

A Living Museum

Nuzhat Kazmi looks at a show of site-specific installations curated by Peter Nagy for the Museum of Fine Arts, Punjab University, Chandigarh, where the artworks respond to the architectural features of the museum site, as well as to the competing art histories embedded in the museum collection.



Detail of the installation by Anita Dube, using a sculpture by Krishna Kumar.

On Tuesday, January 30, 2001, at twelve noon I was standing in the premises of the Museum of Fine Arts, Punjab University, Chandigarh. Warm sun, expansive green space and a stone sculpture of Balbir Katt right in front of me: a formal surprise and a sculptural delight, fresh and light. I walk into the museum, partly prepared for what I had come to see. Inside the museum, the silence hits you: while the enfolding space draws you into galleries, and there are actually 13 galleries in this museum, each 25 by 25 feet. This certainly is a museum that can be read as content and as a metaphor, an unspoiled context to a whole horde of questions and counter questions: museum as a space; art as practice; history as living; theory as practice;

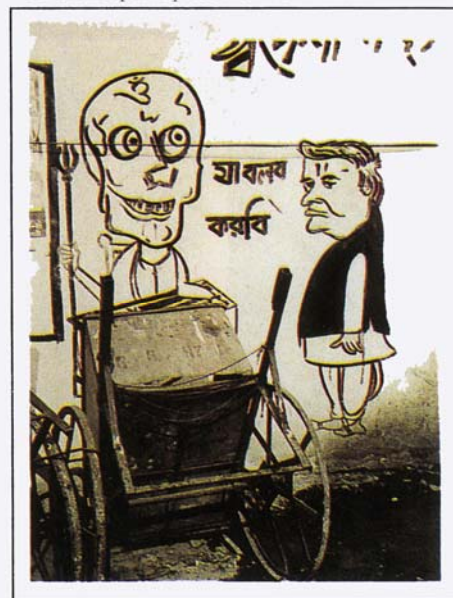
aesthetics as fun; artist as a creator, a mediator between a concept, an idea and the viewer; artwork as a code; as a signifier and the signified, a structured material, being at the same time a destructured presence.

I am in the city to look at an exhibition *Context as Content - Museum as Metaphor*, curated by Peter Nagy. Sometime in 1999, Dr. Alka Pande, the ex-Director of the Punjab University Museum, Chandigarh, invited Peter Nagy to curate an exhibition highlighting the works in the collection of the museum. Peter, who is no longer an alien American on the Indian art scene, being in the mainstream contemporary Indian and international art activities, took his job seriously. He visited the city of Chandigarh, studied its architectural character and history, delved into its genesis and surveyed the culture in and around the university campus. He went through a kind of stock-checking of the museum: saw all the works in its collection; informed himself of the artists' concerns and formal strategies. In the exhibition catalogue, Peter observes, "As artists, it is our belief that the works of other artists are resilient enough to be re-contextualised, to be creatively manipulated into new settings, and to be re-examined as cultural artefacts with a multiplicity of possible meanings".

For Gallery One of the museum, Peter selected and arranged photographic material and architecture plan drawings of B. P. Mathur (1926-1976), the architect who had worked with Le Corbusier on the city plan and buildings of Chandigarh. Drawing inspiration from the works of the American sculptors Donald Judd and Haim Steinbach, as well as ritual Indian objects and elements of traditional Japanese décor, Peter arranged in Gallery Two, an installation. Here a collage and a lithograph by Nasreen

Mohamedi is arranged along with a woodcut by Archana Sinha; a lithograph and a wood relief by Jeram Patel; an ink drawing by V. S. Gaitonde with sculptures by Nagji Patel and Valsan Kollerli.

From here the viewer moves into another gallery space where Anita Dube's installation is mounted. One is caught by the view that holds one's eye: A blue nylon expanse of net drapes down on the wooden sculpture *Yellow Monkey* of Krishna Kumar, the most vociferous spokesperson of the Radical



Artists Association of the 1980s, who committed suicide in 1989. The windows, covered with red cellophane by Anita, remind one of the Gothic stained glassworks of medieval Europe, as also of the colonial churches in India. This gallery is flooded with light and the colours red and blue, mix in an intensity that almost blurs the conscious. There is something about the forms here: cutting and sharp and yet persuasive to create a historical narration through

the photographic record of the dead artist, Anita attempts a historical catharsis through formal structure and material deconstruction. References to Krishna Kumar continues on the floor of the mezzanine, under the overhanging lamp is a bedding, a few books and a black and white photograph of Krishna Kumar: just the face with deep intense stare and a firm smile, perhaps suggesting a resurrection of the artist from his death.

