Ranjit Hoskote: Signposting the Indian Highway

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You Can't Drive Down the Same Highway Twice…
…as Ed Ruscha might have said to Heraclitus. But to begin this story properly: two artists, two highways, two time horizons a decade apart in India.

Atul Dodiya's memorable painting, 'Highway: For Mansur', was first shown at his 1999Vadehra Art Gallery solo exhibition in New Delhi. The painting is dominated by a pair of vultures, a quotation culled from the folios of the Mughal artist Mansur; the birds look down on a highway that cuts diagonally across a desert. The decisiveness of this symbol of progress is negated by a broken-down car that stands right in the middle of it. The sun beats down on the marooned driver, whose ineffectual attempts at repairing his vehicle are viewed with interest by the predators. In the lower half of the frame, Dodiya inserts an enclosure in which a painter, identifiably the irrepressible satirist and gay artist Bhupen Khakhar, bends over his work. Veined with melancholia as well as quixotic humour, this painting prompts several interpretations. Does the car symbolise the fate of painting as an artistic choice, at a time when new media possibilities were opening up; is the car shorthand for the project of modernism? Or is this an elegy for the beat-up postcolonial nation-state, becalmed in the dunes of globalisation? In an admittedly summary reading, 'Highway: For Mansur' could be viewed as an allegory embodying a dilemma that has immobilised the artist, even as he contemplates flamboyant encounters with history in the confines of his studio. Should Dodiya retrieve the elegiac high seriousness of the past symbolised by the courtly Mansur; or should he align himself instead with the defiant, playful Khakharesque avant-garde, risking his claim to posterity on a precarious wager? [1]

Contrast Dodiya's painting with a recent, untitled video work by Shilpa Gupta, extracted from an ongoing series concerning the contamination of everyday life by militarisation, and shown at the 7th Gwangju Biennale (2008). Gupta shot her video while driving from Srinagar to Gulmarg along National Highway No: 1 in Kashmir, a region over which Indian forces, Pakistani irregulars and Kashmiri militants have fought with increasing ferocity since the early-1990s. The subject matter of the video seems, at first sight, to be perfectly innocuous: we are presented with a blurred, continuously unfurling view of fields, trees, scattered buildings and sky. Over the visuals, the car radio and the polyglot cross-talk of the vehicle's occupants compete for aural attention. But the video is interrupted with metronomic regularity; each time this happens, the image seizes up, the sound track hangs in raucous mid-note. The cause of each such interruption is identical: every few yards, the camera spots a soldier, one of nearly 500,000 deployed throughout the Valley of Kashmir; the video is programmed to alert us to the brutal militarisation of a landscape once synonymous with idyllic beauty. In Gupta's work, we find ourselves addressed by the artist as decisively politicised subject: she acts as documentarist and commentator, and as an undercover agent who does not produce propaganda but conveys the urgencies of a conflict zone through a visual meditation that is paradoxically subtle yet declarative, ironic yet passionate, ostensibly objective in its transcription of a quotidian act of passage yet empathetically partisan in its oblique portraiture of a site of oppression and anguish. [2]

Dodiya (born 1959) is a major presence in the generation of Indian artists that came to prominence during the mid-1990s; Gupta (born 1976) is an equally key figure in the generation of artists that has come to prominence since the turn of the century. While Dodiya has established a strong national context for his work with major international shows only since 2001, Gupta's trajectory has followed the opposite course; her work has been shown widely on the international circuit and only recently has been presented at home. And although their careers overlap and their works have been shown together in a number of survey exhibitions internationally, the distance between their thematic concerns and formal choices is instructive. It is not merely symptomatic of the difference in outlook and opportunity between two generations. Taken as two ends of a spectrum, Dodiya's homage to Mansur/ Khakhar and Gupta's Kashmir video allow us to chart the dramatic transition that has taken place in contemporary Indian art during the last decade. I will reflect on some of the major aspects of this transition, writing as one who has participated intensely in the contemporary Indian art situation since 1988 as critic, theorist and curator; but also as a friend and co-conspirator, with artists in various image-making and discursive adventures.

