



Spectres of the Real

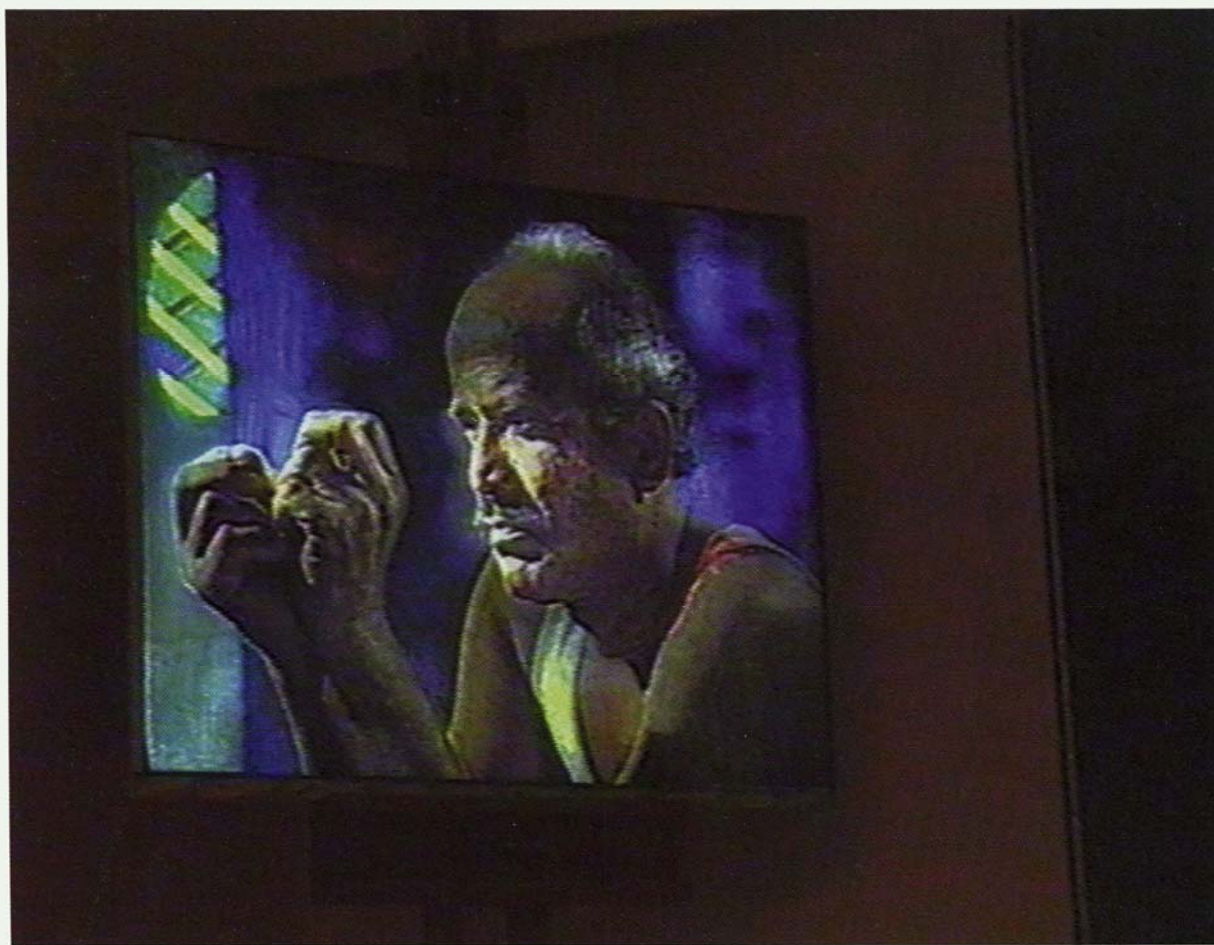
Geeta Kapur presents varied readings of Ranbir Kaleka's *Man Threading a Needle*, a work which combines the painted image with video and sound and locates the work within the context of Indian art.

