

THE DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE OF RADICALISM
IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART 1960-1990

by

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ABSTRACT

By the early 1980s the Department of Fine Arts and Aesthetics at the Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda stood as the key institution for contemporary art in India. Its reputation had been carefully cultivated over the last fifteen years by both K. G. Subramanyan and Geeta Kapur. Under their careful artistic and theoretical tutelage, the Faculty of Fine Arts turned to narrative-figuration as a self-proclaimed polemical stance against the materialist/determinist thrust of history. The narrative turn moved beyond the regional locality of Baroda in 1981 with the exhibition *Place for People*. Held in the cosmopolitan art centres of Delhi and Bombay the show included the work of six artists variously affiliated with the school in Baroda: Bhupen Khakhar, Vivan Sundaram, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Nalini Malani, Jogen Chowdhury, and Sudhir Patwardhan.

The arrival of *Place for People* in the 1980s must be situated within the larger frames of contemporary art in the post-colonial moment. In attending to the variegated terrain spanning both theory and practice, my project has as its underlying concern the interface between discursive formations, institutional structures, and sites of artistic intervention. More specifically, I am interested the representational strategies that emerged in the period between 1960 and 1990. In looking to the gaps in the discourse, alongside the points of conflict or conciliation, I raise larger questions about the politics of representation, and the productive or prohibitive possibilities of artistic intervention. At the core of my argument is the rise of painterly narrative-figuration exemplified by

Place for People and the challenge leveled against it by the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association. Both laid claim to radicalism as a polemical gesture; however, the battle was waged across the historically contingent fields of artistic subjectivity, regional difference and the capacity of art to function as an agent of social change. Pivotal to my study is how certain approaches to both the theory and practice of contemporary art in India have emerged as paradigmatic while others have gathered the dust of disregard.

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DEDICATION

For Dr. Katherine Hacker

INTRODUCTION

Present Tense: International Interludes

As the nation of India continues to become more prominent on the international stage, its culture becomes increasingly relevant to the rest of the world. An amalgam of ethnicities, cultures and language, religion, political ideologies and economic strata, how the people of India negotiate these complexities to form a unified and democratic nation can become a model for how other nations may resolve the anxieties presented by globalization and post-modernism.

India at the Venice Biennale 2005,
Press Release¹

In 2005, for the first time in the history of the prestigious Venice Biennale, India had its own pavilion.² *iCon: India Contemporary* was sponsored by the Lucas Artists Program at the Montalvo Arts Centre in Saratoga, California and jointly curated by Peter Nagy, George Knox, and Julie Evans. The Venice exhibition showcased installations, paintings and sculptures by Atul Dodiya, Anita Dube, Ranbir Kaleka, Nalini Malani, Nataraj Sharma and the Raqs Media Collective.³ Although Malani has enjoyed a consistent international presence since the mid 1980s, the remaining artists in *iCon: India Contemporary* are relatively new members on the international circuit. In the last few years, this younger generation has opened a new chapter in contemporary

¹ "India at the Venice Biennale 2005, *iCon: India Contemporary*," published by the Organizers (March 2005), <http://www.universes-in-universes.de/car/venezia/bien51/eng/ind.text-1.htm>.

² Indian artists had participated independently in the past. Mahendra Pandya exhibited independently in 1966 and N.N. Rimzon was the last Indian artist to participate in the event during XLV Venice Biennale (1993). This year Subhodh Gupta's installations were also included as an independent entry to the exhibition.

³ Raqs Media Collective includes Monica Narula, Jeebash Bagchi, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta. They began working together in 1991 and were co-initiators of *Sarai: The New Media Initiative* based in Delhi. This programme operates under the auspices of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.

art and garnered a reputation for experimental artworks and the introduction of new media to artistic practice.

There was a time in the not too distant past when the new found visual vocabulary of the artists in the Venice exhibition found little readership amongst the art going public in India.⁴ Times have changed. The reception and market value of contemporary Indian art has significantly increased in the last few years at both national and international levels. The growing Indian economy and its ever expanding middle class have fuelled investments in contemporary art.⁵ Though middle class Indians may want to increase their social and cultural capital by purchasing art other factors have influenced the escalating interest in contemporary art. For example, organizations such as Osian's, a Bombay based auction house, have actively sought to increase the market profile of Indian art. Osian's Chairman and CEO, Neville Tuli sees the auction house as a critical and necessary component in building a national infrastructure for the arts

⁴ Writing at the end of the 90s Peter Nagy observes:

Most of the federally funded art institutions seem to take their cue from the High Society model, consciously disregarding the avant-garde in favor of a fictionalized, democratized version of the fine arts. A polarity currently exists within the contemporary art scene in India. On the one hand we have a large market which is predominantly defined by the whims of the urban upper middle class infatuated with kitsch and self-consciously smug about its lack of knowledge of art in general. Our other pole is a vibrant milieu made up of passionate thinkers and gifted creators which exists, miraculously, on no funds at all (but of course there is a middle ground and wide swaths of grays).

Nagy moved to India in 1992 and set up Nature Morte, a gallery in South Delhi that has been very supportive of new experimental art. Nagy, "Inside/Outside," *ArtIndia: The Art News Magazine of India* 3 (April-June 1999): 96. Entrepreneur Amit Judge is but one of the many individuals who have also recently emerged as keen advocates of contemporary art. In the last few years Judge has opened galleries in Singapore, Bombay, Delhi and recently New York under the banner of Bodhi Art.

See Vibhuti Patel, "Investing in India's Art," *Newsweek* (September 25, 2006), <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14871424/site/newsweek/>.

⁵ Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop, "India's art market booming," *International Herald Tribune* (January 25, 2007), <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/01/25/news/rindart.php>.

beyond the pale of state institutions.⁶ Osian's efforts include the production of comprehensive catalogues devoted to contemporary and historical art. These catalogues are filled with high quality reproductions, extensive bibliographies and equal care and attention are given to establishing authenticity and verifying provenance. However, these endeavors are not merely altruistic and more often than not Osian's sets its varied collections upon the block for public auction.⁷

Osian's professionalism undoubtedly paved the way for the changing perception of contemporary art within the nation. Yet its success also encouraged international auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's to reconsider the Indian art market. Despite the fact that a little more than a decade ago Sotheby's (London) closed down its Delhi office due to a lack of sustainable national interest, in 2005 it re-opened an office in Bombay.⁸ Anuradha Mazumda, a representative of the London-based auction house observes, "[T]he market for contemporary Indian art is bullish and aggressive . . . India is now recognized as a major growth market, forcing international auction houses to pay

⁶ Indian Cultural Organizations such as Lalit Kala Akademi have done little to encourage the new market in contemporary art. Established in 1954 under the first Five Year Plan of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Lalit Kala Akademi has been the primary source of funding for many artists. However, since its inception it has been consistently criticized for its inability to serve the needs of young artists. Gayatri Sinha, "The Lalit Kala Akademi—Between a Rock and a Hard Place," *ArtIndia: The Art News Magazine of India* III, issue IV (October – December 1998): 71-72; Ratnottama Sengupta, "Fine Arts Body Shows Signs of Malaise," *ArtIndia: The Art News Magazine of India* I, issue 2 (August –October, 1996): 15.

⁷ See for example, *India: A Historical Lila: Auctions of Indian Modern and Contemporary Paintings, Drawings and Graphic Art* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publications, 2000); *Masterpieces and Museum Quality Series: Indian Contemporary Art Books, Paintings and Sculpture* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publications, 2004); *Indian Contemporary Art: Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publications, 2005).

⁸ The office opened in 1991 but subsequently closed in 1993 due to poor response. After the closing of the Indian office, in 1995 Sotheby's sponsored two auctions of contemporary art in New York and London respectively. The pieces in the New York auction were largely culled from the Chester and Davidia Herwitz collection, and was comprised of approximately 210 painting produced by 28 individual artists; the auction raised \$1.2 million - the highest prices \$48,875 and \$41,400 were fetched by two of M.F. Husain's paintings. See *Contemporary Indian Painters 1996 Associated with the Jahangir Art Gallery* (Bombay: Jahangir Art Gallery, 1996), 21.

more attention to it.”⁹ Indeed many international collectors stood up and noticed the bullish market for contemporary art when Christie’s (New York) placed Tyeb Mehta’s *Mahisasura*, 1997 on the auction block in January 2006 where it fetched \$1.58 million (US) far surpassing its listed value of \$600,000 (fig. 1). If the unexpected worth of Mehta’s work, India’s pavilion within the venerated environs of the Venice Biennale and the burgeoning market interest in contemporary art mark a critical rite of India’s artistic passage, then it is long overdue.¹⁰ Though the trans-global flow of international art is now a social fact India’s presence within its permeable geographical boundaries has a corrugated historical terrain. The present ease with which artists interpolate themselves into the international art world is the result of a set of struggles that first began in the 1960s and continued to have resonance within India up until the early 1990s. It is this particularly charged and complex time span upon which my project focuses.

Mapping the Calibrations of Culture

Increasingly, the issue of cultural difference emerges at points of social crisis, and the question of identity that it raises are agonistic; identity is claimed either from a position of marginality or in an attempt at gaining the centre: in both senses, [they are] ex-centric.¹¹

I find it troubling that within the context of the press release for the Venice

⁹ Indrajit Basu, “Contemporary Indian Art Gains Status on a Global Canvas,” *Christian Science Monitor* (July 21, 2005), <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0721/p07s01-wosc.html>.

¹⁰ The flurry of interest in contemporary Indian art was bolstered by recent blockbuster exhibitions such as *Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India* held at the Asia Society in New York and the solo exhibition of F.N. Souza at the Tate in November 2005. See Chaitanya Sambrani, Kajri Jain and Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India* (London: Philip Wilson, 2005); Francesca Souza, *Religion & Erotica: Religious and Erotic Drawing from the Estate of F. N. Souza* (London: Barklem.com, 2005).

¹¹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 177.

Biennale, India's culture is now held up as a paradigmatic model for the resolution of anxieties embedded in the social, political, and cultural complexities of our current global moment. There was a time, in the not too distant past, when culture (writ large) in the waning years of colonialism was considered the last refuge of resistance to hegemonic forces; however, if one is to take the press release of the Biennale at face value and position India's culture as a model by which the rest of the world can resolve its own anxieties over globalization and postmodernism then India's distinct postcolonial culture becomes the unique site of approbation. The changing role of culture – its definitions and its deployments – are a central theme in this thesis. To be sure, there are many classifications of culture; however, within the scope of my study, culture is taken as a problematic term which needs to be carefully historicized and contextualized especially in relation to artistic production. Whether India's culture is now celebrated for its unique artistic expressions or its untapped and apparently lucrative market value is a question that remains to be answered.¹²

The role of culture in the hard-fought struggles for legitimacy has been a key issue and perhaps one of the most productive theoretical and concrete forces of the late twentieth century. The Subaltern Studies Group, for example, raised serious methodological questions about the writing of colonial history and actively sought to invert a top-down model of historiography. Theirs was a project that seriously

¹² However, the celebration of hybridized cultural identities needs to be met with some suspicion as Rasheed Araeen observes, "The triumph of the hybrid is in fact the triumph of a neo-liberal multiculturalism and global capitalism." "A New Beginning: Beyond Post-Colonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics," *Third Text* 50 (Spring 2000): 15.

considered the role of culture in the articulation of dissent and the possibility of claiming agency in spaces existing beyond the frames of elite power. However, as Vinay Bahl points out the Subaltern Studies initial valorization of culture was deeply problematic as it rested upon a “classic liberal view that culture represents the realm of freedom and choice.”¹³ Though Bahl’s critique was written ten years ago it stands as a harbinger of negative political “truth.” One need only recall how a politicized version of culture became the battering ram of fascism throughout the 1980s and 1990s with the rise of *Hindutva*. The ascendancy of Hindu Nationalism is an extreme illustration of the abuse of culture, but it serves to underscore how definitions of culture can be manipulated to valorize a particular ideology.

At the risk of sounding polemical I cite the words of Amilcar Cabral writing in the 1970s:

The value of culture as an element of resistance to foreign domination lies in the fact that culture is the rigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated or to be dominated. Culture is simultaneously the fruit of a people’s history and a determinant of history, by positive or negative influence which it exerts on the evolution of relationships between man and his environment, among men or groups of men within society, as well as among different societies.¹⁴

In contradistinction to Cabral’s characterization of culture, the present and decidedly postmodern understanding of culture is deeply problematic. As Terry Eagleton argues the halcyon days of cultural theory have long since past. Culture is no longer the site of

¹³ “Relevance (or Irrelevance) of Subaltern Studies,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (June 7, 1997): 1335.

¹⁴ “National Liberation and Culture,” in *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral*, ed. Africa Information Service (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 40.

resistance, it is now a nebulous field which is easily traversed, “[W]e have come to recognize culture in the broader sense as an arena in which the discarded and dispossessed can explore shared meanings and affirm a common identity.”¹⁵ The era and the intellectual climate that precipitated the dawning of postcolonial studies and its critical reconsideration of colonialism’s history have seemingly been domesticated within our current moment. One wonders if cultural expressions or the assertions of origin and/or identity as a critically disruptive tactic have been reduced to misplaced modifiers in the grammar of postmodernism.

Within India, culture sat at the nexus of many debates and throughout the 1960s was subject to various reconfigurations that left a mark on artistic engagements. The long decade of the 1960s was a time of artistic crisis and questions of authenticity and identity loomed as points of serious consideration. It became increasingly evident that in order to make a foray into the international realm and simultaneously dislodge the moribund assertions of India’s own linkages of art and nationalism, artistic practice would have to shift the margins of its expression both within and without national boundaries. It is within this context that Bhabha’s notion of the “excentric” becomes a pivotal strategy in nuancing both the past and the present in an effort to dismantle binary constructions of both time and circumstance. At the level of artistic engagement, however, a series of implicit and explicit entanglements hindered India’s postcolonial aesthetic autonomy.

¹⁵ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 97.

During the 1960s India's status as a *postcolony* meant that it was politically struggling to articulate a fully independent and modern identity. My designation of India as a *postcolony* during this specific timeframe is pivotal to understanding some of the broader issues addressed in this thesis. Historian Achille Mbembe argues that:

The notion 'postcolony' identifies specifically a given historical trajectory—that of societies emerging from the experience of colonisation and the violence which the colonial relationship, *par excellence*, involves. To be sure, the postcolony is chaotically pluralistic, yet it has nonetheless an internal coherence. It is specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or reforming stereotypes. It is not, however, just an economy of signs in which power is mirrored and imagined self-reflectively. The postcolony is characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and a lack of proportion as well as by the distinctive ways in which identities are multiplied, transformed and put into circulation.¹⁶

While economically India's status as a *postcolony* have been ultimately bound up with issues of development and modernization, at the level of artistic practice two distinct issues emerged. The first was how contemporary artists could frame their visual expressions in a way that would free them from the stylistic antecedents of the national past and reflect India's growing modern climate. The second resonated beyond national borders to question how contemporary artistic engagements could unequivocally stand as valid expressions within the international art matrix. It was across the divide of the national past and the international present that a series of prismatic engagements emerged to refract the lingering influence of the earlier parochial modernism advocated by the Bengal School and to question the larger frames of so called "western"

¹⁶ "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 62 (1992): 3.

modernism.

The hegemonic weight of past foreign domination and the subsequent acts of surfacing out from beneath it define a *postcolony*. During the 1960s the surface of the past and the present rippled with the autonomous emergence of multiple and transformative discursive engagements that by the early 1970s led to a more self reflective and critically minded postcolonial aesthetic environment. The acts of improvisation, identified by Bhabha, rested upon strategic deployments of culture as a marker of both difference and legitimacy. By the mid-1970s, however, the “cultural” barricades against the international were summarily dismantled and reconstructed to fend off the encroachments of state power when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended the constitution during the Emergency (1975-1977). In 1975, Gandhi was found guilty of election fraud and by law she had to resign her office. However, instead of surrendering her parliamentary seat the Prime Minister suspended the constitution and declared martial law. During the late 1970s as the political chimera of democracy collapsed under the reality of totalitarian rule cultural heritage was revived as a site of resistance to national assertions of political power.

In 1981, *Place for People* emerged as self-proclaimed radical artistic initiative that embraced the democratic possibilities of the painted image.¹⁷ Bringing together the more senior and established artist Gulammohammed Sheikh, with that of his peers Bhupen Khakhar and Jogen Chowdhury alongside the work of three younger artists Vivan Sundaram, Nalini Malani, and Sudhir Patwardhan the show had no curator but was conceived and compiled as a collective endeavour undertaken by the artists and art

¹⁷ *Place for People* (Bombay: Jahangir Art Gallery; Delhi: Rabindra Bhavan, 1981).

critic Geeta Kapur. It was within this exhibition that questions of radicalism first emerged as an oppositional stance not only to the international avant-garde but also to the shifting terrain of India's political climate from the mid 1970s and early 1980s. Its claims of radicalism, couched in the deployment of a visual micro-narrative, seized on the site of culture as a theoretically bound yet antagonistic stance against the juggernaut of historical determinism. Kapur's catalogue essay for the exhibition positioned the paintings of *Place for People* as expressions of a "mythic imagination" and within this context, the artists claimed a culturally bound and transcendent position whereby (capital H) history was unmoored from temporal or geographical constraints.¹⁸

It is against the backdrop of the turn toward narrative painting in the 1980s that the reopening of Sotheby's in Bombay in 2005 finds historical correspondence within the period that spans my own project. In 1989 Sotheby's hosted *Timeless Art*, an unprecedented auction of contemporary figurative work in Bombay.¹⁹ Showcasing the work of thirty-five individuals, representing a broad array of senior and junior artists, the *Timeless Art* auction catapulted many into the international arena: Nalini Malani, Manjit Bawa, N.S Bendre, Bhupen Khakhar, Manu Parekha, Madhuvi Parekh, Gieve Patel, Alex Matthew, Tyeb Mehta, Mrinalini Mukherjee, Pushpamala N, D.L.N. Reddy, Ravinder Reddy, Himmat Shaw, G.M. Sheikh, Nilima Sheikh, K.G. Subramanyan and Vivan Sundaram. Though the auction was received as a coup for contemporary art in

¹⁸ Geeta Kapur, "Partisan Views about the Human Figure." *Place for People* (Bombay: Jahangir Art Gallery: Delhi: Rabindra Bhavan, 1981).

¹⁹ The auction celebrated the 150th Anniversary of the *Times of India* which fell under the corporate umbrella of Bennet Coleman and Co. Ltd. Preminda S. Jacobs notes that the situation for contemporary Indian artists changed significantly after the Sotheby's 1989 auction. "Works by senior artists and relative newcomers in the field were sold at unprecedented prices. This alerted investors in India, sending prices in the art market rocketing upwards." "Between Modernism and Modernization: Locating Modernity in South Asian Art" *Art Journal* 58, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 51.

the 1980s, at the time a voice of dissent rose from a group of artists from the southern Indian state of Kerala. This politically charged collective, led by the sculptor K. P. Krishnakumar, operated under the designation the Radical Indian Painters and Sculptors Association (The Radicals).²⁰ Emerging at a time when India's vexed relationship to western frames of artistic practice had been largely *rhetorically* resolved the Radicals appearance suggested that at the level of artistic engagement it was still an embattled territory. The Radicals met *Timeless Art* with deep suspicion and at the time of the Sotheby's auction a statement voicing their concerns was printed in the *Times of India*. Their "Against the Imperialist Exploitation of Art" shared a page in the newspaper with an article written by Aparajita Chandra celebrating Sotheby's interest in the contemporary figurative work of Indian artists (fig. 2).²¹ Despite the celebratory timbre of Chandra's article the Radicals pointed to the unspoken perils of international interest and the dark side of employing the emergent rhetoric of postmodernism as a governing rubric for artistic practice. Claiming the auction to be an expression of overt cultural imperialism, the Radicals charged the artists participating in the show with capitulating to the lucrative lure of capitalism and pointed to the political dangers and ideological pitfalls of blindly following the siren-like voices of international interest. At the heart

²⁰ The Radicals included a flexible roster of like-minded individuals: Jyothi Basu, Rajan, K. Hareedran, C. Pradeep, C.K. Rajan, M. Madhusudhan, Alex Mathew, Puskin, E.H., K. Reghunadhan, K.R. Kurunakaran, Anoop B., D. Alexander and K. Prabhakaran, Sunil Kumar, Johns, Radhakrishan, Piya, Aayisha. Anita Dube was the lone woman associated with the collective; however, her contribution rested in her capacity, not as a contributing artist but rather, as the collective's scribe. Here I am using the artists listed in the Radicals' signed manifesto released in conjunction with *The Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association* exhibition held in Calicut 1989. *The Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association* (Calicut: February 1989).

²¹ Aparajita Chandra, "Art Under the Hammer," *Times of India*, March 10, 1989, Bombay edition.

of the Radical's protest was a concern over reducing India's cultural products to an empty commodity circulating within a market in which few Indians could participate.

Though the Radicals existence was truncated by the suicide of Krishnakumar in 1989, without a doubt their oppositional stance to the commodification of art has left a continued, though under acknowledged mark upon contemporary artistic practice. At the heart of the Radicals dissent was an ideological argument with the strategic deployments of what they regarded as an "amorphous culture" as the trump card for contemporary art brought to the fore in the 1981 exhibition *Place for People*. The national success of the *Place for People* exhibition, the *Timeless Art* auction and the presence of India's contemporary artists at the blockbuster *Festival of India* held the following year at various venues in London suggested that the linkages between culture and economics in the 1980s were firmly secure.

My interest in the Radicals and their emergence in the 1980s started me on the journey that finds expression within the pages of this thesis. Broadly speaking, this project considers both the visual and discursive negotiations with the national and the international in the period between 1960 and 1990. This span of thirty years marks a critical transitional phase in contemporary art - a time in which artists and art historians alike actively sought out decisive frames for their practice. Key institutions, intellectuals, and artists registered their opinions about how India was to critically position its artistic practice in opposition to the leviathan of western paradigms and the lineage of India's own art history. The relevancy of India's culture and its history took on distinct configurations during this time and each was subject to a number of theoretical rapprochements that left their mark on artistic engagements. In considering

these distinct and temporally bound configurations, this project will focus on three specific case studies spanning roughly thirty years. I have deliberately seized on those moments of rupture - those that resist easy placement within the discourse - so that I may pose a larger question about the politics of representation, the strategies of artistic intervention, and the limits of wedding culture to both artistic practice and art historical discourse. This project questions the modalities of contemporary art across the interconnecting fields of the institutional, the discursive, and the artistic to bring back into focus those areas that I believe have been aggregated into the “monument” of art history. In particular, this investigation is concerned with the strategic deployments of culture and how this rather nebulous term was tailored to suit both the social and political changes both within and beyond India.

Past Tense: Negotiating the Canon

We must be ready to receive every moment of a discourse in its sudden irruption; in that punctuality in which it appears, and in that temporal dispersion that enables it to be repeated, known, forgotten, transformed, utterly erased, and hidden far from view, in the dust of books. Discourse must not be referred to as the distant presence of the origin, but treated as and when it occurs.²²

When traversing the historical path of twentieth-century art in India one invariably encounters the same milestones. Though worn and weary, the names Santiniketan -- Rabindranath Tagore – Amrita Sher-Gil – The Progressive Artists Group -- mark out the sanctified historical topography of emergent modern art. It is easy to

²² Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Routledge, 2005), 28.

fall prey to the seductive lure of these pivotal players as they process across the stage of history and to pay deferential homage to their contributions by beginning with them. Indeed reams have been written and continue to be written about how contemporary art traces its lineage, its uniqueness, and its expression backward in time to these central characters. Although their well-established pedigree is incontrovertible, this project does not begin with them. I introduce them here in order to foreground the idea of the *oeuvre* and its particular configuration within the history of contemporary art. The *oeuvre*, according to Foucault, is a false prophet of sorts; its uncontested authority rests upon proclamations of unity and the ability to reconfigure the disparate and the diverse within a seamless and cohesive narrative. The production of a discourse rests upon an endless circuit of statements, references, and multiple frontiers rendered manageable by the hegemony of causality. It is the establishment of the *oeuvre*, its uncontested weight that lies at the core of this project.²³ By examining varied artistic and discursive strategies emerging between the 60s and the 90s and considering the moments of “irruption” of the kind referred to by Foucault – this analysis seeks to, in part, question the *oeuvre* by exerting pressure on the domesticated frontiers of contemporary art.²⁴ My three case studies deliberately focus on moments of aesthetic and political crisis. As a strategy for challenging the *oeuvre*, these case studies (though each reflective of a particular time frame) are not meant to form a cohesive chronology. Instead, they are presented in such a way as to create an open dialogue that actively seeks to question the

²³ Foucault, 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

unilateral and developmental paradigms so dominant within the extant canon of art history.

The effort to differentiate contemporary art from the legacy of the past and forge new territory for the present is addressed in the first chapter through its consideration of both archival material and various exhibitions. The shifts in artistic practice occurring 1960 and the early 1970s, I argue, were the result of a sequence of complex negotiations with India's own artistic rubrics and those that resonated beyond its borders. K. G. Subramanyan, J. Swaminathan, and Geeta Kapur emerge at this time as key players in the pursuit of a distinctly Indian modernism. As artists, Subramanyan and Swaminathan cast their ideas across the concrete intersections of theory and practice whereas Kapur sat in the critics' corner specifically articulating viable theoretical models. Significantly, Subramanyan and Kapur wrote from within the precincts of the Baroda School and at various junctures exerted tremendous influence upon the pedagogy of the institution. Swaminathan, however, stood outside established educational structures in a gesture of self-imposed exile. Not formally trained as an artist, Swaminathan rejected the normative values of both history and culture and over the course of his lifetime his contributions were often antagonistic and antiestablishment. It is his self-determined opposition that puts him in the unique position to act as a foil to the frames of artistic practice put forth by Subramanyan and Kapur.

United in their concern with theoretical issues of the modern and unified in their disagreement with frames of western modernism, Subramanyan, Swaminathan and Kapur articulated distinct positions on how contemporary artistic practice should take

form within a specifically Indian cultural milieu. By examining the diverse engagements of this triad of individuals, I delineate the contours of the debates informing this pivotal decade and a half. How the conceptual deployments of ‘indigenism,’ ‘craft,’ and ‘cultural identity’ were cast as productive sites of artistic, historical, and theoretical intervention is central to my analysis.

