

Critic Note

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KHOJ 2002 A workshop review

Introduction

Historically, the 1990s has become a junction that progressed towards the millennium, a countdown that was a landmark in time and space. It was also a time to look back in retrospect and look ahead with optimism.

Indian modernism has been viewed against the perspective of the modernist aesthetics and the late international modern of the twentieth century. The other conditions of colonialism and nationalism add a dynamic edge to the debate of visual culture and the quest for an Indian identity that was self-conscious. The debates of modernism have to be viewed in our contexts and time frame. The eclectic cross-cultural encounters evolved new ways of perceiving and representing.

The second phase of international modernism moved beyond culture-specificity and parochial nationalism. The 1990s was a significant departure for many artists who were pushing the frames of modernist conformity. The centre was giving way to work at the periphery, which was more challenging. Despite the mushrooming of commercial galleries and the advent of international auction houses, gentle subversions critiqued commodification; the 'white cube' was substituted but not challenged. Visual art moved into the public sphere and new modes of practice were more visible. Multiculturalism was the new mantra of the global village governed by the trans-national and the multi-national corporations. A hybrid visual language, which was part of post-modernism emerged. Fragmentation, quotation, and cultural pluralism gained prominence. The personal became political. Gender, sexuality, and urban angst were part of the new visual language. The local identity was emphasized in the global arena. Indian artists subverted the clichés thrust upon them by the West, a renewed critique from the third-world nation was offered.

Anxieties of the here and now

Are Indian artists experiencing the anxieties of their society? The 1980s saw an economic liberalisation in India with the first generation artists of the post-Independence era. They had tasted urban patronage and commercial success and were part of the gallery culture that promoted them. International auction houses like Christie's and Sotheby's also participated in showcasing contemporary Indian art in India and the West. Catalogues were published and some serious galleries curated contextual shows. This generation was lucky and responsible to establish a growing art market and they have to be credited with making contemporary Indian art more visible on the international art scene.

The 1990s also saw a greater visibility with international curators positioning contemporary Indian art in the Asian context and for a Western audience. The second generation of artists was building on the success of their predecessors in a more challenging situation. The country was more politically

disturbed, the rise of fundamentalism decreased levels of tolerance and acceptance, and the intellectual and artistic space was contested. There was a threat to secularism with the 1992 demolition of the 16th century Babri Masjid by Hindu fundamentalists: an unfortunate historical moment that bred violence and hatred between the minority and majority communities. The secular fabric of the fragile nation revealed troubled times ahead. Cultural censorship in the name of morality meant that assaults on artists were suddenly seen as a threat to cultural interpretation, and artistic expression had to abide by the unspoken diktats of the State.

Materials as message and metaphors

Artists are contributing by making definite choices in using particular materials and aesthetic options to express themselves and establish their identity, to form an aesthetic that creates a new visual language. The significant changes in aesthetic and visual language have always been associated by change in materials and techniques in the visual arts. In the post colonial context in India the usage of different materials has led to new structural and aesthetic opportunities. It generally leads to another language, change of direction, broadening of perception. It also helps in appropriation of new ideologies and aesthetic in the process of rejection of traditional structures. Materials can be manifestation of desire or a sign in the hands of the artists who belong to this eclectic trans-cultural landscape.

In these times of transition, artists are re-evaluating their concerns and redefining the paradigms of art practice. Materials are used as metaphors, the artist's awareness of materials encourage tactile mediations with the sheer presence of the material and work. This aspect involves the viewer in a direct confrontation with the installations in a theatrical space. This ability to modify space and environment outside the traditional practice of sculpture or painting has led to unprecedented explorations of materials and concepts. Materials constitute to a culture or gender specific identity and contribute to new preoccupation in artists. This awareness of material has many philosophic and environmental associations like the aspect of recycling and the use of ready-mades. The search into material can distinctively see two streams of thought. The first is an indigenous quest with culture specific material, using craft traditions and is also gender specific. The other is an eclectic, urban, and industrial fusion of global sensibilities. These materials have challenged aesthetic tastes, art markets and gallery pressures and are multi-dimensional in volume and concept.

Individual expressions by younger artists and their standpoints within or against established representation is not an easy task for there is bound to be a struggle. It is not a futile struggle however because it is from works and new materials like these that one derives optimism and change.

