

Private Mythologies/Public Concerns

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A new phase of Indian art is on hand.

Fifty years of Indian independence. One of the things it means is that there is now a mature generation of artists born and reared *after* the reigning sentiment of post-Independence nationalism has waned (This is important because nationalism has been a leading cultural feature in India since the nineteenth century).

End of the twentieth century and the succession of ideological battles marking the birth and death of socialism are, arguably, over (Indian urban intelligentsia in the post-Independence period has been very conspicuously connected with the Left; socialism, as a generic idea, has been crucial to the discourse of culture in contemporary India).

A new generation drives a wedge in the received narratives of art; new art forms dislocate an over-socialized art history.

There is, at this moment, an emphatic sense of pastness in the Indian cultural environment which makes it a good time to re-configure attitudes. It is time when everyone claims to be on their own and in "exile."

The Japanese art-historian and curator, Tatehata Akira, chose to translate this proclaimed sense of isolation among the Indian artists that he met, into the operative domain of private mythology. Often an outsider's perceptions are a good trigger: we can, with the help of the terms *private*, and *mythology*, flank the claim of an integral *self* and pull it apart, turn it inside out.

What is the ramified realm of the private?

The private protects the self, nurtures selfhood. But first an aside apropos the self: the civilizational legacy in India creates an overwhelming sense of self, and a self-presence that might be a little out of proportion to the sense of the world which it can sometimes subsume. The opposite of self is non-self, a condition that is not feared in Indian spiritual traditions, for the great universe ultimately obliterates the ego and all differentiated entities in the world. Thus self and selfhood have equally to do with repletion as with austerity. The discourse of the full and the empty as an alternative/alternating state of being is an aspect of Indian aesthetics.

One should add that with A.K. Coomaraswamy the argument goes differently. Intrepid intellectual in the field of Indian aesthetics, Coomaraswamy questions the sensuous, and denies the concept of the soul. Even the self is denuded of the emotive, and certainly of the melancholy taint of mortality. He prefers intellect to designate the aspiring consciousness and for that reason privileges also the normative aspect of language, the coded articulation of metaphysical consciousness that imbues aesthetics and art practice alike.¹

Does this affect formal decisions in art, does it condition morphology, does it make the figural impulse vanish and reappear with a peculiar persistence? What does it mean in respect of the abstract: is the hypothesized structure of the universe like an indelible law of metaphysics?

The individual is traveling on another ticket.

Unlike the mutually reflective categories of the self and non-self lodged in a spiritual universe, individuality, unpacked through sociology and pitched into the historical (into contingent and indeterminate circumstance), becomes a locus of vexations.

There is a dissembling among Indian artists about their individuality; it is often given the sentimental designation of isolation and in a more appropriate, romantic, vocabulary, of solitude. This dissembling may come from an ideological fuzziness about why and how they stand in relation to high modernism which brings to fruition the existential status of the lonely (spiritually exiled) artist. It may be a conscious ruse to deny their modernist affiliation. And/or a device to refuse the social structuring and normative codes that modern art as an institution has acquired in the twentieth century and that is not available, or still not fully desired, in the Indian situation. Most Indian artists are, as a matter of fact, first generation urban individuals.

Jamini Roy in Calcutta (from the 1920s), and Ramkinker Baij in Santiniketan (from the 1930s), make the desired link between the country and the city the very subject and style of their art. In many ways the "rooted" artist has remained prototypical for the discourse of Indian art. In Bengal this is not only held relevant for transitional times; it is a matter of both ethics and ideology till today. Consider the work environment of Meera Mukherjee (fig. 1) during the three most productive decades from the late 1960s. Until her death in 1998 she returned to her adopted village near Calcutta where she persisted in following the tribal metal-casting techniques. Her depiction of peasant work, crowned by an iconography of non-violence (as monumental statuary of emperor Ashoka at Kalinga and of his supreme mentor, the Buddha himself), would be a form of anachronism if it

were not so peculiarly poignant as a contemporary historical statement. Consider the choices of the printmaker/sculptor, Somnath Hore. After a life as a communist-activist and teacher (spanning the decades after the 1940s), he has become a recluse in a tiny village in the outskirts of Santiniketan. He bronze-casts figurines for a never-ending memorial to the hungry and the dead from the man-made malaise of Indian poverty.

In 1947 the Progressive Artists' Group from Mumbai initiated a completely urban life-style and artistic outlook. Most of the artist-members, like M.F. Husain, F.N. Souza, S.H. Raza, K.H. Ara, came from minority communities, working-class or petit bourgeois backgrounds of small town and city. They established an ideology of middle-class metropolitanism that is the dominant model for the artists' self-image in India today. They were also the first generation of internationalists who kept the question of identity on hold within the universal/modernist framework—until it became a generative proposition in the later decades.