My second chapter takes up how the critical and art historical investigations of the 1960s and the early 1970s manifest themselves at the level of artistic practice during the 1980s. This chapter functions as a case study of the *Place for People* exhibition in conjunction with its residual theoretical and artistic effects. It is worth noting that at the time of the exhibition there were three major art centres: Baroda/Bombay, Calcutta/Santiniketan, and Delhi. The artists included in *Place for People* can be seen as representatives of these geographic or artistic enclaves.²⁵ Clearly the list of artists with their various geographic affiliations hints at an attempt to reject regional expressions in favour of a more trans-national artistic expression. I argue that the refusal of the national as rubric for artistic expression carried with it the burden of India’s recent history. Central to my argument is the shifting political environment of India and the residual effects of the period between 1975-1975. During this time Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency, suspended the constitution and plunged India into two years of martial law. Geeta Kapur’s catalogue essay for *Place for People* positioned the exhibition as a radical artistic intervention and pivotal to my

²⁵ Sheikh and Sundaram had earned Fine Arts degrees from the Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda and were still variously affiliated with it. Khakhar was an accountant by profession but had strong ties with the Faculty of Fine Arts. Malani and Patwardhan live and work in Bombay and Chowdhury was educated at the Government College of Arts and Crafts in Calcutta.

analysis is how the rhetoric of radicalism emerges as tool of both aesthetic and political resistance.²⁶

The issue of radicalism and regionalism come to bear on my third chapter which functions as a case study of the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association (1987-1989). When this group of artists migrated up to the Baroda school from Kerala in the mid-1980s they stood as both conceptual and literal outsiders. In 1987 they tripped the perimeter alarms that guarded the environs of the school when they staged the exhibition *Questions and Dialogue* at the university's Fine Arts Gallery. As a counter-exhibition to *Place for People*, this show challenged the deployment of a unified cultural expression as valid tool for artistic intervention. Anita Dube's catalogue essay for the exhibition deconstructed both the interventionist stance of narrative/figuration and the pedagogy of the Baroda school and pointed to the limits of their theoretical frames. However, the Radicals' intrusion is positioned in the historical record as a failure to articulate a sustainable model of radical artistic practice.²⁸ I question this assumption. Influenced by the time I spent researching in Kerala and the primary material I gathered while there, this chapter complicates the initial reception and representation of the Radicals. My argument focuses, in particular, on how the Radicals engaged with history writ large and how their praxis challenged the trajectories of contemporary art. Infused with a Marxist ideology and the desire to bring art to the

²⁶ Kapur, "Partisan Views about the Human Figure," np.

²⁸ See Shivaji Panikkar, "Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association: The Crisis of Political Art in Contemporary India," *Creative Arts in Modern India: Essays in Comparative Criticism*, eds. Ratan Parimoo and Indramohan Sharma. (New Delhi: Books and Books, 1995), 604-626.

people, the Radicals perhaps like no other questioned the dangers of reducing cultural products to an empty commodity. The discourse of radicalism, first introduced by *Place for People*, takes on a different expression in this chapter. In juxtaposition with the frames of radicalism proposed by Kapur, this chapter seeks to investigate whether or not a more Marxist based notion of radicalism can ever be rightfully claimed by the urban bourgeois artist.

The title of my thesis *The Discourse and Practice of Radicalism in Contemporary Indian Art 1960-1990* characterizes the three historical moments I consider. My method is archaeological in the Foucauldian sense, in that it seeks to test the boundaries of the oeuvre by individualizing the various discursive formations and the artistic expressions as they occurred during this cluster of three decades.²⁹ My project deals with the specificities of various “irruptions” to highlight the critical spaces in-between – those productive moments of conciliation and contradiction – which for the most part have not made their way into the more official histories of contemporary art. The sites of “irruption” are geographically varied and sit within three discrete conceptual locales: the institutional, the discursive, and the artistic. In crisscrossing

²⁹ Foucault observes,

Archeology tries to define not the thoughts, representations, images, themes, preoccupations that are concealed or revealed in discourse, but those discourses themselves, those discourses as practices obeying certain rules. It does not treat discourse as a document, as a sign of something else, as an element that ought to be transparent, but whose unfortunate opacity must often be pierced if one is to reach at last the depth of the essential in the place in which it is held in reserve; it is concerned with the discourse within its own volume, as a *monument*. It is not an interpretive discipline: it does not seek another, better hidden discourse. It refuses to be allegorical.

Archeology of Knowledge, 155.

these terrains this project endeavours to offer a more dynamic reading of contemporary art.

During my field research in India I gathered a great deal of primary material that suggested that between 1960 and 1990 contemporary art and art historical engagements were ripe with moments of fissure and flashes of circumstance that stretched the opaque seams of accepted historiography. These moments of “thinness” surfaced at various junctures and find particular resonance in the emergence of the counter-narratives of both Swaminathan and the Radicals. Sharing a common Marxist lineage they vexed the self proclaimed position of the urban class intelligentsia, a position clearly articulated by Kapur,

Once Independence has been gained nationalism itself posed ontological questions – what is at stake in being Indian? And though the question may easily devolve into rhetoric, there is burden of it that rests on a particularly vexed class and its individuals. That is the urban middle class intelligentsia including the artists.³⁰

Although to some degree the history of contemporary art was written as it occurred, the archival texts I examine throughout my project reveal the often untold relationships between individuals and institutions, and by examining them, it is my contention that one is able to better understand the “monument” which we now accept as the history of contemporary Indian art.

³⁰ “Contemporary Cultural Practice: Some Polemical Categories,” *Occasional Papers on History and Society, Second Series* (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, nd), 15.

CHAPTER ONE: FINDING A NEW VISUAL ORDER

Into the Archive

Instead of seeing, on the great mythical book of history, lines of words that translate in visible characters thoughts that were formed in some other time and place, we have in the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and things (with their own possibility of and field of use). They are all these systems of statements (whether events or things) that I propose to call *archive*.¹

By the 1960s India was undeniably secure in its independent political status; however, the question of artistic self-determination was still a matter of critical debate. As a postcolonial country, India's contemporary artists had to wrestle with certain methodological and theoretical problems in order to differentiate their artistic practice from the monolithic models of western modernism. There was a lot at stake in developing a sovereign artistic milieu that could find equal resonance both at a national and international level. This decade marks the beginning of a self-conscious move toward the development of a critically minded contemporary Indian aesthetic and an attendant art historical discourse. It stands as a key transitional moment during which the last vestiges of the postcolony were usurped by the assertions of a postcolonial identity.² As a descriptive term, the concept of the postcolony delineates the emergence

¹ Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 145.

² Once again drawing on Achille Mbembe's definition of a postcolony: "The postcolony is characterized by a distinctive art of improvisation, by a tendency to excess and disproportion as well as by distinctive ways in which identities are multiplied, transformed and put into circulation." "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," 3.

out of the experience of colonization. However when considering its denotative function, its syntactical roots rely on the conjunction of a prefix + noun. Within this pairing there is little room for negotiation as the combination signifies a determinable and identifiable moment. What interests me is how the conceptual limits of the postcolony gave way to the notion of the postcolonial (prefix + adjective) whereby the triumph of the adjective over the noun signals a space of unpredictability through which the connotative function of the word “colony” is radically changed. The hegemonic weight of past foreign domination and the subsequent acts of surfacing out from beneath it define a *postcolony*. I use the term postcolony as a rhetorical frame of reference that enables those areas of mobility and modification to be specifically highlighted. As a conceptual term it not only nuances the term postcolonial which at its heart “reorients the world around a single binary of the colonial/postcolonial” but also, it allows the transitional spaces in-between to be more dynamically considered.³

It is the spaces of volatility - those interstices of key transformation - that this chapter seizes upon in its consideration of the long decade of the 1960s in India. Broadly speaking, my analysis specifically addresses the discursive formations informing contemporary artistic practice as they emerged from 1960 and 1973. In considering the archive and the role that certain institutions and individuals played at a more micro-level, my analysis investigates how the nomenclature of the ‘modern’ shifted toward one of ‘modernity,’ and ultimately what was at stake in this transformation. Informed by my own encounter with the archive and how clusters of

³ Anne McClintock, “Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term Post-colonialism,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 292.

archival material transform over time into a stable monument of the past, my interest in this moment stems from my own questions around the construction of contemporary art history. The hegemony of historiography and the desire to present a seamless progression from the past to the present reconfigures the multiplicity of statements or the circulation of ideas into static and causal events. In light of this, it is not my intent to treat discourse as a series of inert and stable documents, which once brought to the fore will render history transparent and ultimately readable; but rather, in keeping with Foucault, I treat the archive as an unstable construct which has at its heart a density of discursive practices. I am particularly interested in the dynamism of their emergence, the preconditions of their assertions, and the specificities of their occurrence. In looking to the gaps in the discourse, alongside the points of conflict or conciliation, I raise larger questions about the politics of both textual and visual representation, and their productive or prohibitive possibilities.

Yet the archive is not merely a conceptual construct, it is also a real site, a place in which materials are collated, categorized (and if you are lucky) catalogued. I returned to the archives of the Fine Arts Faculty of Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda in the fall of 2003 to complete the second stage of my dissertation research. Battling against the heat of day, the consistent power outages and the seeming disarray of the material, I soon grew disheartened. Convinced that I was in a blind alley, my spirits lifted somewhat once I laid hands on the *Fine Arts College Alumni Get-Together Souvenir*, a small saddle-stitched volume published in 1971. Pamphlet in hand, I approached Ravi-Bhai, the curator, and asked if there were more documents from this

period lurking in some dark recess of the archive.⁴ He smiled, said nothing and left the room. I was perplexed. Was his departure a silent gesture indicating that there were no other such documents? Did he not understand what I was asking? Or was it simply teatime? Minutes passed. Ravi-Bhai did not return. Sensing that this was an indication of the impossibility of my query, I began to gather my things to leave. His reappearance with a stack of documents no doubt unearthed from some shadowy backroom arrested my move. Smiling, he placed a hefty assortment of primary material in front me and within it I found many documents relating specifically to arguments with the western paradigms of artistic practice published under the auspices of the Baroda faculty during the 1960s and early 1970s. These documents included a number of critical essays by K. G. Subramanyan published between 1959 and 1972 alongside a series of articles published by Geeta Kapur over a three-year span (1971-73) in *Vrishchik*, a “little magazine” on contemporary art published under the auspices of the school.⁵ This cluster of primary material suggested that over the long decade of the 1960s a series of complex negotiations precipitated the development of certain rhetorical devices that enabled contemporary Indian artists to come forward as distinct protagonists of modernity. The textual eruptions of Subramanyan and Kapur, staged primarily from within the institutional boundaries of the Baroda school, were dynamic and represented both dialectical and polemical strategies for resolving the issues vexing contemporary art.

⁴ My sincerest thanks to Ravi Kadam for all his help while I worked in the archives at the Fine Arts Faculty of Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda. I also extend thanks to Dr. Shivaji Panikkar, Head of the Department of Art History and Aesthetics for granting me unlimited access to the archive.

⁵ *Vrishchik* was founded in 1969 by Bhupen Khakhar and Gulammohammed Sheikh.

Beyond the confines of Baroda, Delhi-based artist Jagdish Swaminathan also emerged at this time and his writing, when juxtaposed against that of Kapur and Subramanyan, stands as a decisive yet rarely examined tertiary discourse. Swaminathan's position as an untrained artist divorced from the pedagogical influences of artistic institutions set him in a unique position to narrate a history from the outside.⁶ Embracing an unyielding and unrepentant stance, Swaminathan rejected not only the pull of history but also the deployment of an Indian identity as the trump card of contemporary art. His critical essays, appearing in the pages of the Marxist journal *Link* and his own short-lived *Contra 66*, diverge from those of Subramanyan and Kapur at key junctures to actively pose serious questions about the status of contemporary art during the pivotal decade of the 1960s. Perhaps like no other cluster of writers this triad of individuals articulated the tensions and transitions between the postcolony as an overarching stabilized rubric and the more active assertions of a postcolonial identity.

This 'small history' begins with the work of Subramanyan and overlaps with Swaminathan's engagements, then moves on to Kapur who stands somewhat apart. Trained as an art historian and firmly rooted in a younger generation, Kapur's engagements of the early 1970s directly impacted later developments in contemporary art. That said, Kapur's critical assertions are not given the same weight as Subramanyan's and Swaminathan's in this chapter. Although each of these individuals negotiated with notions of a paradigmatic modernism and the place of the Indian artist within it, their engagements bear the mark of historical time. This chapter relies heavily

⁶ Here I borrow the notion of tertiary discourse from Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 52.

upon primary material; however, my engagement with these documents is strategic. My concern rests in how the registered opinions of these three individuals and how their dynamic and productive negotiations have taken on a certain opacity within the historical record. By examining their works and considering the archive, it is not my intent to recreate a seamless narrative, but rather to highlight the points of convergence and divergence in a period that was striated rather than homogenous. In considering the archive and the set of relations, which forms its undercarriage, it is critical to insert those individuals, or rather those moments of interruption that have to date resisted easy placement within the annals of accepted history.

Documenting Encounters: The Fine Arts College Get-Together Souvenir

Years ago, when I was a student, I heard Nandalal Babu [Bose] say that the artist's predicament is similar to that of the blind man clapping his hands to fix his position amongst things on the basis of echoes....⁷

Before beginning with my analysis of the individuals I introduced in my preamble, I would like to briefly discuss the *Fine Arts College Alumni Get-Together Souvenir*. Although its publication date is 1971 and thus sits close to the end of the period under discussion in this chapter, it articulates the pressing issues faced by artists throughout the sixties unlike any other document I found during my stay in Baroda. The theoretical frames of contemporary art were vexed by a series of lingering aesthetic issues: the legacy of the Bengal School, the deployment of 'traditional' or 'folk' motifs and the growing trend toward appropriating western visual idioms undermined the

⁷ K. G. Subramanyan, "The Struggle for Image in Contemporary Indian Art," *Fine Arts College Alumni Get-Together Souvenir, 1971* (Baroda: Maharaja Sayajirao University, 1971): np.

advancement of an unencumbered contemporary aesthetic. It was against this backdrop that the search for a historically and culturally grounded artistic expression took on a particular urgency.

The initial pages of the brochure celebrate the accomplishments of the Fine Arts Faculty in Baroda since its inception in 1949, highlighting its strident efforts to overturn public indifference to contemporary art and to commemorate its path breaking activities to rectify governmental neglect of the arts. As the first artistic institution in independent India to offer studio courses, theoretical and art historical instruction its achievements warranted celebration. Buttressing its significant and noteworthy undertakings, the pamphlet listed the venerated artists and art historians associated with the school over its past two decades. As I sat pouring over the names, I realized that even by today's standards the list stands as a formidable who's who of contemporary art in India. Artists such as M. F. Husain, Ramkinker Baij and Somnath Hore, and art historians like Herman Goetz, B.N. Goswamy and Kapila Vatsyayan found placement within the register and served to further endorse the Baroda school's currency as an institution of considerable import.

Two essays by Shankho Chaudhuri and K. G. Subramanyan caught my attention as I read through the pamphlet.⁸ Both men were pioneers of the Baroda school: Chaudhuri served as the Head of the Sculpture Department and Dean of the Fine Arts Faculty (1966-1970) and K.G. Subramanyan was the Head of the Painting Department

⁸ As far as I can ascertain Chaudhuri's essay was written specifically for the publication; however, Subramanyan's was originally a paper given at the seminar, "The Struggle for Image in Contemporary Art," (Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1969).

and Dean of the Fine Arts Faculty at the time of the brochure's publication.⁹ Chaudhuri was one of the key players in the establishment of the school in 1949 and like Subramanyan he had trained at Santiniketan. Chaudhuri and Subramanyan raised serious questions about how contemporary art was to find placement within a transnational artistic milieu. The rise of art critics extraordinaire, the gallery system and the ubiquity of abstraction as the pristine expression of avant-gardism in the postwar era had no foundational precepts when transposed into India. These trends, without a doubt, were firmly rooted in the developmental paradigm of western art history and sat as the distinct outcome of social, political and artistic changes occurring beyond, rather than within, the subcontinent.

Chaudhuri's and Subramanyan's provocative essays criticized international trends and tested their validity within a South Asian milieu. Chaudhuri's "Technology in Art" raised tangible concerns about the international artistic movements showcased in the controversial *Documenta IV* (1968) held in Kassel, Germany.¹⁰ "Unity in Kinship" was the theme of the *Documenta* and the choice of materials of the 147 artists represented ranged from industrial materials to plastic and electronic media. Arnold Bode, the organizer of the exhibition, suggests, ". . .the artist is no longer engaged in a dialogue with the past. He works directly in and for the contemporary scene, occupied in creating signals of tomorrow."¹¹ If the artists included in the 1968 *Documenta* were

⁹ For more on the roles that these individuals played in the establishment of the Baroda school, see Gulammohammed Sheikh, "The Backdrop," in *Contemporary Art in Baroda*, ed. Gulammohammed Sheikh (Delhi: Tulika, 1997), 55-60.

¹⁰ Sanko Chaudhuri, "Technology in Art," *Fine Arts College Alumni Get-Together Souvenir, 1971* (Baroda: Maharaja Sayajirao University, 1971): np.

¹¹ "Signals of Tomorrow," *Time* (July 12, 1968), <http://time-proxy.yaga.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,712167,00.html>.

no longer concerned with dialoguing with the past it is no wonder that Chaudhuri questions the prevailing visual idioms found in Pop Art, Environmental Art and Minimalism. The visual markers of India's past were ubiquitous within the landscape; her history was manifest not only in the temples, tombs, and monuments of old, but also within the contemporary moment in the form of indigenous craft practices. To bypass the importance of these would be to embrace historical paradox. However, instead of lamenting the cultural or historical disjuncture between India and the west, Chaudhuri questions internationalism's efficacy, casting them as expressions of an obscure phenomenological relationship between object and audience. This gestalt, according to Chaudhuri, is both perilous and problematic:

Art now is no more a human reaction of an individual to his surroundings and his commentary on life. With the internationalization of art the interest among the powers that be seems to centre around one phenomenon which has become a veritable obsession. How far have an artist's concepts advanced over the previous ones or the previous generations? How far has it broken new vistas? This seems to be the only yardstick of achievement.¹²

The dominance of reified abstract expressions, for Chaudhuri, is akin to the monopoly over sacred texts enjoyed by the Brahmin in the past. Chaudhuri asserts that international aesthetic trends do not create an artistic Esperanto, but rather prohibit understanding through the deployment of a specialized lexicon predicated on narrow historical and cultural antecedents.¹³ However, for Chaudhuri there was a subversive opportunity within this myopic construction. The lacuna that existed between the

¹² Chaudhuri, "Technology," np.

¹³ Further to this, Chaudhuri also questions the umbilical relationship between the artist and the gallery system in the west. "[The] International market has given rise to institutional purchase; and you have to get your passport from a gallery and have a critic as your patron saint in order to make the grade." Ibid., np.

international and India's own contemporary artistic expressions was not a burden, but rather a boon, ". . . belonging to an underdeveloped country is a positive boon, thanks to the art scholarships offered by the affluent nations, local Prometheuses are not lacking, who steal the fire from distant places and spread the sparks around."¹⁴

The productive possibilities of cultural difference also resonate in Subramanyan's article, "The Struggle for Image in Contemporary Art." He echoes Chaudhuri's reservations about international trends, their closed system of knowledge and the efficacy of employing external visual idioms within the subcontinent. Subramanyan was well aware of the competitive nature of the international art world, the intense pressure for artists to always surpass the past. He states:

Now that the old regional barriers have been crashed and the world shrunk into a global village, this competition is brisker and giddier; in the world's greatest art fairs the main problem of today's artist is to keep shouting till he gets a hearing. His next problem is to put his neighbour into the shadow by eye-catching or ear-catching or mind massaging gimmick. It also helps to shoot a thundering manifesto, or weave verbal cats-cradles with sympathetic interlocutors, or commission professionals to erect glittering verbal arcades to his work.¹⁵

Sensitive to the asymmetrical relationship between the Indian artist and his international peers, Subramanyan acknowledges the complexities of India's own contemporary moment. Stealing the fire from western gods was not sufficient for Subramanyan as it positioned the genesis of modernism beyond, rather than within, the

¹⁴ Ibid., np. Between 1960 and 1970 at least fifteen foreign scholarships were given to Indian artists and art historians. Many members of the Baroda faculty were recipients of prestigious awards: for example, Art historian Ratan Parimoo studied at the Courtauld Institute on a Commonwealth Scholarship in 1960. The following year painter Jyoti Bhatt received an Italian Government Scholarship to study at the Academi di Belle in Naples and a Fulbright in 1964. In 1963, Gulammohammed Sheikh received a Commonwealth that enabled him to study at the Royal College of Art.

¹⁵ Subramanyan, "The Struggle," np.

country. Attention to one's own environment and the development of one's own theoretical frames for artistic practice were pivotal and emphasized in his statement:

The artist's struggle for image is initially this struggle for identity amongst things, this struggle to get, if we may say so, a cosmographic foothold, to get a synoptic vision of himself in his experimental environment. This gives him meaning and identity; this gives him the right to language, and engenders a valid image.¹⁶

The quest for unencumbered artistic expression, the search for meaning, and the desire to engender a valid image carried real weight within the shifting aesthetic terrain of India during the long decade of the 1960s. The question of historical contingencies and cultural antecedents, coupled with India's status as a postcolony meant that its artists had a stake in differentiating their artistic practice from a monolithic model of western modernism. The international rise of Abstraction, Pop Art and Minimalism were firmly linked to historical and social shifts occurring outside of the subcontinent; to blindly appropriate these dominant visual idioms was to bear the inevitable distinction of being derivative. Conversely, if one ignored the international shifts in artistic practice, then one ran the risk of enduring damning charges of naiveté and provincialism. What alternatives were available to the Indian artist? In evoking Nandalal Bose's anecdote of the blind man clapping, Subramanyan suggests that the artist should develop an extrasensory awareness of his position. The sound, as it reverberates back, delineates a space of selfhood that affirms one's cultural location and unique identity.

¹⁶Ibid., np.

Critical Mass: K.G. Subramanyan and the Burden of History

What makes a work of art irresistible is, I believe, this welling up of sensibilities from a specific environment, carrying the salt of the soil as it were. While I consider the advocacy of such thought-less revivalism by the traditionalists absurd, I consider the talk of an ‘international idiom’ of a counter group equally meaningless.¹⁷

Born in 1924 in Kerala, Subramanyan belongs to a generation of artists directly impacted by the shifting political climate of India during the early twentieth century. In 1942, a year after M. K. Gandhi launched his famous Quit India campaign calling for “the British and the Indians to be reconciled to complete separation from each other,” Subramanyan joined the Presidency College in Madras (now Chennai) to study Economics.¹⁸ Inspired by Gandhi’s agitation for *swaraj* (self rule), Subramanyan participated in a number of political protests that eventually landed him in prison for a six-month term. Subramanyan’s new record as a political dissident did not sit well with his family. His predicament urged his second brother to write a letter to Nandalal Bose, the director of the newly established art school Kala Bhavan at Santiniketan, seeking Subramanyan’s admission to the institution.¹⁹ In 1944 with his enrolment secured, Subramanyan moved to the rural environs of Bengal and began his formal training as an artist.²⁰

The concern for India’s own artistic heritage expressed by Subramanyan’s teachers, especially Nandalal Bose, Benode Behari Mukherjee and Ramkinker Baij, no

¹⁷ K.G. Subramanyan, “The Artist on Art,” *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 3 (June 1965): 14.

¹⁸ Stanley Wolpert, *A New History Of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 335.

¹⁹ R. Siva Kumar, *K.G. Subramanyan: A Retrospective* (New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art, 2003), 15.

²⁰ For more on the history of Santiniketan, see *Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism* (New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art, 1997).

doubt influenced the young artist. When he arrived at Kala Bhavan its pedagogical stance was breaking away from the nationalist agenda of the larger educational complex at Santiniketan. Teaching and learning stressed the importance of being aware of the past, but cautioned against limited expressions: students were expected to learn from their environment and the creative players who existed beyond the confines of higher education. During the early 1940s, Bose invited craftspeople to the school to demonstrate their processes and techniques – a situation in which the students and faculty alike would apprentice themselves to these masters of traditional arts. Close in age to Mukherjee and Baij, Subramanyan's relationship with them stressed the importance of collective work and developed their respective concern for indigenous forms of knowledge. The strong interplay between indigenous art practices, community and the idea of collaborative works left its mark upon Subramanyan and became not only the foundational precepts of his own approach to artistic production, but also found consistent theoretical placement within his early writings on the state of contemporary art.

After Santiniketan, Subramanyan accepted a post as lecturer in the Painting Department at Baroda. Although he was intermittently present on the faculty between 1951 and 1959, it was not until the completion of a one-year British Council Scholarship at the Slade in London (1955) and a brief tenure as the Deputy Director of Design of the All India Handloom Board (1959-61) that he assumed a permanent

position at the school.²¹ Familiar with the writings of Karl Marx and art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, and equally sympathetic to the ideological underpinnings of Gandhi's plea for the self-production of *khadi* (homespun cotton) during the *Swadeshi* movement, Subramanyan privileged artisan practices.²² Even before he was a full-time faculty member at Baroda, Subramanyan's sway over the Fine Arts Faculty was significant. His approaches to art making and his lectures radically refocused the curriculum.²³

Aware that India's move toward industrial modernization cast into question a reliance on old forms of inspiration - the village, the folk, and the mythic - as a resource for aesthetic engagement, Subramanyan also questioned the efficacy of employing distant motifs within an Indian environment.²⁴ If Santiniketan's pedagogy upheld the fundamental principle that artistic practice should not bifurcate the traditional and the

²¹ The All India Handloom Board was implemented under Nehru's First Five Year Plan and developed by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya in 1952. For an overview of the history see Kamala Ramakrishnan, "An Umbrella for Craftsmen," *The Hindu* (21 March 1999), <http://www.hinduonnet.com/fo9903/99030320.htm>.

²² See for example, K.G. Subramanyan, "The Significance of Coomaraswamy's Ideas in our Times," in *Paroksa: Coomaraswamy Centenary Seminar Papers*, ed. Gulammohammed Sheikh and Kapila Vatsyayan (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1984), 15-19.

²³ In 1961, Subramanyan and fellow Santiniketan alumnus Shankho Chaudhuri urged the Fine Arts Faculty at Baroda to host Fine Arts Fairs designed to bring the larger community in contact with the arts. Akin to the *melas* or art fairs held during the halcyon days of Santiniketan, the campus was opened to the public and a series of performances and auctions of student work were held to raise funds. These annual fairs were key events for the school, expressing a concern for local forms of cultural, and artistic expressions are distinctly evinced by Subramanyan's theoretical engagements, his artistic practice and his pedagogical approaches to art making. For more on the art fairs at the Baroda School see, Nilima Sheikh, "A Post-Independence Initiative in Art," in *Contemporary Art in Baroda*, ed. Gulammohammed Sheikh (New Delhi: Tulika, 1997), 101-106.

