on the artist Raja Ravi Varma, motivated in part by the high price he fetched at the HEART auction in 1997, and the fast growing market for his works. The state as a primary patron of arts is now replaced by a set of institutions and people who are highly invested in making the system and are identifying on a somewhat individual basis what kind of organisations and resources are needed.

¹²⁰ The National Culture Fund (NCF) was set up by the Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, in 1996. It is a funding mechanism that enables private institutions and individuals to support arts and culture and directly partner with the government.

¹²¹ The auctions took place in London and New York and continue to happen abroad. The first auction that took place in India was HEART in 1997, where Raja Ravi Varma's painting *Begum's Bath* sold for Rs 32 lakhs. It confirmed the vibrant domestic market.

Ranjit Hoskote (B 1969) poet/ art critic/ curator

- * 1988 – 1999 joined *The Times of India* and began writing on art. Weekly columns on spirituality, culture and philosophy.
- * Book of poetry *Zones of Assault* published in 1991.
- * Senior editor at *The Hindu* between 2000 – 2007.
- * 1998 onwards writes monographs on artists like Jehangir Sabavala, Sudhir Patwardhan, Baiju Parthan as well as catalogue texts on Raqs Media Collective, Praneet Soi, Sumedh Rajendran, G R Irana, Bharti Kher, among others.
- * Curated the mid-career retrospective of Atul Dodiya at Japan Foundation Centre, Tokyo in 2001.
- * Co-curator of Gwangju Biennale in 2008.
- * Curator of the first official Indian Pavilion at Venice Biennale in 2010

HOSKOTE'S POSITION

- * Art critic in the context of liberalization and the growth of the private sector in the arts.
- * Moving between poetic voice, journalistic writing and more niche art writing.
- * Providing the field with much needed texts on a range of artists.
- * Critic's voice negotiating with a range of pressures – market, artist, audience – and producing writing within compressed time.
- * Moving between a domestic, national context and global context.
- * Art critic gradually being replaced by the curator as an important actor in the system.

The market thus produces its own set of institutions, and publications acquire a centrality in its self-legitimising process. To site an example, there was the overnight appearance of the overview publication *Flamed Mosaic*¹²² by Osian's, identified as the first crucial step of a newly set up art institution that wanted to combine the functions of an archive, a collection and an auction house etc to provide a "new, improved, integrated infrastructure model."

This moment of change in the Indian economy also created interesting synergies. There was the opening of the national context of art production and reception into a more global discourse on culture. The idea of the global was linked to Euro-American affiliations and a global art market, but also sought to build networks with practitioners in Latin America, Africa and Asia. A good example of this would be the setting up of the alternative organization Khoj, which created residency opportunities for artists to engage with process-based works, new media or site specific practices within India and also simultaneously in South Asia.¹²³

In an interview Geeta Kapur noted that if the nineties changed the question of the medium, the early part of the twenty first century allowed for experimental, eccentric contemporaneity related to global exposure. Kapur's column *Turning Point* in Art India written between 1999 and 2001 was a short interlude after the completion of her book *When was Modernism* and her prestigious curatorial project *Bombay/Mumbai, 1992 – 2001* at the Tate Modern, London. Speaking on this first-ever sustained contribution in a non-academic art magazine, she describes it as an "expression of wanting to intervene in a very clearly changing art scene." She goes on to say, "I had concluded a phase [in *When was Modernism*] and I was witnessing one strand of what I was arguing theoretically, which was the experimental, the avant-garde and the uncharted practice in third world contexts of Africa, Latin America and China. I wanted to send out a set of signifiers that this was happening around me."¹²⁴

Kapur is referring to the changed conditions of art production and dissemination that demanded criticism to intervene directly and explicate more immediately on diverse

¹²² Tulli, Neville. *The Flamed Mosaic: Indian Contemporary Painting*. (BCK Plantations Binding, 1997).

