

**BODY•CITY**

SITING CONTEMPORARY CULTURE IN INDIA

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p71

In exact contrast ..... 'is' the video-work of Ranbir Kaleka, whose aesthetic is based on the principle of liminality. The use of the digital medium allows him to achieve a transparency, a hallucinatory quality where the (male) character/person/body is both present and absent, reducible to a pixel-puzzle and conjured as a simulacrum — a copy of that which does not exist in material terms or just enough to throw a shadow and create a contemplative moment of identification. Or, on the other hand, to tantalize vision itself with a fleeting grasp of desire. Whether it is his pock-marked model in a vest, a carpenter threading a needle in a superimposed image, at once painting and video-shot ("*Man Threading Needle*", 1998–99), or a placid bald man with the face of the buddha clutching and letting go then clutching and letting go a plumed fowl ("*Man with Cockerel*", 2001: (fig. 11)), Kaleka presents the body as an index of mortality — at the edge of its dissolution, and disappearance. Precise name, identity, gender and profession are subordinated to a fragile sense of being where no assertion, no action is necessary except that which trusts in a minimal continuum of survival; the form itself resembles a haiku in that the hypothesis it offers is profoundly about a lived life that needs no backing of proof.

Geeta Kapur  
art historian, critic and curator

Publicity by HKW (House of World Cultures, Berlin, **2003**)

The poetic video works by Ranbir Kaleka, *Man Threading Needle* and *Man with Cockerel*, exemplify a more introspective position in contemporary Indian art.

**Kapital & Karma**

RECENT POSITIONS IN INDIAN ART

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Kunsthalle Wien  
Hatje Cantz

Madan Gopal Singh on Ranbir Kaleka  
p148-150

There once existed an aperture before the mind's eye. Images would pass through the defile in a stop-go movement weaving narratives of tender melos before dissolving into the continuum of life. The flood of images mingled with forgotten songs of celebration. These imaginings were more like plaintive wakes within the heart of remembrance - as possibilities of sleep. They seemed to rise from clearings of light and volumes. Were these choices of technique? Compulsions of memory? Or just a unique way of reclaiming history put under erasure? So

many cellars of remembrance would resonate in unison. The musty aroma of time, the muted sounds of uncertainly beckoning ghosts.

Friendly. Inapproachable. Ranbir's work during student days had the profundity of light sitting quietly, almost unobtrusively, beside you. And it seemed to spring from perhaps a very finely developed sense of sound. It caressed submerged histories that had been put indifferently away but had mercifully continued to exist.

Within the technologies of the cinematograph, an image could get stuck in the defile. And having got stuck, it could not manage to move itself away from light. Not being able to bear the intensity of light, it would burn before our eyes. It would stick like the molten melt caught in a single image memory carrying scars of neurosis to endless repetitions.

And then the technologies of power brought us into a world of virtual maze. The signs of fire began to recede. Neuroses now reappeared as so many playful ghosts in a dance of unpredictable repetitions. The ghosts recovered differences through spans of durative stillness now broken quite unexpectedly by the twitch of eyelids, a slight movement of hand unexpectedly astir to put the freeze back into time. The homogeneity of a small image demanding a heterogeneity of 'gaze'. The water trickles down against what is perhaps a blue window. Light filters across like the intensity of a mild ember - staining the window filling it with volume. Like the luminous poetic word - aglow from within. Light sitting on a painted surface in a projective play. There is a ghost within this light and another within the pigment. This is the moment of their encounter. Of their magic. These ghosts reside within digital loops - infinitely replayable, alongside partial narratives of continuously distracted gaze outside.

**Madan Gopal**

holds a doctoral degree in film semiotic. He is a literary and film theorist, script writer, singer and composer. He teaches at Delhi university and has lectured extensively in India and abroad on film theory.

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## **Glimpses of a Conversation with Ranbir Kaleka<sup>1</sup>**

Michael Wörgötter: In painting you have been working on various sorts of rooms since a long time. Now you have shifted into a new media, using video in your work.

Ranbir Kaleka: I don't think that changing to a new medium or using technology in my work has greatly shifted in what I have always been interested in. You rightly mentioned rooms. Most of my earlier paintings did consist of interiors. It took me a long time to venture out of that interior where I introduced the landscape. But that landscape also in many ways is like a large and closed space. That space does interest me. Again as a space of an event, and that's a psychological event. And the actual happening of the event, when art happens, that happens outside of the frame of the painting. There are indications, there are gestures, there is a trajectory from the eye travelling from one point to the other. But if we need to experience as to what is happening, then we have to close our eyes and let the event happen.

M.W. In our installation Powder Room (2000) which was initially conceived for a specific situation in Public Space within the Boxwallahs series<sup>2</sup> you intensively explore this event of perception.

