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Letter from India

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"The art observed on my recent journey throughout India reflects the polarisation of a country split economically and politically."

Virginia Whiles

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Nisha Agrawal, CEO of Oxfam India, writes that '57 billionaires control 70% of India's wealth... India is the second most unequal economy after Russia ... due to the rising inequality between urban and rural areas ... the top 1% has gained more income than the bottom 50% put together'. *ArtTactic*, meanwhile, reports that 'many HNI's (high net-worth individuals) are setting up house museums ... art gives the collector the emotional pleasure of ownership while offering social status and ... a robust financial investment'. The art observed on my recent journey throughout India reflects the polarisation of a country split economically and politically. Play between absolute and relative truths informs the resistance of Indian artists to the rising 'corporatocracy' of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's populist 'Modi-fied' regime.

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One strong response to both local and global political tension lies in the engagement with ecology. *Khoj* is India's major art organisation for an alternative arts-lab like space for socially engaged projects using interdisciplinary, activist art practices. It has become the main site for experimentation and contestation as manifested in its current show, 'Evidence Room', a retrospective of 19 site-specific interventions across India. Issues of public art, ecology and community show how water, waste and pollution are the main terrains for investigation. Diverse projects (exhibited at the *Khoj* space in Khirkee Extension, New Delhi) demonstrated how ethnographic approaches promote revival of traditional practices, such as textile designer Priya Ravish Mehra's *Making the Invisible Visible*, 2012, where 30 pieces of repaired fabrics revealed the extraordinary darning skills of the Raffogar community in Najibabad, or notions of sustainability, as in *Gram Eco Sanitation*, 2014, which charted a method of toilet waste recycling as fertiliser in Madhya Pradesh. 'Frozen World of the Familiar Stranger' showed ten artists using video images of communities on the verge of dystopia. The show was creepy, clever and cool, as illustrated by Tejal Shah's use of 'they' in her discourse as a sign of 'retirement from gender conformity', as an eco-sexual. An overall sense of doom was epitomised by Rachel Rose's 'deathfullness' in her video *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, 2014. The new 'post-anthropocene' scenario (see 'The World Without Us' at HMKV Dortmund) may fascinate the consumer fetishism for angst but, as Amitav Ghosh reported on climate change last year: 'What we need is to find a way out of the individualising imaginary in which we are trapped.' Collective participatory and ethnographic means are embraced by artists rejecting the individual model in a clear adoption of indigenous and subaltern tools of analysis seen in artists like Navjot Altaf and Ravi Agarwal.

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Archival data of the ways in which artworks can perform as evidence towards changing social conditions and even legal assessments are permeating production and curation of contemporary art in India. This is a tool used by curator Gayatri Sinha in her work as editor of the online *Critical Collective* and also as curator of 'Part Narratives' at Bikaner House in Delhi. The radical revision of the Partition of India that might have been expected for its 70th anniversary seemed strangely missing, apart from in this show. Presented as an 'accidental archive', its aim was to propose alternative histories to counter the lack of institutional documentation. Sinha invited artists to reflect through their own tools of memory, such as photo albums or old films. Madhusudhanan showed *History is a Silent*

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Film, 2006, a delicate homage to his father, who is seen repairing old projectors in a background buzz of broken spools and flickering newsreel shots of people fleeing. The mood is melancholic, as with the photos by Nandita Raman of dilapidated cinema seats. Echoes of *Cinema Paradiso* evoke nostalgia but this is transformed into euphoria with the piece by Sheba Chhachhi: *Temporal Twist*, 2017, a 26ft-high kinetic tower streaming down with strips of old film stock. Gently rotating, it expands and contracts like an hour-glass or the breath of a yogi. Perfectly sited in a rotunda that invites the viewer to circumambulate and glimpse a fleeting face, it celebrates celluloid.

The India Art Fair has a reputation for critical debates but this year over half were on collecting and museums, a sign of the times in a country where art museums are shifting into the private zone. The largest one, owned by Kiran Nadar, is suitably sited inside a supermarket and offered the spectacular: 'Stretched Terrains', a retrospective of three major modernists: MF Husain, FN Souza and SH Raza, who were simultaneously celebrated at the art fair where galleries showed a careful mix of modern and contemporary, hedging their bets since the 'demon of demonetisation'.

Discussing the future of museums, two curators from the Guggenheim and the Louvre confidently exposed plans for their new outposts in the Gulf: highly contested by activist artists last year in Venice but this time only one shy voice asked if they were suitable advisors for a post-colonial Indian context. One outstanding example of a progressive state museum exists: the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum is a fabulous piece of colonialist Victoriana, formerly the Victoria and Albert Museum, which has now been revitalised by a programme whereby contemporary artists are invited to participate in a series called Engaging with Traditions - Dayanita Singh (Reviews AM403) is currently exhibiting her *Suitcase Museum*.

Back in Delhi at the grandiose National Gallery of Modern Art was the retrospective of Jitish Kallat, whose 100 pieces were displayed with a considerable concern for effect that somehow camouflaged the affect. This contrasted with his curatorial renown for a tight conceptual approach in the last Kochi Biennale, compared with this year's looser handling by Sudarshan Shetty (Reviews AM403).

Shetty's selection was made with ears and eyes wide open to create links between sound and form in ways that constantly surprised. The works manifested the qualities sought by Shetty, son of a Yakshagana storyteller, such as sensorial aesthetics, ritual performance and craft skills. His challenge that the Biennale should 'flow' was seized by Nicola Durvasula, whose 108 handmade objects and a big audience witnessed her spontaneous performance with local rock musicians playing to her 'kolam' patterns of rice paste on dung: a Cagean moment. The recent shift towards spiritual abstraction is inspired by the minimal work of Nasreen Mohammadi and the geometric work of neo-Tantrics such as Raza, Mohanti and Viswanadhan. One exhibition in this mode showed the photos of Katarina Weslien taken at the mammoth Kumbh Mela where 30 million pilgrims share a temporary tent city. Her images disturb by their absence of human life, a longed-for silence. This was soothing to see in the cacophony of Varanasi/Banaras at the Kriti Gallery. Nearby on the Ganges at the famous Assi Ghat sits another rare space: the Alice Boner Institute, recently open to artists' residencies, where the Swiss artist lived and worked for over 40 years. Her work and extraordinary collection of Indian art are shared between the local Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum and the Museum Rietberg.

The inclusion in the Biennale of students from 55 art schools was astute in the light of nationwide protests this year against political repression faced by public educational institutions. I witnessed the positive effects of their collaboration while teaching at Hyderabad University, where the students come from far more modest homes than those in UK art schools today. The constant dialogue between students and teachers took place in vast studios open 24 hours a day. While totally at ease with digital media (Bangalore is up the road), the students' respect for traditional skills opens up an interface based on process and practice rather than concept - researching the vernacular while googling the global results in wittily improvised disjunctures. Coincidentally, Alec Cumming, the only British artist at the Delhi Art Fair, showed paintings in 'Stripped Bare' that flaunted an East-West dialogue. After years of working in India, his practice echoes the sardonic yet sensuous

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imagery of the great Indian artist KG Subramanyan, who died last year and who, in response to critical murmurings between 'professional' Indian curators that artists should not curate, might have shouted: 'Long live the artist-as-trickster.'

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