Other cities—Chennai (Madras), Delhi, Vadodara, Hyderabad, and later, in the 1980s, Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum), and Bangalore—have developed active art milieus in the last fifty years and in varying degrees played out similar transitional maneuvers between the country and city. Sometimes you find the artists, who come directly from the rural environment, deliberating over the folk and tribal as much from nostalgia as from modernist interest in the formal aspect of the artifact. Sometimes you get a range from high/esoteric to popular traditions as with K.C.S. Paniker, K.G. Subramanyan, and Bhupen Khakhar, who have had the wit and confidence to calibrate given traditions according to contemporary priorities.

In more recent times this faith in origins has led to an expressionist valorization of peasant and working-class identity as for example in the Marxist dominated region of Kerala. Here the distinction between country and city is obliterated by developed systems of transport and education but the very contradiction in the consciousness and living conditions of people leads to a precipitate aesthetic: an iconography that spells a no-return-no-exit existentialism comes to stand in for humanism. But the actors in the scene hope that the martyrdom of exile will not run waste; it is placed face to face with a burning awareness of the forces of history whereby you try to understand, in the Gramscian sense, what an organic intellectual (and artist) might do in terms of grassroots ideology.² From this contradiction derives also the question: what might be the criteria for a more universally valid praxis.

In Bangalore, a sudden and somewhat artificial cosmopolitanism has been brought about by quick industrialization set apace by the recent Indian policy of liberalization. As in Mumbai, art activity by young artists in fast-growing cities, takes for granted the triumph of capital whereby you turn successful, yes, and alert to the global projects, but also as likely you develop an oblique response and become oppositional, ironical, avant-garde.

This raises the question if individual consciousness in India still exists at the country/city divide. Along with that there is the question whether consciousness is sufficiently political to take up the cause of the collective *against* capitalist anomie?

A difficult weaning-off from the clan and a return to it for political solidarity; an uneven modernization and insecure identity in a mixed metropolitan population and, despite that, the heroic stance of the exile: there is, wrapped up with dissembling, a great stake in individuality among Indian artists. Accompanying it is an anxiety, almost as if the entire project of modernity requires to be singularly undertaken and embodied in every odd artist as his/her responsibility.

Individuality is not only a peculiarly pressured phenomenon in Indian life, it is becoming a way of being in a world that destroys, even as it underscores, the ethics of *location*. This new identity is coming to be placed outside of the regional and national paradigms, or what one might call the frames of belonging. It pitches itself into the global that provides no firm frame to speak of. Precisely, therefore, the artists are required to work without/outside frames, construing at one and the same time:

- subject and provenance;
- material object and its conceptual context;
- identity and its appropriate mythology.

Thus the isolation that an Indian artist may speak about is to be explained historically, in terms of the Indian experience of artists having to handle existential/caste/class questions as a form of political paradox. Additionally, like artists everywhere in the globalized world, Indian artists have now to match a formal analogue with their own subjectivity. That is to say, they have to fabricate language as foil for the soul-force of subjectivity in the actual practice of art.

But what *is* the force of subjectivity?

While it overlaps with selfhood and individuality, subjectivity virtually implodes what may be designated as the private domain. The subject acts and is acted upon. There is, in the modern condition of the subject, heroism of the protagonist in history as well as the vulnerability of the victim of history.

In the past decades, subjectivity has been considered the privileged realm of the feminist consciousness and, for our present argument, of women as artists. Latecomers in the historical process, women have brought to the question of subjectivity not the aura of the monad but the effulgence of suppressed knowledges released from the bewilderment of past ages where their subject-position was determined by male interlocutors. These new-old knowledges produce volatile histories of gendered forms: of aspiring bodies that de-alienate concepts around the human. Gender consciousness, in the larger sense of the term, has played a prominent role in exploring possibilities within the subjective realm through narration, and outside narration through iconographic rendering. Women artists have worked out critical annotations of materials, and through these the use of radical signifiers.

Likewise subjectivity has been developed by marginal and minority groups in voluntarist terms, and here the example of black arts, from the days of negritude to the later call for militant against-white politics remains exemplary. Conjoined with gender liberation, this subjectivity both confronts and plays out a masquerade of the "other" in the fully ironical sense of the term. This (by now multi-ethnic and polyvocal) subjectivity has been so mobilized that it may finally win the day over older claims of selfhood, and even that of identity. But so that the world is not entirely relativized, we must continue with the modernist regard of protagonist and victim subjectivities; to always recoup the agency of the historical subject, over against postmodern discourse that tends to trigger anti-historical factors and encourages conditions of cultural entropy.

Since the 1990s there is, in India, a more critical reflex in the language of representation, an offering of dislocated and fragmented and deferred subjectivities. This is what we may now call an *other* politics, deriving not from nationalism but from gender, and potentially from *dalit*, and minority consciousness.