R.K. What has interested me is the juxtaposition of the self and the space, which one creates for oneself. Even the way we are sitting interests me greatly, how we occupy that space and where we draw a circle around ourselves and also how much we transgress into the other space or how much we allow somebody else to enter our space, with their gestures, with the trajectories of our eyes and – also when we come to video – with the nature of our sound, the tonality of our voice.

M.W. Most of all, I think, it's an investigation into the relationship between >self< and >other<?

R.K. When we look at our own image in the mirror we are non-critical at one level. But we are also critical at an other level when we look at our own image in relation to other images, other faces, other human entities that we are aware of or we have looked at. I wanted to see how we would respond when we are looking at our own image and the same brain chemistry applies which applies to us in our intimate moments of looking at ourselves and suddenly if the same space without refocusing our eyes is replaced by the image of the other. What happens?

Angelika Fitz: Some reactions to this experiment were quite different from what we had expected. Do you think that Indian notions of >self and other< differ from lets say more western notions?

R.K. I was told of two gentlemen who went into this installation, two Indian gentlemen, and as they came out they were asked what they had experienced. So they both replied that they saw their future. They were younger men and they saw an older man, their image being replaced by an older man. But there was also a young girl in the images which were replaced. So they were asked: "What about the young girl?" "Oh, that's our next birth! It's our after life". So for them the other wasn't really the other they were still looking only at themselves.

M.W. If the other is reflected as part of oneself, would that mean that every Indian is an artist?

R.K. A lot of Indians would claim that there is no distinction between what they do or what they experience as art and some of the other experiences, be they religious or say musical in nature. This has been slightly problematic because the term installation has come from the West to the Indian scene. What has often been said was that we have installations all around and they are art. The way the man selling vegetables sets up his vegetable cart or any other person on the street, even if he has no home, the way he set about arranging the space around him-self is a kind of installation. Or the cow pads which are dried up made into sculptural forms. But they sometimes miss out that there is in installations, as we understand it now as art practice, a conscious generation of meanings.

A.F. Even though narration plays a very important part in your work you don't introduce film as a narrative element.

R.K. When I use video I do not set out to do something which could be described as , >video art<. I have been interested in cinema. That's the medium I have been familiar with. I know that through cinematic forms meanings can be created. And then I find video accessible. So I use the tools which are available to me but my interests remain the same. Using light to create an image and watch what the aura of an image created through light is, that interests me. That is different from a painted image. Even a photographed image, which is created by using light, has a different presence. Using something like holograms for a greater presence of an object or a different kind of presence of an object, that would interest me. Not so much that its a development in scientific terms. Also that's fascinating. I always like to follow it up. But only because it will allow me to reach areas of meaning which for me do not seem to be accessible through the painted image or the photographed image or the video image.

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1. Conversation with Michael Wörgötter and Angelika Fitz, New Delhi, January 2000
2. *Boxwallahs. The 'DeEgo Cube' Facing an Indian Petrol Pump*, Interventions in public space..

### Angelika Fitz

is a cultural theorist. She works on interdisciplinary projects in the fields of art, architecture, film and cultural studies. Together with Michael Wörgötter she has realised different art and film projects with Indian artists and theorists, e.g. *Boxwallahs* (new Delhi 1999/2000).

Michael Worgotter

is an artist and founder of the art and theory network *DeEgo*, Vienna. His main focus lies on the requirements and possibilities of art production relating to different contexts.

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## **ART MONTHLY**

June 2002/No 257/UK

### IDENTITY POLITICS

Capital & Karma

p46

...Perhaps the best piece is by Kaleka himself: *Man Threading a Needle* is a video loop of a man poised on the point of threading needle, cast onto an identical painting of the same subject. The protagonist does not move, except for the inevitable movement of a person sitting still. 'We liked this for its way of extracting a notion of time out of painting and a notion of light out of film and making a third thing...Paintings are important in India but here some of the painting might just look exotic'. So one of the roles of these Austrian curators is to decide how the Viennese context will affect the look of a piece; there is little point in including works whose significance drains away to leave mere exoticism.

David Lillington

art critic and curator

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**1999**

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### TURNING POINT

**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.

THE ART NEWS MAGAZINE OF INDIA – volume 4, issue 3, July-September **1999**

### **The Image**

Ranbir Kaleka's most recent artwork, *Man Threading a Needle* (1999), 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 one might find an old master painting 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 visuality: 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 neat-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.

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 through their meaning, when they subside into their image. This realm of fascination, where what we see seizes our vision and makes it interminable, here 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*<sup>1</sup>

### **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 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 the 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 terror 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 reason 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 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 sentience that is conveyed in the nature of a relay, and the bodily effect, deferred and transposed to us as spectators is tantalising.
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 process of film and drama) is a vexed business. It is all the more impossible to recommend in the 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?
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 posed arrow is the supreme motif of concentration. But while the Zen instruction is to hit the target, the action remains incomplete in Kaleka's 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 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<sup>2</sup>

Ranbir Kaleka's project of visibility 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.