Divergent horizons

The challenge today is the subversion of the art-object and the capacity to sustain material exploration beyond the art market. These transgressions have largely been possible by efforts of individuals and organisations that have nurtured artists' explorations with material. We can recollect the efforts of artists' camps like KHOJ in Delhi workshops like these have consciously encouraged exploration in material. But the market is still anemic to unconventional material and is concerned about permanence and resale value.

The most exciting contemporary works are hybrid 'they are global in character. These artists are witty and cosmopolitan in nature; they deal with urban waste, recycled objects that move beyond their

utilitarian concerns to speak in a Dadaesque language. The act of recycling can also be seen as an environmental concern. The ability to transform material through clever juxtapositioning is common. They can be seen as acts of resistance and subversion in a response to the commercialization and objectification of visual art. These humble objects also challenge the craft of making an art object in the Duchampian mode. It encouraged the artist's engagement with the physical qualities of her / his medium. This democratic attitude towards neglected material was also indirectly instrumental for the acceptance of new materials.

The debris of the machine age becomes a catalyst for play. The assemblage of these ingredients is invested with meaning. The fragments from the urban junkyard are reconstructed through intuition; they metamorphose into interactive toys, complex apparatus, and quirky objects threatening the hallowed spaces of the gallery and the museum.

The most interesting aspect, of this dynamic flux in the use of material by these artists, is the reclaiming of new surfaces and material in their work. While the conventional easel painting has found new ways of surviving, the two-dimensional language adapts these new materials. The matter of material has become a political stance. And these are attempts to reclaim craft traditions and to move beyond gender and patriarchy. These explorations have also led artists to yield to the power of material without their egos. Most of these works are flexible, permeable and temporary, but the underlying appearance is the perception of "matter in flux" which spiritually links these artists to rituals that are pan-religious in our country.

More often many of these artists are interested in the concept of change to express impermanence by using material. The future of material will merely be incidental in the flux of existence. The transience of material will celebrate the temporary confluence of public space and the natural elements. The inconsequence of the art object will prevail over the artist and will survive beyond materiality.

From the centre to the periphery

The relocation of KHOJ 2002 to Mysore and Bangalore from the capital Delhi was a shift to revitalize an established art event in Modinagar from the outskirts of Delhi. This de-centring process can be seen as a dynamic shift to the South from the familiar national centre of art.

The colonial Modi House in Sikhribagh housed the workshop for the last five years in the background of the Industrial township of Modinagar. This contrasted with the acres of feudal farmland of the workshop. The hosts in Mysore Mr. Giri and his son Tarun Giri operate a flourishing hospitality business in Mysore (Hotel Siddhartha and The Chancery, Bangalore). Le Olive Garden is another ambitious enterprise to create a resort amidst the acres of coconut farms. The Giris' have sponsored an artists' camp earlier and have a long association with the local art community. Their hospitality and enthusiasm was much appreciated.

The workshop is committed towards developing a forum for exchange and experimentation between artistic communities within India and abroad. Within the large international context it develops a deeper connection with South Asia, which is of key importance. Mysore was the idyllic location for the workshop at le Olive Garden, a sprawling 8-acre resort nestling in the foot of Chamundi hills. The newly built open-air theatre and the undulated landscape was the site for action. The unfamiliar terrain was explored for spaces and stimuli, to trigger artistic sensibilities. For 15 days, artists who were strangers became friends, working together and exchanging ideas about the visual arts. The camp

saw the unfolding of activity, from collaboration to introspective studio practice the artists were marking out spaces for creating site-specific installations; from using local materials and craftsmen to the use of digital technology.

There was a significant emphasis to use local art students from Chamrajendra Academy of Visual Arts (CAVA), slide shows by the respective artists were held every day to introduce the artists participating in the camp. It created questions and dialogues of art practice in the young minds about contemporary visual art practice. Every evening, a stream of curious visitors, local artists and students from Mysore and Bangalore were exposed to the artistic activities. An estimated 1000 people attended the Open Day activity -- an unprecedented number for an art event. It was a day for intense and informal interaction between artist, critic, sponsors and art-students. The outreach programme emphasized in connecting the working artists with people of Mysore. Some of them worked with challenged children, old-age homes, hospitals, and local schools. This was an attempt to reach out to the public and make art a part of everyday reality. On the last day, New Zealand artist Michel Tuffery treated the audience to a performance and with a dramatic display of talent left the viewers mesmerized.

