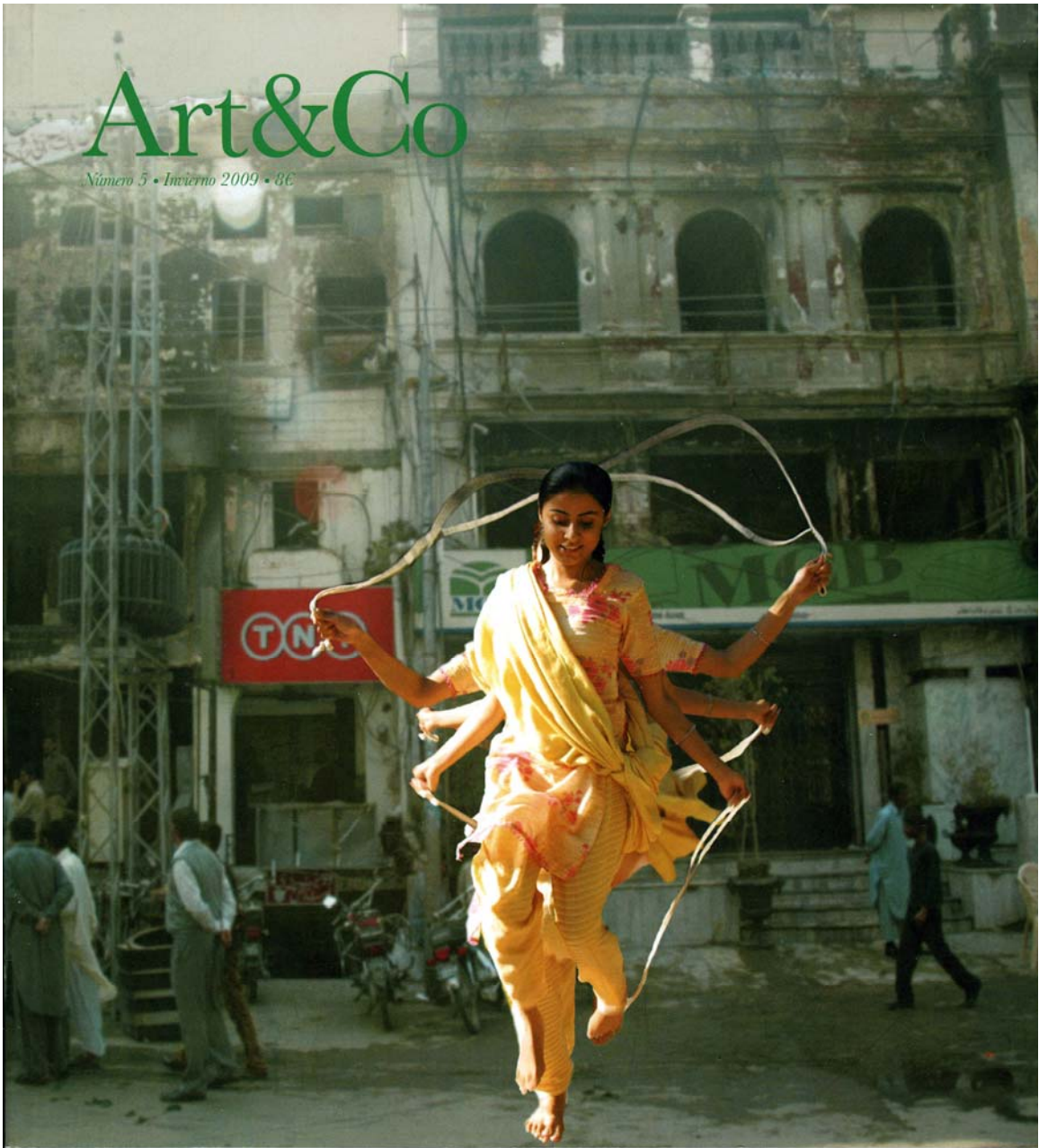


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Change of paradigm

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The global attention that contemporary Indian art has received in recent years has been fixed on the boom in the Indian art market. This reveals only one dimension of the dramatic transition through which the subcontinental art situation has passed since the early 1990s. Indeed, it is true that the market has transformed the lives of many Indian artists and opened up undreamt-of opportunities in terms of experimentation with media and materials, gallery infrastructure, and the expansion of consciousness that comes with travel. But, paradoxically, the demands on artists have increased to such an extent that their freedom to extend themselves in bold new formal and conceptual directions has been reduced. Meanwhile, some of the most expressively and conceptually stimulating artistic projects are being conducted outside the market scenario. They are staged in those richly productive zones of engagement where a self-critical art practice bypasses the gallery and auction-house circuits to forge solidarities with other cultural practices.

This rubric embraces not only video and intermedia art, but also social projects and new-media initiatives; interfaces between image-making, pedagogy and activism; and research and archival projects. This tendency in contemporary Indian art is strongly represented by artists like Ravi Agarwal, who attends closely to the crises of ecological devastation and the important public question of environmental change; Amar Kanwar, who addresses the complex politics of violence in the Indian subcontinent; and the Raqs Media Collective, whose three members combine a commitment to dissent and its defence with their articulation of plural, layered narratives of place and belonging

as a guarantee against the monopolistic claims of religion, nation and State. Interestingly enough, Agarwal, Kanwar and Raqs were all first presented in the context of international contemporary art by Okwui Enwezor in his Documenta 11 (2002).

I will reflect here on some of the major aspects of this transition, writing as one who has participated intensely in the contemporary Indian art situation since 1988 as critic, theorist and curator. I write, also, as a friend of the Indian artists, having collaborated with many of them in image-making and discursive adventures. If I were to describe the changing ecology in which Indian art has developed during the last decade, I would identify the Indian art market boom as only one among four key vectors of change, the other three being: the schisms and scissions within the Indian nation-state, which have altered the textures of public life and the scope of cultural expression; newly available media and technologies of image-making and communication; and transcultural experiments in travel, dialogue and collaboration.