### Painting Fetish

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), man 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 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<sup>3</sup>

#### •Notes

1. Maurice Blanchot. *The Gaze of Orpheus* (Station Hill, New York, 1981), p.75-76.
2. *Ibid.* p.81
3. *Ibid.* p.67

Geeta Kapur

art historian, critic and curator

1988

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### SEVENTEEN INDIAN PAINTERS

Gallery Chemould's 25 Years at the Jehangir

September 1988

The work of Ranbir Kaleka strikes me as being exceptional for several reasons. First and foremost it is in the manner in which his paintings – and especially his more recent work – reflect an ability to incorporate personal experience with wider and more general issues. But in addition, the pictorial language that he is in the process of developing, seems admirably suited to express what I take to be his increasing preoccupation with myth.

By this I do not imply that he paints about mythological subject material. Myths cannot be transcribed through written language. Nor, in the latter part of the twentieth century can they be described by pictorial means. A myth, in terms of its essence, can only be projected through another myth. A verbal interpretation of a myth, however faithful, is bound by its very nature to be based on some form of scientific methodology and thus becomes analytical. For this reason it cannot embody a dialectical interpretation and is thus separated from any philosophical concept.

The earlier paintings of Kaleka dating from the seventies and, with the exception of two works, unfortunately known to me only through reproductions, reflect a view of the world that is highly internalized and appear to place much reliance on the juxtaposition of improbabilities. In this sense they are to some extent dependent on certain aspects of Surrealism. Morphological and visceral forms cohabit in an enclosed space with sharply rendered manufactured industrial components. They depend on a kind of lucid spacial transparency in which an element of levitation is frequently hinted at. The family of artifacts and figure featured in these pictures is curiously weightless and thus to an extent implies an absence. Realism is however affirmed through an exactitude of technique in which every part of the painting is projected with the same degree of focussed intensity.

A degree of evolution in Kaleka's work can be found in the untitled 1981 painting that he showed in the exhibition of Contemporary Indian Art held at the Royal Academy in London in the following year. It not only makes use of larger and freer forms, notable in the case of a petalled canopy straddling the center of the picture. The treatment of the imagery is wider and, compared to works done in the previous decade, the painting is altogether more expansive and the content less dependant on psychological stress. The artifacts found in his pictures of the seventies have virtually disappeared.

Within the following six years Kaleka's vision has broadened and his concerns have centered on the depiction of myths that aspire to incorporate collective beliefs. His paintings are wide ranging and prospective works. What strikes me as most impressive is that they have lost none of the personal presence of the artist. But the balance has shifted. His range of interests now seeks to invite the viewer to empathize with the world in general, with nature in terms of clouds and water, with the mood of people or the times of day. They are not narrative paintings in the narrow sense in which the word is so frequently used. But they invite speculation on a whole range of emergent situations and possible transmutations stemming from the power and inventiveness of his imagery.

Kaleka's 1984 picture, titled *The Old Restraint gets a New Wing*, also called *Family* stresses his predilection for making use of a pictorial language that induces contemplation and a deep impression of serenity. In the context of the clamour made by the claims of most contemporary art, Ranbir Kaleka's work offers a reassurance of the permanence and continuity of these essential qualities.

Peter de Francia

B.1921, authority on Leger: *Fernand Leger-The Great Parade*, Cassel, 1969  
Principal of Fine Art Dept., Goldsmiths' College, 1970-72,  
Professor of Painting, RCA, 1972-86

**1987**

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## **YOUNG MASTERS**

Time Out – London's Weekly Guide August 1987, No.885

One thinks of Indian art as being very Westernised, but in the past few years the traffic has been the other way with painters like the Italian Clemente, living in Madras for several months each year and the sculptor Stephen Cox being profoundly influenced by his encounter with the craftsmen there. Since his visit Kaleka's work has, if anything, become less European, changing from surrealism to a richly coloured metaphysical realism based on allegory. In his complex and carefully orchestrated pictures, conjurers appear to fool the eyes of their public with cleverly staged tricks. One such genie produces flames from the palm of his hand to beguile a man on a bicycle, another the image of a sailing ship to charm a tailor with his spell. But the miracles are mirages – merely pictures projected on to a screen.



One might suppose that the conjurer represents the artist and his seductive powers, but these dream-like pictures are political allegories. 'They are like aphorisms or maxims,' explains Kaleka, 'that comment on political reality by oblique means. The conjurers are politicians who play with and manipulate people's perceptions, and the sleepers those who fall under their spell. I want to avoid propaganda but not protest – agitprop is too narrow and open to misinterpretation. During the Bangladesh War, for instance, journalists were invited to photograph an execution of prisoners that was staged especially for the cameras. It was a real event yet, at the same time, it was a falsification. Because the paintings are stylised, they could never be mistaken for a chunk of reality – they are clearly my invention'.

**Sarah Kent**

critic and writer on western art