

ART FOR ART'S SAKE, OR FOR A WORLD MARKET?

Made in India

India's artists, sometimes constrained by domestic politics, have discovered a demand for their work on the international art circuit. But is institutional inertia and catering to an international market in danger of turning Indian art into just a fashionable commodity at home and abroad?

BY PHILIPPE PATAUD CÉLÉRIER

Valay Shende's *Transit* is impressive: a life-size truck soldered together from tens of thousands of stainless steel hemispheres, with passengers standing in the back, scarves and saris billowing in the wind. They look straight ahead with a cold metallic gaze. The skill surprises, as does the flashy appearance of the truck transporting rural workers to the city. Look into its rear-view mirrors, their glass replaced by two video screens showing the route, and you see the filmed reality of people who live by the roadside, contrasting with the shimmering riches the truck promises. Is the truck a delusion? "Look in the mirrors. How many migrants have been able to afford to live in cities that couldn't function without them?"

Shende is 30, and "totally dedicated", according to Thierry Raspail, director of Lyons' Museum of Contemporary Art (MAC) and Thierry Prat, production director. They came across *Transit* in Shende's studio in Mumbai while it was being created. Later the seven-ton truck was dismantled and sent off as part of Indian Highway IV, the fourth incarnation of a travelling, evolving exhibition, very successful for MAC (1). "Shende doesn't worry about whether collectors will see his work. He crystallises things which are in front of him; things which he often no longer wants to see," said Raspail. Shende's recent installation, at the Sakshi gallery in Mumbai, was eight empty chairs around a sumptuous dining table: on the table a cruet set containing earth mixed with the ashes of a peasant farmer who killed himself in the Vidarbha region in the state of Maharashtra, known as the "great cotton belt".

"For years there has been a suicide every eight hours in this region... for heavily indebted peasants death is often the only way out (2). They've been ruined and all they can do is bring their mineral salts to season the food of those who govern us. That's what I wanted to say to the political leaders, who are often indifferent when they are not in collusion with the multinationals to force farmers to use even more costly genetically-modified seed. Only the few farmers I have been able to help financially have come to see my work," said Shende. He has mixed feelings about the prospect of his installations going to Scandinavian museums, and not being seen where they could have the greatest effect.

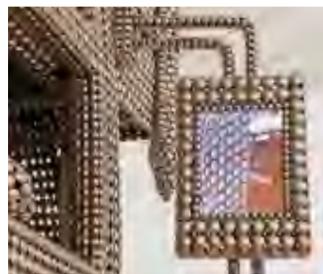
"Apart from those who produce it, contemporary art doesn't interest many people," said Samarth Banerjee, 39, who wrote India's first graphic novels. His latest work, *The Harappa Files*, was published in English, and his two preceding works have sold over 20,000 copies (3). India's middle class, insofar as it might share a value system, "is largely conservative and reactionary in response to modernist aesthetics and forms, whatever they address," said the documentary filmmaker Ravi Agarwal. "Everyday consumer goods, ideally imported from the West, are far more highly valued [than art]." For each new work a public has to be found and cultivated, to make up for the shortcomings of the state in promoting contemporary art.

"Public institutions, which were active in 1950-70 in promoting artists such as Maqbool Fida Husain (1915-2011) or Ram Kumar (b 1924) at the main international biennials, have fallen into torpor since the turn of the century," said the critic Gayatri Sinha (4). Even the National Gallery of Modern Art, the principal contemporary art institution, is lethargic. "Is it down to conservatism?" asked Kavita Singh, a specialist in the history of museums at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi (5). "Or financial constraints? Or bureaucratic obstacles, the burden of running a public institution in an age of ever more red tape?"

Philippe Pataud Célérier is a journalist



VALAY SHENDE: 'Transit' (2010), from the Indian Highway IV exhibition at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Lyons (24 February – 31 July 2011)



Of India's secularism, Rajeev Bhargava, professor of political science at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in Delhi, said it "does not impose a radical separation between church and state as in France" but demonstrates "the same goodwill – neither hostile nor servile – to all religious communities which are accepted in the public sphere". It is possible that secularism might cause institutional decision-makers to adopt indifference, if not total neutrality, since religious sensitivities will always prevail over artistic sensibilities. "It's true that public museums could play a vital role in defending secular values which often they don't do, possibly to avoid controversy," said Shivaji Panikkar, former head of the department of art history at the University of Baroda in Vadodara (Gujarat). "Controversy" is something of a euphemism. No one has forgotten that a radical Hindu group put a price of \$11.5m on the head of Maqbool Fida Husain, who was exiled to Qatar in 2006 and died there this year, because of the alleged obscenity of his representation of naked gods.