Although the first decade of the 21st century is not synonymous with any single major political event (as the 1990s were with the cataclysmic violence following the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, 1992), this period has witnessed the deepening of India's political schisms. While the ascendancy of the Hindu-majoritarian Bharatiya Janata Party was broken electorally by the centrist Congress Party and its allies in 2004, the public sphere remains sharply polarised. An aggressive, upper-caste Hindu majoritarian movement claims the ground of hypernationalism; it is opposed by equally assertive subnational movements and lower-caste mass mobilisations. Since successive governments have followed the populist policy of appeasing ultra-orthodox sentiment in every community, the tenor of public life has gradually grown intolerant of dissent and idiosyncrasy.

This negative development has had a specific effect on the artist's claim to intervene in the public sphere. The artist's freedom of expression has been infringed repeatedly by the discourses of politicised religiosity and ethnic pride, most viciously in the case of MF Husain, a foundational figure in the history of modern Indian art. A sustained campaign of legal harassment and mob violence by the Right has forced the nonagenarian painter, writer and film-maker to exile himself in the UK and the UAE. At the same time, many artists have wrested opportunity from catastrophe: they have been prompted by the situation to mobilise alliances with writers and cultural activists, to organise platforms of resistance against illiberalism and censorship.¹

Alongside these political developments, Indian artists suddenly found themselves in possession of newly available technologies of imaging and communication from the late 1990s onward. The advent of advanced video technology, the internet, graphic interfaces, virtual-reality software and digital retrieval systems has amplified the scope of artistic production and also, crucially, transformed the nature of artistic practice. For many artists, the work of art has been rendered unstable, versional, re-programmable and open-ended: it is no longer the irreducible summation of a process so much as it is a provisional statement of the process, not a destination but a log entry.²