¹²³ Khoj International Artists' Association is an artist-led, alternative forum for experimentation and international exchange based in India. It was set up in 1997 and is involved in building a South Asian network of artists in the region. It is also part of the global Triangle Arts Trust.

¹²⁴ Interview with Geeta Kapur in New Delhi, May 2011.

practices. She took on this role briefly via the *Art India* column as a way of marking transitions in her own career and in the art scene, only to return to more academic writing.

Ranjit Hoskote, on the other hand, started writing in the early nineties and his career was shaped and structured by this changing art scene. Following from his post-graduate degree in English literature and aesthetics, he became an art critic at a young age of 19, first at *The Times of India*, Bombay in 1988 and later *The Hindu* (2000-2007). He published his first book of poems *Zones of Assault* soon after, in 1991.

Hoskote's early writings, in poetry as well as art, began in association with an older generation of artists and poets, taking forward some of their concerns with the intricacies of language. While speaking of his early beginnings as an art critic, Hoskote evokes the legacy of Bombay poets Nissim Ezekiel, Adil Jussawala and Dom Moraes who were instrumental in carving a space for Indian writing in English while also writing on multiple art forms. Reviewing art exhibitions from the sixties onwards, these writers created a culture of art writing that remained committed to the local and cosmopolitan context of Bombay. Speaking on his vocation as an art reviewer for *The Times of India*, Ezekiel makes a strong case for the independent role for the art critic, "I exerted myself to be a critic not a patron, not an art organizer, not an encourager of artists and art appreciators. In those roles when I played them at all, I underplayed, stopped early and withdrew. Within the art world I am still, deliberately, an outsider, an observer, a commentator. I keep at a certain distance from all others in the world because that is how I see the function of a critic."¹²⁵ This critical distance also arose from empathy for the artist's creative process, which Ezekiel identified with, and felt would be crucial in promoting, "some measure of self-knowledge, in art as in life, without which nothing can be done authentically."¹²⁶ Ezekiel found great solace in an artist like Bhupen Khakhar whose work demonstrated an active relationship with his environment. "He has given these scenes a distinct dimension and suggested a host of possibilities to other artists in the task of coping with actuality,"¹²⁷ he wrote on his compatriot, who exemplified Ezekiel's own search for an identity rooted in the mundane realities and the transcendental possibilities of his immediate context.

¹²⁵ Ezekiel, Nissim. 'Modern Art in India, A Point of View', source missing around 1970. From Press Clippings at Archive, Department of Art History, Faculty of Fine Arts, M S University.

¹²⁶ Ezekiel, Nissim. 'Self-Defeating Techniques, City Exhibition, in *The Times of India*, April 15, 1966.

¹²⁷ Ezekiel, Nissim. 'Bhupen Khakhar', in *Z* magazine, June 1974.

Ezekiel's commitment was to an ethos where multiple arts received critical nourishment from an independent and knowledgeable cultural elite. Hoskote reminisces how this role was in fact deeply tied to a model of the 'Man of letters' that Ezekiel and his ilk represented – intellectuals keeping alive critical enquiry and debate in the city, addressing both practitioners and audiences. "That was also in some sense the legacy. It might depend on what your particular radicalising experience is and for me it was above all Ayodhya. At that point it became clear to me, someone brought up in the Nehruvian ethos, that the idea of a liberal, inclusive, secular republic was under great threat. The Hindu right had to be opposed at all costs,"¹²⁸ Hoskote noted on his early formations.