Gallery Four has Peter Nagy selecting three works of three different artists: **Bhupen Khakhar**, **Madhvi Parekh** and **Sudhir Patwardhan**. Through these works, Peter juxtaposes the elements of figuration and abstraction in contemporary Indian painting. In Gallery Five, Samit Das has structured his installation around his fascination for city architecture: he relates to the architecture of Chandigarh.



Detail of the installation by Ram Rahman: on the left, one of Ram's photographs; on the right, a lithograph from the portfolio "The Realm of the Absurd" by Gaganendranath Tagore.

Galleries Six, Seven and Eight have installations by Vivan Sundaram. This entire assemblage has references to art activities conducted at the Kasauli Art Centre, initiated by him and partially funded by the Museum of Fine Arts. Vivan has created a study centre where photographs of the Kasauli workshops are extensively laid and

overlaid. The visitor is invited to flip through the folios and turn the albums upside down, making his own selection for viewing. Climbing the mezzanine level and from this added height, looking down, the viewer confronts an area of the installation, where more emphatically perhaps the "theory of chaos" is applied then elsewhere in the exhibition. Paintings hang close so as to make a grid-like visual impact or maybe a patchwork quilt of contemporary art hung on the wall, like a makeshift tapestry.

On the other side of the mezzanine, on the floor you have numerous sculptural pieces, lying together, with an appearance of being placed at random and amongst them you have a remarkable work of Mrinalini Mukherjee, almost bereft of its formal content and thereby logically of its creative thrust. It is here that one is forced to confront the annoying questions about the limits of an artist's authorship and authority over works of other artists as his pliable material to be thrown and juxtaposed; his right to recontextualise and rehabilitate the content of artworks. Descending into Gallery Eight, one sees the photographs and sculptures of the *Seven Young Sculptors*, an exhibition organised of works that were made during a Kasauli workshop in 1984, there one experiences a sense of fun and work, a commune-like milieu.

As we move on, we see Sonia Khurana's installation which is built around her selection of paintings from the museum's collection, hung on the wall. The works are partially covered by overhanging screens. The installation of **Ram Rahman**, a photographer and a graphic designer, recontextualises *The Realm of the Absurd*, a 1917 portfolio of caricature by Gaganendranath Tagore with his own photographs and popular magazine advertisements of today. Rahman's work confronts Tagore's contemporary history and also simultaneously mirrors our own political predicament and social malaise.

Gallery Twelve has Peter paying a tribute to J. Swaminathan. A total rebel, who along with other artists like Jeram Patel, Himmat Shah, **Gulammohammed Sheikh** and Jyoti

Bhatt had formed the radical Group 1890 in 1963. Swaminathan is much respected for his visionary institution, Bharat Bhavan, which functioned as a composite museum of urban, folk and tribal art. Peter has hung three paintings of Swaminathan in an installation that also includes objects from Indian tribal and folk craft traditions. His installation recalls Swaminathan's attitudes in relation to curatorial possibilities and the encompassing, expansive role of a living museum in a modern world.

Viewer moves to Gallery Thirteen, where Peter has allowed the architecture to "...dictate the placement of sculpture". What results is an assemblage worked out from an assortment of different works of various artists. The open courtyard has been claimed by **Subodh Gupta**, who in his usual confident and fluent manner, focuses on the conventions and ideologies inherent in various objects of commercial and domestic use that make the visual world of an ordinary Indian.

When I walked away from the museum, the sun was still warm, the grass green and expansive, the shadow of the stone sculpture outside the walls of the museum long and dark. Inside there were the receptionists, the deputy curator and no visitor.



Subodh Gupta completing his sculptural installation in the museum's courtyard. All images Courtesy Ram Rahman.