The Market and the Margins

The global attention contemporary Indian art has received in recent years has been focused mainly on the boom in the Indian art market. While such dazzling visibility might possess tactical value in the short run, it will eventually be exposed as premature and specious. Premature, because the boom has largely been the result of steep escalations in price orchestrated by the interests of a narrow collector base; and specious, because the volumes of trade diminish to their correct measure when viewed, for instance, against the corresponding international auction-house sales figures for contemporary Chinese art. Also specious, because much of the compelling work of the imagination in India is being conducted beyond radar range of the market, at those richly productive margins where a self-critical art practice bypasses the studio-gallery-auction house circuit to forge solidarities with other disciplines and cultural practices.

This rubric embraces not only video and intermedia art, but also social projects and new-media initiatives, interfaces between image-making, pedagogy and activism, and research and archival projects. Within 'Indian Highway', this tendency in contemporary Indian art is represented by Ravi Agarwal, who attends closely to the crises of ecological devastation and the important public question of environmental change; Amar Kanwar, who addresses the complex politics of violence in the Indian subcontinent; and the Raqs Media Collective, whose three members combine a commitment to dissent and its defence with their articulation of plural, layered narratives of place and belonging as a guarantee against the monopolistic claims of religion, nation and State. Agarwal, Kanwar and Raqs were all, interestingly enough, first presented in the context of international contemporary art by Okwui Enwezor in his Documenta 11 (2002).

If I were to describe the changing ecology in which Indian art has developed during the last decade, I would annotate the Indian art market boom as reflecting a resurgent economy, and identify it as only one among four key vectors of change, the other three being: the schisms and scissions within the Indian nation-state, which have altered the textures of public life and the scope of cultural expression; newly available media and technologies of image-making and communication; and transcultural experiments in travel, dialogue and collaboration.

Although the first decade of the 21st century is not identified with any single, major political event (as the 1990s were with the cataclysmic violence following the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, 1992), this period has borne witness to the deepening of the schisms that afflict India. While the ascendancy of the Hindu-majoritarian Bharatiya Janata Party was broken electorally by the centrist Congress Party and its allies in 2004, the national debate remains sharply polarised. An aggressive, upper-caste Hindu majoritarian movement claims the ground of hypernationalism; it is opposed by equally assertive subnational movements and lower-caste mass mobilisations. Since successive governments have followed a policy of even-handed populism, aimed at appeasing the ultra-orthodox in every community, the general tenor of public life has grown illiberal, intolerant of dissent or idiosyncrasy. This has had a particular effect on the artist's claim to intervene in the national debate; the artist's freedom of expression has been infringed repeatedly by the discourses of politicised religiosity and ethnic pride, most viciously in the case of MF Husain, a foundational figure in the history of modern Indian art. The nonagenarian painter, writer and film-maker has been self-exiled in the UK and the UAE, due to a sustained campaign of legal harassment and mob violence by the Right. At the same time, wresting opportunity from catastrophe, many artists have been prompted by the situation to same time, wresting opportunity from catastrophe, many artists have been prompted by the situation to mobilise alliances with writers and cultural activists, to organise platforms of protest against illiberalism and censorship. [3]

Alongside these political developments, Indian artists suddenly found themselves in possession of newly available technologies of imaging and communication from the late-1990s onward. The advent of advanced video technology, the internet, graphic interfaces, virtual-reality software and digital retrieval systems has amplified the scope of artistic production and also, crucially, transformed the nature of artistic practice. For many artists, the work of art has been rendered unstable, versional, re-programmable and open-ended; it is no longer the irreducible summation of a process so much as it is a provisional statement of the process, not a destination but a log entry. [4]

The globalisation-era potential of the Indian art world was most productively realised in the variety of transcultural experiments in dialogue, encounter and travel beginning in the late-1990s. With agencies like the Japan Foundation, the Goethe Institute, the Triangle Arts Trust, the Prince Claus Fund underwriting these experiments, Indian artists, critics, theorists and curators benefited enormously from the cross-fertilisation of ideas that took place in residencies, workshops, conferences, collaborations and exchanges held both in India and overseas. The most revolutionary outcome of these transcultural experiments was the transformation of perspective for an entire generation of Indian artists who abandoned the colonialist centre-periphery model of the world – in which the West was always the donor and the non-West always the recipient of contemporary culture, marked by belatedness, imitation and permanent apprenticeship – becoming socialised into the world as an assembly of multiple, improvisational, self-renovating modernisms, a conversation among regional trajectories of the contemporary. [5]