Art Camps like KHOJ, create bonds between the artists working within the country and help in forming a global network. It is an attempt to create arenas of international and local artistic exchange, a space for inquiry, experimentation and critical dialogue. Thus the liberatory power of art increases narrow conditions of cultural exchange in the geo-cultural and aesthetic territory of today. As the artists return to their respective homes, with renewed energy to continue their work, they have learnt to accept with generosity the wisdom of others and also accept differences in thought and practice.

The artist **Amy Plant (U.K.)** produced a newsletter called Amy's News. It was a personal account of various experiences encountered by the artist. She wanted to be a journalist, in an effort to communicate through the print media to her audience. The paper was a collection of curious incidents and people she encountered.

Chang Yoong Chia (Malaysia) created numerous icons of TV watchers placed on the trunks of coconut trees. He spoke about the passive insensitivity of 'couch potatoes' watching a clip from a Bollywood cinema.

Carla Guagliardi (Brazil) created an architectural space that comprised of two semi-circular enclosure intersecting each other which functioned as an archetypal sacred space and at another level it spoke about territories that intersect to form a common space.

Christoph Storz (Switzerland) toiled by himself to create a path amidst thick weeds, the solitary journey of the artist as worker/ farmer created a maze like path that criss-crossed in a secluded coconut grove. A handcart with marbles was placed in the pathway, adding to the ambiguity of the act. The rangoli pattern on the cart rhymed with the maze-like pathway.

Gisele Amantea (Canada) occupied an aisle to create a passage that was decorated with colourful braided disks, silver foil and a large charcoal drawing of a woman's hand in the act of wearing bangles. It echoed the experience of fitting into another culture. Jasmine perfume was sprayed on visitors and the recorded sounds of women bathing and intimate conversations at a beauty parlour were part of the audio track that played in the background, recreating a feminine space.

Jacob Jari (Nigeria) occupied a room with a single bed. He hung a photograph of an abandoned child garlanded with condoms and sanitary pads. This was his political commentary on the population explosion. Another work used empty plastic cups against a tap speaking about the local water crisis. Meanwhile Mandy Ridley (Australia) could not help responding to the exotic colours seen in the Indian market place. She worked with colourful plastic shopping bags decorated with paper cuts of rangoli patterns in florescent colours. **Mahabubur Rahman (Bangladesh)** work entitled 'Nix-Art Museum fluctuated between a performer and a curator. He masqueraded with camouflage attire and birds wings. His tent was constructed to house objects like toys, guns, death masks etc. He advertised his performance with a lithographic poster. **Sarath Kumarasiri (Sri Lanka)** responded to the local topical issue of the Cauvery river dispute. He symbolically used metres of blue cloth descending from the trees onto a freshly quarried granite slab. Empty plastic pots and newspapers with images of the dispute were part of the installation.

Michel Tuffery (New Zealand) brought theatricality, performance, and the indigenous issues into the workshop. He showed a pre-occupation with the image of the bull, which was strengthened by the local Nandi on the Chamundi hill. His dramatic performances with a bull-mask enacted a gruesome trance like performance that kept the audience spellbound. He also painted a large ox with tattoo patterns with reference to his own tattooed body. **Mayura Subhedar (Amsterdam/ India)** traced patterns from obscure parts of the workshop like the kitchen and dining areas. She multiplied these images into wallpaper that decorated an enclosed space with a coconut tree. A seat was constructed, within the space, as a sculpture inviting the viewer to sit down and observe her creations.

Babu Eshwar Prasad constructed a colourful set reminiscent of the architectural spaces from his paintings. The brilliant colours and the theatricality of the space were inviting. Biju Joze paid homage to skill and technology; he used his father's technical drawings against the backdrop of a horse and a mountain.

Hema Upadhyay cultivated the local millet (ragi) in a form of a letter to her parents. Her pathway led to a picture postcard house. Her letter spoke of life away from home echoing distance, time and longing. She made a private gesture public.