The globalisation-era potential of the Indian art world was most productively realised in a range of transcultural experiments in dialogue, encounter and travel that began in the late 1990s. With agencies like the Japan Foundation, the Goethe Institute, the Triangle Arts Trust and the Prince Claus Fund underwriting these experiments, Indian artists, critics, theorists and curators benefited enormously from residencies, workshops, conferences and collaborations held both in India and overseas. A cross-fertilisation of ideas took place during these exchanges. The most revolutionary outcome of these transcultural experiments was the shift in paradigm and perspective for an entire generation of Indian artists, who abandoned the colonialist centre-periphery model of the world, in which the West was always the donor and the non-West always the recipient of contemporary culture, a relationship marked by the syndromes of belatedness, imitation and permanent apprenticeship. Instead, these artists began to perceive the world, correctly, as an assembly of multiple, improvisational, self-renovating modernisms: a conversation among regional trajectories of the contemporary.³

The Transformation of the Studio

One of the most palpable changes that took place in Indian art practice during the early years of the 21st century was the transformation of the studio, its locus, nature and textures. Until relatively recently, most artists worked at home or in a rented apartment in the neighbourhood. Now, however, many artists find it possible and indeed necessary to extend their studios into a space between laboratory and factory, with the work process departmentalised and delegated among assistants. Krishnamachari Bose and Riyas Komu in Mumbai work on this model, for instance, as do Bharti Kher and Subodh Gupta in New Delhi. For another kind of artist, such as Ashok Sukumaran, the studio has become portable, virtual and

tactically mobile; often no larger than a laptop opened up and worked on in airport lounges and while on residency in remote parts of Europe or North America; often, the studio has no materiality beyond an exchange of drafts and diagrams via email. And yet, for artists like Sukumaran and Shaina Anand, his collaborator in a series of social and community-based projects, public space often becomes the widest possible studio space: they tune into social relationships, trace the contours of political asymmetries of access over sidewalks and hydrants, map the invisible metropolitan architecture built around electrical connections and cable television networks.

The economies of making in which Indian artists now operate may usefully be described by the opposition of distribution and delegation. By distribution, I mean a participatory process of art-making that is fundamentally democratising and transformative; that empowers its participants with information, skills and a potential autonomy; that activates an audience. Under this rubric, I would place the Raqs Media Collective, the Cybermohalla initiative undertaken by SARAI in the shantytowns of Delhi, the discursive platforms orchestrated by CAMP (Critical Art and Media Practices) in Bombay, and the PeriFerry festival of the arts organised by the Desire Machine Collective in Guwahati, in turbulent north-eastern India. In all these projects, expressive and critical activity fold into one another; collaborations among artists, theorists, curators and activists are encouraged; and an effort is made to convene a new and engaged audience for cultural practice from among various social classes.

Delegation, on the other hand, implies the production of individual art works whose realisation – for reasons of scale or technical complexity – requires mixed teams of art-school-trained assistants, technicians and labourers. While its apologists present this tendency as a return to the 16th-century atelier, it is really a simple industrialisation of art practice inspired by the practices of 20th-century monumental sculptors, functioning between studio and factory. This operational method is a response to the voracity of collectors, to cavernous exhibition spaces and the pressures of a career that typically begins with art school recruitment and is pursued through complex negotiations with dealers, gallerists, collectors and investors across the globe. I do not wish to make a value judgement favouring distribution and deploring delegation; my purpose is simply to indicate the variety of scales at which art is now practised in India.

Co-producing the Contemporary

Indian artists are active participants in defining and constructing the global contemporary. I use the word

'contemporary' to designate the present as a *predicament*, which must be addressed creatively and innovated around. It is not merely a given existential situation or a trend to be subscribed to. Indeed, the global contemporary is not legislated and exported across the planet from Western Europe and North America; it proceeds from highly differentiated starting points, from vigorous theatres of the Now being staged in Abidjan and Buenos Aires, Jakarta and Bombay, Rabat and Beirut, Seville and New Orleans, Manila and Ljubljana. The contemporary is a series of entanglements among diverse histories of political struggle, cultural vision and artistic exploration. In this context, the Indian art situation offers an extraordinary traversal of choices and temporalities.