²⁴ Writing in the inaugural issue of *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, Herman Goetz, the former curator of the Baroda Museum, observes,

The Bengal masters created an artificial milieu and where they depicted village life they approached reality to some degree. But they romanticized it likewise painting a world of sweetness, song, love and devotion, but suppressing all its less pleasant aspects, all its bitter struggle for survival except where this could be exploited for sentimental appeal

"The Great Crisis, From Traditional to Modern Indian Art," *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 1 (1961): 14.

modern into mutually exclusive conceptual frameworks, then the Baroda school's appropriation of western motifs was equally problematic for Subramanyan. The epistemological limits of stylistic appropriation and its underlying paradoxes were not merely theoretical concerns for Subramanyan and his artistic experimentations of the early 1950s mark his own visual process through these issues. His first experiments with the medium of oil, done in the early 1950s, not only echo Picasso's work of the 1920s and 1930s in which the figure and the ground are set in endless motion, but also Henri Matisse's interplay between positive and negative spaces in his playful paper cut-outs of the 1940s. Subramanyan's *Woman with Lamp II*, 1951 illustrates a concern for line, form and the dynamic interplay between positive and negative space (fig. 3). The image illustrates a nude woman sitting on a chair with a hurricane lamp in her lap. The flat areas of colour offset by hard-edged decorative forms define the spatial arrangement yet they do not necessarily evoke a scene of Indian reality. The formal play of spatial relationships carries through in his *Mother and Child*, 1953 in which the picture plane is broken up by hard, definitive lines that threaten the physical cohesion of the two figures (fig. 4). Hard diagonals evoke a sense of tension within the image and like his *Mother and Child* Subramanyan reframes the hard perpendicular edges of the painting through a series of off centred painted frames.

While these two images may represent a moment of dynamic visual experimentation with formal structuring principles, Subramanyan soon abandoned these generalized painterly renditions of women, and by the mid 1950s he turned his eye toward more localized images of individuals encountered daily on the streets. Signaling a shift in medium (from oil to linocut) *Two Women*, 1955 and *Man with a Fruit Cart*,

1956 represent the social spaces of contemporary life (figs. 5, 6). *Two Women* illustrates a casual encounter between friends out and about for the day. Subramanyan captures their animated conversation by illustrating their gestures, and their clothing marks out a decidedly urban identity. Still playing upon the decorative possibilities of overlaid colour and pattern, Subramanyan carefully invests the image with a certain local resonance. The focus upon the everyday aspects of life carries through in his *Man with a Fruit Cart*, a ubiquitous character found within the urban environment. Once again, Subramanyan uses the play of successive cuts and prints taken from the linoleum to give form to the man who earns his daily bread through the selling of fresh fruit. The social transparency and the focus on the everyday mark a shift away from his more staid oil studies. Though Subramanyan maintains the muted palette of his earlier paintings, the hard cuts of the knife, so characteristic within the subtractive process of linocut evokes a new visual vocabulary invested with both energy and expression.

Perhaps the linocuts reflect Subramanyan's reconsideration of the politics of style, as at the time of their production he was in England studying under a British Council Fellowship at the Slade; however, back in Baroda the painting department still held fast to the influence of Cubism.²⁵ N. S. Bendre was the head of the painting department at this time and his stylistic engagements still upheld the pedagogical possibilities of synthesizing Indian and western styles.²⁶ Bendre's contemporaneous work stood visually apart from Subramanyan's. His *Festive Mood*, late 1950s, reveals a faceted portrait of three seated women (fig. 7). The theme of the painting could well

²⁵ R. Siva Kumar, *K.G. Subramanyan*, 29.

²⁶ Bendre trained at the Sir J. J. School of Art in Bombay, a colonial art school founded in 1857.

reference *Makar Sankranti*, a festival celebrated in January and marked by the flying of kites. The central figure holds a yellow kite in her lap while those on either side of her prepare the spindles of string. Like much of Bendre's work during the fifties, the subject is decidedly Indian in origin; however, the appropriation of Cubism may have compromised its efficacy.²⁷ Bendre's visual experiments with western visual idioms such as Cubism illustrate a concern for the play of light and his undulating planes of colour. *The Thorn* reveals a synthesis between the well-rehearsed Indian motif of the village and a Cubist style (fig. 8). Though Bendre was criticized for his "poetization of the proletariat," when juxtaposing his works against that of Subramanyan what becomes evident is that mere appropriation without theoretical grounding led Indian art into the dangerous domain of the decorative.²⁸ Clearly, within this context, the decorative was a negative appellation. Although the decorative has played a fundamental role in artistic expressions of the subcontinent, from the vegetal designs on temples to the marginalia of miniatures, within the context of contemporary practice its visual presence was problematic. The only way to reclaim the validity of the decorative as a critically minded contemporary motif was to disengage it from the stranglehold of its unilateral western trajectory. As Subramanyan suggests:

²⁷ Looking back at the prevalence of Cubism with the Baroda school during the 1950s Nilima Sheikh states:

The influences of Cubism have been conceptual, linguistic, or of style. Although these are naturally overlapping categories, it may be useful to distinguish these influences in the twice removed context of Baroda in the fifties. Outside the cause-and-effect currents of mainstream modernism, ruminant choices could be selective, taking on, without engaging in an incumbent concept or ideology, one stylistic facet or the other. If this appears to be a spurious use of style, it could be argued that the terms of authenticity in the Indian context are open-ended.

"A Post-Independence Initiative in Art," 76.

²⁸ Jaya Appasamy, "Contemporary Indian Art – 1950," *Marg* XXI (December 1967): 9.

Visual art at its simplest is uniquely itself concerned solely with visual experiences or intuition, whatever you call them, but when it chooses to convey meaning, symbolize ideas, undertake a narrative, it shares a certain quality with literature. Much great art always meant something as well as was something, depicted themes, told stories.²⁹

Subramanyan addressed issues of the decorative and its importance to Indian artistic practice in his essay, "Art and the Representation of Nature." Written at a moment when the decorative was still aligned with expressions of kitsch, Subramanyan successfully challenged one of the most important artistic assumptions governing artistic practice in the postwar years, inverting Clement Greenberg's position in his seminal 1939 article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."³⁰ Greenberg, perhaps the most prolific theoretician of the American avant-garde, positioned abstraction as the historical and material outcome of the social change in postwar era.³¹ Its antithesis was decorative engagements found particularly within the lowbrow domains of kitsch. Greenberg positions kitsch in opposition to high culture; its creation predicated on a need to fill consumer driven desires for decorative items within the domestic domains of the urbanized proletariat and petty bourgeois. Kitsch, in Greenberg's conception, is reproduced from models of the past and its popular currency relies upon the recuperation of a long since dead folk culture. By the mid twentieth century, folk based art in the west was retrograde; its visual language did not reflect modern cultural circumstances. Instead of creating new objects, kitsch relied upon the recuperation and

²⁹ K. G. Subramanyan, "Art and Representation of Nature," *Journal of the Fine Arts College, Baroda* (April 1959): 6.

³⁰ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* (1939).

³¹ Edward Lucie Smith, "An Interview with Clement Greenberg," *Studio International* 175 (January 1968): 5.

deployment of a nostalgic idiom. Greenberg's antithetical positioning of the highbrow avant-garde in opposition to the lowbrow kitsch was based on a European model of industrial capitalism in which folk traditions had long since been annihilated by industrialization.

Within India, one can see how Greenberg's designation of kitsch posed conceptual problems - the village, the artisan and the folk artists were alive and well. To be sure, India did not possess the same level of urban development that the United States had witnessed in the postwar years, and the classifications of kitsch were paradoxical when applied to the Indian subcontinent. India's history stood distinctly apart from the cultural, social and political shifts of the west and to embrace abstraction as a viable stylistic rubric was not only embedded in historical paradox but also to employ such a visual language inevitably positioned contemporary art across the twin perils of the derivative and the provincial. Subramanyan's skepticism about the appropriation of international trends, resides in his observation "... abstract art in India has lost its connection with the natural and indexical union with reality and has been reduced to the decorative."³² Suggesting that the abstract is merely decorative, Subramanyan aligns it with kitsch, overturning Greenberg's assumptions. In doing so Subramanyan creates a space for artistic practice that attends to India's processes of modernization and its own cultural heritage.

Although by the late 1950s, abstraction had made some impact on contemporary art in India, within his essay Subramanyan fully articulates the impossibility of synthesizing Indian and international artistic expressions, but in doing so he works

³² Subramanyan, "Art and Representation of Nature," 5.

through rather than *around* the ubiquitous theories of Greenberg. Greenberg argues that the material reality of life is experienced through the abstract painted surface; yet, Subramanyan challenges this notion by suggesting that abstraction is based upon nature. The material of life within Greenberg's configuration becomes, for Subramanyan, the materiality of environment. Artistic environmental encounters are imbedded in the tandem aesthetic forces of the decorative and the expressive:

An artist [sic] interests in nature is always more than a casual appraisal, it is also analysis and a recreation, imitation of forms caught in his vision being essential to it. Similarly, all artists are sensitive to the qualities of material and the dictates on the shaping of a work of art to a greater or lesser degree. So that one might say these two aspects co-exist in a work in varying proportions.³³

By strategically reversing the flow of ideas, Subramanyan actively endorsed a dialogic exchange between the west and India but the rules of the engagement have shifted considerably. Significantly, this early article inverts epistemic western operating assumptions so predominant in the 1960s to position Indian cultural experience as the *sui generis* of artistic expression. The persistence of the indexical was vital to Subramanyan's formulation as it opened a differential stance against the hegemony of western abstraction with bold finesse. While Subramanyan stood thousands of miles away from America, he held true to the words of Bose and listened to the reverberations of his own hands clapping. By presenting the limitations of western operating assumptions put forth by Greenberg in particular, Subramanyan set a theoretical precedent that continued to inform the discursive engagements of the 1960s and early 1970s.

³³ *Ibid.*, 5.

Subramanyan's notion of the dynamic interplay between the decorative and the abstract emerged most completely in his *King of the Dark Chamber*, 1963 (fig. 9). This large terracotta mural based on Rabindranath Tagore's play *Raja* (1910) was composed of 13,000 discrete tiles. Mounted on the façade of the Ravindrajaya, a theatre built in Lucknow to mark the centenary of Tagore's birth, the mural articulated Subramanyan's concern for the idioms of traditional craft practices by virtue of its terracotta medium. However, there was more to it than that. *King of the Dark Chamber* dovetailed with the moral of Tagore's play, an allegorical drama about blind ambition and overweening egoism, to downplay the role of the artist as lone genius while celebrating the productive aspects of collective projects. The production of this large mural publicly revived the productive relationship between artisan and artist by having Gyarsilal Varma, a traditional artisan from Jaipur, collaborate with the artist on the project.³⁴

It was not revivalism that Subramanyan was interested in, but rather, how the techniques and formal languages of the craftsperson existing beyond urban environs could add a greater dimension to contemporary art practice. Why should the contemporary artist look to the international when within the subcontinent there was a wealth of raw materials from which to draw? Subramanyan anticipated a debate that fully emerged within the discourse after India held its *First Triennial of International Art* in 1968. Sponsored by Lalit Kala Akademi, the exhibition spanned two galleries,

³⁴ Sheikh, "Post-Independent," 128.

Rabindra Bhavan and Jaipur House and included 700 works from 32 countries.³⁵ In his review of the exhibition, art critic Charles Fabri praised the Indian entries as “the finest in the entire show.”³⁶ Yet despite Fabri’s laudatory remark, Mulk Raj Anand commented in the preface to the Special Triennale Edition of *Lalit Kala Contemporary* that, “There has been a breakdown of communication between the artist and the general public.”³⁷ He pinned this schism on the rise of abstraction and the destruction of the figure in contemporary art; however, not all was lost. Anand cast the experimental artist as one who continues despite the portents of potential misunderstanding.³⁸ In calling for a reconfiguration of the reception rather than representation of contemporary art, Anand posited a new identity for the Indian artist as a “unitary man.” This designation positioned the artist as a member of the “creative intelligentsia of our time.”³⁹ He observed:

[T]he unitary man is a supra-national in politics and has mentally abolished the frontiers of power-states, though he is rooted in his sense of locality and racial unconsciousness and is not a neutral, faceless universalist.

³⁵ The participating countries were as follows: Australia, Britain, Burma, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Chile, Cyprus, Czechoslovakia, France, German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Iraq, Japan, Malaysia, United States, USSR, Nepal, Netherlands, Philippines, Poland, Republic of Vietnam, Spain, Switzerland, United Arab Republic, Yugoslavia, Federal Republic of Germany, Ireland, Kuwait and Mexico. Charles Fabri, “First Triennale – India, 1968,” *Roopa-Lekha XXXVIII* (1969): 186-194.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 186.

³⁷ “The Artist as Hero,” *Lalit Kala Contemporary* Special Triennale Number (September 1967-April 1968), 1. Anand, whose father was a traditional coppersmith, is known primarily as a novelist. Between 1940 and 1970, he played a key role as an advocate of Indian culture. In 1946 in Bombay he founded the journal *MARG* (Modern Architectural Research Group), which is still published today as *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts*. See Kavita Singh, “Mulk Raj Anand: A Visionary Aesthete,” in *2000 Reflections on the Arts in India*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Mumbai: Marg, 2000), 17-25.

³⁸ In a previous issue of *Lalit Kala Contemporary* Jaya Appasamy notes: “Many people are confused and puzzled by the art of modern painters. They would like to put the clock back to an art with which they are familiar. In life they accept new inventions and new ideas with eagerness, but in art they recognize only the art of the past. This is a very natural state since new art cannot help breaking new ground. We have to train ourselves to new ways of seeing.” “Editorial Note,” *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 3 (June 1965): 3.

³⁹ Anand, “Hero,” 2.

He forces the very challenge of whether we shall have more or less technology. And he seeks to adjust himself to his environment, as far as he can, or he rejects the environment where he cannot absorb it, or rejects-accepts parts of the environment, with a view to remolding it in the interests of survival on the human plane.⁴⁰

If Krishen Khanna's *Window into Winter*, 1965 (included as one of the Indian entries in the Triennale) represented a problematic turn for some by virtue of its embrace of an abstract visual language and its formal play of paint upon the surface, then for Anand it evoked a new beginning (fig. 10). He asked: "what is the role of art in our machine civilization, against its role in the previous pastoral and agrarian and handicraft cultures?"⁴¹ Anand cast the unitary man as both the "subject and the object of modernity," a free agent who transcends the fetters of history. History, however, for Subramanyan, was a key issue that could not easily be dismissed if one were to develop viable critical frames for artistic practice. An artist needed to be aware of the fountainhead of the past, lest they end up landing in a house of mirrors in which empty mimicry was unavoidable.

A rather pressing need that most of these artists felt for preserving their national identity in their work (now overwhelmed by new Western conceptions) took them off on the wrong scent; instead of getting to study the traditions in their functional completeness and identify their presentational expedients, they went off after the external motifs, ornaments and stylistic mannerism which they could extract and insert into their work to contrive such an identity; they did not have the patience to consider what the antecedent of these stylistic traits were,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁴¹ Ibid., 2.

or whether their own ideas and purposes, accommodated their use.⁴²

What was needed at this moment was not a reconfiguration of the artist, but rather a re-conceptualization of artistic practice. Rather than stepping outside of dominant rubrics, Subramanyan used them to effectively provincialize the west.⁴³ In inverting Greenberg's position on indigenous or folk traditions, Subramanyan's discursive strategy hinted at the importance of taking on western modernism. The only way to disrupt its hegemonic stance was to meet it head on. Dipesh Chakravarty argues that the project of provincializing Europe cannot employ cultural relativism as a subversive trump card.⁴⁴ In light of this, one can see how Anand positioned the artist as an uncontested hero of Indian modernity—a location that in 1967 was still deeply wedded to the imaginary referents of the orient and the occident.⁴⁵ Conversely, Subramanyan's position takes heed of the need to theorize and he successfully attends to the complications of his own historical and artistic circumstance. The importance of cultural history so central to Subramanyan's formulation was met with some suspicion by Jadish Swaminathan. Though both Subramanyan and Swaminathan were concerned with the aesthetic status of contemporary art, their theoretical paths bifurcated at key moments. Where Subramanyan sought answers, Swaminathan posed questions.

⁴² "Folk Art and the Modern Artist in India," *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 10 (1970): 17.

⁴³ "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" in *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 264.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁴⁵ Here I draw on Chakravarty's identification of Europe and India as hyper-real and reified terms embedded in the structural logic of dominance and subordination. *Ibid.*, 264.

Swaminathan: Polemics and Paradoxes

Yet there remains a concept of India –as what?
 Something more than the urban middle class, the
 politicians, the industrialists, the separate villages.
 Neither this nor that, we are so often told is the “real”
 India. And how well one begins to understand why this
 word is used!⁴⁶

Mystic. Poet. Painter. Ideologue. Antagonist. Jagdish Swaminathan was born in 1928 and though not formally tutored as an artist he emerged on the contemporary art scene in the 1950s and continued to be a formidable source of opposition to dominant artistic trends until his death in 1994. Like Subramanyan, the India Swaminathan knew as a young man was one that was in a state of political and social flux. His career began as a political activist; however, unlike his peer Subramanyan, he was a committed Communist party worker. For most of his career Swaminathan stood outside the institutional structures of art, and it was not until 1958 when he won a scholarship to study printmaking at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw that he assumed the designation of professional artist.⁴⁷ As a man who mystified artistic practice at a moment when others, such as Subramanyan, sought to clearly delineate both the problematic incursions of western paradigms and the historical legacy of India’s own art history, Swaminathan stands as an enigma. It is India’s position of “neither here nor there,” so aptly observed by Indo-Trinidadian novelist V.S. Naipaul in 1962 when he

⁴⁶ V.S. Naipaul, “In the Middle of the Journey,” *The Writer and the World*, ed., Pankaj Mishra (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 7.

⁴⁷ The actual circumstances around Swaminathan’s acceptance to the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw are unrecorded. He did not stay in Warsaw for the duration of his three-year scholarship, but returned to India after a few months stating that he missed his wife and children. It was in Warsaw that he was given the name “cygan” because of his black hair. Little has been written about this moment in Swaminathan’s life, but he does mention it briefly in his, “The Cygan: An Autobiographical Note,” *Lalit Kala Contemporary* (March 1995): 6-13.

journeyed to the subcontinent for the first time from his native Trinidad, that finds equal resonance within Swaminathan's own contemporaneous writing. It is this paradoxical and extra-marginal position that the two men have in common. Both were shaded by the umbrella of colonialism - Naipaul an Indian, twice removed from his own cultural heritage occupies a position in which his identity is fluid and at times indeterminable; whereas, Swaminathan's position of exile, though equally ambivalent, was a manifestation of choice rather than emigrational circumstance.

Swaminathan's contribution to the discursive frames of contemporary art in the 1960s represents another critical register in India's progress toward transcending the limits of the postcolony. However, as one who stood outside institutional structures of art, Swaminathan represents a divergent view. Swaminathan explored the far reaches of the postcolony, plumbed its depths, to critically activate a distinct space of possibility for the progress toward a more distinctly postcolonial position. He consistently maintained that art should speak for itself; it knew no historical or stylistic bounds. It need not look to the past or the present for legitimacy. Swaminathan challenged the synecdochial uses of culture for authenticity, and the confrontational front he constructed located him in a position that resists easy placement within the larger discursive frames of the 1960s. For Swaminathan the part could not be used to speak of the whole, and most of his artistic life centred on questioning what it meant to be a contemporary artist at the level of both ideology and practice. Mining the past for present day experiments or simply miming the West was anathema to Swaminathan. Both were blind alleys; to venture down them in the search of legitimate artistic platforms would be futile.

It was Swaminathan's enigmatic stance that set him apart from many of his contemporaries. It is my contention that his "neither this nor that" position embraced the strategic use of ambivalence and his disavowal of historical trajectories made him matchless. Swaminathan's position of ambivalence cast him as an operative of what Homi Bhabha has identified as the "third space." Where Subramanyan actively sought out an inversion of the binary between the orient and the occident, the Western self and the Other-- Swaminathan activated the gap between the imagination and the reality of contemporary art to enunciate and delineate a "third Space" of praxis identified by Bhabha:

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People.⁴⁸

While perhaps in our present day Swaminathan's attitude would be celebrated rather than shunned, in the 1960s his position was perceived as tenuous at best. Looking back on Swaminathan's contributions, Geeta Kapur's 1978 monograph on the artist pointedly states:

[H]is thinking is polemical. This gives it effervescence, but also a rather haphazard structure. Polemics, moreover, encourage paradox and paradox is not dialectics.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Bhabha, *Location*, 37.

⁴⁹ "J. Swaminathan: Wings of a Metaphor," in *Contemporary Indian Artists* (Delhi: Vikas, 1978), 196. To date this is the only monograph on Swaminathan.

Swaminathan's full embrace of both the polemical and the paradoxical articulated a counter-site, yet what becomes interesting is how this position can be thought of as yet another productive strategy for bypassing the logistics of the postcolony. At a moment when many like Subramanyan sought to dismantle or invert the primacy of the west, Swaminathan was not even willing to concede its impact upon contemporary Indian art. He rejected the national past and the unifying force of culture, challenging the anxiety of influence that weighed down many of his peers. Within this context, Kapur's words do ring true – Swaminathan was polemical - however, perhaps not in the sense she anticipated. His thinking was not concerned with artistic or discursive dialectics and for him synthesis was simply not an option.

Swaminathan's established himself in the art world through his involvement with a Communist "little magazine" called *Link*, published in Delhi and founded by Aruna Asaf Ali and Jayaprakash Narayanan.⁵⁰ Without a doubt, Swaminathan's involvement with various Marxist organizations coloured his initial discursive engagements, lending them a reflective criticality and political nuance that no other contemporary writer of the moment possessed.⁵¹ Within the *Link* articles, he was openly critical of the lack of informed art criticism within the public domain. Claiming that newspaper reportage on exhibitions tended toward flowery praise or outright artistic illiteracy, Swaminathan's art criticism carried an unparalleled critical thrust.⁵² His review of the independent exhibition *Trends in Modern Indian Art*, 1959 articulated

⁵⁰ The *Link* articles were published posthumously in a special edition of *Lalit Kala Contemporary* devoted to Swaminathan. *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 40 (March 1995): 27-45.

⁵¹ In the early 1940s, he joined the Congress Socialist Party as the editor of its weekly Hindi publication, *Mazdoor Awaz (The Workers Voice)*.

⁵² For example, see his review of "Recent Shows," *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 40 (March 1995): 27-28.

his rather unforgiving position on the state of art in contemporary India.⁵³ The show was staged as a protest against the myopic representations of contemporary art sponsored by the government-run Lalit Kala Akademi. At that time, Lalit Kala Akademi suffered under the strains of conservatism, and *Trends in Modern Indian Art* functioned as a *Salon des Refusés* for the twenty artists rejected from the annual Lalit Kala exhibition.⁵⁴ The show was a significant gesture. It included a formidable roster of artists: V.S. Gaitonde, Shanti Dave, Akbar Padamsee, F.N. Souza, Krishen Khanna, N.S. Bendre, Jyoti Bhatt, Paritosh Sen, Biren De and Ram Kumar, and meant to be “an authentic statement of what modern Indian art is.” Swaminathan remained unconvinced.⁵⁵ Deeming the exhibition “wearisome” and devoid of vision, he observed, “[T]he modernism of most of the exhibitors seems to lie in their capacity to present a rehash of what modern Western art has created in the last half century.”⁵⁶ As an alternative to the visual quotes of the west so prominent in the exhibition, Swaminathan proposed that a painting should not rely upon visual antecedents in order to be understood. To encode visual representations with references extending beyond the picture plane compromised their efficacy. Swaminathan stated this clearly when he observed, “[A] painting is also not a hieroglyph, to be understood when the symbol is made known. It is rather a thing to be felt and seen, to be *experienced*.”⁵⁷ In stressing the experiential aspects of the encounter, Swaminathan shifted the focus away from

⁵³ “Trends in Modern Indian Art, 1959, Neither Here Nor There,” *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 40 (March 1995): 36-37.

⁵⁴ Lalit Kala Akademi at this time was still firmly rooted in the past trying to wrestle itself out of the legacy of the Bengal School.

⁵⁵ Swaminathan, “Trends in Modern Art,” 36.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

representation to response. The response is not categorically defined through external references, but rather is located specifically within the relationship between object and observer. It is within this indefinable space of the encounter advocated by Swaminathan that Bhabha's characterization of the Third Space of Enunciation emerges. This space, according to Bhabha, "destroys the mirror of representation, in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an open, expanding code."⁵⁸ But how did this translate into practice?

The experiential aspect of painting found full expression a number of years later in 1962 when Group 1890 formed in the small town of Bhavnagar, in the erstwhile state of Saurashtra (now Gujarat).⁵⁹ Its roster of individuals included Swaminathan at the helm, along with Jeram Patel, Eric Hubert Bowen, Himmat Shaw, Gulammohammed Sheikh, S.G. Nikam, Jyoti Bhatt, Balakrishna Patel, Ambadas, Rajesh Mehra, M. Reddeppa Naidu, Raghav Kaneria.⁶⁰ The collective agenda of Group 1890 turned away from the mandates of previous artistic initiatives. Historical antecedents, such as the Progressive Artists Group and the Bengal School, had been founded respectively on the basis of region and style, whereas Group 1890 was the first concerted effort to unite Indian artists from diverse geographical regions according to ideological kinship.⁶¹ The collective emphasis of the group was on experimentation, claiming such an initiative

⁵⁸ Bhabha, *Location*, 37.

⁵⁹ Their *nom de plume* was derived from the house number of Jayant and Jyoti Pandya, where they met.

⁶⁰ Jeram Patel and Gulam Mohammed Sheikh were already members of the Baroda Faculty; S.G. Nikam was an Art Designer at the Handloom Board and the others included in the exhibition were all recipients at one time or another of the National Lalit Kala Akademi Award. Himmat Shah, Jyoti Bhatt, Balakrishna Patel and Raghav Kaneria later took up posts at the Fine Arts Faculty in Baroda.

⁶¹ J. Swaminathan, "The Birth of a Movement," *Lalit Kala Contemporary* (March 1995): 29.

“would herald a new phase in modern art.”⁶² The ambitions of Group 1890 were both unrivaled and antagonistic. In writing about the group in September of 1962, Swaminathan delineated the group’s plans to develop an Art Centre; though this remained unrealized, the intent was quite clear:

If Santiniketan was a centre for the spread of the Bengal School which exercised a stranglehold on Indian art and stifled the creative instinct in the name of tradition, the Centre to be started by the group is expected to be a centre against all “schools” in art.⁶³

Embedded in the notion of instability and change, Group 1890 identified itself as a “movement.”⁶⁴ Much like Leon Trotsky and André Breton, the group penned a manifesto condemning the bureaucratization of art at the hands of cultural organizations and the laws of artistic creation dictated by the past.⁶⁵ The manifesto concedes that Indian art, from the time of Ravi Varma to the present had been fraught with “the self-conscious search for significance between tradition and contemporaneity[sic], between representation and abstraction, between communication and expression.”⁶⁶ According to Swaminathan, “artists with talent misled themselves into believing that a happy

⁶² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁵ “Manifesto: Toward a Free Revolutionary Art,” *Partisan Review* IV (Fall 1938): 49-53. The Gieve Patel interview with Swaminathan reveals that he had a rather ambivalent stance to Marxism as it manifest itself in the Soviet Union; however, he does make mention of Trotsky’s notion of a continuous revolution. Moreover, the Manifesto’s rejection of history, coupled with the collective’s status as an artistic cell, smacks with designations of modern avant-gardism. “An Interview with Swaminathan,” *Lalit Kala Contemporary* (March 1995): 23-25.

⁶⁶ “Group 1890 Manifesto” *Group 1890* New Delhi, Rabindra Bhavan, (October 1963), np.