Ranbir Kaleka collaborated with the local repertory theatre, Rangayana. In his short video film, he juxtaposed genres of popular and parallel cinema. The actors enacted cryptic sequences from the urban middle-class milieu. This was accompanied by an eclectic sound track.

The local artist turned set designer **Dwarkanath. H. K** used a royal carriage that was part of the restaurant's decor as a prop. This carriage was originally used to transport food to royalty. The artist used many gesturing hands miming actions to narrate stories from the working class.

The location provoked artists like **N. N. Rimzon** to extend his studio practice. He created a folio of drawings inspired by archetypes of Mountain, House, and Tree. These intimate charcoal drawings were like key sketches for his later work.

Shambhavi found the high-tile roof of the conference room an ideal setting to place a large circular canvas painted with the colours of the night sky. A cage like house was hung as a resting place for pigeons. **Smitha Cariappa** celebrated local flavours with exotic gift-boxes in red silk which enclosed audio-visual-tactile-olfactory experiences for the viewers to cherish and take back.

Surekha worked on a photo installation using a portfolio of studio photographs of local women. The typical jasmine braid "moggina jade" that decorated the hair of women as a ritual was captured for posterity. She played with the ideas of memory, gaze, and the comical poses of the protagonists.

Vijay Bagodi extended his pre-occupation with violence from his graphic prints to three-dimension. He remembered the Gujarat violence in his assemblage of a severed head, dramatically arranged in the open-air theatre. The atmospheric light added to the fragments of a violent aftermath. **Yanseel Penpa**, a Thangka painter living in Bylkuppe (a Tibetan resettlement near Mysore) continued his traditional practice of iconic Buddhist painting without rupture. He attempted to reclaim and sustain a cultural, spiritual practice without contradictions or questions.

Reena Saini used local bamboo weavers to create a large installation with reference to her early work. She used the shape of a uterus as a focal point and placed a charaka from which patterns of signs, symbols and implements that celebrated labour and the unity of faiths emerged.

KHOJ a new ethics of dialogue

KHOJ has become an independent space to share, learn and understand differences. It realizes the common human bond of art making in our global world. Looking back at the agenda of KHOJ we see a conversation between cultures, attempts to harness the artistic potential, to break away from the linear mode of thought and perception.

Here, in Mysore, in an attempt to re-create new social rituals, the Artist Camp was an answer to bring isolated individuals together. It is an attempt to find a point of intersection between diverse artists. The social recognition of the visual arts is crucial to create the nexus between artist and patron in the educational institution. This camp is a quest for the active acceptance of visual arts in society; it encourages creative people to share their lifestyles and private mythologies. We see art in action and share imagination, intuition, and feeling in public. This is a new social ritual to create a dialogue between artists and society.

Private mythologies were made public in this event. The artist was positioned in public as a performer. The myth of creation was under scrutiny, the alchemist was asked to share his cryptic secrets with us. The mystery of creation was pulled apart to reveal the vulnerable artist in conflict with his work, in introspection and play. The artist basked under the arc lights like a celebrity with an aura, pampered and cajoled in a new found status in contemporary society. Despite this euphoria serious and honest art is an extension of the self, reflection of the milieu and has a subjectivity that speaks of concerns, identities, and ideologies. It stands the litmus test of the powerful art market, media hype, and speculations.

The contested modernist space of the gallery/camp is subverted by strategic manipulations through the language and politics of installation. Contemporary Indian art in the global age has challenged the old economic policy, political stances and the cultural paradigms. Younger Indian artists are speaking in a new vernacular visual language beyond the high modern classicism. The new eclectic strategies incorporate a new range of stances that are hybrid, plural, and multicultural.

The new generation of Indian visual artists is consciously interrupting the grand historic narrative. These strategic manipulations are eclectic in sensibility, and take the viewer by surprise to shock and trick by the use of ready-mades and manipulations in materials. They take an anti-aesthetic stand to circumvent the gallery space in the Utopia of the post modern landscape. In the new millennium, art is

in a transitional period. Art and human life have changed. Art needs to respond to our time and maintain its connection to our past.

As we see new centres and spaces emerging, new strategies to accommodate and acknowledge multiple expressions are invented. The expanded field of Indian contemporary expression will undoubtedly challenge viewers beyond the boundaries and continue to humble us with the complexity and diversity of a changing nation.