Panikkar's university career was damaged in 2007 because of his support for "the freedom of expression and creation which every artist has a right to", and especially for Chandar Mohan, one of his students. Mohan was beaten and had the work in his end of year show vandalised on university premises by Hindu and Catholic extremists who considered it sacrilegious. He

was imprisoned for a few days by the pro-BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, the Hindu nationalist party) police force. That he was not tried in Gujarat, governed by the BJP since 1995. Anti-Muslim riots in the state caused nearly 2,000 deaths in 2002 in the main city, Ahmedabad, and elsewhere; the state's chief minister, the BJP's most prominent member, Narendra Modi, is still strongly suspected of involvement in the anti-Muslim riots (6).

Indian art's appeal is 'not because it – or some of its artists – have suddenly become irresistible,' said the documentary maker Amar Kanwar. From Tokyo to London to Paris, the same artists reappear

After he was suspended by the university rector, Panikkar resigned. "What can you hope for from a university under the thumb of the BJP? All disciplinary inquiries have been stalled for the past year. And so what, if they found in my favour? In 2008 the Supreme Court refused to condemn the painter Husain (7), but that didn't prevent him from dying in exile." The poet and essayist Ranjit Hoskote said: "Successful

governments have followed a populist line with the aim of appeasing the ultra-orthodox in each community, to the detriment of artists' right to take part in national debate. Freedom of expression has shrivelled, undermined by religious bans and ethnic sensitivities. And at the regional level in Gujarat, where the far right is very well entrenched, I am even less optimistic about the future of the freedom to teach and create at Baroda." For the intellectual and artistic community, which supported Panikkar, this trauma is important: Baroda University trained almost all of India's notable artists.

With all these difficulties, it's not surprising that Indian artists have turned to the international art scene, which has begun to speculate on the Indian market following the spectacular rise of the Chinese market (which did not speak English and was more closed) (8). Galleries, collectors, museums, auction houses and art fairs have moved into India, with optimism, seeing economic conditions similar to those that generated the demand for Chinese art a decade earlier – a high annual growth rate (between 7% and 8% in the past decade) and new affluent social classes that are breeding a new generation of collectors (57 Indian billionaires in 2011 according to Forbes). The first major international fair for Indian art plans workshops and conferences in 2012 "to increase receptiveness and access to art among young collectors". India Art Summit, renamed India Art Fair from next year, has joined the contemporary world art circuit.

With major exhibitions, galleries and new private collections, such as the Devi Art Foundation in 2008, the Kiran Nadar Museum in 2009 (9) or KMoMa in Kolkata (Calcutta), demand has taken off. KMoMa learned the effects of architectural prestige from powerful institutions in the contemporary art world, and was designed by the Swiss firm of Herzog and De Meuron, behind the Tate Modern in London. But Indian art's appeal is "not because it – or some of its artists – have suddenly become irresistible," said the documentary maker Amar Kanwar. From Tokyo to London to Paris, the same artists reappear; of the 30 presented by MAC in Lyons this year, about 20 were included in the Paris-Delhi-Bombay exhibition at the Pompidou Centre, a few months later.

The Pompidou had wanted to show India's singularity through its diversity: but if there are 500 well-known artists in France, which has a population of 65 million, there should be 9,000 artists in India, with a population of 1.2 billion. Do the artists have the gift of ubiquity or are they shown because of their talent, or networking? Most shows claim, as the Pompidou Centre did, to be an invitation to discover "contemporary Indian society".

"If that's the case, why should aboriginal art be excluded, and with it the 60 million Indians who are part of tribal communities?" asked Hervé Perdiolle, a tribal art specialist (10). Probably because, even if it is emerging from the ethnographic ghetto, the art of the *advaisi* (indigenous Indians) – whom the historian Ramachandra Guha calls "the biggest losers in India's economic growth" – is hard to integrate into major exhibitions. These exhibitions are less representative of the diversity of Indian society than the homogeneity of art market networks, their conventions of artistic production and market value. "One might feel justifiably disappointed at the lack of a more balanced approach from public institutions," said Perdiolle. "What we have is a carbon copy of the contemporary art market."

Frank Barthélémy, a critic based in Bangalore, said: "Institutions often have neither the means nor the desire to seek out new artists, [or may be] dissuaded by the logistical or financial support provided by powerful galleries



NALINI MALINI: 'Cassandra' (2009)

which push their own protégés." An independent exhibition organiser said these galleries are "all the more pushy as they are on to such a sure-fire thing; the more visibility artists gain, the higher their prices go, in proportion to the prestige of the institution that shows their work. But the less initiated the collector, the higher this visibility needs to be. For some it's the 'as seen on TV' phenomenon ... People with new money like collecting Indian artists who have been approved by western galleries." That might lead to urban, English-speaking, comparatively affluent Indian artists changing their work in form or content, to develop an aesthetic or deal with issues in keeping with a market governed by the imprimatur of western institutions.