I thank Akhilesh for his generosity in giving me an original copy of the *Group 1890* exhibition catalogue and sharing with me his copies of *Contra 66* and an assortment of Swaminathan’s exhibition catalogues.

compromise could be achieved by recasting native folk and miniatures styles in the framework of concepts developed by the modern in the west.”⁶⁷

The production of a manifesto was the first of its kind in India.⁶⁸ No doubt fuelled by Swaminathan’s own involvement with Marxism, the manifesto was by no means a modest proposal. It sat as the first polemical stance against the emerging rubrics of contemporary art in India. Its revolutionary thrust to cast off the legacy of the historical precursors of modern art cannot be overstated. As noted earlier, in the early 1960s, the Fine Arts Faculty in Baroda was still in its synthetic mode of engagement with the west under the stewardship of Bendre, and in contrast to this institutional predilection Swaminathan called for a clean slate from which to begin. Indian art needed to reclaim its pure expressive capabilities, on its own terms, without regard for historical, indigenous or international style. The manifesto states:

. . . from its early beginnings in the vulgar naturalism of raja ravi verma and the pastoral idealism of the bengal school, down through the hybrid mannerisms resulting from the imposition of concepts evolved by successive movements in modern European art on classical, miniature and folk styles to the flight into ‘abstraction’ in the name of cosmopolitanism, tortured alternately by memories of a glorious past born out of a sense of futility in the face of a dynamic present and the urge to catch up with the times so as to merit recognition, modern Indian art by and large has been inhibited by the self-defeating purposiveness [sic] of its attempts at establishing an identity.⁶⁹

⁶⁷“Art, Modern or Contemporary?” *Lalit Kala Contemporary* (March 1995):16.

⁶⁸ Although F.N. Souza’s statement in the catalogue of the Progressive Artists Group’s first show in Bombay at the Bombay Art Society (July 1949) had been received as a manifesto it was never claimed as such when it emerged. See Yashodhara Dalmia, *The Making of Modern Art: The Progressives* (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2001), 43. The Group 1890’s manifesto has been attributed to Swaminathan.

⁶⁹ “Group 1890 Manifesto” (October 1963), np. I have preserved the manner of spelling, capitalization and punctuation as it appeared in the catalogue.

The manifesto reads as a laundry list of refusals, yet once again, how did it translate into artistic practice? Did the rhetoric readily lend itself to visual representation? Group 1890's first exhibition opened in Delhi, October 1963 at Rabindra Bhavan and ran for a little more than a week. Inaugurated by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and introduced by Octavio Paz, Mexican Ambassador to India, it is difficult to determine the overall impact of the show, as reviews of the exhibition are scant.⁷⁰ Adding to the difficulties of assessment, the exhibition catalogue did not contain any images.⁷¹ Perhaps this is notable -signifying that it was the idea rather than the art that was of critical importance. The catalogue essay written by Paz sums up the initiative of the exhibition:

The true subject of this exhibition is the confrontation of the vision of these painters with the inherited image. Contemporary Indian Art, if this country is to have an art worthy of its past cannot but be born from the violent clash. I do not affirm that the first exhibition of Group 1890 is already new Indian painting. Neither are these painters the only ones, nor is their work final. I affirm that this exhibition is one sign of the new time, a time that will be of criticism as well as creation.⁷²

⁷⁰ Octavio Paz was the Mexican Ambassador to India (1962-68). Charles Fabri briefly mentions the exhibition as "an impressive exhibition, with a few good, some mediocre and some poor exhibits. Among the better works were those of Mr. Ghulam [sic] Mohammed Sheikh, Mr. Swaminathan, Mr. Jyoti Bhatt and Mr. Redeppa Naidu. Among the worst were some by Rajesh Mehra and Mr. Himmat Shaw." "Art Chronicle – Delhi," *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 3 (June 1965): 34.

⁷¹ Years later, writing about the show and the work Vivan Sundaram states:

Rupture, dismemberment and the silence that follows in its wake, is the dominant image I carry of the Group 1890 exhibition in 1963. Swaminathan's paintings as well as most of Group 1890's work of the period is unknown, therefore one is constructing images without images. Many of the important artists' works are destroyed or lost. Was there some death which unconsciously built into the show, a marker, a flare that could be extinguished as soon as it went up?

"J Swaminathan And the Moment of Group 1890 (1963)," *The India Magazine* 14 (June 1994): 79.

⁷² Octavio Paz, "Surrounded by Infinity..." *Group 1890* (New Delhi 20-29 October 1963), np.

The fact that this was the only occasion that these artists showed together suggests the impossibility of sustaining their antagonistic vision. It was - despite Paz's claim - their final work. The confrontation with the inherited image left a vacuum in its wake. Or as K.G. Goel states, "[T]heir brave attempts did not make the kind of impact they had imagined; and for the simple reason that they had themselves been working within the system which set up such false categories as 'advance,' 'new' and 'significant' art."⁷³

The outcome of the show and perhaps the dissolution of Group 1890 found register in the pages of *Contra 66*, a journal devoted to contemporary art criticism founded by Swaminathan in 1966. Originally established as a venue for artist generated criticism, the journal ran through four issues before ceasing production. During its abbreviated life span, it was controversial and came under fire from many in the artistic community who charged Swaminathan with being unethical. The artistic consensus was that he had "no right to both paint and write on other people's work."⁷⁴ The cover of the first issue of *Contra 66* was graced with the following quote, "Art and liberty, like the fire of Prometheus are things that one must steal, to be used against the established order."⁷⁵ Although these are the words of Pablo Picasso, they were not acknowledged as his - in effect Swaminathan stole them. Even though they underwent some selective editing it is worth citing the quote in its entirety:

⁷³ "Swaminathan," *Swaminathan '88* (New Delhi: Doomimal Gallery, March 26- April 15, 1988), np.

⁷⁴ Writing about the reception to *Contra 66* in September 1993 Swaminathan states:

Many leading artist who had subscribed to it did not like the criticism poked at their work and one day, in a specially arranged meeting at Bal Chabra's New Delhi residence they gave me the drubbing of my life and that I can not use their money for debunking them and that anyway I had no right to both paint and write on other people's work, it was unethical.

"The Cygan: An Auto-bio note," np.

⁷⁵ *Contra 66* vol I (October 1966).

The point is, art is something subversive, it's something that should not be free. Art and liberty, like the fire of Prometheus are things that one must steal, to be used against the established order. Once art becomes "official" and open to everyone then it becomes the new academicism.⁷⁶

The full force of Swaminathan's polemical position against the status quo was summed up in his article that appeared in the first volume of *Contra 66*:

They say that it should not be done but I see no reason why I may not speak about my work and leave it to second rate minds who want to tell me all about it so that I may orient myself to their mediocrity and become their pet project or if I say No Sirs they pull me to pieces because I have willfully agreed to keep my mouth shut and let the work speak for itself...⁷⁷

The idea that the work should speak for itself - that it had some inexplicable universal language - found full voice in the journal's lead essay, "The Numinous Image" by Philip S. Rawson.⁷⁸ Rawson identified the numinous as something that is self-manifesting, almost akin to the concept of *swambhu*. He suggests:

European artists always feel that the canvas is blank before they start to work on it. Everything that is put on it comes out of the artist. But Indian Painters, on the other hand, always start with the idea that there is something hidden somehow behind the surface, some sort of presence that can be made to show itself. All the marks the artists make, and the material they apply to the surface are meant to help the image to our side of the canvas. The first was an emotional reaction to the colour used and it is through our feelings that the numinous speaks to us.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Francois Gilot and Carleton Lake, *Life with Picasso* (New York: Mc Graw-Hill, 1964), 197.

⁷⁷ "Form, Contemporaneity, Me," *Contra 66* vol. 1 (October 1966): 10.

⁷⁸ At the time Rawson was the Director of the Gulbenkian Museum of Oriental Art in Durham, England. The article was originally a lecture given at the inauguration of the "Art Now in India" exhibition held in England 1965. "The Numinous Image," *Contra 66* no.1 (October 1966): 4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

The numinous suggests that the image has the metaphysical ability to surpass the bounds of the mundane. Within the context of Swaminathan's work, it becomes an attribute of both revolution and revelation. In looking at *The Yellow Sign*, 1960 an early work by Swaminathan, the muted and muddied colours bleed into the canvas (fig. 11). The *pentimenti* of previous forms oscillate in endless competition across the surface of the picture plane. The iconic form at the centre marked out by a clear hard line of red suggests an overall interplay between order and chaos.

By 1968, Swaminathan changed direction and it is here that his lucid colour and his distinct forms emerge as articulations of a 'third space' that test both historical identity and its entrenchment within the homogenizing and unifying thrust of culture. By drawing upon both Pahari paintings of the 17th and 19th centuries and the work of Paul Klee, Swaminathan articulates a unique vision that is embedded in a solid conceptual frame. The Pahari images more often than not deal with stories relating to Radha and Krishna, a popular theme in the Hindu Bhakti movement that stressed the transgression of rigid caste constraints and religious protocols. By advocating a direct relationship with god, adherents of Bhakti possessed the ability to surpass staid boundaries of religious tradition. It is the stepping outside of tradition -outside of the dictates of normative values that finds equal resonance in the work of Klee. Swaminathan saw Klee as a unique individual who repudiates historical convention. His work "is the total expression of the free individual who is not a creature of

history.”⁸⁰ By obliquely referencing these two distinct positions, Swaminathan posed the possibility of going beyond the pieties and conceits of contemporary art.

The Colour of Geometry, 1968 best exemplifies this position (fig. 12). Swaminathan utilizes flat areas of colour offset by gestural marks to disturb the pristine painted surface. One can see how Swaminathan visually articulates a rejection of all that stood before him. The work was conceptually experimental and for the most part visually abstract. The flat colour fields, alongside the painterly marks and organic allusions, in no way articulate a distinctly Indian motif. They were pictorial allusions rather than idiomatic recreations. To be sure, despite their laconic references, Swaminathan’s work of the late 1960s can be seen as examples of the numinous image, which according to Swaminathan was:

[T]he anthropomorphic imagination functioning in our miniature painting, the psychedelic use of colour in Tantric painting and the geometric use of space in all of our traditional painting have one end in view; not to represent reality or even analyze it, but to create a para-natural image which inspires man to contend with reality.⁸¹

Significantly, this stylistic gesture, although conceptually drawn from an Indian context, did not articulate either a specifically Indian reality or uniquely Indian expression. For Geeta Kapur however, this posed a significant problem:

Whether Swaminathan has derived his palette of colours from Pahari miniatures, or from the more recent, intensely colour conscious artists of the West is difficult to say. [She continues. . .] This also raises certain important questions. The abstractionists we have mentioned above, whatever their spiritual position, are superbly *competent*

⁸⁰ “The Reality of the Image,” *Contra* 66 vol. 2 (November 1966): 10.

⁸¹ J. Swaminathan, “The New Promise,” *Lalit Kala Contemporary* (March 1995): 29.

painters. The elements in the picture, few as they might be, are fitted into an impeccable design and each square inch of the picture is painted with the best possible skill and fineness. Swaminathan's are not. Should we regard this as a failure?⁸²

The logic of the encounter echoed a modernist ideal that I believe proved problematic for many. Clearly, Swaminathan's model argued for the transcendent possibilities of art; however, what is key to my project is how the rejection of his model precipitated a turn toward the indexical articulations of Indian culture. In looking to the work of Swaminathan there is no visual indication of cultural distinctiveness – nothing that visually suggested that the work was done by a specifically *Indian* artist. It was the argument over the visual claims of the cultural that would continue to inform the shifts of the 1960s. Swaminathan's rejection of historical antecedents for visual practice both within and without India perhaps swung too far in one direction: what was lost was the unique *cultural* expression of an Indian identity.

Geeta Kapur and the Reclamation of Cultural Identity

This in-drawing into the self in pure relationship to the activity of art, may now have the potential to release artists into exploring an extended identity, a 'racial unconscious' if we want to be grand.⁸³

In 1969, the Baroda school began publishing the journal *Vrishchik* co-edited by Bhupen Khakhar and Gulammohammed Sheikh, a former member of Group 1890. The title of the journal means scorpion and indeed the articles published within its pages

⁸² Kapur, "Wings of a Metaphor," 211.

⁸³ Geeta Kapur, "Contemporary Indian Art – 1960s," *Marg*, supplement to Vol XXI (December 1967): 14.

were intended to deliver a series of fatal stings. In 1972, an intense questioning of the historical contingencies of western art history began to fully emerge and Kapur comes forward at this time as a key voice in the discourse. In her article, "Critique of Contemporary Western Art" she addressed the two tandem trends of American Avant-gardism: Abstraction and Pop.⁸⁴ What materializes in her critique is a theoretical dismantling of western paradigms and an open embrace of a unique cultural identity. Kapur's appeal to a 'racial unconsciousness' was shot through with a clever dismantling of the efficacy of the avant-garde principle within India. Unlike Subramanyan's earlier attempts to work *through* rubrics of western art, Kapur's critical engagements articulate an impasse.

We have now the heir of modernism, 'the cult of the new.' Clement Greenberg in *Art and Culture* suggests avant-gardism as the prime mover in contemporary culture. But it should be stated that an acceleration of the avant-garde principle, in that it disallows any system of values to emerge or be transmitted, undermines culture.⁸⁵

Her refusal challenged the causality of western art criticism and its valorization of the "cult of the new" by arguing that within this framework artistic initiatives were reduced to the level of an empty commodity circulating within a closed system orchestrated by the art critic:

The historian critic rationalizes a work or movement, makes a linear connection between successive works and names a mainstream. As he exercises so much influence, the artist tends to do what 'logically' follows with the obligation of solving the historically appropriate problems, of finding such 'solutions' that take forward the artistic achievement. Analogically speaking, the critic as

⁸⁴ Geeta Kapur, "Critique of Contemporary Western Art," *Vrishchik* 8-9 (June-July 1972): np.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

master artist and the artist as artisan is not so far fetched, particularly in the last few decades.⁸⁶

By way of example, Kapur pointed to the sterility of internationalism and its exemplary expression pop art as embedded in an impossible teleological parody of itself.⁸⁷ Art, which positioned itself vis-à-vis these models effaced the identity of the artist and negated the cultural importance of artistic practice by privileging style over content. The cult of the new simply did not exist within India. Moreover, the prevalence of formalism as a governing rubric of art criticism in the west further negated the philosophical or sociological import of artistic practice. Clearly, this trend is at odds with India's reality and Kapur suggested that, ". . . in India's opened and chaotic cultural situation an interpretative and evaluative approach is more fruitful."⁸⁸

It is here that Kapur shifted the discourse from a focus on the modern to a focus on modernity as a lived experience. This context driven notion ruptured the modern as a hermetic category and posited the embrace of the experience of modernity as a prismatic experience rather than unilateral expression.⁸⁹ Within this configuration culture became the unique site upon which the artist could finally rise above the limits of the postcolony and assume a fully articulated and ultimately creative postcolonial identity. Kapur's theoretical embrace of the creativity of the artist, as one who operates beyond an evolutionary paradigm suggested,

⁸⁶ Kapur, "Critique," np.

⁸⁷ Kapur suggests that, ". . . an art based on parody as its only content finds itself in a position where it is only parodying itself." Ibid., np.

⁸⁸ "In Quest of Identity: Art and Indigenism in Post-colonial Culture with Special Reference to Contemporary Indian Painting," *Vrishchik* 3 (June-July 1972): np.

⁸⁹ Kapur notes in her "Art Criticism in India," "Indian artists are assured they can create original works of modern art (so much anxiety about being 'modern' as if modernity was a coveted category rather than a felt experience." *Vrishchik* 4 (December 1973): np.

. . . the significance of an artist, it would seem, is not determined by the degree of his conscious concerns for social problems and his participation in their solution. It depends on the unity within him, of conscience and memory –a conscience which sees into the heart of things, making art a part of our striving to humanize ourselves and a memory that carries with it, the accretions of culture.⁹⁰

This consciousness continued to inform the frames of India's developing contemporary art historical discourse. It is interesting that Swaminathan and Subramanyan at various moments called upon identity - either its embrace or rejection - as the foundational assumption of contemporary art. For Subramanyan it was the necessary component in producing a valid image, whereas for Swaminathan it hindered true expression. Artistic identity, in Kapur's and Subramanyan's design, was temporally bound in the experience of the environment as a lived, rather than imagined experience. In contrast to this, the subjectivity of the artist in Swaminathan's configuration was not bound by temporality and he, in fact, would repeatedly renounce the frame of history. By the mid 1970s, both Subramanyan and Kapur proposed a temporally based identity for the artist vis-à-vis the open embrace of the accretions of Indian culture. For Subramanyan this became the deployment of a folk idiom, and for Kapur it would rest in the embrace of a figurative visual language. Significantly, both rejected western modernism as governing rubric for contemporary art to rally around both the agency and the identity of the Indian artist as a point of historically bound yet critical opposition.

Swaminathan, in contrast to this, rejected the stabilizing force of time to rally for the subjectivity of the artist and the agency of the image. For Swaminathan, the artist

⁹⁰ Geeta Kapur, "Introduction, The Social Context of Contemporary Indian Art," *Vrishchik* 4 (December 1973): np.

was an operative of transcendence; his worldview embraced the metaphysical and the logic of the Encounter. He rejected all that stood before him and, in this way, his position may be considered the one and only expression of an Indian avant-garde. But this too has its limits. His was not a monolithic venture that forged ahead and left in its wake an aesthetic upheaval; instead it might be fruitful to think of it as a moment of extreme potential that was nullified by the burdens of both the past and the present.

CHAPTER TWO: THE HISTORICAL POSE

To this day protagonists will place an avant-garde badge on the breasts of purists – consider Clement Greenberg’s role. But heresies and orthodoxies change places and should we not offer the badge of radicalism to figurative artists? Yes, if by radicalism we mean the most advanced views of change along democratic lines, for let the people come back into the pictures and tell their stories must indeed merit the name of radicalism.¹

Painted in May 1981, Gulammohammed Sheikh’s large oil painting *Speaking Street* was included in the exhibition *Place for People* held that same year in the two Indian art metropolises of New Delhi and Bombay (fig. 13).² The image, emblematic of the turn toward narrative figuration — the style that would become *de rigueur* during the 1980s — reveals a densely populated cityscape that invites the viewer to explore an urban locale teeming with activity. A narrow alley cuts diagonally through the lower left hand side of the painting drawing attention to how the artist uses architecture to order urban space. A large green mosque rises out of the middle ground. Above its airy quadrangle another courtyard opens up revealing a pair of *Al – Fâtir* (angels) levitating a man.³ A shadow beneath him testifies to his air bound and precarious state. A third heavenly figure kneels before him, arms gesturing outward as if to beseech the man’s compliance. Is this a scene of struggle or salvation? Like many of the micro-views represented in *Speaking Street*, this vignette is ambiguous. Paired with the

¹ Kapur, “Partisan Views about the Human Figure,” np.

² The Exhibition was held Nov. 9-15, 1981 at the Jehangir Art Gallery in Bombay; and Nov. 21-Dec. 3, 1981 at Rabindra Bhavan, New Delhi.

³References to angels are quite common in the Islamic tradition, see, for example: “Sûrah XXXV,” *The Koran*, trans. M. Pickthall (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1992), 444-449.

commonplace activities of the *masjid* in which the faithful move freely about - preparing for prayer and offering *namaz* - the angelic intercession asks us to consider not only the horizontal terrain of the mundane, but also the vertical axis of the supra-mundane. Within Sheikh's city all is open to possible view, from the *Al-Fâtir* and their visual reference to religious life, to the domestic and secular spaces interwoven throughout the remainder of the image.

In the foreground, walls cut away revealing the internal workings of spaces normally concealed from sight - scenes of domestic violence and bliss, views of work and sites of leisure punctuate the image. People traverse across the thresholds of familial space just as we, the viewers, transcend the strict divisions between public and private. The viewer is granted an ideal perspective - all routes are possible. In shattering the linear flow of narrative space Sheikh's image articulates an alternative spatial discourse of the city, one that has at its heart notions of multiplicity. The kaleidoscopic visions and undulating frames of reference allow the viewer to meander at random, uninhibited by prescribed movement. The spatial syntaxes of *Speaking Street* evoked in conjunction with the dilation and constriction of community spaces express the modalities of social life in urban India.⁴

Though the image suggests a dynamic narrative that extends beyond its painted surface, it is the visual reclamation of unmitigated and transient social space that ironically transforms Sheikh's image into a definitive expression of "place." In describing the attributes of "place" Michel de Certeau observes:

⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Riddall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 115.

The law of the ‘proper’ rules in place: the elements taken into consideration are *beside* one another, each situated in its own “proper” and distinct location, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability.⁵

As Kapur expresses in her exhibition catalogue, *Place for People* casts itself as a radical democratic intervention. The populist appeal of the exhibition’s title, its claims upon definitive articulations of “place” suggest that it was an event meant to resonate within a larger social milieu. Nuances of its larger agenda found equal expression in the organization and content of the exhibition catalogue suggesting that both the text and the images carried with them the burden of recent history. The title of the exhibition rhetorically evoked a sense of self-determination and it is important to remember that only a few years earlier in India freedoms were curtailed and the country was thrown into oppressive silence by the suspension of the Constitution and declaration of martial law under the Emergency (1975-1977). This was a time of fear. Strict curfews were in place, public gatherings were subject to restriction and opposition against the government was met with imprisonment. The draconian exercises of state power at the hands of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi left a trail of terror in its wake. Over the 572 days of emergency rule twenty-six political parties were banned and 140,000 individuals were imprisoned for political dissidence.⁶ The difficulties of life under Emergency rule still held fast in the public imagination and no doubt gathered the patina of paradox given that in 1981, the year the exhibition opened, Mrs. Gandhi had just returned to power.

⁵ de Certeau, *Practice*, 117.

⁶ Balraj Puri, “A Fuller View of the Emergency,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (July 15, 1995): 1739.

Conceived as a joint venture between the artists and the art critic Geeta Kapur, the pictorial narratives unfolding in the images of *Place for People* ranged from externalized expressions of life on the streets, to the internalized worlds of quiet contemplation. Bringing together the more senior and established work of Sheikh, with that of his peers Bhupen Khakhar and Jogen Chowdhury, the exhibition also included the work of three younger artists: Vivan Sundaram, Nalini Malani, and Sudhir Patwardhan. Physical and social isolation marked some of the images; yet, equal consideration was given to notions of community and togetherness. Sheikh and Khakhar tended to stress densely populated urban areas; Sundaram and Malani focused on internal dramas unfolding within the domestic realm to represent vexed interpersonal or interfamilial relationships, whereas Patwardhan and Chowdhury were united in the conveyance of existential solitude. These images unquestionably opened up a dynamic view of contemporary life allowing the viewer entry into a wide range of social terrains populated by an equally diverse population.

Born in the 1930s and 1940s, the artists of *Place for People* spanned two generations. In spite of their differing career stages, the catalogue lists the artists alphabetically suggesting a deliberate rupture of seniority-based hierarchy so often adhered to in exhibitions. The catalogue thus mirrored the democratic imperative assigned to the radicalism of the figurative artists in this show. Artist's statements, curriculum vitae, and three images per artist appeared along side photographs of each. Equal weight was given to the voice of the critic and the voice of the artist. Kapur, at the outset of her catalogue essay, entitled "Partisan Views about the Human Figure" states, "[T]his essay is not about the artists in this exhibition but is written expressly for

them, as a tribute to the imaginative concentration in their work.”⁷ Kapur’s essay stood as a narrative that circumvented particularized discussion of the work in the exhibition. In sidestepping the role of the critic as an arbiter of aesthetic engagement, her strategic positioning allowed the voices of the artists to tell their own stories. Some, like Nalini Malani and Vivan Sundaram, simply chose to include quotes alongside their images, while others like Bhupen Khakhar told a story of his own devising about a father and a son. Jogen Chowdhury, Gulammohammed Sheikh and Sudhir Patwardhan offered more traditional statements of varied length, describing the influences or conceptual underpinnings of their work. The interwoven narratives of the critic and the artists effectively implied a series of open-ended conversations, an agora of ideas about what it meant to be an artist at that moment in time. Like Sheikh’s *Speaking Street*, the voices represented in the catalogue were dynamic, offering multiple layers of dialogue.

This chapter functions as a case study of *Place for People* in order to consider both its aesthetic and political impact across a number of discrete terrains. Art critic Ranjit Hoskote describes this show as an “exhibition-as-manifesto”, and the artists who participated as “dissidents who rejected what they saw as the vacuous transcendentalism of indigenist symbology and abstract idealism that had preoccupied the generation of artists immediately preceding theirs.”⁸ I disagree with Hoskote’s characterization of the exhibition as one simply embedded in a stylistic turn. The claims on “place” so pivotal to the ideological and visual assertions of this exhibition, suggest that it also bore the

⁷ Geeta Kapur, “Partisan Views about the Human Figure,” np .

⁸ “Indian Art: Influence and Impulses in the 1980s and 1990s,” in *Indian Art: An Overview* ed., Gayatri Sinha (New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2003), 203.

distinct marks of the political. It was a manifesto of *kind* but not one that simply confined itself to the artistic. Set against the political backdrop of Indira Gandhi's return to power, *Place for People* offers a rich entry point into a discussion around how changes within India's social and political environment impacted artistic practice and how the nomenclature of radicalism deployed by this exhibition supplanted the last vestiges of both western modernism and the unilateral pull of the avant-garde.

In this case study of *Place for People* I argue the pictorial narratives of everyday life evinced by the artists have two parallel subplots extending beyond their painted visions. The first subplot is interwoven with issues arising out of India's specifically *visual* encounters with the art of the west. In her catalogue essay Kapur openly states that the polarities of Indian and western art, so predominant in the preceding generations were now defunct.

The Indian Art situation can now sustain a number of options which cut across the conventional polarities of Indian and Western. Rather than tying ourselves in knots about the question of identity in these terms we should now be able to bring these new options – of sensibility and ideology – into focus.⁹

The return to the figure at this moment may have allowed for new considerations of “sensibility and ideology” to emerge within artistic practice; however, in casting engagements with the human figure as a particularly Indian artistic predisposition, Kapur raises a self-conscious polemical stance against encroachments of the west. But this too has its own history. Kapur's reference to Clement Greenberg in the exhibition catalogue harkens back to a moment in 1967 when Greenberg accompanied New

⁹ Kapur, “Partisan Views,” np.

York's Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Two Decades of American Painting* to Delhi. The meeting of Indian artists and critics with the Americans can be cast as a germane moment. It was in the aftermath of this meeting that Kapur began to advocate a return to the figure that would not fully emerge as a critically strategic artistic endeavor until *Place for People* opened its doors to the public almost 15 years later.