In Ezekiel's case tightly-worded art reviews sufficed as interventions to preserve the domain of culture while Hoskote's writings address spirituality and philosophy as much as art, in a more expansive understanding on the relationship between political and cultural discourse. In his journalistic career, Hoskote's art reviews appeared along with his weekly spiritual and philosophical columns *Ripple Effects* and the hugely popular *The Speaking Tree*, which he started and ran between 1996 and 1999. He credits this phase as having given him "precise ideas on looking at religion in relation to various arts."¹²⁹

From the nineties onwards Hoskote has consistently written on coming together of politicized religiosity with the era of globalization to create counter-modernities. He works against the notion of cultural and religious purity that right-wing groups uphold, drawing instead on example of trans-cultural confluences that bring together "disparate belief systems and ethnicities into a fruitful and sophisticated hybridity." Particularly noteworthy is Hoskote's 2007 publication *Kampfabsage*, coauthored with German writer Ilija Trojanow, which explores diverse histories of cultural convergences excavated and presented in the wake of the global politics of culture post 'September 11'.

Let us also set up a dialogue between Hoskote and another poet-critic predecessor Richard Bartholomew in how they relate to the artist. Unlike Ezekiel, both Bartholomew and Hoskote are partisan to this figure and comparing their writings tell us something about the changing role of this kind of art criticism in post-independence and post-liberalized India. In an emotional speech at the tail end of a seminar on Indian aesthetics and art activity organised at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla, in 1966, Ram Kumar described the artist's

¹²⁸ Interview with Ranjit Hoskote in Mumbai, August 2010.

¹²⁹ Interview with Ranjit Hoskote in Mumbai, August 2010.

sense of estrangement both from art critics and the general public, “Where are the people who sympathetically and sincerely try to understand my creations? I find none except a handful of artists brothers.”¹³⁰ The modernist artist was desperately seeking the empathetic critic (also equally wary of him), one who would observe his workings and his engagement with language, provide dispassionate critique on it and relay it to a larger audience, best exemplified in a figure like Bartholomew. What remains of this job description in liberalized India? What is the relationship of the critic with the artist and with his audience?

Perhaps one can look for answers in the interesting convergence of the texts of Bartholomew and Hoskote in the *Ram Kumar* monograph published in 2003. The monograph was part of a slew of publications that appeared from the mid nineties onwards, generated by art galleries in close collaboration with the artists, to address the lack of textual material and documentation. One can note a close correlation between the appearance of these books and the auction prices of the artists. There is a re-evaluation of the artists both in terms of art writing and art market that takes place in an accelerated pace from the late nineties.

Bartholomew’s essay in the *Ram Kumar* monograph, reproduced from the *Lalit Kala Contemporary* issue no. 19-20, is the last in a series of texts he had written on the artist for more than 30 years. It looks at the “abstract as a pictorial proposition” and provides a remarkably consistent vision of a modernist artist’s oeuvre, in its movement towards “synthesis, refinement and rarefaction.”¹³¹ Hoskote, on his part, paints the picture with broader sweeping strokes – touching lightly upon the artist’s location as first generation post-colonial painter and the kind of phases in his work, and delineating the spatial explorations of the artist with a poetic eye. He also looks at the work in the context of Indic culture and presents us with a teleology of another kind – against the backdrop of Varanasi, the artist is seen to traverse the grounds between *samsara* and *nirvana*, the stages of worldly life and renunciation as stated in Hindu philosophical texts.¹³² In his 2005 Tyeb Mehta essay, Hoskote signals to the artist’s ethnic and religious background by

¹³⁰ Kumar, Ram. ‘Observations of an artist face a face with all the aesthetic theories’, in seminar proceedings *Indian Aesthetics and Art Activity*, organised by Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla, May 15 – 28, 1966.

¹³¹ Bartholomew, Richard. ‘The Abstract as Pictorial Proposition’, in *Ram Kumar A Journey Within*, editor Gagan Gill. (New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery, 1996): 29.

¹³² Hoskote, Ranjit. ‘The Poet of the Visionary Landscape’, in *Ram Kumar A Journey Within*, editor Gagan Gill. (New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery, 1996): 39.

foregrounding the “tragic Shia vision of history”¹³³ that the artist has inherited and how it forms a subtext to his condensed figuration that speaks of rupture and violence.

