Change of paradigm
RANJIT HOSKOTE

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 numerous 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 expressive 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-referential 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 schism and scissions within the Indian nation-state, which have altered the structures 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.

Among 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 schema. 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-national sentiment in every community, the tenor of public life has gradually grown insensible to dissent and ideosyncrasy.

This negative development has had a specific effect on the artist’s claims to intervene in the public sphere. The artist’s freedom of expression has been infringed repeatedly by the discourse of ‘politicised religion’ and ethnic pride, most viciously in the case of M.F. 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 witnessed 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.

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, simulations and software and digital recording 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 untunable, unverifiable, 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.

The globalisation of 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 colonialism, initiation and permanent apprenticeship. Instead, these artists began to perceive the world, correctly, as an assembly of multiple, improvisational, self-renewing modernisms: a conversation among regional trajectories of the contemporary.

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 texture. Until relatively recently, most artists worked at home or in rented apartments in the neighbourhood. Now, however, many artists find it possible and indeed necessary to extend their studios into a space between laboratory and lounge, with the work process domesticated and delegated among assistants. Krishnachandra Bose and Rina Banerjee in Mumbai work on this model, for instance, as do Bharti Kher and Sohel Haque in New Delhi. For another kind of artist, such as Ashok Sukumaran, the studio has become portable, virtual and...
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 produces, which must be addressed creatively and innovatively around. It is not merely a given historical situation to be subscribed to. Indeed, the global contemporary is not legislated and exported across the planet from Western Europe and North America, but produced from hily differentiated starting points, from various theatres of the New being staged in Abu Dhabi and Buenos Aires, Jakarta and Bombay, Rabat and Beirut, Seoul and New Orleans, Manila and Ljubljana. The contemporary is a series of entanglements among diverse histories of political struggle, cultural vision, and artistic explorations. In this context, the Indian art scene offers an extraordinary traversal of choice and complexities.

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 appoaches to the Schools of Paris or New York and found exchange in a renewed classicism, a neo-gotthic sublime or a vurgently rhetorical abstraction. The Indian contemporary art scene is thus an example of a globally distributed and autonomous practice, a form of distributed creativity that is not centralised but distributed among a variety of local and regional contexts. The contemporary is not merely a given historical situation to be subscribed to. Indeed, the global contemporary is not legislated and exported across the planet from Western Europe and North America, but produced from hily differentiated starting points, from various theatres of the New being staged in Abu Dhabi and Buenos Aires, Jakarta and Bombay, Rabat and Beirut, Seoul and New Orleans, Manila and Ljubljana. The contemporary is a series of entanglements among diverse histories of political struggle, cultural vision, and artistic explorations. In this context, the Indian art scene offers an extraordinary traversal of choice and complexities.

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1. See Anke Tikku’s contribution to the catalogue of the exhibition "Indian Art Goes Global: Contemporary Art from India", National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2010.

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