Yet the questions of sensibility and ideology evoked by Kapur are not mere rhetorical fanfare, as Sheikh's image of wide-open urban spaces attests; there was more at stake in this exhibition. The narrative turn in artistic practice sought to reclaim the "aspect of telling – the re-enacting - of history came to be emphasized, rather than its homogenizing end product."¹⁰ *Place for People* did not simply herald a shift in visual engagements or exhibitionary strategies, but it concerned itself with the reconfiguration of social space – a space that had been seriously contravened during the Emergency. It was within this context that the second and perhaps more politically overt subplot of *Place for People* emerged. The re-enacting of history, the possibilities of writing or representing a micro-vision of history by gazing askance at the master narratives of both the political and the aesthetic was the underlying premise of the exhibition and the moment in which it arrived. The turn toward the pictorial narrative in India has at its heart a story; it is one that weaved through both the search for artistic meaning and the failure of the nation-state.

¹⁰Ashish Rajadhhyaksha, "The Last Decade," in *Art in Baroda*, ed. Gulammohammed Sheikh (Delhi: Tulika. 1997), 214.

The Emerging Figure and Exhibitionary Antecedents

In my last chapter, I discussed at length how the critical engagements of artists and critics writing in the 1960s and early 1970s coalesced around issues of cultural identity. The reclamation of craft or so-called indigenous idioms by Subramanyan and Swaminathan respectively were given greater theoretical edge in the latter part of the seventies through Kapur's theoretical explorations into broader assertions of a postcolonial identity. Burdened by the unilateral force of western modernism, the struggle to find equal footing, or at least artistic legitimacy, punctuated much of the archival material I examined. The arguments with western paradigms of artistic practice took on a particularly visual, rather than textual edge, when, on March 28, 1967, New York's Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Two Decades of American Painting* opened at Lalit Kala Akademi in Delhi.¹¹ The exhibition itself was rather timely; growing cold war hostilities between America, the USSR and the People's Republic of China had a historical correspondence within India. In 1954 Nehru advocated the notion of the Non-Aligned Movement to secure India's non-partisanship in the larger political plays between Communism and the United States.¹² Given India's position as one who refused to take sides in the growing polarization of political ideologies, the arrival of the Americans in Delhi could be construed as one that had ulterior motives. To be sure, a great deal of ink has been spilt on the pages of American

¹¹ Although the exhibition was presented by Lalit Kala Akademi in New Delhi, it was organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York under the auspices of the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art. The International Council was established in 1952 through funds donated by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and continues to send American exhibitions abroad. *Two Decades of American Painting* traveled first to Japan in October 1967 and concluded in Melbourne, Australia in August 1967, <http://www.moma.org/international/>.

¹² Arthur Stein, "India and the USSR: The Post—Nehru Era," *Asian Survey* 7 (March 1967): 165-175.

art journals arguing for a conclusive link between the traveling shows of MOMA and CIA surveillance.¹³ However, whether or not this exhibition played a larger covert role in the shifting terrains of global politics is difficult to fully establish.

Showcasing the work of thirty-five American painters, *Two Decades of American Painting* offered a wide range of paintings from the Abstract Expressionism of the 1940s up to Pop Art produced during the 1960s. The exhibition was curated and attended by Waldo Rasmussen, Executive Director of Circulating Exhibitions for MOMA. Clement Greenberg was also in attendance and for the first time Indian artists and critics stood face to face with both the greatest advocate of American avant-gardism and its most elevated pictorial examples.¹⁴ Showcasing the work of thirty-five American painters, *Two Decades of American Painting* offered a wide range of paintings from the abstract expressionism of the 1940s up to pop art produced during the 1960s.¹⁵ The illustrated exhibition catalogue included essays by Irving Sandler,

¹³ M. Kozloff, "American Painting during the Cold War," *Artforum* 11 (May 1973): 42-54 and Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism: Weapons of the Cold War," *Artforum* 12 (June 1974): 39-41. Robert Burstow argues that these assertions have never really been firmly proven and are actually part of a larger revisionist argument that followed in the wake of the Watergate Scandal and the Vietnam War. "The Limits of Modernist art as a 'Weapon of the Cold War,': Reassessing the Unknown Patron of the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner," *Oxford Art Journal* 20 (1997): 68-80.

¹⁴ Although Greenberg spent two months in India, he did not venture forth with a publication on contemporary art. Instead, his "Old India: Her Monuments" focused upon his experiential encounters with the figurative works found on temple architecture. *Art International* 16 (November 1972): 19-22. This article is a revised version of a preface Greenberg contributed to Maurizio Taddei's *India Antica* (Milano: A. Mondadori, 1973).

¹⁵ At the inauguration of the exhibition, Indian External Affairs Minister Mahomedali Currim Chagla, in anticipation of a spirit of fruitful exchange between the east and west, declared that he hoped that contemporary art in India would be reciprocally exhibited in America. As far as I know this exchange did not occur until 1973 when an exhibition of Indian contemporary art traveled to Washington D.C. Held at the Smithsonian Institute, the exhibition received poor reviews from American critics. Patricia Raymer, the art critic for the *Washington Post*, was rather scathing in her assessment of the work: "Where there is colour, there is neither brilliance nor subtlety. Where there is texture, there is neither coarseness nor delicacy. Not that art should aim at extremes but it should have a substance, an essence, a personality, these works do not." *Washington Post* (2 April, 1973) quoted in *Contemporary Indian Painters 1996* (Bombay: Jahangir Art Gallery, 1996), 33.

Lucy Lippard and G.R. Swenson. Though the intent was to foster artistic exchange, in reading the essays one cannot help but be struck by the boldness of assumptions and the pointed asymmetrical ignorance of the Americans about their host country.¹⁶ Lippard, for example, observes, “[S]o many principals of Oriental thought have been assimilated by the West in the last decade or so that one need no longer to be a scholar or even aware of these principles to be affected.”¹⁷ While in all fairness to Lippard, perhaps this was meant as a generalized statement; however, it was the visual assumptions of the American work that posed the greatest problem.

Jasper John’s *MAP I*, 1961 hung in the foyer of the gallery greeting visitors with its heavy impasto and obscured subject matter (fig. 14). Moving through the exhibition, gallery goers stood face to face with de Kooning’s *Woman VI*, 1953, Lichtenstein’s *Maybe*, 1965, and Andy Warhol’s iconic representation of the consumerism of postwar America, *Campbell Soup*, 1965 (figs. 15-17). However, instead of being awestruck by these internationally revered images, their presence on Indian soil galvanized debates over how contemporary artists were to frame their own artistic modernism. The issues that emerged at this time were no longer notional, but carried with them the real visual evidence of the impossibility of inserting contemporary Indian art into a foreign rubric of artistic practice. The reviews of the exhibition made it clear that the abstraction of John’s work or the pop images of Warhol could not be emulated in India, as they were

¹⁶ Irving Sandler, “The Will to Renewal,” 5-8; Lucy Lippard, “American Painting the Cult of the Direct and the Difficult,” 9-12; G.R. Swenson, “A View of the Exhibition,” 13-14. *Two Decades of American Painting* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1967).

¹⁷ Lucy Lippard, “American Painting: Cult of the Direct and the Difficult,” *Two Decades of American Painting* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1967), 10.

the stuff of modern American life.¹⁸ In response to the exhibition artist Gieve Patel states that American art was likely to have little impact on contemporary Indian art, as its statements were both closed and resistant to further investigations.¹⁹

Consider the case though: [S]ome of the most widely publicised art of the century; one of the most distinguished art-critics in the world today, all of this aggressively foreign, and a seminar at which both of these would be forced into some sort of relationship with contemporary painting – one of the most mobile areas of artistic expression in India today.²⁰

Greenberg offered a seminar and slide show in conjunction with the exhibition and succeeded in securing the divide between American and Indian artistic practice. His reliance upon formal distinctions in his assessment of artwork, coupled with his subjective criteria for discerning valid aesthetic engagements confounded the audience. For example, he dismissed Frank Stella as a minor painter on the basis of canvas shape and elevated Barnett Newman as a master, though there was no discernable difference in their paint handling or their net visual outcomes.²¹ When asked about his criteria for aesthetic judgment, Greenberg simply declared, “This moves me.” Patel remarked, “. . .

¹⁸ A review by John Action published in *Lalit Kala Contemporary* questions the extremes of the artistic engagement articulated by this collection.

This work, *MAP 1961* by Jasper Johns brings together elements on which much of this exhibition is founded: the use of gesture and the natural characteristics of paint as an end and not simply as a means: the employment of impersonal techniques (in this case stencils); the selection of a banal image as a subject. None of these elements necessarily lead to good or bad art, and all of them have been exploited before the sudden rise of American painting during the 1940s. It is the artists’ willingness to carry processes to the extremes which gives the exhibitions of “Two Decades of American Art” its fundamental importance and frequent magnificence. The artists tread on thinning ice until the best appear to walk on water – inevitably some submerge.

“Two Decades of American Painting,” *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 6 (1967): 42.

¹⁹ At this time Patel was an emergent artist based in Bombay; he is also a poet and a playwright and in 2003 he was the Writer-in-Residence at the Department of South Asia Studies, University of Pennsylvania.

²⁰ “The Decades and the Seminar” *Contra* 66, Number 5&6 (June 1967): 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*

in the absence of criteria more patiently arrived at, what was one to think?”²² Over the course of his slide lecture Greenberg alienated rather than embraced the audience through his ossified statements: “I like that one. That’s a masterpiece. Minor but good. Minor but bad. Good. Bad. Awful.”²³

Despite this, Patel stated that the seminar was entertaining; especially once the beer began to be consumed. Greenberg and Rasmussen engaged in a heated debate over the selection of the images in the show and Swaminathan stood up and insisted that participants “converse in poetry, not cliché.”²⁴ However, the net outcome of the exhibition was clear for many: American painting represented an impenetrable teleological statement. It was an aesthetic and cultural trademark. Its visage left many feeling that the question of the exportability of Indian art was infinitely entangled with “. . . the image of a country producing a certain exclusive ‘brand’ of work that is at the same time consistent with the taste of an official internationalism.”²⁵

A year after the American exhibition landed in India, Lalit Kala Akademi in Delhi hosted a symposium entitled “Figurative and Abstract Art.” Following in the wake of India’s First Triennale of World Contemporary Art, the symposium’s thirteen

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 6.

²⁴ Ibid. Writing about the event many years later Geeta Kapur comments on Swaminathan’s behavior at the event:

Recently returned from New York, I was a well-informed cub-critic at the event. I remember how Swaminathan, drinking through the day, gave a shrewd go-by to American painting as he did to most ‘western’ art, and then put the seminar to rout. Being himself the proverbial untutored artist, he targeted any form of art historical *discourse* lest it rob him of his performative ingenuity in the developing *mise en scene* of contemporary Indian art. In his space-clearing gesture he managed to place Greenberg [as] the personification of the Imperialist American Critic. . .

“Signatures of Dissent,” *ArtIndia: The Art News Magazine of India* VI (2001): 78.

²⁵ Patel, “Decades,” 6.

participants represented some of India's most important critics and artists of the time.²⁶ Each weighed in on the debate over whether or not it was possible for Indian art to fully embrace abstraction as a successful visual idiom for contemporary life. Many of the opinions put forth hovered semantically around disputes over definitions; the published proceedings reveal a struggle to identify exactly what was meant when one applies the designation of abstraction to a work. Questions abounded about how one should define non-representational art. Cannot figurative art be rooted in abstraction? Or conversely, does not all abstract art have at its core implicit or explicit components of figuration? Many asked if the ensuing debate over these terms offered genuine or invented roadblocks to contemporary art.

At the symposium K. G. Subramanyan commented upon the real or imagined debate between figurative and non-figurative work by declaring:

I think that the balance of the abstract with the objective is one of the most significant characteristics of the traditional art of my country – like in its temples which are impressive abstract heaps of stone but which bristle up with mythologies and representational detail at the second glance.²⁷

Subramanyan played the local card and effectively nullified the need to lament over legitimatising or aligning artistic practice with either the figurative or the abstract through his suggestion that India has always produced art that successfully united the two seemingly antithetical visual designations. However, senior artist K.S. Kulkarni,

²⁶ The Triennale was organized by Lalit Kala Akademi in India in Spring of 1968. The complete list of symposium participants is as follows: Laxman Pai, Charles Fabri, K.G. Subramanyan, K.K. Hebbar, Sunil Kumar Bhattacharya, Dhan Raj Bhagat, Chintamani Kar, K.S. Kulkarni, Jahangir Sabavala, N.S. Bendre, Shankho Chaudhuri, J. Sultan Ali, and Geeta Kapur. For transcripts see, S.A. Krishnan, "Figurative and Abstract Art – A Symposium," *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, Special Triennale Number (September 1967-April 1968): 24-37.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

who at the time was the Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts and Head of the Painting Department at Banaras Hindu University, expanded the discussion beyond the locales of the nation to state, “There is a marked tendency to work in a non-figurative way among contemporary artists. In some quarters, this tendency goes so far as to think that this is the only progressive style and all else is old-fashioned and retrograde.”²⁸ These two comments highlight the tensions vexing artists and critics in the wake of *Two Decades of American Painting*. Should artists confidently embrace cultural heritage without worry or apology as Subramanyan suggested? Or should they be aware, as Kulkarni hinted, of how such an endeavor might be received beyond the borders of the subcontinent? Between these two seemingly polarized views, the young emergent art critic Geeta Kapur called for an outright rejection of the narrow demands of abstract and pop art.²⁹ It was patently obvious that to appropriate these visual languages would run the risk of being artistically derivative and such an aesthetic gesture would inevitably place India in an antipodal relationship to the West. Kapur maintained that if India were to ever take its rightful place within the artistic matrix of the international, her artists would have to seize on something that was distinctly Indian in content. At this time, in a hypothetic proposal, Kapur lobbied for an embrace of a figurative visual language as a critical artistic stance.

The role of the figure in art is more inextricably linked with the human situation as it unfolds - whether it is heroic, fragmented, emaciated or commercialized. However the significance of a re-emphasis of the figure will only be, if it is infused and made potent with vaster

²⁸ Ibid., 32.

²⁹ It is interesting that later, in 1972 Kapur fully developed these ideas in her “Critique of Contemporary Art”. (See my discussion in Chapter One).

‘issues’ involving the whole complex of life. Otherwise, it will remain as much a victim of narrow demands – yielding only marginal statements – as a large part of recent abstract art has been.³⁰

The figure, or perhaps more specifically narrative painting, had long since been evacuated from the international art scene, and to suggest its revival at this time in India was decidedly polemical.

Kapur’s position continued to develop and ten years after *Two Decades of American Painting* she “conceived and compiled” the exhibition *Pictorial Space*, held in Delhi at Rabindra Bhavan.³¹ This large show included forty-six artists spanning three generations: Khakhar, Sheikh, Malani, Sundaram and Chowdhury all participated in the exhibition. Within the conceptual frames of this exhibition Kapur explored the possibility of looking at contemporary art through a thematic lens and clustered her brief discussions into four discrete sections: 1) Surface Configuration: Marks, Motifs, Geometry; 2) Apparitions; 3) The Horizon; and 4) Situation: Scenario: Dramatic Projection. These subdivisions rejected periodization and were based upon how the artists used their pictorial language. This experimentation with thematic readings is interesting as it, like her position as one who “conceives and compiles” as opposed to curates, expresses her disagreement with the strategies of western art exhibitions and the role of the curator as one who arbitrates meaning. Echoing her earlier position articulated in *Vrishchik* in which she sees the acceleration of an avant-garde principle within India as one which undermines culture, Kapur’s claim on the thematic (as

³⁰ Krishnan, “Figurative and Abstract Art,” 37.

³¹ Geeta Kapur, *Pictorial Space: A Point of View on Contemporary Indian Art* (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1977-1978), np.

opposed to the historical) stands as a clearly defined oppositional stance. Kapur situates the visual language of the artists syntactically within the cultural and visual vocabulary of the subcontinent by looking to indigenous sources for visual motifs such as the flatness found in miniature paintings and their ultimate rejection of Albertian perspective. These pictorial spaces represented a distinct cultural identity that would - in Kapur's opinion - "lead to more correct conclusions regarding an issue that continues to bedevil discussions of contemporary art: the issue of originality/subordination of the Indian artist to the foreign influence."³² And while Kapur's position may seem parochial, it marked a level of self-confidence and self-determination in the visual arts and seemingly dispersed the anxiety of influence that plagued contemporary art through the 1960s and 1970s.

Kapur effectively provincialized the west by adamantly declaring that the flatness of the early modernists such as Matisse and Picasso actually found its roots within non-western artist traditions.³³ There is no disputing this fact -- reams have been written on how western art of the early modernists appropriated visual vocabularies of the Orient -- yet these discussions upheld the notion that the cultural exchange between the metropolis and the colonies was inherently asymmetrical.³⁴ The Orient, if one

³² Kapur, *Pictorial Space*. np.

³³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992): 1-26. Interestingly, Kapur revisits these arguments in the pages of her "Partisan Views About the Human Figure" in the *Place for People* catalogue. She once again discusses how western modernism drew on the visual languages of the East. She states:

But modern western artists, seeking alternative formal principals in alien traditions ignore, understandably enough, the actual subject matter if the art forms: and insofar as they themselves in [sic] revolt against the literary and realistic conventions of their own culture they may even consciously suppress the depictive aspects of the non-western traditions.

³⁴ For example see "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed William Rubin. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984.

recalls Lippard's statement in the *Two Decades of American Painting* catalogue, was immediately apprehensible. Kapur overturned this assumption by offering a cultural/historical grounding for contemporary art. The erroneous understanding of the Orient vis-à-vis the stylistic appropriation of the early modernists was repatriated by Kapur in this exhibition. Now the artist could look to their own cultural landscape without apology. By reclaiming localized motifs or attitudes as the genesis of contemporary art, Kapur ruptured the notion that the west had a monopoly on expressions of the modern.³⁵ The fluidity of the ethno-aesthetic-scape, opened up a new set of aesthetic relations.³⁶

While Kapur acknowledged that her *Pictorial Space* exhibition may have appeared diffuse,

without any 'schools' or movements as we understand them in the West – a survey of the approaches to pictorial space will help sift [sic] the scene at a basic level, and to discern distinct clusters or natural groupings of artists on the basis of true affiliations.³⁷

The idea of true affiliations was based on a syntactical and spatial relationship that the artist enjoyed within their own cultural milieu. The appropriation of localized forms created the building blocks of a new artistic locality. The narrative of contemporary art within this context emerged as a self-driven text that negated the superaltern position of

³⁵ Kapur anticipated debates that would only emerge after the turn of the millennium. Here I refer to Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998) and Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001). Both of these books draw heavily on the ideas of Edward Said to problematize the accepted and stable relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and to argue that the relationship between India and Britain was one of equal rather than asymmetrical exchange.

³⁶ Here I borrow Arjun Appadurai's suffix "-scape" as a perspective which transcends rigid boundaries of the historical, the linguistic and the political, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33.

³⁷ Kapur, *Pictorial Space* np.

Western modern art and an avant-garde based upon forging ahead into new unexplored visual territories. In locating the engagements of this exhibition within a transhistorical, yet decidedly localized environment, Kapur released Indian contemporary art from the stranglehold of meta-history, allowing varied visions to arise - images that successfully cut across evolutionary or strictly developmental terrains. Buttressing her textual positioning of the exhibition, Kapur's catalogue is interspersed with images drawn from a variety of historical and cultural sources. The visual references to Persian and Kishanghari (Rajput) miniatures, the traditional *pats* of Bengal and Bihar, to the wall paintings of Mithila lend another layer of meaning to the words printed on the page. Freed from the causality of history, contemporary art was cast as something that could hover successfully between the past and the present without regret. The twin peaks of then and now were leveled and the alluvial plain left by this exhibition set a precedent for locating contemporary art within a larger atemporal cultural structure.

Rhetorically speaking, Kapur's essay opens up the possibility of examining the borderlines of both the historical and aesthetic contingencies in the late 1970s. As Homi Bhabha observes:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with newness that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as a social cause or aesthetic precedent, it reviews the past, reconfiguring it as a contingent in between space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The past-present becomes part of the necessary, not the nostalgia, of living.³⁸

³⁸ Bhabha, *Location 7*.

Kapur's proposition accounted not only for the disparities in visual engagement in India and the divide that existed both regionally and between the traditional and contemporary arts, she also casts contemporary art as something that existed beyond the pale of western influence.

What was interesting was how the artists who would later exhibit in *Place for People* (with the exception of Sudhir Patwardhan) were set apart from their contemporaries under the subheading "Situation: Scenario: Dramatic Projection."³⁹ The unity of the artists included in this section of the exhibition rested upon their unanimous engagement with the figure. Kapur begins her discussion in this section with M.F. Husain's landmark image *Between the Spider and the Lamp*, 1956, discussing how his use of a pictorial space to vertically and horizontally divide the surface of the painting evokes a multi-level spatial narrative (fig. 18). Husain's image delineates the tensions between the India of the past and the present. As if to heighten the strains between tradition and modernity, Husain divides the picture plane with a large swath of vibrant red. Within this space stand three women, on one side are those representative of the village, their transitory identities are marked out by the inclusion of masks. Opposite, stands a properly clad urban woman; lamp on head she seems to be beckoning the others to follow, to leave the past behind. As Yashodhara Dalmia observes, "The lamp burning brightly above and the spider below denote humans trapped between superstition and new advances."⁴⁰

³⁹ Kapur, *Pictorial Space*, np.

⁴⁰ *The Making of Modern Art*, 104.

If Husain calls up the real tensions between rural and urban India, then Bhupen Khakhar's *Man Eating Jalebee*, 1974 rests in the assertion of a fantastic relationship with the world (fig. 19). Unmoored from a specific locale, a lone man sits at a table set above an imagined idyllic surrounding. The saturated blue of the water, the car speeding off across a causeway toward a suburban oasis gives the image a sense of escapism. Kapur states, "Bhupen's intention has been singular: to place his subject, the common, middle class householder, in a setting that fuses his specific environment with his three-penny dream."⁴¹ The imaginative correlation Kapur sets up between the artists in the exhibition and her visual and textual references to past Indian artistic engagements argued for a new conceptual frame for contemporary practice. It was the borderline between the past and the present that allowed a contingent place to emerge – one that was fueled by the historical circumstances of India's own artistic practice to emerge as a dynamic field of cultural encounters.

Later that same year, Gulammohammed Sheikh curated the exhibition *New Contemporaries*; however, unlike Kapur's multigenerational exhibition, his exhibition narrowed the focus to include ten artists of a younger generation working in both graphic and painterly mediums.⁴² Held at the Jahangir Gallery in Bombay, the exhibition included the work of Vivan Sundaram, Bikash Bhattacharjee, Anupam Sud, Gieve Patel, D.L.N. Reddy, Laxman Goud, Jogen Chowdhury, Ganesh Pyne, K. Ramanujam, and Nalini Malani. This cluster of artists, according to Sheikh, represented a new alternative in contemporary art. In contrast to Kapur's thematic organization of

⁴¹ Kapur, *Pictorial Space*, np.

⁴² *New Contemporaries* (Bombay: Jahangir Art Gallery, 1978). The exhibition was a joint venture between Marg and the Indian Society of Art Appreciation.

Pictorial Space, Sheikh acknowledged that the artists included in *New Contemporaries* were,

. . . heterogeneous, as far as styles of their work is concerned and one could say that even ideological affinities are loose and liberal. But the most distinguishing feature of the art of the younger artist is its growing involvement with the local environment, its shifts from generalities to specific areas of interest.⁴³

Once again the local was privileged over the global, and stylistic or thematic arrangements gave way to a more prismatic arrangement that put the artists' own choices at the apex of their practice. Having abandoned the pressures to rediscover the traditional in an effort to stave off the encroachments of western modernism, these artists embraced a figurative language that "guiltlessly draws from all available sources – Indian and Western, traditional and modern."⁴⁴ Specific areas of interests manifest themselves in Nalini Malani's feminist minded engagements with the female form. Her *Painting 16*, 1973 reveals a prone woman, bare from the waist up (fig. 20). The eloquent realism of the lower torso is contrasted to the heavy impasto and rough gestures of paint delineating the upper. The quiet solitude of the figure is disturbing; her face is rendered amorphous yet the agitated portrayal of the hands leaves one with a sense of discomfiting violation. The viewer is positioned above looking down on the female form with unmitigated authority. The woman is reduced to an object, a disenfranchised and tortured individual in a decidedly patriarchal world. The reclamation of a brutal yet voyeuristic viewpoint by a female artist ruptures the

⁴³ Sheikh, *New Contemporaries*, 89.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 89. Badrinayan, in his review of the exhibition quotes Mulk Raj Anand's assessment of the exhibition as, "presenting the work of a young group of painters who are distinguished by the transition from the abstractionism of the early seventies to the re-entry of the figure in certain human situations." 'Exhibitions: Bombay, Delhi' *Lalit Kala Contemporary* (April 1979): 33.

possibilities of looking upon the female form as an object of desire. By disrupting the field of visual pleasure, Malini's partially nude figure delivered a critique of gender hierarchies crisscrossing the boundaries of both class and caste.

The issue of the political takes a different tack in the work of Vivan Sundaram. Rather than calling upon the politics of private domestic life, his image *Emergency*, 1976 commented upon the recent political upheaval in India (fig. 21).⁴⁵ This small pen and ink drawing ruptures notions of the aesthetic through his representation of iconic, militaristic figures set within a landscape. Its crude vision is delineated by hatch marks and shades of abstracted forms, making it difficult to read. Signaling the dystopic machinery of state, the image has an aggressive mechanical feel. The wrenches of power mingle in a landscape intersected by a railway track, yet the visual reference to movement and progress are quelled by the stabilized forms of the iconic faces. Art historian Ajay Sinha marks out these images as the beginnings of Sundaram's attempt to invest artistic practice with a specific Marxist ideological agenda through which, "he tried to both illustrate the Marxist position and to find formal equivalents for the ideological struggle."⁴⁶

The linkages of the political and the visual exemplified by Sundaram and Malani, like Sheikh's *New Contemporary* and Kapur's *Pictorial Space*, shifted the ground of both artistic expression and exhibition strategies in India. Kapur's thematic approach in conjunction with her alignment of the present with the past opened up new

⁴⁵ This image is identified as *The Gang* in *Contemporary Art in Baroda*.

⁴⁶ "Envisioning the Seventies and the Eighties," in *Contemporary Art in Baroda*, ed. Gulammohamed Sheikh (Delhi: Tulika, 1997), 174, quoted from the catalogue, *Six who Declined to Show at the Triennale* (New Delhi: Kumar Gallery, 1987).

ways of conceptualizing contemporary art. Sheikh's foregrounding of the artistic choice to represent personal and intimate engagements with subject matter offered the means by which contemporary artists could transcend reified boundaries of modern and traditional, eastern and western. The outcome of these two exhibitions marked the ascendancy of not only the figure as a viable vehicle for the present, but also set in place a combination of artists who would once again be united in the exhibition *Place for People*. What began in the 1960s as a series of visual debates with western art and its theoretical frames were subject to a series of successive modifications throughout the 1970s. Kapur, as my discussion has evinced, played a pivotal role. Not only was she one of the first art critics within India to critically broaden debates, but her theoretical sophistication also enabled Indian contemporary art to assume its rightful place within the international art matrix. I have highlighted certain key historical nodal points to expose what I consider to be the first subplot operating within the larger narrative engagements of *Place for People*. The embrace of narrative figuration can be seen as a visually critical stance that bore the stamp not only of Kapur's sophistication, but also rests within a larger discussion about India's search for a viable frame of artistic practice.

