

## Cultural Translation: The Case of Contemporary Indian Art

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How does one begin to talk about contemporary Indian art in a situation where the growing interest it is generating internationally is becoming virtually indistinguishable from the culture of spectacle and speculation that is second nature to globalisation? As the Western media hype would have us believe, after China, it is India that is now 'the next big thing', the journalistic label that is the equivalent of a kind of package deal wherein cultural products of all kinds—ethnic craft, fashion, Bollywood *and* contemporary art—come as a bonus or added incentive to the litany of plus-points that is making the country so attractive to investors from abroad. And just as the perception of India as a new economic force on the international scene tends to occlude the very real social inequalities existing within the country, so, too, the reception of contemporary Indian art abroad is prone to gloss over the deep contradictions of a society in transitio—precisely the topos addressed by a significant number of artists. For many of them who came of age in the mid-1990s, the critical catchword — 'local versus global'—has proved to be, whether consciously or not, a *modus operandi* for reckoning with the new world order into which India has been catapulted. (The names that readily come to mind are Subodh Gupta, Sheela Gowda, N.S. Harsha, Sharmila Samant, the Raqs Media Collective). An older version of this dichotomy, or rather dialectic, namely, of 'tradition' and 'modernity', had, of course, long exercised preceding generations of Indian artists, but the terms in which it had been framed were intimately linked to questions of postcolonial identity. Indeed, at the very outset, the emergence of a proto-modernist art in India in the late 1930s is indissociable from what can only be called the civilisational dilemmas faced by the divided subjects of colonial history in their negotiation of a national identity that was, perforce, Janus-faced, hinged as it was on the tension between the indigenous and the imported.

The different trajectories and diverse orientations that constitute the history of modern art in independent India from the late forties to the eighties include varieties of realism in painting and sculpture, a properly modernist interlude characterised by an interest in the poetics of the pictorial or graphic sign, notably in painterly or geometric abstraction, followed by a late-modernist, playful and subversive appropriation of popular and vernacular modes as an irreverent or politically edged foil to the pieties of high art. In the 1980s there is a growing attraction for mixed media, and then, inevitably, a move beyond the frame or pedestal and into installation work. This admittedly very schematic account is intended to register, punctually, the rich historical background to the work that emerges during the nineties, and, more polemically, to recall the existence of *other* modernities outside the hegemonic Euro-American sphere. Only when

the prevalence, world-wide, of these multiple lineages of the modern is acknowledged will it be possible to proceed with a critical reckoning of what comes in their wake: postmodernism and globalisation.

The generation of artists that emerged during the 1990s is less burdened by questions of the postcolonial heritage, and has a rather more relaxed attitude to what their predecessors were often prone to see as the somewhat intimidating monolith of Western art. The proliferation of biennales in the southern hemisphere, while providing alternative platforms for exchange and exposure, has served to relativise the omnipresence of London and New York as harbingers of the 'new' (although it is in these cities that contemporary Indian art is fetching record prices). More importantly, for many of these artists (Sheba Chhachhi Anita Dube, Bharti Kher, Hema Upadhyay, among others) the post-medium condition of much of contemporary art practice has sanctioned new freedoms in the reappropriation and recoding of certain formal procedures associated with movements or tendencies of the recent past, namely Pop art, Minimalism, and Installation art. Intermedia work in particular has become a kind of global *lingua franca*, although the point that needs to be stressed is the ambition, on the part of some of the more critically astute practitioners (Atul Dodiya, Pushpamala N., Jitish Kallat), to estrange, on the level of content, what an international audience would, at first sight, recognise in a rather facile way as something familiar (if not *déjà vu*) in terms of the formal language deployed. This is where the notion of cultural translation has an important role to play, in that something more is at stake than the usual recourse to pastiche and parody that Fredric Jameson has famously identified as the leading tropes of postmodernism. The hybrid nature of a significant number of works—in the choice of raw materials no less than on a symbolic or allegorical level—suggest that it is an enlarged notion of art practice that most keenly registers the cultural contradictions of the new world order. Further, if the breach of medium specificity has provoked a proliferation of mixed media and installation work, surely not all of this can be dismissed as the manifestation of an international fashion 'in which art essentially finds itself complicit with a globalisation of the image in the service of the capital,' as Rosalind Krauss does in a recent essay. For many Indian (read: non-Western) artists, the 'expanded field' of contemporary art holds out the possibility—at last!—of a 'decolonisation' of art practice, with the attraction of, say, installation work lying in its potential to instantiate political and poetic *links* between culturally disparate entities. In many cases their work offers what Jameson has described as a striking feature of the 'most interesting postmodernist works', namely, 'a more positive conception of relationship, which restores its proper tension to the notion of difference itself'... 'Difference relates' is the paradoxical slogan proposed by Jameson to characterise this postmodernist experience of form.