I am proposing the possibility in contemporary Indian art of the self opening out to gain metonymic extension; and to configure, from the part-for-whole fragments, a situational identity. I am thinking of the way Arpita Singh (fig. 2) and Nilima Sheikh will play out the feminine as masquerade—the one through exposing her good and bad objects, the other through an elliptical figural/formal arrangement, making an orbit for her body. But then if that form of identity promotes a perennial longing, the trick may be to jettison that too compact notion of the artist's self as well and turn squarely to the *artwork*. To mark its elusive objecthood which can be textualized in a way as to see that it does not simply get interpellated into the global space but turns around to designate the new historical forces at work in that space. Nalini Malani, for example, will pitch the artwork in the position of a subversive "gift" being serialized into the artspace, and bringing disparate subjectivities in its wake.

(Private) Mythologies.

There is a mythological mantle for everything in India. Mythologies wind round our cultural psyche like friendly pythons. There is also a struggle to disentangle and cut clean as an individual. Therefore the attempt by Indian artists, especially since the 1950s when they declared their modernity, to deliver themselves into the world with an autobiographical imagery and a legible signature.

There is a mantle besides the mythological. A nascent individualism is quickly overlaid by national allegories in the Indian cultural context. The subject-in-history, in order to be regarded as such, must sacrifice/enhance itself by a collective affiliation to the nation. Now, as the pythons slip into their ancient nests and, for good or worse, the urgency of national allegories subsides in the age of globalization, it is time for new decathecting devices. Now, indeed, when the replete self is under challenge from anti-metaphysical and what are considered de-totalizing ideologies, we will witness less metaphors and more metonymies at work: an array of fragments will split and facet the signature to make it less legible.

But this is not the end of the private mythologies syndrome. While actual myths may be left to the anthropologists' surer hands, there is mythic material that, for example, the surrealists, or surrealism as an attitude and language, invent. There are objects and events turned into mythologies that yield their meaning through semiotic analysis. Thus if we believe that mythologies are derived from the tradition, from signs-in-the-world, and from the unconscious, all of these aspects have come to be freshly relevant for the Indian artist today.

There is in contemporary art a recurring attempt to look at mythic material with revulsion/attraction and, to borrow a term from Walter Benjamin with reference to surrealism, as "*profane illumination*."³ A cross-section of the 1960s generation of Indian artists showed an attraction to this feature of modernity: a discernibly new surrealist tendency shows up once again in the work of younger artists (It may be mentioned that artists have generally set aside expressionism and realism in the making of this iconographic repertoire—though during the 1980s this was a pronounced feature in the art milieu along the Vadodara-Mumbai-Kerala axis, and in Calcutta). I call them the new *avatars* delivered by the great Imaginary from the realm of plenitude into that of mortality, and finding a vocabulary for the difficult survival of the human through contemporary iconography. I refer here to artists like Bhupen Khakhar, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Arpita Singh, Jogen Chowdhury, all belonging to the generation of the 1960s. At the same time I refer to artists who came into the scene during the 1980s, such as Ravinder G. Reddy and N.N. Rimzon, Surendran Nair (fig.3), C.S. Douglas and Atul Dodiya.

There is, as I mentioned above, another use for the term mythologies—of translating phenomenon into linguistic codes. One can call this (after Roland Barthes) a semiotic rendering of contemporary culture into mythology.⁴ While the surrealist imagination specializes in handling the fragmented imaginary, gaining a masterful command of the private mythologies syndrome, the conceptual system of configuring signs takes on a greater textuality, as for example in Western feminist art from the 1970s.

Private mythology, with its libidinal spark, invariably includes fetishism. There is a great interest in the fetish today. It is, as in the work of Navjot Altaf, a way of deflecting the double discourse of primitivism and capitalist commodification. With the fetish we reach beyond sincerity and into the politics of the artifact. But the fetish is also indulgence and self-exposure, as with Mrinalini Mukherjee; and it develops into irony with younger artists like Sudarshan Shetty, Kausik Mukhopadhyay, Tushar Joag. The fetish is sheer pleasure, sheer provocation, possible subversion. When it is introduced by a politically self-conscious artist like Anita Dube, it circles the problem of reification and leaves the object (of art) to survive as it will in the great masquerade of forms.

Where in all this shall we palace the Real/the historical?

Introducing public space.

What has been excluded from this discussion is art relevant to a citizen-subject; that is to say, art within specific historical circumstance as for example within a social order designated as the nation. (The social order we address can be on a much smaller scale such as a community, or of a much larger scale like the global.) There is still a relative lack of cultural theorizing on actual art practice that might reflect the changing views on the national formation—specifically the growing critique around it. This task rests with cultures of the third world where the national is not obsolete nor a matter of cynical dismissal, bound as it is with liberation struggles that are (in some cases) so recent as the mid-twentieth century. In the interim there are certain kinds of positions that can catapult us into this theorizing—and a possibility towards the kind of art practice that takes the question of the individual artist in the public space further afield.