Figuring the People in "Place for People"

In the waning days of the Emergency Kapur published an article in *Economic and Political Weekly*, a widely read weekly social sciences journal. "Art in These Dark Times" resounds with criticism directed at the political situation in India and how it would potentially inflect the ensuing focal points of contemporary art:

For nations that find themselves at the cross-roads after a long spell of colonial rule tend to become petty-tyrannies, while adopting at the same time, the path of capitalism. Here exploitation is doubled, lies are doubled, hope is roused by slogans and double-crossed in the political game. Hence our question needs to be repeated with a certain urgency: can the artist in such societies remain indifferent, oblivious and unaffected?⁴⁷

Challenging the earlier and lofty assertions of Mulk Raj Anand in 1968, when he argued that the contemporary artist occupied a “super-national” political stance in which they could “mentally abolish the frontiers of the power states,” Kapur’s words stand as a distinct call to action.⁴⁸ While the “power states” within the context of Anand’s statement undeniably refer to the hegemony of the west’s claim on modernism within the unilateral and despotic political environment of 1977, the artist could no longer occupy a “super-national” position. However it would not be until 1981 that the combat zone between the national and the international bifurcated into two fronts. Urged on by the legacy of martial law and the so-called return to democracy in 1981 with the re-election of Indira Gandhi new barricades emerged. Built with the raw material of culture, the triumphal return of the figure jettisoned India into the international matrix while simultaneously explicating - through visual inversion - the traces of state oppression. The borderline work of culture was transposed into an act of political insurgency to stand as a protest and a disruption of the present.

Over the course of the eighteen months of the Emergency it was the power of the state, its ability to reject human rights in the pursuit of absolute power that urged a decisive reconsideration of the role of the artist in political life. In a climate in which

⁴⁷ Geeta Kapur, “Art in These Dark Times,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (March 12, 1977): 450.

⁴⁸ See my discussion in Chapter One .

access to free speech was quelled, and opposition to the government was met with imprisonment, the artist and his/her pictures became salient and pictorial expressions of political subversion. The idealistic linkages of art and state politics, so embedded in the artistic history of India over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, had been shattered into a million irretrievable pieces. Within this political context, the title of the exhibition *Place for People* recouperated and subverted the populist appeals of the earlier slogans of the Congress Party. If Gandhi's 1971 election was secured through the utopian catchphrases such as *Garibi hatao* (Remove Poverty), then by 1975 new slogans emerged signaling the dark underside of Congress rule. *Hum Do, Hamare Do* (We are two, we have two) when translated into practice led to horrific urban beautification projects in which many were displaced from their homes and mass sterilizations of the poorest sectors of the Indian population were common practice.⁴⁹ The terror of the Emergency cut across all class and social hierarchies; however, within this moment it becomes essential to differentiate between the operations of terror versus those of violence. "Terror is not the same as violence, it is rather, the form of government that comes into being when violence having destroyed all power does not abdicate but on the contrary, remains in full control."⁵⁰ Without a doubt, the Emergency was violent, but it was its uses of terror that became its most effective tool of suppression.

⁴⁹ Anthropologist Emma Tarlo deals with the personal experiences of individuals living under the Emergency in Delhi. See her *Unsettled Memories: Narratives of India's Emergency* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003). Similar in content to John Dayal and Ajoy Bose's 1977 publication *For Reason of State: Delhi Under the Emergency* these two studies focus upon personal narratives and offer a rich counterpoint to the official records. (Delhi: Ess Ess Publications, 1977).

⁵⁰ Here I draw from Hannah Arendt's distinction between violence and terror. *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 55.

We were warned repeatedly to be careful. Particularly not to indicate any sort of politics in our classroom lectures. Absolutely nothing. Then they sent us a code of conduct. They even set up a vigilance squad. There comes the dog squad, the teachers would say whenever one of its members would be seen in the department.⁵¹

The psychological impact of the Emergency is represented in Sheikh's 1975 *Speechless City* (fig. 22). Standing in complete opposition to his later *Speaking Street* (see fig.13), within *Speechless City* the streets are evacuated of all human inhabitants. The flat colour of the ground juxtaposed with the white pristine buildings articulate a void of humanity that resounds with fear and loss. A lone cow in the foreground stands amidst sentinel-like black dogs - these are the black dogs of the Emergency. Rather than the ubiquitous wild dogs normally found on urban streets, the unified pedigree of these dogs conjure images of well-trained vigilant enforcers. Operating in a terrific capacity they keep the population at bay, driving them from sight, repressing them through the *threat* of violence. A particularly observant member of the dog squad moves through the buildings sniffing out the scent of political dissidence. The crossing of thresholds here, unlike in *Speaking Street*, becomes a violation, an unfathomable trespass. Ironically, only the flock of crows is allowed freedom of movement; however, even they, the scavengers of the sky, take flight as the enforcers of state oppression move in.

Sheikh's *Speechless City* introduces what I have identified as the second subplot to narrative strategies of *Place for People*. The specifically Indian *mise en scène*

⁵¹ These are the words of Dr. Abhimanyu Sharma, a professor in the Faculty of Science, Delhi University. The targeting of university faculty during the Emergency was extreme and an astounding number of arrests occurred within educational institutions. For example, on the night of June 25th 1977, the eve of the declaration of the Emergency, 110 professors of Delhi University were taken from their homes and imprisoned. J. Dayal and A. Bose, *For Reasons of State*, 25.

created by each of the artists included in the exhibition cut across the boundaries of the public and the private, the social and the psychological, to focus upon aspects of story telling. They collectively represented a story that could never be told under the authoritarian machinations of Prime Minister Gandhi's rule. Within the context of the exhibition, "place" with all its possibilities of simultaneous and parallel stories, was politicized for its claim upon stability. Though many of the images juxtaposed different areas of action side by side, their painted surfaces articulated a new line of control in which the people rather than the state were granted a position of agency. The images stood as an act of reconciliation and a performance of remembrance.

Kapur's exhibition catalogue essay, "Partisan Views about the Human Figure," mirrors this strategy by proposing that Indian art has at its core a historically bound aesthetic proclivity toward figurative narration. However, the narratives she calls upon, such as the quasi-historical images of the *Hamzanama*, do not follow a strict linear progression.⁵² For example, *The Spy Zambur Brings Mahiya to Tawariq, Where They Meet Ustad Khatuna ca. 1570*, a large painting on cloth, was devised specifically as a narrative prop for telling stories with the text inscribed on the back of the image (fig. 23). As a visual complement to the act of story telling, the episodic images juxtaposed multiple layers of action contained within varying architectural structures. These paintings, for Kapur, represent the "epic dimension" in which the narrative is cast as "a moment" or "manifestation" of discrete yet corresponding accounts.⁵³ Although the

⁵² The *Hamzanama* tells the fantastic story of Amir Hamza, the uncle of the Prophet Mohammed. The visual recreation of Hamza's travels across the world spreading the teachings of Islam were popularized during the rule of Akbar (1542-1605).

⁵³ Kapur, "Partisan Views," np.

elliptical visual narratives of the *Hamzanama* resist linear readings, the performative aspect of the storyteller's intercession is pivotal to their historical understanding. The reference to this historic mode within *Place for People* was reconfigured, and the agency of the storyteller as one who draws from a prescribed or inscribed text upon the back of the image was transferred to the front. The viewers could look upon the images and create their own stories --it was no longer the 'back-story' that was essential to animating the representations of *Place for People*-- but rather it was their tacitly foregrounded contemporary context that framed the stories they represented. Their ability to resonate outward in an ever widening circle of 'front-story' grounded in the memory of despotic rule lent them untold currency and potency.

Bhupen Khakhar's massive *The Celebration of Guru Jayanti*, 1980 included in *Place for People*, stands as rich example of the frontal possibilities of narration (fig. 24). The painting ruptures notions of a broad imagined community by focusing on the local - the man on the street - the everyday aspects of life. A guru goes about his religious observances but no one seems to notice. A group of men casually sit in the foreground chatting and smoking. The background is filled with people doing daily chores - it is a scene that could take place in any city or town. According to Khakhar, the inspiration for this image was the panoramic fresco *Allegory of Good Government* painted in the fourteenth century by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (fig. 25). Like Lorenzetti's allegorical image, *The Celebration of Guru Jayanti* spreads out across various fields of action; the subdued tones of the image coupled with its atmospheric perspective and its use of light washes, as opposed to heavy impasto, evoke a fresco-like quality. Unlike his earlier *Man Eating Jalebee*, 1974 (see fig. 19) with its saturated colour and

centralized viewpoint, *Guru Jayanti* was created after he returned to Baroda from England and represents a stylistic turn for Khakhar. In England he had participated in Timothy Hyman's exhibition *Narrative Paintings* alongside twenty-one other figurative painters.⁵⁴ Although Khakhar was the only painter who was not of British origin, Hyman affords him the title of "Honorary Englishman." The exhibition also included Howard Hodgkin, R.B. Kitaj and David Hockney to name a few.⁵⁵ Within his catalogue essay, Hyman positioned narrative painting's emergence in the 1980s as one that endeavored to reveal "personal predicaments, about the state of our society, our culture, and our psychological perceptions."⁵⁶ The personal predicaments for Khakhar translated into the every day life he witnessed unfolding around him in India. The people in *The Celebration of Guru Jayanti* read as archetypal figures - as multiple expressions of 'everyman' set amidst a broadly circumscribed social environment.⁵⁷ The image stood as a political statement by suggesting that a well-governed city in the post-Emergency moment was one that allowed people to gather in public. A benevolent government permitted life to continue without fear or the need to hide. Indeed, we can

⁵⁴ *Narrative Paintings: Figurative Art of Two Generations Selected by Timothy Hyman* (Bristol: Arnolfini, 1 September – 20 October 1979), np. The show traveled to three other locations in the United Kingdom: Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (26 October – 25 November 1979); City Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent (5 January – 2 February 1980); Fruit Market Gallery, Edinburgh (9 February-29 March 1980).

⁵⁵ Hyman, *Narrative Paintings*, np. In a review of the exhibition Anna Gruetzner indicated that "there are few memorable images" from the exhibition. And although she appreciated the scope of the exhibition, she questioned the intent of the return to narrative as a personal and experimental aesthetic position. She does, however, declare that Bhupen Khakhar's *Man in a Pub* is ironically one of the "most accurate descriptions of English life in the exhibition." "Narrative Paintings, Figurative Art of Two Generations," *The Burlington Magazine* 121 (December 1979): 817.

⁵⁶ Hyman, *Narrative Paintings*, np.

⁵⁷ Hyman attributed the production of *The Celebration of Guru Jayanti* to a bet made between Khakhar and Hodgkin over who could produce a large-scale image. *Bhupen Khakhar* (Bombay: Chemould Publications and Arts, 1998), 56. While on display at the Knoedler Gallery in London in 1983, the painting was stolen and has yet to resurface.

visually move freely through Khakhar's streets to witness a man shoeing a dog or another toiling away, stitching a garment. Unlike Lorenzetti's frescoes, this is not an idealized image. Khakhar underscores plurality and freedom, successfully striking equilibrium within the social spaces of difference.

The stylistic correlation between Khakhar's and Sheikh's works discussed earlier is obvious: multiple points of view, the role of architecture as an organizing principle and the attention paid to diverse social and religious practices. In *Revolving Routes* 1981, Sheikh moves away from generic cityscapes and the ubiquitous everyman to offer a more biographical account specifically rooted in the locale of Baroda (fig. 26). Sheikh sits at the vortex of the image. Some of his work is laid out before him, yet as if caught in the centrifugal force of the image some sheaves of paper are driven air bound. The city of Baroda is caught up the energetic sweep of the image in which multiple narratives hover between the real and the imaginary⁵⁸ To the artist's right are the quadrants of the Baroda school and to his left, in the foliage of a tree set in an expansive courtyard, are portraits of Bhupen Khakhar, Geeta Kapur, K. G. Subramanyan and Vivan Sundaram. The "everyman" evoked by Khakhar's image is reconfigured by Sheikh and it is interesting to note that his friends and colleagues are removed from the chaotic routes of the cityscape. Why are they set apart? Is the visual gesture an

⁵⁸ In many ways Shiekh's image lends credence to Kapur's observation about the objectives of Place for People. The narrative images "bring in allegory and realism in mediated forms" which in turn according to Kapur, "build up an epic position whereby the artist can introject [sic] his subject-matter into history." "Partisan Views," np.

expression of solidarity or separation? Much like the dramatic encounter between the man and the *Al – Fâtir* (angels) in *Speaking Street* the vignette is ambiguous (fig.13).

The visual dynamic set up between the self-portrait of the Sheikh and his friends carries through in the work of Nalini Malani. Her *Concerning a Friend*, 1981 portrays the young artist sitting deferentially on the floor gazing up at the formidable seated figure of Geeta Kapur (fig. 27).⁶⁰ While Malani's focus is the critic, Kapur stares out from the picture plane, as if her eyes are firmly rooted on the horizon of the future. The relationship between the artist and the critic seems to sum up the overall strategy of *Place for People* and the role that Kapur played in it as one who refused to offer deterministic readings of the exhibition.

Agents of Postcolonialism and Radical Pluralism

It is worth noting that in 1981 there were three major art centres: Baroda/Bombay, Calcutta/Shantiniketan and Delhi. The artists included in *Place for People* can be seen as representatives of these three geographic or artistic enclaves.⁶² Clearly the list of artists, with their various geographic affiliations, hints at an attempt to

⁶⁰ Thomas McEvelley identifies the seated figure as Geeta Kapur in his "The Common Air," *Artforum* 24 (Summer 1986): 110.

⁶² Sheikh, Khakhar and Sundaram earned degrees from the Baroda school and were still variously affiliated with it. Malani and Patwardhan lived and work in Bombay and Chowdhury was educated at the Government College of Arts and Crafts in Calcutta.

reject an undifferentiated national in favour of pluralist expressions.⁶³ Kapur's call to reject the narrow constraints of identity resonated with the emergent theoretical considerations of postcolonial theory. The question of the past loomed large in Kapur's catalogue essay, and *Place for People* coalesced with some of the critical theoretical shifts brought to the fore with the rise of postcolonial theory. The return to the narrative in the 1980s can be seen as a distinctly postcolonial gesture which takes on a certain historical veracity when set against what I consider to be one of the most interesting ideas put forth in Edward Said's landmark study *Orientalism*.⁶⁴ Said explored the narrative as a latent force within colonial states. Its eradication was fueled by colonial projects that positioned the "other" as a stable and essentialized identity that was ultimately knowable through the hegemony of vision. In this capacity, the Orientalist of the colonial period became "a kind of agent of comprehensible visions."⁶⁵ What is of particular interest to me is how Said posits the narrative as a site of instability and potential insurgency that challenged a holistic and reductive view of the Orient. Although Said is careful to point out that the narrative was defeated by colonialism's panoptic surveillance of indigenous cultures, if one considers the historic demise of particularized storytelling against its return in the *Place for People*, then one must ask how does the reclamation of the narrative bear upon the contemporary moment?

⁶³ This strategy mirrors that of Group 1890 which sought out a collective identity based upon ideological, rather than geographical, unity.

⁶⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 239.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

My question stands in part as a rhetorical device signaling a shift in my own storyline toward a discussion of the productive possibilities of the narrative. If one considers how the narrative, both historically and visually, endorsed a politics of the people, its revival in the 1980s has an additional theoretical foundation. It is here that I would like to consider the concurrent reframing of India's own history spearheaded by the Subaltern Studies group. The Subaltern Studies group successfully recast the model of historiography in India by inverting the top down model of Indian Nationalism, in which the indigenous elite was cast as the key liberators from colonial rule. Their operating assumption fueled an examination of particular sites of peasant resistance as they unfolded within the varied social, political and geographical terrain of India. It was the untold masses, the Subaltern Studies scholars argued, who played an equal part in the agitation for self-rule. Insurgency was particularized within certain social strata, it was random - temporally and socially contingent - and often occurred beyond the pale of the urban elite. Notions of culture, kinship and geographical locality were examined by the Subaltern scholars in order to highlight the conceptual gaps and silences of nationalist historiography. Significantly, the Subaltern Studies collective rejected a vertical model of political mobilization, in which the oppressed rose up against the oppressor, in favour of one that expanded horizontally. Ranajit Guha's manifesto for the group, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," posited the political views of particularized people and groups as key components of anti-colonial agitation. The horizontal conception of insurgency allowed for a "politics of the people" to emerge through which sites of insurgency were considered in opposition to

the extant elitist model of resistance.⁶⁶ The insertion of the people from below into historiography allowed for demographic difference to enter the discourse and methodologically facilitated a discussion of the particulars of anti-colonial agitation. In effect, the Subaltern scholars demythologized the Indian nation in order to dismantle the juggernaut of a united India, in which the parts were subsumed into an undifferentiated model of resistance.

The Indian nation, at least within the theoretical and historical engagements of the Subaltern Studies group, was reconfigured from national representations of space into one that allowed for representational spaces of the people within the nation to emerge. This shift from the conceptual or the stable abstract construct of the nation in which the parts were subordinated to the whole, toward a model which was more dynamic and contingent, allowed for the space of the nation to live and speak. The theoretical undertaking of the Subaltern Studies group was key to an emergent understanding of how national texts were dismantled and can be placed parallel to the reconfiguration of how the concepts of the national impacted the artistic realm.

It is the issue of the nation, and how it was represented in the post Emergency moment, that informs what I identified at the outset of this chapter as the second subplot operating within *Place for People*. Like the Subaltern Studies group, *Place for People* cut across vertical boundaries through its horizontal representations of the everyday. The ideological thrust of the exhibition suggested by Kapur is marked by the absence of

⁶⁶ Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds., Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 40. First published in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1-8.

iconic representations. Indeed, in the wake of the Emergency, this exhibition jettisoned the vertical and monolithic notions of nationhood imbued with grand iconic or mythological references in favour of the particular and the local. The rejection of the iconic form was pivotal at this moment and by representing the people of the nation, rather than collapsing them into a reified sign *Place for People* dislodged the visual antecedents of a national identity, which first emerged during the early agitations against colonialism. Representations of the nation were cast as abstract ideals which effaced differences and perhaps set a visual precedent for how the conceptual nation manifest itself in times of political crisis. Here, of course, I refer to Abanindranath Tagore's image of *Bharat Mata*, 1905 (fig. 28). As an emblem of political and aesthetic solidarity, *Bharat Mata* was printed onto silk banners and carried through the streets as an icon for the fundraising activities of the *Swadeshi* movement in 1905-06.⁶⁷ However, while Tagore's image may have expressed critical social solidarity to serve the early nationalist movement well, the declaration of the Emergency gave rise to another such gesture: a call for the need to dismantle iconic representations of India and de-link the cultural from the national.

If Tagore's image was embedded in the utopic dream of future democracy and self-rule, M.F. Husain's iconic and mythological images published in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* on July 27, 1975 articulated a dystopia of untold and dark dimensions (fig. 29).⁶⁸ The dating of these images is critical to how one is to understand them.

⁶⁷ Tapati Guha Thakurta, *The Making of a New Indian Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal 1850-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 259.

⁶⁸ "In the News..." *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (July 27, 1975): 24. I discussed these images at length in my M.A. Thesis, *Bodies at Play in the Field of the Nation: M.F. Husain and the Trace of Modernity* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2000).

Although this full-page layout was published in July 1975, it references three events that took place a month before the Emergency was declared. These graphic images were widely shown on Doordarshan, India's National Television station, and were circulated in a government issued pamphlet endorsing the Emergency entitled, "The Triumph of Good over Evil."⁶⁹ The first image, *Twelfth June '75* [sic], marks the day that Indira Gandhi was found guilty of election fraud by the Allahabad high court. The word *janata* or 'The People' rests on the shoulders of a headless but multi-armed figure who points at a lone woman held aloft by a cupped hand. The word *janaki* inscribed beside the solitary and besieged figure enables us to identify her as the wrongly accused Sita from the epic *Ramayana*. This image's mythological antecedents capitalized on its audience's ability to recognize the visual claim that the Prime Minister, like Sita, was falsely accused.

The second image, entitled *Twenty-fourth June '75*, shows India in turmoil and marks the day that the charges against the Prime Minister were upheld by the Supreme Court. Bharat Mata is stripped bare; her hair is unbound to suggest the brewing turmoil within the nation-state. The final image, entitled *Twenty-sixth June '75*, boldly represents the Prime Minister as the goddess Durga astride a lion poised for battle. The Emergency has begun. On this same day in a radio broadcast Prime Minister Indira Gandhi claimed the Emergency was necessary "to introduce certain progressive measures of benefit to the common man and woman of India..."⁷⁰ It was the common

⁶⁹ Indra Molhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 174.

⁷⁰ The transcript of the radio broadcast is reprinted in *Indira Gandhi, Selected Speeches and Writings, vol III, 1972-1977* (Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1984), 177-8.

men and women who were most deeply affected by the “beautification” or slum clearing projects and the draconian family planning measures of the Emergency. However, the strictures on civil liberties resonated through all aspects of life: the press was censored and criticisms of the government were met with imprisonment. The consequence of Husain’s political resurrection of the iconic was the masking of the horrors felt by the common man on the streets during the Emergency. Husain’s gesture may have simply rehearsed the conceptual forms of the nation; however, after the Emergency, it was clear that such abstract national forms could no longer be a palimpsest – or a site of endless re-inscription in which mythological figures were repeatedly called into the service of state. The Emergency barred artist practice against such grand gestures.

In 1977, *The Great Confrontation: Bimonthly on the Problems of Art*, a new little magazine, emerged.⁷¹ The journal was an attempt to question the place of the artist and art in society. It dealt specifically with issues of the art historical record; regional representation and the hegemony of both state politics and state run art institutions such as Lalit Kala Akedemi.⁷² This modest short-lived journal raised serious questions about the institutions of art in India and suggested that realpolitik had been an issue which eluded the contemporary artist at moments of crisis. In the May – June 1978 issue Bijan Bhattacharya wrote a commentary on the place of the artist in

⁷¹ The archives at the Baroda School held five issues that proved to be of great interest, not only as historical documents but also as a resource illustrating pressing issues about artistic production in the wake of the Emergency. Published in New Delhi and edited by the sculptor Balbir Singh Katt, its issues invited a number of guest editors to offer their opinions about the state of contemporary art. An alumnus of Santiniketan and MSU Baroda, Katt was the Dean of Visual Arts at Benaras Hindu University until he mysteriously disappeared in 2000. Subhash Mishra, “Intrigues in Academia,” *India Today* (June 12, 2000), <http://www.india-today.com/itoday/20000612/crime.html>.

⁷² K. V. Haridasan, “Akademi,” *The Great Confrontation* (May-June 1977): 3.

time of political strife. The article entitled, “Artist and The [sic] Social Responsibility” opined:

The crisis of the artist today is the crisis of the individual isolated from society. As the artist is able to generate a broad social understanding among the people, leading to an activation of the people against the forces of reaction, the artist himself is integrated into society in the process. When the artist fails to achieve this interaction with society, he can flounder in the hallucination of his egoism.⁷³

Bhattacharya, the author of the Indian People’s Theatre Association’s (IPTA) *Nabanna* or *New Harvest* (1944), obviously felt that art and artists were still removed from the public sphere in the wake of the Emergency. However, in the next issue in the letters to the editor I found an interesting observation on the lack of artistic resistance to the Emergency.

Eventually during the Emergency, when the whole of the nation was reeling under the fire of repression, the artist failed to spot *Nabanna*’s crawling baby fumbling over the corpses searching for its dead mothers breasts. So the hollowness of the creative output enlarged. Did the artists rise to paint or perform the massacre at Turkman Gate? Did the artist portray any Rajan or Shehlata Reddy? Of course, they were busy portraying Durga.⁷⁴

The author references the political agitations of Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) and the production of Bijan Bhattacharya’s play *Nabanna*. The play dealt directly with the suffering of the people during the Bengal famine of 1943 during which

⁷³ Bijan Bhattacharya, “Artist and The Social Responsibility,” *The Great Confrontation*, Vol. II, No.1 (May-June 1978): 18.

⁷⁴ A.A. Khaan, “Artists to be Blamed,” *Readers Confront*, *The Great Confrontation* Vol. II, No.1 (May-June 1978): np.

an estimated three million people died.⁷⁵ The play fearlessly dealt with the politics of oppression; however, according to Khaan no equal condemnation of the Emergency was heard. Citing the lack of artistic response to the demolition of the settlements around Turkman Gate in Old Delhi and the subsequent massacre of protesters by police in 1976, and the famous Rajan case in which two young students were whisked away from their college in Calicut, Khaan asks hard questions about the linkages of art and political protest.⁷⁶ The issues raised around the Emergency in *The Great Confrontation* without a doubt carried some heartfelt currency; however, as the earlier works of Sheikh and Sundaram attest there *were* visual registers of protest against the Emergency. Yet unlike Husain's, they did not circulate widely. This in and of itself lends credence to the oppressive nature and the strict censorship during the long days of the Emergency.

Indeed, *Place for People* dismantled the solitary figures of the nation, such as those promoted by Husain, to represent its individual parts, the people who make up the nation.⁷⁷ The reclamation of the figure in the 1980s articulated a space in between, a critical interstice – overlapping fields of temporal difference, in conjunction with contemporary juxtapositions of the personal and the collective. The exhibition took up

⁷⁵ The famine was attributed to the fiscal mismanagement and indifference of the colonial state. For more on this play see Rustom Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 40-54.

⁷⁶ J. Dayal and A. Bose, discuss at length the demolitions at Turkman Gate. See *For Reason of State*, 35-65. In 1976, P. Rajan, and Joseph Chali were apprehended for their apparent Naxalite activities and although there is no official record of the arrest or the charges, it is known that Rajan died in police custody. Despite his father's continued vigilance to find out what exactly happened, his pursuance of justice through the Supreme Court has largely ended in a blind alley. *PUCL Bulletin* (October 1981), <http://www.pucl.org/from-archives/81oct/rajan.htm>. The Rajan case was made into a movie in 1988 entitled *Piravi* directed by Shaji N. Karun. The film received *Mention d'honneur - Caméra d'Or* at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival.

⁷⁷ Rajadhyaksha notes, "Modernism was itself transposed into a new frontier. The emphasis on narrative-typically a sort of how things work type of examination served mainly to bypass an apparently key contradiction. Now it can be asked: how can the Indian artist be truly modern, it is from the premise that the Indian tradition discourages individualism." "The Last Decade," 216.

exploratory possibilities, and the identities represented within the paintings of this exhibition set up a series of interrogatory examinations: who are the people of India today? How do they live and what are their experiences? It is through this visual reappraisal and the tandem engagements with the banal and the everyday that the representation of a stable and iconic nation is vanquished.