Many of the works that situate themselves on the local/ global axis merit being seen in the light of this play of difference and relationship. (Viewed from this optic,

the 'relational aesthetics' proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud could thus be 'defamiliarised' in a productive way.) This is where a poetics of cultural translation would be, at the same time, a hermeneutics of art. Two examples will have to suffice: A superficial reading of, say, Subodh Gupta's recourse to household utensils in gleaming stainless steel that are ubiquitous in middle-class households all over India would see it as an Indian version of a post-Pop celebration of commodity fetishism à la Jeff Koons, ignoring the specific local connotations of these objects, and their role in a symbolic economy of signs. For the use-value of these utensils coexists with their exchange-value, inasmuch as the cups and tumblers and plates are also a staple of the bridal dowry in villages. If fetishism there is, it is internally riven by the culturally coded nature of the goods in question. Gupta's ingenuity lies in transposing the everyday in the currency of art: in the installation called *The Way Home* (1998-99), for example, the object-world of village and small town India is configured as a circular arrangement on the floor (ever the phenomenological ground for the most creaturely activities in rural India: eating, conversing, sleeping...), with, at the centre, the presiding figure of that ambiguous mascot, the 'holy cow', as revered in the countryside for its mythic association with Krishna (the cowherd god) as it is a nuisance in the cities where the bovine creatures stray at will on the roads, feeding off garbage and plastic bags, nodding placidly at traffic roundabouts as the cars swerve past. The viewers circling around Gupta's installation would need to keep these references in mind and be alerted to the fact that the presence of the simulacra of rustic pistols amidst the benign kitchen utensils is a pointed allusion to the banalisation of violence in the artist's native Bihar, the 'far west' of India, given its record of criminality and gangsterism. What is singular about Gupta's work is the unabashed nourishment it derives from a sense of locatedness, however much he himself has (geographically) moved away from the place of his origins. The self-portrait with the revealing title *Bihari* (1999) acknowledges as much: the epithet in Hindi, spelt out by tiny red lightbulbs, commonly refers to the supposed rusticity of those native to Bihar, and as if to draw home the point, the background of the painting is smeared in cow-dung, a substance traditionally used as plaster in village dwellings. The symbiotic relation to this *materia prima* that is still fresh in Gupta's recollections from his childhood must, however, stand in contrast to, say, Chris Ofili's use of elephant dung as a decorative appendage to his ornamental paintings.

Sheela Gowda is another artist interested in critically recoding substances with a vernacular connotation but the recycling (in the ecological sense of the word) has a rather more pointed moral inflection than Gupta's intuitive play with cultural signs. Her predilection for poor materials reflects on her engagement with environmental issues and so-called women's work. For example, she has, in the past, worked with dried cow-dung which is used as fuel in the countryside but is also laden with ritual associations. The task of gathering the bovine excreta, fashioning it into flattened cakes and then laying them out to dry in the sun is carried out by the womenfolk of