In all these instances, Hoskote constructs an artist self that emerges from biographical details, close reading of the artworks and broad cultural and religious archetypes. His writings provide us with a panoramic view, a free flowing text that glides through various registers – formal, metaphysical, poetic, contextual, among others, to present an eloquent defense of the artists’ practices. It points to the variegated pressures that the critic is addressing – a series of intelligent negotiations with diverse audiences ranging from artists, galleries and collectors who are looking to build quickly a corpus of textual material, and are also in many cases its patrons, a growing international art audience of collectors and curators, whose exposure to art from this ‘other’ context is minimal and a general public, whose interest is increasingly being diverted from high art to the growing entertainment industry and mass culture.

Hoskote’s sheer range of writing has been subject to some amount of criticism, something that he is aware of. “...At various points it has been held against me by some people, like how can you like [Jehangir] Sabavala’s lyrical landscapes and [Vivan] Sundaram’s machine oil work. Our brains have different centres, I never saw any virtue in aligning myself with a particular school or movement. There is virtue to that position, people have done it, but personally I do not see that as my way.”¹³⁴

His writings are heterogeneous and voluminous. One must not undermine the democratic gesture inherent in this production, for in the last two decades Hoskote has worked at breakneck speed to build up a corpus of texts on various artists that are highly competent, and in some cases, form the only textual records of the artists’ careers.

Amidst this diverse body of writing, Hoskote has also consistently followed some artists like Atul Dodiya and Sudhir Patwardhan. From the nineties Hoskote has tracked Dodiya’s penchant for “promiscuous quotage”¹³⁵, looking carefully at the way the artist creates a meeting ground for images and references from different registers of popular culture and

¹³³ Hoskote, Ranjit. ‘Images of Transcendence (Towards a New Reading of Tyeb Mehta’s Art), in *Tyeb Mehta Ideas Images Exchange*. (New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery, 2005): 24.

¹³⁴ Interview with Ranjit Hoskote in Mumbai, August 2011.

¹³⁵ Hoskote, Ranjit. ‘An Autobiography in Fifteen Frames: Recent Works by Atul Dodiya’, in catalogue *Atul Dodiya* unnumbered. New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery, 1999.

high art. He is perceptive about how Dodiya is able to balance the act of “private associations” and “public meanings” of the images and the way he works almost intuitively through the kinds of transactions taking place with different viewers. Hoskote also adeptly addresses Patwardhan’s central question as an artist, of how to relate to the subject in his figurative narrative paintings – “through a constant shuttling between proximate and distant viewpoints that yield an intermediate knowledge of constraint and transcendence.”¹³⁶

But in some other cases the emphasis in Hoskote’s writings is not so much on cultivating critical distance but in performing a ventriloquist act for the ‘silent’ artist. Bartholomew dealt with the artist’s intentionality as it showed on the painted surface. In the case of Hoskote, it is more than a close reading of the work of art. It is as though the critic while trying to articulate the artist’s position in words, ends sometimes by underwhelming the images precisely because of the writer’s erudition and skill. The problem does not lie with Hoskote who actually works successfully with the mode of art writing, slipping in insights and sensitive readings alongside more apparent appreciation, but with the constraints placed on the discipline of art criticism itself by the market, by artists and by its role in the present context. Hoskote discusses the predicament of the curator and the cultural theorist in the India who is, “under pressure to underline tendencies with which he may not be wholly in sympathy, in order to justify his activity in an institutional context still dominated by the gallery system.”¹³⁷

When reading critics like Bartholomew, Leyden, Swaminathan and Ezekiel who are so clear of their critical role in relation to art practice, one is struck by the change in the tenor of art writing today. Much has been made on the role of judgment or the loss of it in the current critical scene in the art seminars organised by James Elkins at different universities. One of the better explanations for this comes from Boris Groys who traces the uncertain position of the critic in today’s art world to “confusion is rooted in the genealogy of contemporary criticism.”¹³⁸ Groys notes that the figure of the art critic emerged at the end of eighteenth and early nineteenth century as an, “outside observer whose function was to judge and

¹³⁶ Hoskote, Ranjit. ‘The Startling View from the Studio: Recent Paintings by Gieve Patel and Sudhir Patwardhan’, catalogue essay in Gieve Patel Sudhir Patwardhan, BP Contemporary Art of India Series vol. 28. 6. New York, Bose Pacia, 2000.