This is not to say that the iconic was completely evacuated from the images of *Place for People*. Chowdhury's figural studies done in ink and pastel are an anomalous inclusion in the exhibition and unlike most of the works (with the exception of Khakhar's *Man with a Red Scarf*, 1980) his images focus upon a lone figure set within an empty ground. The context for these images is not articulated through spatial allusions or architectural references, but rather through their absence. The stoic solitary figure in his *Man III*, 1981 wears nothing save a Nehru cap on his head (fig. 30). Hatch-marks cover his corpulent body and strangely attenuated limbs. His physicality, offset by the undifferentiated negative space, tests the boundaries of the picture plane. Yet Chowdhury's totemic figures recall a cultural lineage that dates back to the historical *yaksha* figure whose primary purpose was to function as a figure marking out the boundaries of a sacred space. Within a secular and contemporary milieu Chowdhury's *Man III* seems satirical, the Nehru cap and his podgy body speak of political excess and the differences between now and then. The decadence of Congress rule is clearly expressed and the iconic within this image is reframed to speak of perversion and of excess. In writing about his own artist engagements Chowdhury stated:

These artists [in *Place for People*] are open-minded and observant of art movements taking place outside India, and know that it is necessary to be aware of them. They may not hesitate to acknowledge occasional experiments done, achievements made elsewhere, but prefer to look at them in relation to their own problems of art and society.⁷⁸

His opinion articulated how *Place for People* stood apart from other concurrent artistic ventures. He suggests that while artists working today should be aware of art movements taking place beyond the national boundaries, he saw no reason, “to be a part of the international trends.”⁷⁹ He poetically stated, “We may not forget, a tulip can bloom in Europe while a lotus opens its petals in India.”⁸⁰

Chowdhury’s opinions about the place of contemporary art in juxtaposition with the west stand in productive opposition with both the statement by Sundaram in the catalogue and his large richly coloured paintings included in the exhibition. His *Guddo*, 1980, like Shiekh’s *Speaking Street*, employs architecture as a stabilizing force but sets it within a fractured and collage-like landscape (fig. 31). His painterly montage juxtaposes a young, *salwar kameez*-clad woman in the foreground with an old woman sitting on her haunches in the background.⁸¹ On the left hand side of the picture a man lies on the ground, his feet touching the window of a burning house. The two figures seem unaware of each other’s presence and their incongruous spatial relationship implies a profound distance. Whether it is a psychological or generational distance is up to us to decide.

⁷⁸ Jogen Chowdhury, *Place for People*, np.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ The image references the rape of a young woman that took place in a police station in the mid 1970s. See Suneet Chopra, “Developing Radical Art: The Success Story,” *The Financial Express* (July 27, 2003), http://fecolumnists.expressindia.com/full_column.php?content_id=38872

By centering her attention on a desire to reject the narrow constraints of identity, Kapur's opening statement in the exhibition catalogue begs the question: how did the peopled places represented in these images become the site upon which the sensibility of the artist was imbued with a certain ideology?⁸² Certainly, if Chowdhury's and Sundaram's catalogue entries are any indication, the ideological viewpoints of the artists were sundry. Chowdhury celebrates indigenous origins, whereas Sundaram, by way of quoting key authors and artists of the twentieth century in his statement in the catalogue, set his sights firmly on the international horizon. His quote from Hannah Arendt perhaps exemplifies his artistic mandate: "Quotations have the double task of interrupting the flow of presentations with transcendent force and at the same time concentrating within themselves that which is presented."⁸³

Sudhir Patwardhan offered a different view of life by focusing more closely on the individual. His *The City*, 1977 also used architecture to define the spaces of social interaction (fig. 32). A solitary man sits in an urban bus stand drinking *chai* from a saucer, so that the liquid cools more rapidly. It is an indication of the pace of life within urban environs. Another man leans against a railing casually looking at a loaded bus. The juxtaposition of time and space evoke an urban landscape marked by both physical isolation and social inclusion. The banality of the everyday carries through to his *Street Play*, 1981; however, this image takes up a more ambiguous subject matter (fig. 33).

⁸² I would like to once again call upon the introductory words of Kapur's catalogue essay:

The Indian Art situation can now sustain a number of options which cut across the conventional polarities of Indian and Western. Rather than tying ourselves in knots about the question of identity in these terms we should now be able to bring these new options – of sensibility and ideology – into focus.

Kapur, "Partisan Views," np.

⁸³ Sundaram, "Place for People," np.

Conceived in two discrete panels of action, on the right we see what could be a performance of a street play, perhaps a reference to the IPTA. An actor sits on his knees, arms raised in a dramatic gesture while another man looks on impassively. The left panel takes up a darker vision. Men hurl stones at another crouched in the streets. In the background, people stare at the social drama unfolding before their eyes.⁸⁴ This image addresses the politics of looking and the question of social responsibility. It takes up notions of social boundaries, and the distances between action and inertia. Patwardhan stated, “In *The City* and *Train* I was moving back, creating distances between the figure and myself. Distancing meant a restraint in projecting strong impulses directly into the figure, and channeling them instead into a rigid overall structure of the picture.”⁸⁵ The appeals to the people so evident in the images included in *Place for People* not only ruptured monolithic assertions of state, but also allowed for a more pluralist vision of India to emerge. In the wake of the Emergency this was, without a doubt, a radical initiative. In his assessment of the exhibition Ajay Sinha suggests:

In painting people in their mental and physical states in specific milieus and articulating them in a space that opens out to define them in a coherent image, these artists aim at a clearer version of the world than their predecessors. Unlike the art of the ‘50s and ‘60s, the contemporary art expresses a non-utopian concern with reality.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Patwardhan’s image seems to allude to the IPTA’s consciousness-raising street plays and, interestingly, it foreshadows the work of the *Jana Natya Manch (Janam)* and the social activism of Safdar Hashmi, who was killed during a performance in 1989 by Congress goondas. See, *The Right to Perform: Selected Writings of Safdar Hashmi* (Delhi: Sahmat, 1989); Qamar Azad Hashmi, *The Fifth Flame: The Story of Safdar Hashmi* (Delhi: Viking, 1997).

⁸⁵ Patwardhan, *Place for People*, np

⁸⁶ “Place for People – New Images,” *Journal of Art and Ideas* 1 (October-December, 1982): 28.

The transgression of both social space and the rights of the individual during the Emergency may have precipitated the emergence of cultural radicalism and allowed the figure to be imbued with a certain political agenda. Through the rejection of a grand vision of history, the artist interpolates her/himself into a micro-narrative that disrupts (much like the Subaltern Studies project) a top-down model. The presence of the artist and his cohorts (as evident in the works of Sheikh and Malani) within the image dismantles the possibility of a unilateral history. The references to the personal and the particular affirm the union of their epic adventure across the boundaries of temporal and pictorial space. But the appeal to culture, as something that stands apart from history (writ large) has imbedded within it a different set of orthodoxies.

Micro-narratives and metonymy

. . .the new art should find ways of aligning the imaginative and historical dimensions so as to gain not simply an ideology but visionary possibilities in art.⁸⁷

According to Kapur, narration or the tendency to tell stories was a key component in both the worldview and the representational strategies of Indian artists since time immemorial. But the efficacy of *Place for People* rested upon deployments of cultural authenticity, an argument that Kapur discursively introduced in 1972 and later conceptually explored in her *Pictorial Space Exhibition* (1978). The idea - to a certain extent - was imbedded in a notion of identity that was pluralistic and ahistorical. Despite *Place for People's* assertion of unique cultural origins, its arrival coincided with the rise of the trans-avant-garde in Italy and Germany. Coined by Achille Bonito

⁸⁷ Kapur, "Partisan Views," np.

Oliva, the trans-avant-garde also has at its roots issues of ideology and sensibility.⁸⁸ Although I do not wish to pursue an argument based on cultural relativism, it is the implicit political problematics of the movement that needs to be considered in juxtaposition with the initiatives of *Place for People*.

For Oliva (and perhaps for Kapur) the artist becomes a vehicle of cultural sensibility in which time and space run amok in a free flowing timelessness; however, the two authors differ at a fundamental level. Ideology has no place in the work of the artists of the trans-avant-garde. According to Oliva, it was the arrogance and the progressivism of the avant-garde principle that ultimately led to its contradictory and fatal wedding to ideology.⁸⁹ On the contrary, Kapur sees the work of narrative figuration as the means by which the artists or perhaps his/her visual engagements can stand as an ideological platform. However, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, in his critique of the trans-avant-garde, offers a slightly different reading:

The aesthetic attraction of these eclectic painting practices originates in a nostalgia for the moment in the past when the painting modes to which they refer had historical authenticity. But the specter of derivativeness hovers over every contemporary attempt to resurrect the figuration, representation and traditional modes of production. This is not so much because they actually derive from particular precedents, but because their attempts to reestablish forlorn aesthetic positions immediately situates them in historical secondariness. This is the price of instant acclaim achieved by affirming the status quo under the guise of innovation. The primary function of such culture re-representations is the confirmation of the hierarchies of ideological domination.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ *Trans-avantgarde International*, trans. Dwight Gast and Helena Kontova (Milan : Giancarlo Politi, 1982).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹⁰ "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 60.

Although, it is important to remember that *Place for People* embraced the past on a conceptual rather than visual level – it did not literally recreate past art forms but rather utilized them as a catalyst for a present day art that reflected contemporary concerns. The ideological thrust completely emerges when the past is quoted but not represented. In its review of the past, the contingent spaces of *Place for People* interrupted the conceits of the present. It was an expression of the borderline work of culture in which (and I re-quote Bhabha here) “[T]he ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.”⁹¹ The exhibition effectively marked a break with the historical linkages with the hegemony of the colonial state and its legacy carried on through the assertions of Congress rule during the Emergency. The tandem force of *Place for People*, its dual subtexts I identified at the outset, shifted how contemporary art was to function within India and how it was received within the international art world.⁹² Though Rajadhyaksha is quick to dismiss any fundamental affiliation between the trans-avant-garde and the figurative artists in India, on the basis of Buchloch’s reading of the trans-avant-garde movement as “authoritarian” with its focus upon the atavistic declarations of a unique culture the lines of demarcation become muddled. The question of authoritarianism is an issue that emerged in the latter part of the 1980s when

⁹¹ Bhabha, *Location*, 7.

⁹² Writing ten years after the exhibition, Vivan Sundaram saw it as a missed opportunity to form a cohesive movement. He observed, “[T]he concern then was how narrative brought about a sense of the collective even as it foregrounded the possibility of dealing with oneself. Both Sheikh’s and Bhupen’s paintings made this evident; each of us realized our own experiences, our own context; and that the work must be generated from direct sensuous experience of one’s reality, the flux between the personal and the social, the collective and the political.” “A Tradition of the Modern,” *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 20-21 (March 1991): 36.

the question of radicalism introduced by the *Place for People* and its assertions of cultural identity find full explication.

**CHAPTER THREE: COUNTER PRAXIS -
THE INDIAN RADICAL PAINTERS AND SCULPTORS ASSOCIATION**

Foreign art models and their cheap imitations by local artists have cast a shadow on Indian visions and memories and have resulted in a crisis in painting, sculpting and other art forms. We have realized that the mission of Indian modern art, with its hallowed historical path, is being trampled upon at the festivities of bureaucrats in Paris and America.¹

In late February 1989 the exhibition entitled the *Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association* opened at the Calicut Town Hall in the southwestern state of Kerala. Running for a mere three days, the show announced the birth of a radical artistic collective bearing the same appellation as the exhibition's title. Though this exhibition marked the *formal* emergence of the Radicals, at least since 1985 a varied constellation of Keralite artists left their critical mark on the *artscape* of North India. Through a series of exhibitions staged in both Delhi and Baroda these artists actively questioned the theoretical and political assumptions of contemporary art as it had developed throughout the 1980s. Led by the sculptor K.P. Krishnakumar (1958-1989) the Radicals included: Jyothi Basu, K. Hareendran, C. Pradeep, C.K. Rajan, M. Madhusudhan, Alex Mathew, Puskin E.H., K. Reghunadhan, K.R. Karunakaran, Anoop B., D. Alexander, K. Prabhakaran and Anita Dube.² The Calicut exhibition represented

¹ Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association, "Manifesto," Kozhikode (Calicut), Kerala (January 27, 1989), np.

² These fourteen artists represent the critical core of the group; however, at the time of the Calicut exhibition the list of affiliated artists was expanded to include: Bahu, Valsaraj, Pradeep, Sunil Kumar, Radhakrishnan, Johns, Piya and Aayisha. It is also worth noting that while I was in Kerala this roster varied greatly depending on whom I spoke with.

the culmination point of their endeavours and the Radicals' embrace of the local stood as a volatile act of refusal. Though the exhibition announced their official birth it also foreshadowed their untimely demise: a few months later Krishnakumar would take his own life.

United on the basis of both regional and political affiliations and urged on by a shared apprehension over the growing commercialization of contemporary art in the 1980s, the figurative work of the Radicals brought a different set of concerns to artistic practice. Reflecting a specifically Marxist ideological foundation rooted in their natal state the Radicals were committed to the idea of cultural action and social change and their visual and discursive engagements were fueled by a desire to make art accessible to all. Significantly, their designation as both "radical" and "Indian" within the context of the Calicut exhibition tested the rhetorical and epistemological limits of modernism and the assumption of cultural and temporal unity brought to the fore in the 1981 exhibition *Place for People*. Indeed theirs was an argument over the use and or abuse of the term "radical." Perhaps it is worthwhile rehearsing Kapur's earlier words in her catalogue essay for *Place for People* in which she fastened the badge of radicalism on the figurative artists represented by the exhibition:

Yes, if by radicalism we mean the most advanced view of change along democratic lines, for to let the people come back into the pictures and tell their stories must indeed merit the name of radicalism.³

This case study considers the rhetoric of radicalism in contradistinction to that proposed by Kapur and artistic initiatives of *Place for People* to consider how the term

³ Kapur, "Partisan Views," np.

“radical” was re-claimed by the Kerala artists as an adversarial stance. Arguably it was their position of subalterity, their geographical distance from the artistic metropolis that allowed the Radicals’ counter-praxis to emerge as a recollection of a history that unapologetically wove through western modernism and their own localized geographical milieu. Although they effectively challenged the reclamation of the pan-Indian “cultural” past as a viable resource for contemporary practice their critical efforts have, for the most part, gathered the dust of disregard. The discursive ellipses and silences that obscure the Radicals initiatives not only suggest a certain epistemic violence but also ideological intolerance.

The scholarship on the Radicals remains thin and to date Shivaji Panikkar, professor of Art History and Aesthetics at the Baroda School, has written a series of articles (since 1995) that either directly or indirectly address the Radicals’ praxis.⁴ Their arrival at the Baroda school in 1987 is discussed at length by Ashish Rajadhyaksha in his chapter, “The Last Decade” that appeared in *Contemporary Art in Baroda* (1997).⁵ Kapur as well has mentioned the Radicals in various publications; however, the unity of these discussions rests in the assertion that the Radicals were a problematic “blip” on the radar screen of contemporary art.⁶ Although I will address this scholarship at a later point in this chapter, at this juncture, it is noteworthy to

⁴ “Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association: The Crisis of Political Art in Contemporary India,” in *Creative Arts in Modern India: Essays in Comparative Criticism*, eds., Ratan Parimoo and Indramohan Sharma (New Delhi: Books and Books, 1995); “Two Spikey Subjectivities: Identity, Art-making and Left Politics 1,” *Matters of Art: India’s First E-Zine on Art* <http://www.mattersofart.com/lead8.htm>.; Shivaji Panikkar, Preeta Nair and Anshuman Das Gupta, “Art Subjectivity and Ideology: Colonial and Post-Independence India,” *Nandan* XVII (1997).

⁵ Ed. Gulammohammed Sheikh (New Delhi: Tulika, 1997).

⁶ “A Stake in Modernity: Brief History of Contemporary Indian Art,” in *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1993); “When Was Modernism in Indian Art?” in *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (Delhi: Tulika Press, 2000).

mention that both the rise of figurative painting and the production of contemporary art historical discourse has its roots within the Baroda school and those writers who have ventured forth to offer opinions about the Radicals have indelible ties with the school.

This case study considers the limited analyses of the Radicals to address issues relating to representation and reception. By privileging the Radicals' unique historical and regional locale as a catalyst for their artistic practice, my study tilts the axis of analysis away from the criticisms of them generated out of the Baroda School. Rustom Bharucha's articulation of the "intracultural" position is particularly useful when considering the social, political, and regional differences underscoring the Radicals artistic agenda. As a conceptual framework for disrupting assumptions of a homogenous nation Bharucha positions the "intracultural" as a dynamic site that exists "between and across specific communities and regions within the boundaries of the nation-state."⁷ In considering both the Radicals' representational strategies and their rhetorical engagements this chapter seeks to test the accepted artistic boundaries of a national artistic modernity to ask a series of larger questions about the structuring principles of contemporary art in the 1980s.

The staging of the Calicut exhibition beyond the pale of metropolitan art centres was a self-conscious move that consistently resonated with the Radicals' ideological foundations. Their rejection of the national in favour of the regional was *not* an attempt to Balkanize artistic practice, nor was it a retreat into exile; rather, it was designed to

⁷ Rustom Bharucha, "Introduction," *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 8.

test whether or not the linkage of contemporary art and culture could ever transcend the domain of the North Indian urban middle class intelligentsia. Significantly, the manifesto and the broadsheet-cum-exhibition catalogue were written in Malayalam as opposed to English, the preferred language of post colonial India - or perhaps more pointedly the language of the educated urban bourgeoisie (figs. 34-36). The rejection of English as the language of representation not only allowed the Radicals to reach out to a broader Malayalam speaking audience but also it was a decisive strategy of resistance. As Ajaz Ahmad points out the use of the English language participates in a larger ideological and national schematic:

. . . in all the cosmopolitan cities of the country, an English-based intelligentsia for whom the only literary document produced in English is a *national* document; all else is regional, hence minor and forgettable, so that English emerges in this imagination as *one* of the Indian languages, which it undoubtedly is, but as *the* language of national integration and bourgeois civility.⁸

In rejecting the language of “national integration and bourgeois civility” the Radicals secured their position as self-proclaimed subalterns who could actively subvert and challenge the dominant paradigms of contemporary art.

By consistently representing those who fell between the cracks of both artistic and political representation the Radicals’ social realism introduced a vision of Indian modernism that was nuanced by the often untenable disparities between region, class, and caste. The Radicals maintained that if art was ever to reclaim its revolutionary possibilities it had to reach a broader public and could not be reduced to an empty

⁸ *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 75.

commodity circulating for consumption by a select few. The Calicut manifesto clearly stated,

In the pitiful Indian conditions, art remains a burden thrust upon the revolutionary class. It is only when the artist and his art meet the public do they reveal the real issues involved.⁹

The public, in this sense was not wealthy urbanites, informed collectors, or the NRI looking to buy art to increase their social capital. At the focal point of their artistic initiatives stood the people existing in-between—those whose struggle for survival was rendered invisible by virtue of the fact that they were labourers, farmers or fisherman supplying the needs of the country.¹⁰

The issue of “entrepreneurial cultural politics” as the uncontested domain of the ruling urban classes loomed large in the manifesto produced at the time of the Calicut exhibition. In keeping with this, the signed manifesto questioned what was at stake in the recent international displays of Indian culture circulating under the auspices of the government-sponsored *Festival of India*. These festivals cast India’s distinct historical and contemporary artistic products as international ambassadors in a play for the

⁹ Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association, “Manifesto,” np. It is worth comparing this statement with that of Kapur’s:

Once Independence has been gained nationalism itself posed ontological questions – what is at stake in being Indian? And though the question may easily devolve into rhetoric, there is burden of it that rests on a particularly vexed class and its individuals.

That is the urban middle class intelligentsia including the artists.

See, “Contemporary Cultural Practice: Some Polemical Categories,” *Occasional Papers on History and Society, Second Series* (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, nd), 15.

I thank Jayanand Kizhakkevalappil for his help in translating this document.

¹⁰ The 2001 census, for example, indicates that only 27.78 % of India’s population live in urban areas. *Census of India, 2001* <http://www.censusindia.net/results/rudist.html>

liberalization of the economy under the stewardship of both Indira and Rajiv Gandhi.¹¹

However, the group's repudiation of India's participation in international cultural festivals took on a more directly confrontational and concrete tone in the month following the Calicut exhibition. Responding to the arrival of Sotheby's (London) in Bombay and their participation in an upcoming auction of contemporary art, the Radicals published the statement "Against the Imperialist Exploitation of Art" in the March 10, 1989 issue of the *Times of India* (see fig. 2). Printed on page 7 of the newspaper and offset by the large by-line "Timeless," the Radicals' statement was juxtaposed on the page with Aparajita Chandra's article, "Art Under The Hammer," applauding the international currency and financial success of Sothebys:

Sothebys, the world's oldest and finest fine art auctioneers, reported last year worldwide auction sales of \$1,814 billion. Encompassing the globe with a network of offices across Great Britain, the United States, Europe and the Far East.¹²

The laudatory treatment of Sotheby's arrival in Chandra's piece was diametrically opposed to the negative rhetorical thrust of the Radicals' statement. The physical proximity of the two articles on the page suggested the productive possibilities of an open dialogue regarding what was at stake in the burgeoning international interest in

¹¹ These exhibitions arguably echoed the world fairs of the 19th century in their unspoken attempts to reignite economic interests in India. Held between March and November 1982, the first *Festival of India* was a joint venture of the Indian and British Governments. The scale of the *Festival of India* marked the inception of Indian cultural festivals held throughout the 1980s in countries like England, France (1985-86) and the United States (1985-86). For more see Saryu Doshi, "Introduction," in *Pageant of Indian Art: Festival of India in Great Britain*, ed. Saryu Doshi (Bombay: Marg, 1983); Niranjana Desai, "The Festival of India in Britain, 1982," *The Round Table: Commonwealth Journal on International Affairs* 287 (August 1983). Geeta Kapur curated the exhibition *Contemporary India Art: An Exhibition of the Festival of India, 1982* which included all the artists who participated in *Place for People*. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1982). There was an additional exhibition of contemporary art held at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. *India: Myth and Reality: Aspects of Modern Indian Art* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1982).

¹² *The Times of India*, March 10, 1989, Bombay edition.

India's contemporary artistic engagements. However, instead of fostering further conversation, whether by design or default, the Radicals' statement articulated an impasse - a formidable breach in the social and political objectives of artistic practice in the late 1980s.

Against the Imperialist Exploitation of Art

The Sotheby's auction was the celebrated culmination point of *Timeless Art*, an exhibition of contemporary figurative work held earlier that same month on the central platform of the historic Victoria Terminus railway station in Bombay.¹³ Marking the occasion of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, the famous urban railway station opened in 1887. Built in a neo-Gothic style and firmly rooted in the colonial past, the architecture of Victoria Terminus ironically expresses the historical legacy of colonial paternalism. Atop its central dome stands the sculptural personification of progress and though one could argue that the allegorical power of the figure had long since passed in a climate of growing neo-capitalism its continued symbolic currency was open to debate. In 1989, however, it was not the exotic commodities of India that could potentially line the coffers of a foreign leviathan - it was India's distinct contemporary artistic products.

Timeless Art specifically centred on the resurgence of figurative work following in the wake of the success of *Place for People* and the participation of its artists in the

¹³ After the right wing Shiv Sena party came into power in Maharashtra in 1995, they began renaming colonial institutions and urban streets after historic local appellations: Victoria Terminus was renamed Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus after the famous Marathi king Chhatrapati Shivaji Raje Bhonslé (1630-1680).

Festival of India. If narrative figuration was in fact a radical democratic gesture that allowed “the people to come back into the pictures and tell their stories” then it became clear that by the time of the auction that some stories were more worthy of being told.¹⁴ Those that were forgotten in this lucrative transaction were the millions of displaced families that provided the cheap labour pool for building cities in which they could never afford to live.¹⁵ Although the staging of *Timeless Art* within the station was an unprecedented exhibitionary gesture, the Radicals seized upon the unfathomable gap between an art that claimed to represent the people and the reality of their everyday struggle.¹⁶ Positioning the new found international interest in contemporary art as evidence of the perils of embracing multinational economic interests and citing the 1984 Bhopal tragedy as critical evidence, the Radicals seethed with rage at the audacity of the *Times of India* for both sponsoring and staging the event in the “living gallery” of the central platform in Victoria Terminus.¹⁷

¹⁴ Kapur, “Partisan Views,” np.

¹⁵ Some have attributed the mass migration to urban centres as the direct result of large dam building projects undertaken by the Indian Institute of Public Administration. These undertakings were done in the name of progress. In the years immediately following Independence, large dam projects and irrigation projects were seen as a means to rectify India’s food shortages. Arundhati Roy, perhaps the most prolific critic of these projects, estimates that in the last fifty years over 33 million people have been displaced from their natal lands. Left with little options these uprooted people have migrated to major urban centres in search of livelihood. See *The Cost of Living* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

¹⁶ The unusual venue for the exhibition set a precedent in India for holding art exhibitions outside of traditional gallery spaces. The Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT) was the leading proponent of these types of exhibitions. SAHMAT was formed in late 1989 to protest the brutal murder of Marxist poet and street performer Safdar Hashmi on January 2, 1989. Ironically M.F. Husain’s image *Freedom: A Tribute to Safdar Hashmi* fetched the highest price at the *Timeless Art* auction (Rs. 10 lakh /\$30,000 Cnd) even though it was later revealed that Husain had merely postdated the work to make it seem like a posthumous memorial image.

¹⁷ On December 3, 1984, the Union Carbide Corporation, a U.S.-based multinational plant was the site of one of the worst industrial disasters in history. Located near the densely populated city of Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, the plant leaked a highly toxic cloud of methyl isocyanate into the air. Of the estimated one million people living in Bhopal at the time, 2,000 were killed immediately, at least 600,000 were injured, and at least 6,000 have died since.

The *tableaux vivant* of the station rife with destitute and desperate individuals stood as a bleak reminder of the social problems vexing urban India. The question of India's pristine and supra-mundane timelessness, so eloquently evoked by *Timeless Art* was an issue that found profound and immediate correspondence in the Radicals' statement:

In India it was the Colonialist strategy to see everything as 'timeless,' and now the Indian ruling classes see their country with the same eyes. The Indian farmer, the fisherman and the crowds of men and women covered with dust working to build the cities don't believe in timelessness. Their each moment passes through great agony. Day and night, summer and winter writhes through this time.¹⁸

The people, at least for the Radicals in 1989, were evacuated from the ideological text framing this stylistic turn, and the seminal auction suggested that at the cusp of the 90s the political efficacy of narrative figuration, underwritten by its appeals to radicalism, had succumbed to an unfathomable doublespeak.