The Image

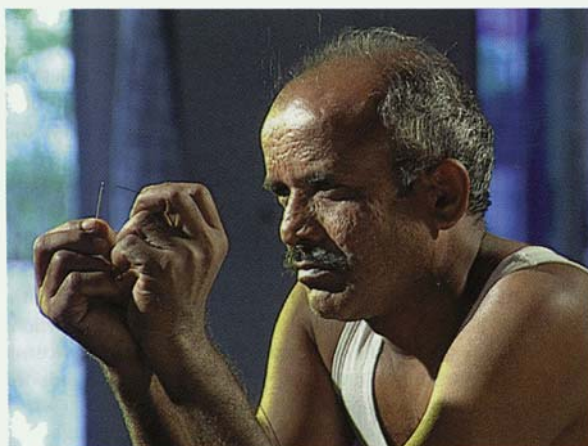
Ranbir Kaleka's most recent artwork, *Man Threading a Needle* (1999),¹ is presented to the viewer as a painting set on a good easel and placed in a darkened alcove of what is presumably the white box of the museum or gallery. The painting is lit rather as you might find an old master painting set apart for special attention when it has just been acquired and holds pride of place in the collection, or when it is isolated to make a point at the time of a curated exhibition. Knowing that 'a work of art' gains its meaning from the process of viewing it in the sacred space of the art gallery, you enter the space demarcated by Kaleka imbued with the requisite awe. Thereon the artist's ingenuity has to be matched by the viewing protocol: together this yields unexpected meanings. The light comes from a (hidden)

projector. The image occasionally twitches, it responds to a periodic sound that punctuates and penetrates the image – as it does the spectator. Slowly, you realise that Kaleka has manipulated the image: he has doubled (tripled?) its affect by a video projection of a real man on a painted image of the same man. He has done what must be written into the script for a painter who turns to another form of visibility: he matches image to image as between painting and video, he makes it faintly animate, he presents it theatrically, as an installation.

Even as Kaleka augments the image, he brings to the surface the near-perversion of its seductions. He plays up the undercurrents of romance in imagist aesthetic, but taints the aura of the unique image producing a doubt about the very fascination the image exerts on the spectator.



Ranbir Kaleka. *Man Threading a Needle*. Video projection on painting. Installation view. 1999. 26 x 35.5 inches. All photos courtesy RARA Designs, New Delhi.



Ranbir Kaleka. *Man Threading a Needle*. Still from video. 1999. Projection size: 26 inches x 35.5 inches. Collection, artist, New Delhi.

It can be said that a person who is fascinated does not perceive any real object, any real form, because what he sees does not belong to the world of reality, but to the indeterminate realm of fascination. A realm that is, so to speak, absolute. Distance is not excluded from it, but it is excessive, being the unlimited depth that lies behind the image, a depth that is not alive, not tractable, absolutely present though not provided, where objects sink when they become separated from their meaning, when they subside into their image. This realm of fascination, where what we see seizes our vision and makes it interminable, where our gaze solidifies into light, where light is the absolute sheen of an eye that we do not see, that we nevertheless do not leave off seeing because it is the mirror image of our own gaze, this realm is supremely attractive, fascinating: light that is also the abyss, horrifying and alluring light in which we sink.

— Maurice Blanchot.²

Indexical Sign

The work I am referring to shows the head and upper torso of a working-class man trying to thread a needle. The man is partially bald, he has a bristly moustache and pitted skin, he is wearing a *baniyan*. In the video film the real man breathes and blinks, but he is very still and does not in fact succeed in threading the needle. In the painting the man is a smudge, more or less: the pigment is brushed-in so as to absorb light in one area, to bounce off light in other areas, and to accommodate the man's slight, spasmodic movement in the video film footage.

Kaleka's painting-video is entirely about overlapping procedures. One: the effect of light brings material substance into being in the magical sense. Two: there is a claim to contiguity with the phenomenal world in the image-component that the photographic process conveys, so that indeed from painting to photograph to a 'filmic' image there is at work a converse and construed materiality. Thereby the image turns from an iconic into an indexical sign; a sign that purports to carry the material trace, an imprint of objective reality. Three: there is the factor of time in the video image, but it moves so tardily in Kaleka's artwork that it arrests the condition of becoming. The image held mid-distance between stillness and mobility devolves into a spectral phenomenon in the realm of the real.