The Changing Locus of the Studio

One of the most palpable changes that took place in Indian art practice during the early years of the 21st century was the transformation of the studio. Until relatively recently, most artists worked in single rooms hived away from their homes or in close proximity. Now many artists, such as Krishnamachari Bose and Riyas Komu in Mumbai, have found it possible and indeed necessary to extend their studios into factory-style production lines, with work departmentalised and delegated among an army of assistants. For another kind of artist, such as Ashok Sukumaran, the studio has become portable, virtual and tactically mobile: often no larger than a laptop opened up and worked on in airport lounges and while on residency in remote parts of Europe or North America; often, the studio has no materiality beyond an exchange of drafts and diagrams via email. And yet, both for Sukumaran and Shaina Anand, his collaborator in a series of social and community-based projects, public space often becomes the widest possible studio space: they tune into social relationships, trace the contours of political asymmetries of access over sidewalks and hydrants, map the invisible metropolitan architecture built around electrical connections and cable television networks.

The economies of making in which Indian artists now operate may usefully be described by the opposition of distribution and delegation. By distribution, I mean a participatory process of art-making that is fundamentally democratising and transformative; that empowers its participants with information, skills and a potential autonomy; that activates an audience. Under this rubric, I would place the Raqs Media Collective, the Cybermohalla initiative undertaken by SARAI in the shantytowns of Delhi, the discursive platforms orchestrated by CAMP (Critical Art and Media Practices) in Bombay, and the PeriFerry festival of the arts organised by the Desire Machine Collective in Guwahati, in turbulent north-eastern India. In all these projects, expressive and critical activity fold into one another; collaborations among artists, theorists, curators and activists are encouraged; and an effort is made to convene a new and engaged audience for cultural practice from among various social classes. The work of art, in this sector of the contemporary Indian art scene, is emphatically a verb rather than a noun.

Delegation, on the other hand, implies the production of individual art works whose realisation – for reasons of scale or technical complexity – requires mixed teams of art-school-trained assistants, technicians and labourers. While its apologists present this tendency as a return to the 16th-century atelier, it is really a simple industrialisation of art practice inspired by the practices of 20th-century monumental sculptors, functioning between studio and factory. This operational method is a response to the voracity of collectors, to cavernous exhibition spaces and the pressures of a career that typically begins with art school recruitment and pursued by complex negotiations with dealers, gallerists, collectors and investors across the globe.

The Collaborative Production of the Contemporary

The artists represented in ‘Indian Highway’ are participants in defining the contemporary, – collaboratively produced across the abandoned borders of Cold War geopolitics. As we escape the conventional narrative of modernism and the contemporary as universally executable programs exported across the planet from art world institutions of Western Europe and North America, we realise the global contemporary proceeds from highly differentiated starting points, from vigorous theatres of the Now being staged in Abidjan and Buenos Aires, Jakarta and Bombay, Rabat and Beirut, Seville and New Orleans, Manila and Ljubljana. The contemporary is a series of entanglements among diverse histories of political struggle, cultural vision and artistic exploration. In this context, the Indian art situation offers an extraordinary traversal of choices and temporalities.

With four generations of artists working simultaneously and prodigiously, and subscribing to one or another of at least five major perspectives, contemporary Indian art is festive in its diversity. The gamut includes artists whose work has evolved from critical apprenticeship to the Schools of Paris or New York and found anchorage in a renewed classicism or a renegotiated Sublime (M F Husain, Akbar Padamsee, Tyeb Mehta, Mehlli Gobhai); artists who formulate a language reflecting the local and immediate mapped onto sophisticated and historically informed references to the 1960s Western avant-gardes (Nalini Malani, Sudhir Patwardhan, Rameshwar Broota, Gulammohammed Sheikh); artists whose subtle politics of self has inspired them to combine autobiography with allegories of the nation-state (Atul Dodiya, Surendran Nair, Subodh Gupta, Dayanita Singh, Gargi Raina); artists who deconstruct fixed identity through the ambiguities of plural belonging, often in risky, performative modes (Bharti Kher, Nikhil Chopra, Tejal Shah); and artists who confront terror in an epoch whose leitmotifs are occupation, torture, surveillance, migration and genocide (Krishen Khanna, Baiju Parthan, Praneet Soi, Sumedh Rajendran, Riyas Komu).