¹³⁷ Hoskote, Ranjit. ‘The Elusiveness of the Transitive: Reflections on the Curatorial Gesture and Its Conditions in India’, in *Locus: Interventions in Art Practice*, ed. Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez & Joselina Cruz (Manila: National Commission for Culture & the Arts, 2005).

¹³⁸ Groys, Boris. ‘Critical Reflections’, in *The States of Art Criticism*, ed. by Elkins, James and Michael Newman (Routledge: 2007).

critic works of art in the name of the public.”¹³⁹ But with the coming of the avant-garde, art criticism withdrew itself from this public role. It was the artwork that judged its public and the art critic now spoke on behalf of the artist. And here lies the contradiction, according to Groys, where current art criticism carries the burden of both these lineages. “The paradoxical task of judging art in the name of the public while criticizing society in the name of art opens a deep rift within the discourse of contemporary criticism,”¹⁴⁰ he concludes. Groys sees today’s critical discourse as an attempt to bridge, or at least conceal, this divide.

At the turn of the century art criticism has reappeared in its more immediate avatar and we see a proliferation of it in the niche spaces of exhibition catalogues and other publications supported by the market. Despite these spaces, one senses the accompanying frustration at the demand for ceaseless production from the art critic coupled with a lack of visibility and power accorded to the figure.

The idea of powerlessness is often spoken of when art critics are discussed in the contemporary art context. Marc Spiegler, who went from being a journalist to Director, Art Basel in 2007, builds a consensus on this in his article, where he describes art critics as being pushed to the sidelines in today’s frenetic art world¹⁴¹, and also being increasingly replaced by the figure of the curator.

Hoskote brings up the notion of the critic as a complicit observer whose role in actual artistic production is not always acknowledged. “The critic is one who bears witness to the journeys of artists. There is much co-production at the level of ideas and sometimes at the level of actual making which is never documented partly because it is not seen as your role. It is seen as artists doing it,”¹⁴² he says. There is a feeling of being not given one’s due in the system. It is almost as if the critic must morph into a curator to assume a position of authority, to have his voice heard. The curator’s powerful public performance as an orchestrator of the exhibition, his creative and authorial presence are being valued more.

Hoskote also admits to moving towards taking on more curatorial roles in the near future. In 2008 Hoskote co-curated the 7th Gwangju Biennale, along with Okwui Enwezor and Hyunjin

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Spiegler, Marc. ‘Do Art Critics Still Matter’, *The Art Newspaper*, April 2005, reproduced online <http://www.marcspiegler.com/Articles/Artnewspaper/ArtNewspaper-2005-04-Critics.htm>.

¹⁴² Interview with Ranjit Hoskote in Mumbai, August 2010.

Kim and recently curated the first-ever official Indian pavilion at Venice Biennale in 2011. Hoskote is interested in the kind of advances the ‘transnational curator’ can make, an insider-outsider figure who accounts for and makes space for divergent cultural practice from multiple sources and initiatives of different scales and import.¹⁴³