The man is alive but stoically meditating. He is a dead



Ranbir Kaleka. *Man Threading a Needle*. Oil on board. 1999. 26 inches x 35.5 inches. Collection, artist, New Delhi.

man with a small spark of life left in him. Or is he simply a man falling asleep?

The small sharp movement associated with his (not) threading the needle is in fact gained by speeding up his frozen stance. He appears to breathe and blink fast at certain phases in the viewing and there is a little tremor of fear when the high sound of a rail-engine, of a siren, of a peacock comes on in the image-sound loop. Because this robotised reaction is manipulated on the machine, it looks more like a kind of glitch in the running of the video than the voluntary response of the real man to calls from the real world. The very act of painful rejuvenation that he exhibits through the jerky movement, demonstrates a more enduring condition of psychic closure.

The man threading a needle, painted and filmed, is a persistent (non-) performing presence: of the actor who refuses to get off the stage, who virtually installs *himself*, who thereby shades into the condition of the object fitted with due amplification of light, sound and theatrical profile. Kaleka recognises the phenomenology of object-presence where the artwork palpitates with the encounter. A body encounter that is unique to an installation – which is neither painting, nor film, nor theatre.

The final, highly articulate, almost *trompe l'oeil* image in Kaleka's painting-video has been achieved by contrived means: the 'authentic' qualities of each medium are superimposed, fuzzed, brightened, refocused, slowed, jumped up. The representational quality of the image is likewise made more uncannily present but less comprehensible for all the literalness of the laboriously combined means.

Action

Aspiring to a condition of hypostasis, the man threading a needle is a living icon, haloed by light, evacuated of any ambition to transform, condemned to a kind of nascent apotheosis. He invites compassion, and even a form of social humility. But this, I would like to suggest, has as much to do with the trick of a closely registered image-on-image, sound-on-image as with the inscrutable action of the man represented. I will try alternative readings:

1. The man trains his gaze, gives regard – not to another

TURNING POINT

person, but to an object. He performs a trivial action with such frozen concentration that the whole business can be taken as an acting out of the artist's own state of self-absorption. It is in proxy of self-regard. Even more precisely the gesture is an act of displaced narcissism.

2. In a condition where an unknown desire is being cathected on to an object, when that object is gaining a fetish status, the likely effect is to create an erotic motif at one remove. This is the case even when there is no kind of sexual imagery offered by Kaleka. (We know, of course, that Kaleka paints large and small pictures that are so sexual as to be nearly pornographic, and we may tend to exaggerate the libidinal aspect of all his images). Nevertheless, there is a form of sentence that is conveyed in the nature of a relay, and the bodily effect, deferred and transposed to us as spectators, is tantalising.



Ranbir Kaleka. *Man with Bhutta*. Oil on shaped board. 1999. 24 inches x 34 inches x 4 inches. Collection, artist, New Delhi.

3. Perhaps the gesture is not about self-absorption. Because if it were so the image would be even more voyeuristically positioned, less acceptable to the viewer. The identification that this man invites, the retrieval as well as the protected presence of a working-class figure suggests a different positioning of the image. As it is the process of identification with the working class (so much the subject of debate since Eisenstein and Brecht questioned realist assumptions and identificatory processes of film and drama) is a vexed business. It is all the more impossible to recommend in this non-identificatory phase of postmodern art where the author and 'text' (/ image) already offer so mediated a relationship that the viewer in the picture has hardly any possibility of identification: it is obviated, dispersed, blasted. Ranbir Kaleka asks the question in an elliptical way: what form of identification can this image of the subaltern figure produce?

(A cross-reference to Sudhir Patwardhan is in place: Ranbir Kaleka asks the question about the proletarian figure in a way that is very different from Sudhir Patwardhan, who carries the gravity of a Marxist understanding about the problem of representation and who takes it into ideological as well as psychoanalytical areas of identity, integrity, guilt,

collectivity – or more properly, class solidarity).

4. Arbitrarily foregrounding ordinary action, like threading a needle, privileges a kind of disinterestedness. It can denote a form of contemplation, it can produce a mystical moment. Remember that Zen practice favours archery: the precision of the strung and poised arrow is the supreme motif of concentration. But while the Zen instruction is to hit the target, the action remains incomplete in Kaleka's representation, the man does not fulfil his object. There is a reluctance that falls short of Zen practice and leaves the artist and spectator bereft. This failed objective, this unrealised being leads us, via the route of mystical retraction, towards an existential condition where humanist concerns for mortal aspiration, mortal fear, place doubt over the modes of metaphysical transcendence.

