

STAKING OUT

the **GLOBE** Indian art now¹

■ Chaitanya Sambrani

Contemporary Indian art has become the site for an unprecedented series of investments since the beginning of this century. Individual and institutional collectors, market speculators, commercial galleries and public museums, university departments and publishing houses, all seem to have arrived at a realisation of the significance of contemporary art in India. And this new realisation is being acted out with a degree of enthusiasm that would have seemed improbable a few decades ago. New commercial galleries and auction houses have mushroomed in major Indian cities. International galleries have started courting major players in this lucrative sector of the art market. A number of artists have become regulars in a supercharged gallery and museum circuit. Names such as Subodh Gupta (b. 1964), Bharti Kher (b. 1969), Jitish Kallat (b. 1974), and Shilpa Gupta (b. 1976), are now to be commonly found in international listings of what's happening and who's who. As Subodh Gupta put it in 2008:

...Success is frightening because you don't want to lose anything and artists have to be fearless in order to create... We've got everything today, maybe too much, certainly more than we can handle...only 10 years ago, the art world knew nothing about Indian art, and today...we feel that if we speak, people have to listen.²

It is inevitable that contemporary art arrives at new stations of exchange under regimes of globalisation. The production, dissemination and consumption of contemporary art is carried out through apparatus that are less in keeping with earlier, romantic notions of the artist in a lonely studio. Rather, art becomes an instrument of trade, a specific kind of value-added commodity.

Twentieth century Indian art presents a sustained history of modernist experimentation since at least the later 1930s. The major task that the first two generations of post-Independence artists in India undertook was the devising of visual languages that could claim anchorage in the life of the nation in their themes, while simultaneously

claiming a degree of modernist intelligibility. The certitudes of this national modernism were challenged by a series of interventions from the early 1960s to the 1980s, introducing a locally nuanced politics of art alongside questions of indigenism, pluralism, gender and sexuality.

Indian art during the 1990s was characterised by major shifts in media and modes of engagement that resulted from the simultaneous emergence of economic globalisation and political fundamentalism. India further strengthened its policies of liberalisation and privatisation during the 1990s, allowing greater access for multinational capital to the lucrative consumer market, simultaneously bringing it into serious contention as a globally competitive provider of services, resources and specialised labour. Simultaneously, the early 1990s were a time of rising intolerance and sectarian violence, most appallingly exemplified in the 6 December 1992 demolition of the sixteenth century Babri Mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu mobs in contravention of a Supreme Court order. The demolition was preceded and succeeded by waves of sectarian violence involving systematic attacks against minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians. The torsional pairing of globalisation and fundamentalism was manifested in the genocidal attacks on Muslims in Gujarat (2002). More recent incidents such as the violence in Nandigram (West Bengal, 2007), where villagers protesting the establishment of a multinational-owned chemical plant were shot dead by police, and the atrocities against Christians in Kandhamal (Orissa, 2008) testify to the continuing virulence of extreme cultural conservatism paired with a drive towards the free-market economy.

Several artists born in the 1940s, such as Nalini Malani, Vivan Sundaram, Rummana Hussain and Navjot Altaf, who had trained and made their careers as painters, started working with 'experimental' modes such as video, photography and installation during the early to mid-1990s. This move in media and modes of engaging audiences was propelled by a realisation of the limitations of conventional materials, with their stylistic and art historical baggage, to adequately address the drastically changed conditions of public life. It was also, arguably, influenced by an increasing awareness of contemporary practice in Euro-American and Asia-Pacific art, coinciding with greater opportunities for travel and

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Subodh Gupta *Line of Control* 2008, stainless steel and steel structure, stainless steel utensils, 10 x 10 x 10 m.
Collection: Kiran Nadar Museum of Art.



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international representation. In a phenomenon that has close parallels in other Asian contexts, Indian artists and critics were beginning to make their first acquaintance with art histories and the conditions of contemporary practice in other Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Thailand and China.³

The increased visibility of contemporary Asian art in non-Asian venues is a phenomenon that started during the early 1990s, and had roots in geopolitical and demographic transformations in several advanced economies. This is not to say that no such visibility precedes that decade. Within the Indian context for instance, there are several examples of Indian artists being represented in one-off solo and group exhibitions in the UK, USA and Europe, in addition to festivals such as the Havana and São Paulo biennales, *documenta* in Kassel, etc., at least from the mid-1960s onwards. Add to this a number of 'official' state-sponsored touring exhibitions sent overseas to 'strengthen cultural ties', and we would end up with a very considerable amount of Indian art being seen outside India.

What distinguishes the post-1990 burgeoning of opportunities and audiences from the largely state-administered exhibitions of previous decades is a quantum shift in the politics of creating and showcasing art. This shift has taken place both with domestic developments in political circumstances and the art market, and internationally, in terms of changing institutional priorities and ideological predilections. The last two decades have also seen a virtual abdication of positive involvement with contemporary art on the part of state institutions and mainstream media in India. Simultaneously, self-proclaimed defenders of cultural purity have gained prominence, as demonstrated in the case of M.F. Husain, and in the troubles at one of India's leading art schools, the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda, in the wake of controversy about a student's examination work in May 2007.