There is also a shift in his location from the national context into the global context. Hoskote has changed his position on this issue over the years. In 1999 *Art India* issue on internationalism he was openly apprehensive about internationalism, pointing out that globalization produces its ‘own genre of unease’¹⁴⁴, given the skewed power relations between first world curators and third world artists. He was also critical of the values the global art world promoted where artists like Anandjit Ray and Atul Dodiya were bypassed by the curators because of their commitment to easel painting, cast as an outdated mode. Over the years he has become more appreciative of the possibilities that globalization allows for – in recent years he, along with critic, curator and cultural theorist Nancy Adajania, has coined the term ‘Critical Transregionality’ to talk of the location of cultural practitioners today. They refuse to be shaped by the constricting categories of nation, religion or region and see the possibilities of “open conversations in different cities and sympathetic interlocutors far from home. They ask for the right to be heard and speak on a variety of debates across the planet, and seek collaboration with individuals and organizations at different locations in the world.”¹⁴⁵

In the *Indian Highway* exhibition catalogue, held in 2008 at Serpentine Gallery, London, Hoskote stresses “transcultural experience as the only certain basis of contemporary artistic experience.”¹⁴⁶ He focuses on the collaborative production of the contemporary which has a liberatory effect on the artists in terms of the kinds of alignments they can make.

So we have a comparison between an art critic like Ezekiel working with the ethical force of the critic’s judgment and addressing the cosmopolitan context of Bombay in the sixties, and Hoskote’s writings that weave together broader arguments on culture and religion and

¹⁴³ Hoskote, Ranjit. ‘Biennials of Resistance: Reflections on the Seventh Gwangju Biennial’, in *The Biennial Reader*, editors Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, Solveig Øvstebo, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010.

¹⁴⁴ Hoskote, Ranjit. ‘The Anxiety of Influence’, lead feature in issue on India International, *Art India*, vol. 4, Issue 2, 1999, 32 – 35.

¹⁴⁵ Hoskote, Ranjit & Adajania, Nancy. ‘Notes towards a Lexicon of Urgencies’ Dispatch, ICI, (October 1, 2010), http://www.ici-exhibitions.org/index.php/dispatch/posts/notes_towards_a_lexicon_of_urgencies/.

¹⁴⁶ Hoskote, Ranjit. ‘Signposting the Indian Highway,’ in exhibition catalogue *Indian Highway*, Serpentine Gallery. (London: Koenig Books, 2008): 193.

increasingly address a global context in the twenty-first century. The critic is seen to be morphing on one hand into the cultural theorist and on the other the curator to establish his agency, participation and location within the art scene.

In his essay on Raqs Media Collective, Hoskote brings in the idea of the 'Nomad Position', an idea he has developed over the years to speak of the position cultural practitioners occupy, "based on mobility as a freedom from constraint, from the methods of confinement and conformity that nation-states, academies and other orthodoxies practice."¹⁴⁷ Increasingly the texts bring into focus terminologies that Hoskote has coined to refer to global experience of art production and viewing. Some of these have collated together in a recent essay he co-authored Adajania titled 'Notes towards a Lexicon of Urgencies'.

Here the term 'Critical Transregionality', which I mentioned before as an open-ness to engage with rest of the world based on shared affinities and predicaments, is balanced against ideas of 'Emplacement' "where artists position themselves responsively in locations within or outside their own society"¹⁴⁸ and 'Heaviness' as a condition that anchors practitioners with the weight of history and memory and a commitment to their contexts.¹⁴⁹ They end the article stressing the importance of the 'Contributory Ethic' that must accompany all forms of collaborations taking place in the twenty-first century, acknowledging the participation, inputs and in some cases 'invisible labour' of the various actors involved in the production of art.¹⁵⁰ Yet another term, the Dividual Self, is used in an essay on the artist Praneet Soi, "a self in transit between continents, societies and cultures."¹⁵¹ The emphasis of the Dividual Self is on the multiple lineages and contending histories that make an individual, and identity is constructed by engaging and not suppressing these multiple inheritances.

Hoskote's career has been remarkable for the way it has responded to the demands of the contemporary art world and it gives us an insight into the shifting contexts of art production and reception. While acknowledging the shift that has occurred away from the meta-discourse of the nation, it remains to be seen how salutary and liberating the international

¹⁴⁷ Hoskote, Ranjit. 'Forms of Conveyance: Collegial Reflections on the Raqs Media Collective', catalogue essay in *Raqs Media Collective The Impostor in the Waiting Room*. Unnumbered Bose Pacia, New York, 2004.