Reflection

After marking representational responsibilities, we return to the image, for *Man Threading a Needle* is, at the end of the loop, about visuality: it creates a chimera of concreteness through light, pigment, material and the photographic process of indexing a life-person on film.

The photograph, as Roland Barthes says, is always in the past. The video image is about presentness, there is nothing before or after. As against the cinematic image, the video image denies sequentiality, narration – it elides the question of mortality.

True to the virtues of the video image the man threading the needle subsists in time present like an indestructible ghost that has no home elsewhere in space...Where, then, does the real person fit into all this, is he pure fiction? The image of the man in the painting-video is an irreducible reflection.

Nevertheless: doesn't the reflection always seem more spiritual than the object reflected? Isn't it the ideal expression of that object, its presence freed of existence, its form without matter? And artists who exile themselves in the illusion of images, isn't their task to idealise beings, to elevate them to their disembodied resemblance?

— Maurice Blanchot.³

Ranbir Kaleka's project of visuality has to do with the obsessive gaze in the surreal imagination which awakens dead/ painted objects to a profoundly fake life; with the double-edged meaning of illusionism, making naturalism itself a compulsive pursuit of art; and with the lost and found tradition of the *trompe l'oeil* imagery where art plays tricks with reality via a seduced vision.

Because of all this, there is a good deal of, and about, voyeurism. This is what I least like about Kaleka's work. But I am willing to qualify: there is a form of voyeurism that goes less with capturing the viewer, more with the meekness of the author. This is a voyeurism that evades a face to face encounter and, in the fear of a confrontation, *concedes the body*.

(A cross-reference to Bhupen Khakhar, who indulges in the activity and form of voyeurism will broaden the frame of reference. A seemingly intrusive gaze becomes an intimate, affectionate contact, a caress in Khakhar's astonishingly candid autoerotic paintings. Khakhar's gaze on the body opens a window into the prison-house of the soul).

Painting Fetish

Ranbir Kaleka can be placed squarely within a set of concerns pursued by Indian artists. I have mentioned Sudhir Patwardhan and Bhupen Khakhar. Place Atul Dodiya and Anandajit Ray on a perpendicular axis and Kaleka can be contextualised. These latter artists, younger to Kaleka, carry the oneiric extravagance of the image-world into zones of sublimity and decadence. Tugging at the hold that the great surrealists exert on the imaginary, they take the business of painting towards the (sometimes welcome) vagabondage of the postmodern. Atul Dodiya works through a figure of high art, through allegory. He follows the career of allegory as it devolves through art-historical manoeuvres into the ironies of the popular and then spirals back into the more reflexive aspect of postmodern genres. Anandajit Ray, working less ambitiously, contracts into a private language and the fictions thereof. He settles into a world of object-fixations.

Ranbir Kaleka has always been driven by the desire to paint fetish objects. Some of his earliest images include a man mesmerised by a freak pattern on his shirt (*Oops*, 1977), a man beside a handpump, threading a needle with desperate effort (*Painting III*, 1978), men smuggling a fabled creature (*Fish Dreaming of its Holy Captors*, 1987), not to speak of Kaleka's painting fetish, as for example in his hugely carnivalesque amalgam (*Story-Teller*, 1995) where there is zany self-indulgence around sexuality as there is a mythologising of the act of painting, of brushing in rainbows of pigment. More recently, in his *Man with Bhutta* (1998), you see the same model who features in the new painting-video, washed by a flood of lurid light, gripping a corn on the cob in his hand as if it were the chewed-up desire of an asylum-inmate – or the broken prayer wheel of a renegade monk.