These developments have had interesting and perhaps, contradictory repercussions on art production. The art market boom, which started during the late 1980s and reached stratospheric heights in the last decade, created unprecedented opportunities for artists. The newfound confidence and liquidity of the urban elite in India and overseas served to create an overheated speculative investment market. The impact of the global financial crisis was hard for many artists, dealers and speculators. The correction in the market may have been inevitable, and perhaps even necessary. However, we are yet to understand what this impact may mean for art practice in the longer term. At another level, the emergence of privately owned and funded non-profit art spaces and museums, like the Devi Art Foundation in Gurgaon and the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in Delhi, speaks of a sense of long-term commitment to collecting and displaying contemporary art on the part of wealthy patrons.

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within the country. Artists for their part seem inclined to present more and more spectacular works at major venues, often executing enlarged versions of earlier works, so that the initial work can be, in retrospect, seen as a maquette or preparatory sketch.

As in other parts of Asia, a number of successful artists in India belong to an increasingly mobile, global sphere of operations and exchange wherein the facts of birth and citizenship are continuously tempered and rendered ambiguous by those of migration, residency and access to opportunity. It is now commonplace for artists to work across media that are substantially different to those they were trained in. These crossings are attended by shifts in the market for contemporary visual art production, where we can now imagine a trans-national circuit of production, dissemination and consumption. We are witnessing a phenomenon where the embodied labour of many workers is transformed through the agency of artist-entrepreneurs into 'value added' artefacts that speak to a range of diverse audiences within and outside national boundaries.

Belonging in terms of ethnicity and citizenship is no longer an adequate framework for the work being 'Indian'. What then, does Indian-ness in contemporary art consist in? Can an audience expect discernible markers of culturally specific content that proclaim the work as being irreducibly Indian, while still being universally recognisable as contemporary art? In other words, does contemporary Indian (or Chinese, Japanese, Korean and so forth) art make its international entry by operating in an international art language peppered with 'native' flavour?

Significantly, a large number of Indian artists make use of words, images and references that are deeply encoded within Indian history. To understand work such as this, the viewer must make an effort to unlock these coded messages, to enter the contexts within which the images operate. Here is a paradox: like their contemporaries elsewhere in Asia, Indian artists are working with an inheritance of historical vocabularies and references.⁵ On the other hand though, in the international arena which is increasingly the sphere of operations for these artists, these codes are frequently lost, or require curatorial explanation. Equally, it is this coded nature of the work that above all, attracts international attention, in that it represents something authentic, something that is irrevocably part of the Indian experience, and therefore, can be understood as articulating a vision of the world from a uniquely Indian point of view.

India is often spoken of in terms of rapid growth and the info-tech boom, of technological attainments and the prowess of its educated and upwardly mobile middle class as service providers and consumers. By these accounts, India is set to rival China in the near future, and together, these 'Asian giants' are likely to determine much of how the twenty-first century pans out. These sanguine declamations miss troublesome facts such as ongoing violence against women and minorities, discrimination and desperate poverty,

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Shilpa Gupta *Untitled* 2004-5, interactive video projection and sound, projector and computer, 600 x 800 cm, courtesy of the artist.



Jitish Kallat *Public Notice* 2003, burnt adhesive on acrylic mirror, wood and stainless steel frames, 5 panels, 198.1 x 137.2 x 15.2 cm each, collection Shumita and Arani Bose, New York.

farmers' suicides and endemic malnutrition, a lack of civic infrastructure and exponentially growing inequality between the incomes of the rich and the poor.

India is notoriously a multiverse of often-conflicting realities. Extreme conditions routinely coexist.⁶ The role that the artist may play in this network of over-determined signification shifts constantly between that of sham/shaman and witness/confessor. Much contemporary art practice, executed tongue firmly in cheek and irony perpetually writ on the brow, seems to reflect this. Some works play with 'faking it', casting the self as pretend representative of ideas or communities. Others rely on the dream of life-transforming action (when such transformation is manifestly already impossible). Occasionally, they essay the more earnest role of the witness who has a paranormal faculty of vision. It is also this assumed, illusory, elusive vision that allows artists to play the roles of confessor and healer, or of the fool who speaks the truth, albeit through subterfuge and humour. ■

1 The title of this essay makes reference to Geeta Kapur's 'A Stake in Modernity: Brief History of Contemporary Indian Art' in Caroline Turner, (ed.), *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 1993.

2 Subodh Gupta, in *ArtAsiaPacific Almanac* 2008, p. 182.

3 Significantly, these acquaintances were facilitated by and mediated through the agencies and agenda of non-Asian art institutions, such as the Queensland Art Gallery in Australia and the Asia Society in the USA.

4 See *Art India* Vol XII, Issue III, May 2007, special issue on censorship, for further discussions of this incident and its fallout.

5 That some of these references have origins outside the geographical boundaries of the nation could be seen as an affirmation of the post-colonial inheritance of multiplicity, plurality and hybridity.

6 As Gulammohammed Sheikh put it: "Living in India means living simultaneously in several cultures and times. One often walks into 'medieval' situations, and runs into 'primitive' people. The past exists as a living entity alongside the present, each illuminating and sustaining the other." 'Among Several Cultures and Times,' in Carla Borden, (ed.), *Contemporary Indian Tradition*, New York, Smithsonian Institution, 1989, p. 107.

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