Such entanglements, which I have elsewhere described as forming ‘continents of affinity’ mapped in contradistinction to nationalist and Cold War geography, are increasingly being recorded by new curatorial and theoretical frameworks emerging from India. Significantly, 2008 marks the first time major biennales were co-curated by Indians – Manifesta by the Raqs Media Collective and the Gwangju Biennale by me. [6]

Correspondingly, the rubrics of debate have changed. The tedious themes that dominated much discourse in the Indian art world between the 1950s and the 1990s have been rendered irrelevant. The anxiety of national identity, typically phrased in the form of apocalyptic binaries such as ‘Indianness vs. internationalism’ or ‘tradition vs. modernity’, has receded; the chimera of auto-Orientalism, with its valorisation of a spurious ‘authenticity’, to be secured as the guarantee of an embattled local against an overwhelming global, has been swept away. I speculate the vacuum left behind by this lapsed, unproductive rhetoric will gradually be filled by awareness that transcultural experience is the only certain basis of contemporary artistic practice. As the cultural theorist Nancy Adajania and I have argued elsewhere, transcultural experience – and the corresponding stance of ‘critical transregionality’ – gives the cultural practitioner “strategic and imaginative freedom… to link regions on the basis of elective affinities arising from common cultural predicaments, jointly faced crises, and shared choices of practice.” [7] This is not a means of escaping the urgencies of the globalised local; rather, it underwrites a responsible and responsive encounter with the contemporary with all its multifarious provocations. The Indian highway is a work in progress; it has, to paraphrase the visionary modernist poet Mohammed Iqbal, ‘many more horizons to traverse’.
(Gwangju, October 2008 – Bombay, November 2008)

Notes

1. For a discussion of ‘Highway: For Mansur’ and the suite of paintings of which it forms a part, see Ranjit Hoskote, ‘An Autobiography in Fifteen Frames: Recent Works by Atul Dodiya’ (exhibition catalogue essay; New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery, 1999).
2. For a discussion of Gupta’s works based on the situation in Kashmir, see Nancy Adajania, ‘A Shadow in Search of a Body’ (Introduction to Shilpa Gupta; Bombay/ New Delhi: Sakshi Gallery & Apeejay Media Gallery, 2007).
3. For an account of the foundational proposals of postcolonial India, framed through the debates among Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru, among other thinkers, see Sunil Khilnani, The Idea of India (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998). For a study of the major social and political developments that have taken place in India since Independence, see Ramachandra Guha, India after Gandhi: A History of the World’s Largest Democracy (New Delhi: Picador, 2007).
4. For a detailed account of technological change and its effect on Indian art practice, see Ranjit Hoskote, ‘The Elusiveness of the Transitive: Reflections on the Curatorial Gesture and Its Conditions in India’, in Joselina Cruz et al eds., Locus: Interventions in Art Practice (Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2005), pp. 225-237.
5. For a substantial account of the opening up of transcultural exchange and dialogue, and its formative influence on the younger generation of Indian artists from the late 1990s onward, see Nancy Adajania, ‘Probing the Khojness of Khoj’, in Pooja Sood ed., Ten Years of Khoj (New Delhi: Harper Collins, forthcoming, 2009).
6. Ranjit Hoskote, ‘Scales of Elaboration’, in Okwui Enwezor ed., Annual Report: A Year in Exhibitions (curatorial essay in the exhibition catalogue of the 7th Gwangju Biennale; Gwangju: Gwangju Biennale Foundation, 2008), pp. 40-53.
7. See Ranjit Hoskote, ‘Retrieving the Far West: Towards a Curatorial Representation of the House of Islam’, in Shaheen Merali ed., Re-Imagining Asia: A Thousand Years of Separation (London / Berlin: Saqi & Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2008), p. 121.