¹⁴⁸ Hoskote, Ranjit & Adajania, Nancy. 'Notes towards a Lexicon of Urgencies.' *Dispatch*, ICI, (October 1, 2010). http://www.ici-exhibitions.org/index.php/dispatch/posts/notes_towards_a_lexicon_of_urgencies/

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Hoskote, Ranjit. 'Telescoping Media, Geographies & Studios', Reflections on the Art of Praneet Soi', in catalogue *Still, Life*, Praneet Soi. New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery, 2009, 24 – 45.

art scene is – whether the perceived straitjacketing of the domestic contexts are also not carried over into the global arena or whether it does not produce its own kind of constraints and also if it will allow for the almost idealistic and utopic positioning of the cultural practitioner that Hoskote and Adajania uphold.

As for the curatorial role, one could argue that it is a capitulation of the space of reflection that critical writing provides for the more transient context of the exhibition that is produced today, more than before, as a series of working negotiations between curators, artists, institutions, market, national and global economies within short time periods. Or perhaps it signals the current moment's demands for collaborative modes of exchange and dialogue that can yield altered imaginations and echo new realities, and enter into a dialectical relationship with critical thinking and writing.

Only time will tell, and that is the one thing the current accelerated art scene does not seem to make a provision for.

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Conclusion

The five writers that I have focused on write at different registers – in relation to the disciplines of art history and anthropology in the texts of Archer, in the public domain of the print media in the writings of Bartholomew and in negotiation with accelerated production of the post-nineties art scene in Hoskote's case. There is the crafting of the critic's voice – a scholarly critical voice expanding to construct larger theoretical frameworks in the writings of Geeta Kapur alongside its strategic use by an artist like J Swaminathan to disturb existing paradigms.

There is the return to familiar tropes of the national, modern, tradition and global/international which is constantly being recalibrated by each generation to define the place of the artist and her/his cultural production. The predicament of the post-colonial condition is a recurring thematic of most of these writers. From different ideological, personal and historical vantage points, these writers engage with the complexities which are involved in the artistic productions of the post-colonial nation-state. Through various modes of writing and critical strategies, each of them has engaged with these predicaments of culture in substantively different manners.

Even as Archer makes claims for the objectiveness of the discipline of art history he reveals his anxiety around establishing the subject-position and authority of the art critic/historian "vis-à-vis his material." Each generation of art critics has worked on this issue differently. Bartholomew made acute observations on the 'life of paint', to form a body of internal criticism that spoke directly to a group of artists, expressing solidarity, involvement and dispassionate critique all at the same time. Swaminathan used the critical voice to extend the artist's voice, placing both personality and positionality at the centre of the discourse. It is via writing that he is able to mark a rupture from the art of the previous generations and clear the field for the generations to follow. With Kapur we have this equation being turned on its head – here the critical voice emerges from close contact with a generation of artists and stakes its autonomy. It enters into a complex relationship with artists of its own generation – both transforming and being transformed by it – and is able to construct from this engagement broader theoretical and ideological positions on cultural practices in the Indian context.

And finally, with Hoskote there is the prolific art writer who responds to the needs of the art market, producing art criticism at a time when the role of the critic is being usurped by the

curator, at a time when power and visibility seem to be the most sought after qualities for various actors in the art field. Working through the changing historical conditions of artistic production, Hoskote's writings are a skillful negotiation with variegated pressures of the artists and market in the national and international context. I use Hoskote as a highly competent reference point of the art critic working in today's context, as a way of thinking through the somewhat flexible positioning and dispensable role of an art writer today and its ideological underpinnings. My attempt in tracing these significant moments, events and individual contributions in the history of art criticism is aimed at constructing an initial platform for such critical scrutiny in the future.

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