Meanwhile I give a tangential example: the position articulated by the curator of 1997 *Documenta X*, Catherine David.⁵ She supplanted the well-used terms, political art/radical art, with her preferred term, critical art. She thereby made art and discourse co-terminus but not only that, she (re-) introduced the idea of praxis where indeed theory and practice achieve a dialectical synthesis. I do not agree with David's exclusive and therefore at times arrogant definition of what is urgently to be foregrounded as contemporary art. You cannot deduce from even the best of European maps the historical necessity in non-European societies nor can the Western notions of criticality serve for an aesthetic manifesto for the whole world. I am suggesting that though David's stringent choices in contemporary art may not be to our purpose, her argument can be. It is precisely for us to bring to the category of critical art a useful historicity from another vantage point. And the kind of resilient vision that can swing together the *past and the future* of national cultures, engaged like India in confronting the global and yet beginning to find forms of cultural praxis therefrom.

Through the 1990s, Indian artists have developed an interest in certain aspects of a minimalist and conceptual aesthetic, of installation and photography and idea-based art. This initiative is to be given as much contextual importance as the appearance of successive phases of modernism itself with its labelled forms such as expressionism etc. The shift away from the too homogenous aesthetic of modernism is in no way arbitrary, nor a matter of some belated catching-up programme with postmodernism as cynical opinion will have it. Such a move is tuned to a particular moment of dis-

juncture in the social time of practicing artists in India. It is a dialectical move from within the cultural context as much as an art-historical affiliation.

Art practice in India is now set for a degree of detachment by bringing into play the symbolic function of art as language; by bringing to the surface the mediating markers between the (supposedly) replete self and the (subject) matter perceived as the "real." This fresh transaction places emphasis on materiality, and there is art practice that takes steps in the direction of actually conceiving such structured phenomena; that creates an appropriate phenomenology: a framing of the "real" which is at the same time a historical denouement of the contemporary here and now. I am thinking of artists like Vivian Sundaram and his work from the *Memorial* to the very recent *Journey Towards Freedom*; and Rummana Hussain's *Home/Nation* and *The Tomb of Begum Hazrat Mahal* (fig. 4).

This side of allegory, materiality in art can yield a deliberately simple code of values; tilted towards the "real," it is converted into the politics of use and the ideologies of labor by Sheela Gowda.

There is now an increasing use of photographs to cut down an excess of soulful representation in Indian pictorial art, and yet there is soul captured, displaced, returned to its fugitive status in works of Sundaram, and Rummana Hussain; and of N. Pushpamala and Ayisha Abraham whose mock-narratives suggest how the photographic image, so deceptively real, is simultaneously the perfect artifact for representational retakes—a symbolic thing.

There is in India now a politics of installation that goes beyond anti-commodity theories. There is recognition of the architectural, the environmental, and the ethics that goes with it. Further, this politics has to do with the tropes for spatialization in postmodern art, and with that a different reinscription of time—as for example theatrical encounters like Nalini Malani's *Medeaprojekt*, and the *Mutant* series, in the desperate time of now.

There is an aspect of circumambulation, a more meditative ambience that explores the phenomenology associated with the body. This leads to another kind of commitment to self, the object and the world. There is a spiritual protocol in the work of Rimzon, for example where it is the chastened body of sculpture that propels the viewer into a controlled encounter. Though structured within a seemingly tabooed space, the encounter does not involve the raw/dead/real body. Holding off hallucination in the duration of a dream walk, it concretizes an archetype for contemporary use.

I will end on a somewhat phantasmic note. A new kind of stand-in may be on the way to being invented, a *decoy* that is precariously perched to precipitate the artwork as *idea*. That is to say, the artwork may be positioned precisely so as to camouflage/protect, and if necessary replace, that wonderfully reassuring sense of the situated self we are all used to addressing. In this act we will touch at once the vulnerable part of the lost self and the lonely individual; we will also re-situate the subject-in-history to speak in a more public voice about what has been hitherto unaddressed.

Notes

1. See A. K. Coomaraswamy, "Akimcanna: Self-Naughting," in *Coomaraswamy 2: Selected Papers: Metaphysics*, edited by Roger Lipsey, Bollingen Series LXXXIX, Princeton University Press, Princeton/New Jersey, 1977.
2. See Antonio Gramsci, "Formation of Intellectuals," in *The Modern Prince & other writings*, International Publishers, New York, 1957.
3. See Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism" in *One-Way Street*, NLB, London, 1979.
4. See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1972.
5. See Catherine David, "Introduction," *Documenta X Short Guide*, Cantz Verlag/Documenta, Kassel, 1997.