the village. This menial work is sacralised, as it were, by the delicate slivers of gold paper in the form of an imprint of the artist's palm that adorns the hardened dun-coloured substance, shaped into rectangles and aligned on the wall, their surfaces occasionally bearing traces of red pigment. The powdered colour in question is, of course, what is traditionally used by women to form a dot on the forehead or in the parting in the hair to signify their marital status but which in Gowda's application must stand as a sign of subalternity as such. The materiality of Gowda's work is inevitably linked to the harsher realities of manual toil and labour: witness the imposing structure called *A Blanket and the Sky* (2004) made out of flattened tar drums, a transposition of the kind of makeshift shelters fabricated by migrant labourers hired on a daily basis for such tasks as the laying of land cables or the maintenance of public works. So the austerity of Gowda's sculptural object bespeaks a 'truth to materials' that has an ethical basis far removed from the purely formal understanding of that venerable modernist shibboleth, just as the use, in some of her other works, of string, rope, charcoal powder, pigment and gauze has a symbolic valence that is necessarily different from, say, the recourse to comparably modest materials that register Arte Povera's resistance to the technocratic basis of American Minimalism.

Between the impersonal shine of Subodh Gupta's stainless steel utensils and the matte materiality of Sheela Gowda's tar drums, between the fulgent and the fuliginous, there is, of course a whole spectrum of work that goes by the name of contemporary Indian art. A nuanced understanding of it calls for an attempt at cultural translation in the light of Walter Benjamin's great essay, 'The Task of the Translator'.

...(A)ll translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages... It is not the highest praise of a translation, particularly in the age of its origin, to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language.<sup>1</sup>

Translations, after all, are addressed to foreigners, to those who don't speak the language.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970): 75, 79. These two sentences are conjoined by Susan Sontag in her essay "The World as India: The St. Jerome Lecture on Literary Translation," in Susan Sontag, *At the Same Time: Essays & Speeches* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2007): 176.

## Q and A with the artist Mircea Cantor

I will begin with a work that I did in 2000, called *All the Directions*. I was invited to New York along with a group of artists, but I couldn't go because the American embassy classified me as a potential immigrant to the United States and denied me the visa. I really wanted to take part in this exhibition. But I didn't know how to react to the situation so I did a performance: I went hitchhiking with a sign that said "Heaven," because in my mind—and in those of many people of Eastern Europe—the United States was the Promised Land. I took a photograph of it: the sign read "Heaven," but since I couldn't get to Heaven, it was almost like Hell. As it would have been too literal to write "Hell" on the sign, I decided to leave it blank, thus taking me in all directions.

Another work that I did in 2002 was called *Double Heads Matches*. It was presented at a show in Brussels, where I took advantage of my contacts to present this slightly older project. It was inspired by the Belgian context: a country divided into two parts, the Flemish part and the French part. But it is also a portrait of my life, coming from the East but living in the Western context. It was complicated to do, because you cannot make these matches mechanically. I tried in Belgium, which has the best match factories in the world, but they couldn't make them. So we did them at a factory in Romania, where they found a way to make them manually: all of these matches were done manually, at a factory.

In the context of the exhibition, they weren't presented as very interesting objects: they were given to people on the street or in restaurants. I loved the multipotentiality of the object. There are multiple interpretations. For example, it says something very different to Belgians than it does to Arabs living in Belgium, or to those living in France. There is a film documenting the process.

I also did a film called *The Landscape Is Changing*, a project for the Tirana Biennial. I was invited there and had the idea of doing a demonstration with people holding mirrors instead of slogans. Why mirrors? In Tirana, as in Romania, this sort of demonstration is very common: supporting a party or a president, like in many Latin American countries. And also, when I took a detached view of what was happening, I began to wonder what the point of all of this was. How was it possible to criticize reality without affirming or denying anything?

At first, my idea was to have people holding blank signs, like in *All the Directions*, but the problem was that someone could potentially write something on them, while a mirror—a simple object—just reflects reality. The film is very simple, lasting twenty-two minutes and showing many places in Tirana, as well as the demonstration and the fragmented reality. The soundtrack is a special song, edited with an audio artist.