



# IN THE FAST LANE

THE NEW BUZZ AROUND CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART

Pooja Sood

**H**IGH ON ENERGY, ANXIETY and celebration: An electric current is rushing through contemporary Indian art today. There is much to celebrate: Amar Kanwar and Sheela Gowda's presence at Documenta 12; Jitish Kallat's exhibition at the Albion Gallery in London alongside such stalwarts as Vito Acconci and Mariko Mori; Shilpa Gupta's presence at every biennale from Liverpool, Sydney and Shanghai to most recently the 9th Lyon Biennale; and the near iconic status of Subodh Gupta and Atul Dodiya in the Indian art world, are just some of the reasons.

After the Chinese boom, Indian art is the new buzz. The past two years have seen a spate of high-profile India-based exhibitions across Europe and the US — Lille, Paris, Bern, Milan, Arles, Karlsruhe, Frankfurt, New York — with several more in the pipeline for 2008 and 2009. Fumio Nanjo has just visited India and Hans Ulrich Obrist is about to make his second trip this year. International curators — once a rarity — are commonplace in the Indian subcontinent; while artists spend more time at airports than ever before, Indian gallerists are racing from Basel to Shanghai.

Back home in India an art district has sprung to life in the heart of Mumbai with galleries such as Sakshi, Chemould Prescott, Bodhi Art, Mirchandani and Steinrucke moving into larger,

more glamorous outposts with extensions in Singapore, New York and London. In Delhi, the gallery Nature Morte reigns supreme while the Apeejay Media Gallery, which has shown videos by Francis Alys and Nam June Paik in the past, is revving up for a makeover. The Devi Art Foundation, which has one of the best collections of contemporary Indian art, is set to open in early 2008 and the Kolkata Museum of Modern Art (KMOMA), a private-public enterprise, is in the making in Kolkata (Calcutta).

The spotlight, it seems, is sharply focused on the edifying rubric of the international exhibition, the art market and giddy auction prices. However, in parallel there are a range of artistic practices that are temporal, research-based and collaborative — projects that employ digital technology and are concerned with older, more activist modes of engagement with communities. These approaches are situated outside the supportive structures of the gallery and within the extended idea of the public realm. In short, the focus on the market and exhibition export appears to eclipse much socially engaged and post-medium art practices being explored by Indian artists.

Premised on the facilitation of dialogue, or what Tom Finkelppearl calls "dialogue-based public art," is the noteworthy 11-year project by artist Navjot Altaf in the tribal area of

Kondagaon, central India. Altaf has worked with the artists and the extended community of Kondagaon to develop the "Nalpar" (or water drainage structures) for the local women who collect their daily quota of water from the pump in the village. The "Pilla Gudis" (or temples for children) are spaces for cultural activities for the village children that were developed over many conversations with the community. Straddling the slippery terrain of activism and art, the key to this project is the artist's ongoing commitment to independent dialogue and engagement with local individuals.

Using the strategy of dialogue but interfaced by new technologies, *A Kiosk of Someone Else's Dreams* is a project by collaborators Ashok Sukumaran and Shaina Anand. A security booth is situated on a busy promenade in Mumbai that is undergoing rapid gentrification. Inside the kiosk, a touch screen is rigged to computers and wireless technology to create real-time connections between people from the posh beach-front apartments, street vendors and passersby on the promenade.

As the artists explain: "A viewer/user can browse through archives of recorded material, as well as open live connections to the sources of this material, or perform physical world transformations." This simple and radical gesture facilitates a difficult conversation between

disparate members of a divided neighborhood and also critically addresses the limitations of how seemingly ubiquitous communication technologies are normally used.

Bangalore-based artist Abhishek Hazra does not see himself as an evangelist of new technologies, but has a critical engagement with technology. He is interested in the social history of scientific research in India. Hazra explores the intersections between technology and culture through animation and the narrative device of a 'visual fable.' In a recent work, *Summation [pH]n1 to [pH]n2*, which consisted of a single-channel video, four monitors and sound, Hazra researched the early history of the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science (IACS) in Calcutta — one of the first science research institutes in the country. Through an ironic citation of C.V. Raman's 1928 research on spectroscopy, Hazra attempted to revisit some of the controversies around 'pure' and 'applied' science that marked the establishment of IACS by rearticulating a scientific debate in the social language of storytelling.

In a world of accelerated genetic modification and stem-cell research, Delhi-based artist Rohini Devasher explores natural structures. Inspired by Johann Wolfgang Goethe's theoretical concept of the archetypal plant or the *Urpflanze*, Devasher examined structural similarities of plants at a macro and microscopic level in a scientific lab under the guidance of Botany professors at the Delhi University. Her work in digital media consists of hybrid organics that "float in a twilight world halfway between imagined and observed reality, strange denizens of a science fiction botanical garden where form and function blur and these strange hybrid organics become more of a possibility of what could be."

While Mumbai is renowned for the hyper-speed of its urban development, it is Delhi that is being actively transformed from the bottom up, with rapid changes to everything from street life to water usage; thus, a number of artists based in the city are responding intensely to multiple urbanisms that Delhi creates.