It occurs that a man who is holding a pencil may want very much to let go of it, but his hand will not let go: quite the opposite – it tightens, it has no intention of opening. The other hand intervenes with more success, but then we see the hand that we may call sick slowly gesturing, trying to recapture the object that is moving away. What is strange is the slowness of this gesture. The hand moves through a time that is hardly human, that is neither the time of viable action nor the time of hope, but rather the shadow of time which is itself the shadow of a hand slipping in an unreal way towards an object that has become its shadow. At certain moments, this hand feels a very great need to grasp: it must take the pencil, this is necessary, this is an order, an imperious requirement. The phenomenon is known as persecutive prehension. — Maurice Blanchot.⁴

Video Installation

We are often asked why there is so little video art/ video installation in India. The answer is not difficult: mediums and genres and styles become 'naturalised' languages and yield their semiotic possibilities differently in different locations. They inscribe themselves into the ongoing processes of artists' work when the time is ripe, when the historical moment arrives, when the existential, political and now, not least, when technological conditions mature. The question is hardly of chronology, it is of breakthroughs in one's own time and place so as to cast asunder precisely those myths of origins – of birth, civilisation, creativity –

that make for privileged accounts in art history – national and global. The point is to select your vantage point and, via such 'surplus' uses of languages and techniques that are accessible, to construct fantasies, to hone in, to make the very *work* of art stand for the simultaneity of cultures in the growing universe of contemporary meanings.

If it needs resources and courage of imagination to capture new media, Nalini Malani's deeply moving video installation, *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* (shown in Amsterdam and Bombay during 1998-99), takes the big leap and situates itself with anti-war artworks everywhere in the world. This room-size work, the discourse that ensues from it, the implication for the open field of video/ art in India, makes for a full further chapter on the theme.⁵

Meanwhile, a quick recap on artist videos in India. Quite early on, Rameshwar Broota made a couple of small video films, manipulating the human body – his own – to surrealist effect (*The Body*, *Biography of a Life*, both 1985). During the 1990s Nalini Malani comes into the video scene with video films featuring installed and destroyed artworks, actors and objects colliding in theatrical performances, video films using the techniques of animation, montage, and complex editing patterns (*City of Desires*, 1992; *Medeamaterial*, 1994; *Memory: Record/ Erase*, 1996 and then *Remembering Toba Tek Singh*, 1998). Vivan Sundaram, apart from making a video film in the manner of documentary-fiction (*Couples*, 1994), uses the video film/ video monitor as part of an object ensemble, animating, focusing, dissolving the concreteness of a sculptural installation with the moving light-image emanating from the small black box. (*House/ Boat*, 1994; *Sher-Gil Archive*, 1995; *Carrier*, 1996; *Structures of Memory*, 1998). The video has been used to record and present performance art most notably by Rummana Hussain (*Living on the Margins*, 1995; *Textured Terrain*, 1997; *Is It What You Think*, 1998; *In-between*, 1998), and briefly by Pushpamala. N. (*Indian Lady*, 1997), and Shilpa Gupta (*Untitled*, 1998). The first video artwork of Ranbir Kaleka, *Man Threading a Needle* (1999) is under scrutiny.

Through this exposition I reveal my own engagement with the life of the image but also dislodge and recontextualise the haloed status of the image in contemporary art. The protestations about the image among Indian artists and critics now leave me cold. I prefer to slowly shift my vocabulary to what, in contradistinction to the image, may be called idea, concept, object, installation. Making these categories coeval helps unburden the image, it loosens out the spell – a paralysing nostalgia – into which the imagists, claiming ancestral rights over the great domain of aesthetics, tend to cast themselves. A more democratic relationship *between* forms broadens the signifying capacity of the artwork. But more about this on another occasion.

Notes :

1. This work was shown in The British Council, New Delhi, in 1999, in an exhibition titled *Edge of the Century* curated by Amit Mukhopadhyaya.
2. Maurice Blanchot. *The Gaze of Orpheus* (Station Hill, New York, 1981), p. 75-76.
3. Ibid. p. 81.
4. Ibid. p. 67.
5. Any further 'chapter' in this discourse should have to begin with Ashish Rajadhyaksha's 'Video, Art, Medeamaterial' in *Nalini Malani: Medeamaterial* (edited by Kamala Kapoor and Amita Desai, Max Mueller Bhavan, Bombay, 1997), and supplemented by his subsequent exposition on Malani's video installation *Remembering Toba Tek Singh*, presented in Bombay in March 1999.