"The majority of Indian artists who are recognised today," said Vjyayanthi Rao, an anthropologist at the New School for Social Research in New York, "were practising artists long before India emerged from its isolation. For the intermediate generations, who worked before and after their country opened up economically, it would be interesting to analyse how their work changed after exposure to market forces but also to ... those collectors whose only affinity with art is having the means to acquire it." Homi K Bhabha, director of the Mahindra Humanities Centre at Harvard University (11), said: "Contemporary Indian art is a globalised art. It is rooted most of the time in local preoccupations, but these resonate more and more with global problems – pollution, inequality, exploitation – even if every generation of artists – and there have been five of them since independence – is often carried by a major historical event."

Decolonisation, independence and the partition of India are recurring themes in the work of artists born after 1947. Nalini Malini, one of India's greatest artists, born in 1946, reminds us that the separation of India and Pakistan, decided by men, still causes women to suffer: more than 100,000 have been raped or abducted on both sides of the border since partition. Fifty years on, Tejal Shah, born in 1979, now claims respect for sexual minorities, such as the *hippa*, the transsexual community that the authorities in Tamil Nadu have recently recognised as a third gender.

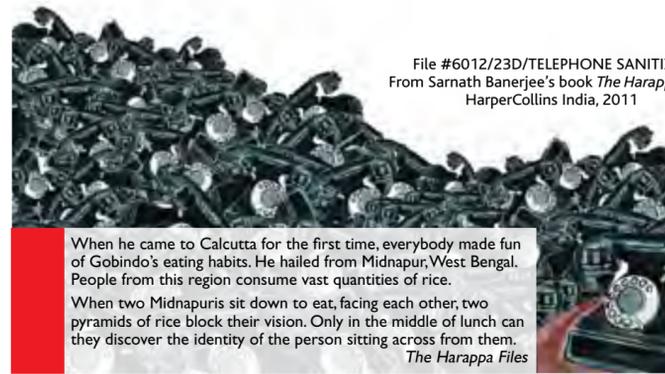
Each decade finds its own modes of expression, but for most Indian artists, intercommunal violence is a permanent source of reflection that transcends generations. Anita Dube, an art historian and critic, turned artist after the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodya



RAVI AGARVAL: From the series 'Have You Seen the Flowers on the River?' (2007)

(Uttar Pradesh) in 1992. Sunil Gawde, born in 1960, exhibited garlands of flowers made from razor blades threaded on steel cable – a reminder that former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, 1944-91, was killed as he lowered his head to accept a garland in which explosives were hidden.

TRANSLATED BY GEORGE MILLER



File #6012/Z3D/TELEPHONE SANITIZER From Samarth Banerjee's book *The Harappa Files* HarperCollins India, 2011

When he came to Calcutta for the first time, everybody made fun of Gobindo's eating habits. He hailed from Midnapur, West Bengal. People from this region consume vast quantities of rice.

When two Midnapuris sit down to eat, facing each other, two pyramids of rice block their vision. Only in the middle of lunch can they discover the identity of the person sitting across from them. *The Harappa Files*

- (3) Samarth Banerjee, *The Harappa Files*, HarperCollins India, Noida, 2011.
- (4) Gayatri Sinha, "New persuasions in contemporary Indian art", *Voices of change*, The Marg Foundation, Mumbai, 2010.
- (5) Kavita Singh, "Aller au musée en Inde" (Going to the Museum in India), in Fabrice Bousteau and Sophie Duplaix (eds), *Paris-Delhi-Bombay*, Centre Georges-Pompidou, Paris, 2011.
- (6) "I was there, Narendra Modi said let the people vent their anger", *Teheka*, New Delhi, 19 February 2011, and the special report, "The Truth in the words of the men who did it: Gujarat 2002", *Teheka*, 3 November 2007; www.teheka.com
- (7) On the grounds that nudity is common in Indian iconography and history, the Court judged that Husain's paintings were not obscene.
- (8) Prices for Chinese contemporary art leapt up by 500% between 2004 and 2008. "Tendances du marché de l'art" (Art market trends), annual report 2009-2010, Art Price, 2011; imgpublic.artprice.com
- (9) Kiran Nadar is the wife of Shiv Nadar, the "Indian Bill Gates".
- (10) See "Autres maîtres de l'Inde" (Other Indian Masters), the catalogue of an exhibition of Indian tribal art at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris in 2010.
- (11) Author of *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, and, with Jean de Loisy, *Anish Kapoor*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2009.