Photographs of miles and miles of gorgeous marigold fields along the Yamuna in Ravi Agarwal's project *Have you seen the flowers on the river?* belie the truth. Agarwal, a reputed photographer and also the director of an environmental NGO, closely examined the self-sustaining micro economies that underpin the marigold fields. His blog records: "Each acre of land is fertile for flowers for 7 months of the year, from October to April the flowers are grown and plucked by family and relatives and sold mostly in the Fatehpuri mandi in Old Delhi [...] tons of flowers are sold each morning in a matter of a few hours [...] they travel to temples, homes, and onto truck bonnets as garlands, or as adornments in weddings and religious rituals. Often they end up back in the river as decaying garbage and debris. A sustainable use of land, and a sustainable livelihood alongside a clean and healthy environment." The Government, however, is acquiring thousands of acres of fertile land by the riverbed from the farmers to build concrete stadiums, temples and, with



From top: NIKHIL CHOPRA, Sir Raja III visits Khowaja Press, 2007. Photo from the performance, dimensions variable; ROHINI DEVASHER, Archetype II (series), 2007. Digital Print and drawing on archival paper, 112 x 152 cm. Opposite: ATUL BHALLA, Yamuna Walk, 2007. Digital photograph, dimensions variable. All images, courtesy the artists.



the 2010 Commonwealth games around the corner, a Commonwealth Games village. Deeply disruptive, the farmers and villagers will lose a sustainable livelihood while the city loses its flowers.

Atul Bhalla, who has been a regular visitor to different parts of the river over the past few years and whose works revolved around the explication of the notion of water, undertook a 48-hour walk along the river as it transitions from a rural landscape, where migratory birds come to roost and vegetables line the river beds, to where the city's underground canals pour over 3000 million liters of the city's sewage into the river, tuning it into a fetid sewer. A powerful social archaeology of the river, Bhalla has attempted to make sense of the social impact of the quickly morphing landscape.

If Bhalla's project is an archeology of landscape, artist Ayisha Abraham has created an archaeology of film. Abraham spent over three years researching amateur films shot in 8 mm, super 8 mm and 16 mm dating back to the '40s in and around the city of Bangalore. "I constructed representations from already produced and imagined images: the readymade, the recycled, found footage or found objects, the parts of 'culture' inhabiting the private archives of memory," says the artist about her first 17-minute video *Straight 8* (2005), a portrait of Tom D'aguair, an Anglo Indian government servant based in Bangalore. Abraham directed silent plays with her friends as actors, converting her kitchen into a dark room and her home into a studio. Using the scratched and faded found footage, conversations with the protagonist of the film are told through a prism of forgetting and remembering.

Nikhil Chopra's performance *Sir Raja III at Khowaja Press*, which took place in the walled city of Old Delhi, was a performative excavation of memory and history. Dressed in glittering royal regalia, the fictitious character Sir Raja III wended his way through the narrow crowded streets of Old Delhi towards Khowaja Press, an

old Urdu printing press that resides across from Jama Masjid — a 17th-century mosque built by Emperor Shah Jahan. Over many conversations with the old, feisty owner of the press Asif Fehmi, he unearthed the hoary past of the Din Duniya House which houses the press and which was believed to have been built for a truant daughter and her tutor lover by a Nawaab. Converted into a factory for a printing press along the way, the press had the historic notoriety of having printed underground material for the famous 1857 Mutiny against the British. As the crowds look on nonplussed, Sir Raja III printed leaflets on the history of the press, handed them out to members of the community and left in silence. A ghost-relic from a colonial past, he left behind a memory palimpsest — and many unanswered questions.

As some artists struggle to use modes of art outside those supported by the market, they need alternative frameworks to enable a sustained engagement. Public and community driven projects, based on collaboration, cooperation and critical dialogue, are striving to reconnect art and society. Beside Kohj in New Delhi, the India Foundation for the Arts (IFA), a funding agency for the arts, and Sarai, a new media initiative which supports research-based practice through a number of small fellowships, offer grants to the artist community and are all internationally funded. More such initiatives are needed; apart from funding, artists require platforms and conduits that will facilitate interactions between the artist, the scientist, the urban planner, the community and the archive.

One cannot look to the public sector — in deep crisis in India — for support. In the '50s, post independence, a concerted effort was made by the government to establish an infrastructure for the visual arts. Two nodal institutions, the National Gallery of Modern Art and the Lalit Kala Academy, both based in New Delhi, were set up to play a pivotal role in supporting the arts. Today, however, they wear a tired look: caught in

Above, from left: ASHOK SUKUMARAN AND SHAINA ANAND, *A Kiosk of Someone Else's Dreams*, 2007. Public installation with touchscreen interface. Courtesy: Camp, Mumbai; RAVI AGARWAL, *Have you seen the flowers on the river?* (series), 2007. C-print on archival paper, 40 x 60 cm. Courtesy the artist; AYISHA ABRAHAM, *Straight 8* (still), 2005. Video, 17 mins.

Below: ABHISHEK HAZRA, *Summation [pH]n1 to [pH]n2*, 2007. Single-channel projection, 4 monitors, sound. Courtesy the artist.

bureaucratic apathy, they have failed to re- envision themselves and keep pace with newer modes of art production and practice. The Ministry of Culture and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), which have small funds for scholarships and airfares, have contemporary art missing from their agendas.

When the best art school in India, the Fine Art department at MS University in Baroda, is almost under lock and key due to misplaced censorship by the state's right-wing governance; when the nonprofit sector can boast of no more than a couple of small art institutions such as Sarai and Khoj that support research and contemporary art projects; when there exists only one art magazine for contemporary art in all of India; when critical and curatorial discourse is minimal; and when the only real funding agency for the arts in India, the IFA, continues to struggle to raise its own funds, it does not bode well for the arts.

Hope, it seems, rests with the growing private sector. The argument that the frenetic growth of the art market will fuel the necessary change comes, however, with a caveat. For, despite India's newly achieved status as an economic power, a conversation between the arts and business — in which art is seen as not just an object for investment, but as an important investment in society itself — is yet to begin.

No doubt the spotlight is on India — but the wiring is fragile and in urgent need of repair. ■

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