Consider the coordinates of the new atlas of Indian art that I have drawn here. There are four generations of Indian artists working simultaneously. In each generation are artists subscribing to one or another of at least six major perspectives. The gamut includes artists whose work has evolved from critical apprenticeship to the Schools of Paris or New York and found anchorage in a renewed classicism, a renegotiated Sublime or a vigorously critical abstraction (M F Husain, Akbar Padamsee, Tyeb Mehta, Jehangir Sabavala, Mehli Gohhai, Zarina); artists who formulate a language reflecting the local and immediate combined with sophisticated and historically informed references to the 1960s Western avant-gardes (Nalini Malani, Sudhir Patwardhan, Rameshwar Broota, Gulammohammed Sheikh); artists whose subtle politics of self inspires them to combine autobiography with allegories of the nation-state (Atul Dodiya, Surendran Nair, Subodh Gupta, Dayanita Singh, Gargi Raina, Nataraj Sharma, Jitish Kallat); artists who deconstruct the fixities of identity through the ambiguities of belonging, often in risky, performative modes (Bharti Kher, Nikhil Chopra, Tejal Shah); artists who scrutinise the politics of information networks and mediatic flows, and who deconstruct the official discourses that control the individual subjectivity (the Raqs Media Collective, Shilpa Gupta, Ashok Sukumaran, Shaina Anand); and artists who confront terror in an epoch whose leitmotifs are occupation, torture, surveillance, migration and genocide (Krishen Khanna, Sudarshan Shetty, Baiju Parthian, Praneet Soi, Sumedh Rajendran, Shaina Anand, Riyas Komu).

Such entanglements, which I have elsewhere described as forming 'continents of affinity' mapped against nationalist and Cold War geography, are increasingly being recorded by new curatorial and theoretical frameworks emerging from India. Significantly,

2008 marked the first time that major biennales were co-curated by Indians – Manifesta by the Raqs Media Collective and the Gwangju Biennale by me.⁴

Correspondingly, the rubrics of debate have changed. The tedious themes that dominated much discourse in the Indian art world between the 1950s and the 1990s have been rendered irrelevant. The anxiety of national identity, typically phrased in the form of specious binaries such as 'Indianness vs. internationalism' or 'tradition vs. modernity', has receded. The chimera of 'authenticity', to be secured as the guarantee of an embattled local against an overwhelming global, has been swept away. I would speculate that the vacuum left behind by this lapsed, unproductive rhetoric will be filled by the awareness that transcultural experience is the only certain basis of contemporary artistic practice.

As the cultural theorist Nancy Adajania and I have argued elsewhere, transcultural experience – and the corresponding stance of 'critical transregionality' – gives the cultural practitioner "strategic and imaginative freedom... to link regions on the basis of elective affinities arising from common cultural predicaments, jointly faced crises, and shared choices of practice."⁵ This is not a means of escaping the urgencies of the globalised local; rather, it sustains a responsible and responsive encounter with the contemporary, with all its manifold provocations.^[6]

1. For an account of the foundational proposals of postcolonial India, framed through the debates among Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru, among other thinkers, see Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998). For a study of the major social and political developments that have taken place in India since Independence, see Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: A History of the World's Largest Democracy* (New Delhi: Picador, 2007).
2. For a detailed account of technological change and its effect on Indian art practice, see Ranjit Hoskote, 'The Elusiveness of the Transitive: Reflections on the Curatorial Gesture and Its Conditions in India', in Joselina Cruz et al. eds., *Locus: Interventions in Art Practice* (Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2005), pp. 225-237.
3. For a substantial account of the opening up of transcultural exchange and dialogue, and its formative influence on the younger generation of Indian artists from the late 1990s onward, see Nancy Adajania, 'Probing the Khojness of Khoj', in Pooja Sood ed., *Ten Years of Khoj* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, forthcoming, 2009).
4. Ranjit Hoskote, 'Scales of Elaboration', in Okwui Enwezor ed., *Annual Report: A Year in Exhibitions* (curatorial essay in the exhibition catalogue of the 7th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju: Gwangju Biennale Foundation, 2008), pp. 40-53.
5. See Ranjit Hoskote, 'Retrieving the Far West: Towards a Curatorial Representation of the House of Islam', in Shaheen Meralli ed., *Re-Imagining Asia: A Thousand Years of Separation* (London / Berlin: Saqi & Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2008), p. 121.