Indeed, others like Marxist sociologist Vinayak Purohit expressed concern over the exhibition and its overt celebrations of a particular social stratum:

Compradorism was openly proclaimed. The catalogue pinpointed the timely point, '[T]he Indian Art situation can now sustain a number of options which cut across the *conventional* polarity of Indian and Western, rather than tying ourselves in knots about the question of identity. What makes the show interesting is the hybridization of sensibilities.' Thus the knotty issue is resolved by a

¹⁸ Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association, "Against Imperialist Exploitation of Art," *The Times of India*, March 10, 1989, Bombay Edition.

passionate embrace of the black and the white to produce brown mindlessness without any identity.¹⁹

It is interesting that Kapur's words that first appeared in the *Place for People* catalogue are reworked in the context of the *Timeless Art* bid folder and for the sake of comparison I rehearse them here:

The Indian art situation can now sustain a number of options which cut across the conventional polarities of Indian and Western. Rather than tying ourselves in knots about the question of identity in these terms we should now be able to bring these new options – of sensibility and ideology – into focus.²⁰

Unlike her earlier statement, within the bid folder the strategic deployments of ideology and sensibility as structural points of differentiation give way to notions of hybridization. However, the celebration of hybridized identities, as Rasheed Araeen observes, needs to be met with some suspicion: “[T]he triumph of the hybrid is in fact the triumph of a neo-liberal multiculturalism and global capitalism.”²¹ Although the Radicals were at times bombastic and adamantly unforgiving, they raised significant questions about contemporary artistic practice as it developed through the 1980s, questions that have largely remained unanswered.

Competing Cosmopolitanisms

Cultural pluralism recognizes difference so long as the general category of the people is still fundamentally

¹⁹ Vinayak Purohit, “Timeless Mindless Tamasha,” in *Compradorism, Times of India and M.F. Husain* (Bombay: Indian Institute of Social Research, 1989), 6.

²⁰ “Partisan Views,” np.

²¹ “A New Beginning,” 15.

understood within a national frame. Such benevolence is often well intentioned, but it fails to acknowledge the critique of modernity that minoritarian cosmopolitans embody in their historic witness to the twentieth century.²²

Cosmopolitanism is a category that has recently been revived as a theoretical means to disrupt the general in favor of the particular. It denies universalisms to position itself as theoretical rubric that encourages a rejection of normative and conclusive historical values to stress the possibilities of mutable encounters. In a collection of essays appearing in *Public Culture* Sheldon Pollock, Homi Bhabha, Carol Breckenridge and Dipesh Chakrabarty address the issues of nationalism, globalization, and multiculturalism and how they have impacted our understanding of cosmopolitanism.²³ Though necessarily linked to the legacy of colonialism and points of intercultural contact vis-à-vis a larger experience of modernity, the authors acknowledge that, “[C]osmopolitans today are often the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism’s upward mobility, and bereft of those comforts and customs of national belonging.”²⁴ What I find most productive in these attempts to rethink cosmopolitanism is how it allows one to consider more discreetly the articulations of peripheral cosmopolitanisms and how they actively dislodge centrifugal assertions of national culture. Within this framework cosmopolitanism nuances the staid dialectical encounter between poles of difference and allows a more complex reading of particularized social,

²² Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, Carol A. Breckenridge, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Cosmopolitanisms,” *Public Culture* 12, no.3 (2000): 582.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

political and cultural/geographical contingencies.²⁵

Clearly within my own project the notion of cosmopolitanism enables a tactical rethinking of the Radicals' emergence to consider the expanse between the theoretical shifts between the modern writ large as they emerged against the more pluralistic assumptions of modernity/postmodernism. In this context the Radicals were not so much the "victims of modernity" but rather stood as voracious critics of *national* modernity in their articulation of minority cosmopolitanism rooted within their specific geographical locale of Kerala. If the Baroda school had established itself as a "cosmopolitan island in a provincial though increasingly industrialized town" then its cosmopolitanism was conceptual rather than concrete and rested within its own early pedagogical mandates to offer a synthesis of Indian and western art.²⁶ In contradistinction, the Radicals were immersed in a social and cultural milieu that had historically witnessed the flux and flow of many cultures. Kerala had established contacts with sea trading nations and distant cultures long before the rest of India. Christianity arrived in Kerala as early as the 3rd Century AD and its port towns like Cochin and Calicut bear the architectural signs and legacies of cultural encounters with the Chinese, the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the Jewish Diaspora. Apprehension over appropriating western ideologies, or western styles, so evident within the North Indian art matrices, had little bearing upon the Radicals' artistic engagements. This is not to say that these artists were indifferent to the legacy of colonialism or the problematic

²⁵ "Cosmopolitanism, in its wide and wavering nets, catches something of our need to ground our sense of mutability in conditions of mutability, and to learn to live tenaciously in terrains of historic and cultural transition." *Ibid.*, 580.

²⁶ Sheikh, "The Backdrop," 58.

postcolonial artistic relationship to the west but rather, perhaps in keeping with artists like Swaminathan they utilized a space of strategic artistic and ideological ambivalence through which they distinctly and visually quoted the modernist past of the west as a strategy of critical parody.

This tactic is perhaps best exemplified in Krishnakumar's *Vasco de Gama*, 1985 through which he articulates the vicissitudes of India's colonial past and the possibilities of a strategic subversion (fig. 37). His fantastic sculptural interpretation of de Gama constructed on the beach head of Goa openly acknowledges the *site specific* entry point of modernity; however, it shifts the tide by inverting the colonial representations of the encounter. Krishnakumar re-imagines colonial contact, creating de Gama as an ephemeral caricature of a past union, which by virtue of its fragile construction materiality, ultimately suffers the ravages of time. The formidable life-size figure is rendered in painted plaster, wood and cloth; its vulnerability stands in opposition to the veritable historical importance of de Gama to early colonial incursions into India. His oversize hands struggle to master what appears to be the faltering sail of the remnants of a ship. The mastery of de Gama's historical expeditions are usurped by the mastery of Krishnakumar's satirical and transient representation.

The monumental physicality of the figure calls up the history of colonialism, yet the construction and the materials used by Krishnakumar ultimately undermine its authority. That Krishnakumar would choose a historical figure could be read as an approbation of the colonial past; however, it is more productive to see it as a point of differentiation, a visual manifestation of a split with the colonial past and an enunciation

of critical difference in the present.²⁷ Its irony rests on the fact that colonialism in the 1980s was reemerging globally under the guise of multi-national capitalism. The ideological and dialectical limits of the past–present exemplified by Krishnakumar’s *Vasco de Gama* can be fast-forwarded and shot through the issues that arose around the *Timeless Art* exhibition in 1989. India was not timeless; the violence of colonization fueled by figures such as de Gama left their marks upon Indian culture especially at its entry point via the port towns of Kerala.

Though the Radicals have been assigned a decidedly avant-garde function within the discourse it is important to remember that avant-gardism within the early discursive engagements of Kapur was cast as something that ultimately undermines culture.²⁸ In keeping with this frame of reference, the Radicals intense focus upon history, and perhaps Krishnakumar’s works in particular, led Ashish Rajadhyaksha to observe:

In effectively assigning the nation’s nationalist bourgeois a colonial identity, which therefore provided no useful precedents to their practice, the Kerala Radicals’ vanguardism necessarily crisscrossed with a then backdated High modern purpose, forcing many of them to literally reenact -- as though viewed in fast forward – the highly contradictory responsibilities of having to introduce history into a land that only knew memory.²⁹

However the issue is not whether the Radicals were embedded in an outmoded embrace of history but rather it is a question of whether or not the broad appeals to culture can be universally applied. Within this context, one cannot subsume the particulars of the

²⁷ Bhabha, *Location*, 129-133.

²⁸ Kapur, “Critique of Contemporary Western Art,” np. See my discussion in Chapter One.

²⁹ Rajadhyaksha, “The Last Decade,” 258. Ashish Rajadhyaksha is currently a Senior Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society in Bangalore. He has been an active member and contributor to the *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, founded in 1982 by Geeta Kapur and Vivan Sundaram.

Radicals' geographical milieu into a generalized schematic of political and social development within India. If one upholds the notion that the Radicals were still rooted in a modernist paradigm, it is my contention that they did so because of a Marxist concern for the tangible and dangerous implications of stepping outside of history. Krishnakumar often quoted the sculptural works of early twentieth-century western artists but he reconfigured them in a way to speak of his own particular social and political circumstances. His life-size *The Philosopher*, c.1989 with its wide spread legs and downward glance strikes an uncanny resemblance to Matisse's *Le Serf*, 1900-03 (figs. 38, 39). Matisse renders the feudal peasant useless. The tools of his trade – his arms – have been amputated. Despite his formidable physicality he stands robbed of the means of his own production to become an icon of disempowerment. However, within Krishnakumar's historic allusion to Matisse's work the figure is re-empowered. The indentured servant is transformed into a philosopher. His arms intact, he decisively reclaims the means of his own production standing as an articulation of political, class and social consciousness.

“Worker-Peasant Artistes”

The Radicals' critique of modernity must be located within the specific historical and social spaces of Kerala itself. A year after it was inaugurated as a state within the union of India, in 1957 Kerala witnessed the election of its first communist government under the leadership of E.M.S. Namboodiripad. As a largely agrarian state, one of the first issues addressed by the Communist ministry was the need for

educational and land reforms. Largely aimed at countering the abuses of both private and ecclesiastical educational practices the Kerala Education Bill centralized the organization of state schools.³⁰ The Bill was not merely a centralist attempt to seize power but rather was an active attempt to even out the disparate access to education amongst Kerala's lower and backward classes. Hindus make up over 60 percent of the population in Kerala and although modernization ruptured some of the traditional caste hierarchies when the communists came to power, it was an issue that needed to be fully addressed.³¹ In conjunction with these reforms, Namboodiripad's ministry was very keen to reorganize the skewed distribution of landed property in the state. Kerala at that time was still mired in a semi-feudal agrarian structure in which the peasant tilled the soil but never reaped the benefits of his labour. Though the Agricultural Relations Bill would never come to pass (and in fact precipitated the dismissal of Namboodiripad's state government) it set in place a mass consciousness movement spearheaded by the disfranchised within the state. Namboodiripad sat at the helm of many of these initiatives and actively cultivated consciousness-raising activities among the lower classes/castes. He was very clear on his objectives for the linkages of art and culture as a tool for social uplift and was a key advocate in the development and deployment of

³⁰ Georges Kristoff Lieten, *The First Communist Ministry in Kerala 1957-9* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Company, 1982), 33-53. See also E. M. S. Namoodiripad, *Kerala: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1968).

³¹ For example,

The lower castes were not only untouchable but also unapproachable. According to the rules of caste hierarchy an Ezhava had to keep 36 feet away from a Namboodiri and 16 feet away from a Nair. A Harijan was not expected to come in front of a Namboodiri, although he could come as far as 24 feet away from a Nair and, 12 feet from an Ezhava. Similar rules of distance prevailed among all castes down the line. It was such practices that led Vivekananda to comment that Kerala was a 'mad house of caste.'

N. Jose Chander, "Political Culture," *Dynamics of State Politics: Kerala*, ed. N. Jose Chander (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1986), 16. The politics of caste in 1960s Kerala are also addressed within the realm of fiction in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (New York: Random House, 1997).

“worker-peasant artistes” within the public sphere of the 1950s. Writing in 1955, he states,

Communist cultural workers, therefore, should clearly bear in mind that their struggle for evolving *a really national, i.e. people’s culture* – a culture *of and for* the mass of the working people has to continue.³²

The role of cultural and grassroots organizations were key to securing the political ascendancy of the CPI (Communist Party of India) in 1956. The Kerala People’s Arts Club (KPAC) and in particular their 1952 production of Thoppil Bhasi’s *Ningalenne Communistakki* (You Made Me a Communist) changed the face of social activism to blur the distinctions between art and life.³³ Carrying a powerful social and political message, the play’s populist appeal, its downplaying of epic characters, and its use of political workers rather than professional actors set a revolutionary precedent for cultural action that still carried currency within the tumultuous times of the 1970s. In May 1977, at a camp organized by the *Janakiya Samskarika Vedi*, a cultural organization that deliberately sought to rupture the hegemonic hold of bourgeois culture, the Malayalam dramatist N. N. Pillai read the following excerpt from the Vedi’s manifesto:

It is the responsibility of revolutionary artists and literary men to discern between progressive and decadent forces in history, to stand with the forces that make progress, to assess their growth, to assimilate them, and to be honest to one’s times. Only thus shall we be able to realize the

³² E.M.S. Namboodiripad, “Communist Party and the Struggle for Cultural Advancement,” in *Marxist Cultural Movement in India: Chronicles and Documents, Vol III*, ed. Sudhi Pradhan (Calcutta: Mrs. Santi Pradhan, 1985), 482-485.

³³ Toppil Bhasi, *Olive Ormmakal (Memories in Hiding)* trans. Jose George and Phillip B. Zarrilli (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1996). Bhasi’s play has been performed over 10,000 times in Kerala since 1952. Nandagopal R. Menon, “Path-breaking Plays,” *Frontline* 18 (May 12-25, 2001), <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1810/18100700.htm>.

idea of a militant cultural front and to fight by means of new artistic-literary creations the cultural domination of the ruling classes.³⁴

These broad strokes of the history of cultural action in Kerala perhaps serve to illustrate some of the political precursors to the Radicals insurgency.

“Comrades We Have to Be Conscious”

The college of Fine Arts that began in 1975 witnessed long student strikes which in turn gave birth to a group of artists in Kerala. Those strikes taught the students to experience a new world outside the wall of the school. Those times still inspire artists like us to focus on the myriad of problems faced by Indian art.³⁵

In 1975, K.P. Krishnakumar, K. Prabhakaran, Alex Matthew, and K.M. Madhusudanan were students at the newly opened Trivandrum College of Art. These artists were and were not children of the Emergency, although it may have fueled their cultural actions. Their initial experience with political agitation was specifically located within the environment of the Fine Arts College. During this time they participated in student strikes against the administration for its inability to provide the college with adequate facilities. Originally conceived of as a technical school, the college simply did not have the institutional or instructional infrastructure to sustain a studio arts program. It had little resources for its students and most days were spent pouring over back dated

³⁴ Quoted in Sreejith K., “Naxalite Movements and Cultural Resistance: Experience of Janakiya Samskarika Vedi in Kerala (1980-82),” *Economic and Political Weekly* (December 10, 2005), <http://www.epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2005&leaf=12&filename=9456&filetype=html>.

³⁵ Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association, “Manifesto,” np.

copies of *Studio International*, painting portraits of one another, or producing posters denouncing the institution for its shortcomings.³⁶

As the Calicut manifesto clearly states it was during the agitations against the college that many of the individuals included in the Radicals final lineup began to formalize their ideas about the political possibilities of art. Shivaji Panikkar also considers the social and political climate of Kerala in the 1970s and how it may have affected the mindset of the future Radicals by observing:

Certain group members like K.M. Madhususanan did have connection with the extreme political activists of the time, but on the whole the actual political involvement of the group had only been a possibility. The sympathies throughout remained at a state of a wishful affiliational [sic] possibility.³⁷

However, the issue was not one of “actual political involvement” but rather how the notion of the worker-artist-peasant could affect political change. This was perhaps best evinced through their introduction of the notion of poster politics to a larger public. Krishnakumar’s “Comrades we have to be conscious. We do not know when our eyes are going to break” illustrates a man bent at the waist speaking into the ear of a disembodied head (fig.40). Despite the supports emerging from its neck the head still requires another man to hold it erect. The image is ironic. Assuming that the head represents the head of state, despite its veritable size, it still requires the support of the people. The appeals to consciousness, when set against the threat of blindness, underscore the need to be socially and politically aware.

³⁶ Conversation with N. N. Rimzon, Trivandrum College of Art, February 2004. Also mentioned by Rajadhyaksha, 244.

³⁷ Panikkar, “Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors,” 611.

When I asked former Radical K. Prabhakaran about the direct impact of the Emergency beyond the educational institution he stated that it was a non-event for the general populace but within the university it took on a certain critical mass (as perhaps Krishnakumar's poster illustrates).³⁸ He explained that unlike the predominant urbanism of the north, the imposed curfew had little or no effect on a population who habitually returned to their homes before dark. However, Prabhakaran did state after the Emergency once the strictures on the press were lifted and people began to learn about the hardships faced by many, the political awareness of artists, writers and filmmakers alike began to bloom. Perhaps the best evidence of this growing consciousness came in the form of John Abraham's films. Abraham (1937-1987) studied under Ritwik Ghatak in Pune and was the founding member of the Odessa Movement. In the spirit of the Indian People's Theatre Association and KPAC this film cooperative actively sought to bestow filmic narratives with a realism that could circumscribe the dictates of bourgeois taste and bring cinema back into the lives of the people.

Abraham's most famous film, *Amma Ariyan* (Report to Mother) 1986 was created by soliciting donations from the public in Kerala. It was an example of cultural action and represents a definitive moment in the breaking down of staid social

³⁸ K. Prabhakaran, interview with author, tape recording 28 December 2004. Calicut, Kerala.

hierarchies.³⁹ The film itself does not follow a linear narrative but intersperses the story of the central protagonist Purushan as he sets out on a journey to Delhi with footage Abraham filmed of actual political protests. Purushan encounters a number of obstacles, yet remains true to his promise to write letters back home to his mother in Kerala. The people who participated in the film were not actors per se, but rather were everyday people who were simply caught within his celluloid frames. Once the film was complete, as homage to all those who participated in the venture the film and a projector were carted through the back roads and villages of Kerala by Venu the cinematographer and shown to the people.⁴⁰

To be sure, in the post-Emergency moment the idea of cultural action took deep root in Kerala; it was a decisive move that sought to challenge the limits of a bourgeois democracy that had gone seriously awry under Congress rule. Resistance to all forms of authoritarianism influenced much of the political and cultural activities in Kerala in the post-Emergency years. While the situation at the college may have solidified the political underpinnings of the Radicals praxis, the protests did not affect any immediate change in the pedagogy of the school. In fact they merely stalled the progress of those who had enrolled during the mid-seventies and many did not graduate until 1981. After

³⁹ As the opening credits of *Amma Ariyan* state:

Odessa tries to communicate the reality of how a film cooperative can reach out to the people. Odessa has reached out to many. It has succeeded in producing good films. Most films portray reality by exploiting economic, cultural and political aspects. Odessa's Report to Mother fulfills the ideal of film as a medium of art. It shows how the appreciation of art can be distilled through the production of good films. We must develop film cooperatives by screening more films – we must help each other sincerely by creating new standards of social awareness.

I thank Rajan M. Krishnan for sharing a copy of this film with me.

⁴⁰ While I was in Kerala in 2003, I met Venu and interviewed him. The Odessa movement is a topic of future research that I anticipate starting after the completion of my Ph.D.

completing their degrees, Krishnakumar left Kerala to continue his studies at Santiniketan, and Alex Matthew and Prabhakaran migrated up to the Baroda school.

It was Krishnakumar's presence at Santiniketan that set in motion a number of events that would anticipate the later formation of the Radicals. In December 1983, he was introduced to Vivan Sundaram who was attending the Nandalal Centenary University Grants Commission (UGC) Seminar at Visva Bharati. A former art history instructor at the Trivandrum College of Art, R. Nandakumar facilitated the meeting which would pave the way for Krishnakumar and a number of other Kerala sculptors - N. N. Rimzon, Alex Matthew, Asokan Poduval - to participate in an Artists Camp held that following year in Kasauli, Shimla.⁴¹ Established at the ancestral home of Vivan Sundaram in the mid 70s, the Kasauli Art Centre hosted many Artists Camps; however, at the time of the sculptors' workshop it had been made into a formal body.⁴² At this time the list of artists and art historians on the Board of Directors was quite formidable: K.G. Subramanyan, B.N. Goswamy, K.V.K. Sundaram, Vivan Sundaram, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Romi Khasa, Geeta Kapur, and Anuradha Kapur. The Camp focused specifically on young sculptors in India and its success gave rise to an exhibition *Seven Young Sculptors*, held at Rabindra Bhavan in New Delhi in the fall of 1985. This exhibition marks not only the arrival of the Kerala artists in North India but also firmly established their contacts with the Baroda school's critical players. Though

⁴¹ Z. Hussain and K.P. Pradeep Kumar, "Why the Radical Movement Did Not Take Root in Kerala. An Interview with R. Nandakumar," trans., Renu Ramanath, *Madhyamam* (March 2004). An Act of Parliament formed the UGC in 1956 to provide financial support for educational initiatives in India.

⁴² Vivan Sundaram, "Kasauli Art Centre," in *Seven Young Sculptors* (New Delhi: Rabindra Bhavan, 30 October-13 November 1985), np.

the Kerala sculptors also embraced a figurative visual language it was the ideas and intentions behind their work that would eventually create an unbridgeable schism.

Emerging Radicalism: “Seven Young Sculptors”

The *Seven Young Sculptors* show announced the emergence of expressive experimentations with the human form. With few exceptions the human figure had not been a major preoccupation for many sculptors working in the 1970s and early 1980s.⁴³ The legacy of Subramanyan’s intersections of craft and contemporary expressions still held fast within the Baroda School; however, in the early 1980s, the introduction of new materials such as fibreglass resin allowed for new consideration of the sculptural form.⁴⁴ Organized by Vivan Sundaram and Anita Dube, *Seven Young Sculptors* included the work of Krishnakumar, Alex Mathew, Asokan Poduval, N.N. Rimzon, Pushpamala N., Prithapal Singh Sehdev Ladi and Khushbash Shehravat. The figurative work in the exhibition employed a wide range of materials: terracotta, bronze, plaster, fibreglass and wood.

In her essay for the exhibition, Dube suggests that the young artists were in their artistic adolescence, a metaphorical state that openly acknowledged the “contradictions, complexities and anxieties of growth.”⁴⁵ Pushpamala N. and Ladi were alumni of the Fine Arts college in Baroda and Shehravat was an alumnus of the College of Art in New

⁴³ Shivaji Panikkar positions Dhruva Mistry, G. Ravinder Reddy, Pushpamala N and Prithapal Singh Sehdev Ladi as the key artists working with the figure in the late 60s and early 70s. However, he overlooks the knotted jute figural engagements of Mrinalini Mukherjee. “Introduction,” *Twentieth Century Sculpture – The Last Two Decades*, ed. Shivaji K. Panikkar (Bombay: Marg, 2000), 10.

⁴⁴ For a more indepth discussion, see Ajay Sinha, “Envisioning the Seventies and the Eighties,” in *Contemporary Art in Baroda*, ed. Gulammohammed Sheikh (Delhi: Tulika. 1997), 196-209.

⁴⁵ Dube, *Seven Young Sculptors* (New Delhi: Kasauli Art Centre 30 October – 13 November 1985), np. All the artists participating in the show were in their late 20s.

Delhi. The work of these three artists was relatively small in scale and illustrated a spirit of experimentation with the materials of terracotta and bronze. Standing nearly 90 cm tall Pushpamala N.'s *Girl with Shell*, 1984 has an air of quiet introspection (fig. 41). The delicate use of colour coupled with the figure's self contained presence (evoked by the closed eyes of the figure) suggests a retreat from ones environment. However, what became evident in the exhibition was the stylistic divide between the artists who had trained in art institutions of the north and those who came from Kerala - Krishnakumar, Rimzon, Matthew, Poduval. The point of distinction rests in the relatively small scale of the sculptures by Ladi, Shehnavat and Pushmapala and how they expressed no ascertainable stylistic influences. The Kerala artists on the other hand were firmly entrenched in a modernist idiom that found its origins in the western avant-gardism of the 1920s-30s. Their work distinctly bore the visual influences of the German Expressionists. Their large sculptures were roughly hewn and possessed an energetic engagement with material echoing the admiration for artists like Kirchner, felt by many students at the Trivandrum College in the late 1970s.⁴⁶

The reference to the west was deliberate and self-consciously cloaked in a desire to maintain the dynamic possibilities of historical encounters. In light of this Dube argues:

So our contact with it, historically irreversible as it is, if it is to become meaningful, must come through its own voices of dissent: those radical expressions within its art that have refused to give in, challenging the dominant ideology with a life giving humanism; and those thinkers and critics which have systematically explained and

⁴⁶ Mentioned in a conversation with Rajan M. Krishnan a former student of the Trivandrum College. Also noted by Rajadhyaksha, "The Last Decade," 256.

exposed this culture in all its complexity. Our solidarity with such intention (motivated by our colonial history) will help to clarify us within the process of self-determination and towards a rightful modernity.⁴⁷

Dube suggests that there is no way to negate the influence of the west given India's longstanding colonial contact with it. The embrace of the west was an articulation of dissent, a means by which the artists of Kerala could trouble the extant versions of a pristine Indian culture unfettered by the encroachment of colonialism. Unlike Kapur's earlier embrace of modernity as a viable option for the articulation of a unique postcolonial identity, Dube shifts its categorical deployment by appealing to the polyvalence of modernity. Modernity, for Dube, is striated through the particulars of its manifestations and in this way she upholds the notion that "the experience of modernity is local."⁴⁸ The locality was clearly Kerala; yet its visual articulation was manifest through a critical embrace—rather than a wholesale rejection—of the western modern. Dube's proposal to complicate modernist paradigms of the west (instead of jettisoning them altogether) stands in distinct opposition to the ongoing discursive debates over the last two decades in India.

Dube also orients the work in *Seven Young Sculptors* toward a decidedly Marxist ideology by stating:

All around us we are seeing the function of art being compromised and its elitist base being strengthened. Sculptures and paintings have become mysterious, a-historic, aesthetically isolated and somewhat sacrosanct. This is far from our desire to reinstate art as a passionate

⁴⁷ Dube, *Seven Young Sculptors*, np.

⁴⁸ Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge, "Public Modernity in India," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 15.

activity: Labour with a radical purpose, when it will become as Marx visualized it, a form of interaction with nature and an expression of humanism.⁴⁹

In part, this statement resonates with the founding principles of Kasauli as a centre for critical enquiry into the contemporary arts and a few years prior to *Seven Young Sculptors* it hosted a seminar entitled *Marxism and Aesthetics*.⁵⁰ Held in 1979, the seminar brought together eight individuals from a variety of disciplines to discuss the possibilities of arriving at a more successful union of Marxist ideology and cultural intervention.⁵¹ Malini Bhattacharya's paper, "Marxian Aesthetics and Peoples Democratic Movement" discusses the complexities of cultural intervention and the problematics of critiquing its efficacy.⁵² Does one assess artistic/cultural intervention on the basis of aesthetic or political criterion?⁵³ In answer to this she suggests that the two must be necessarily divided and the politicization of cultural forms must be positioned outside of the constraints of realpolitik. She states, "[C]ultural intervention, then, is different from other forms of intervention in so far as it aims at a change in popular consciousness by working directly at the level of consciousness."⁵⁴

The direct engagement with popular consciousness finds expression within the Kerala artists who participated in the *Seven Young Sculptors* exhibition. Instead of upholding the distinctions between art and assertions of realpolitik the artists deliberately blurred them. Dube's catalogue essay suggests that the work was invested

⁴⁹ Dube, *Seven Young Sculptors*, np.

⁵⁰ Held in October 1979. The proceedings of the seminar were published in *Social Scientist* 8 (Dec-Jan, 1979-80).

⁵¹ Participants included: Malini Bhattacharya, Mihir Bhattacharya, Anil Bhatti, G.P. Deshpande, Geeta Kapur, Akhtara Mitra, G.B. Mohan, Kalpana Sahni.

⁵² Bhattacharya is now the Director, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Calcutta.

⁵³ *Social Scientist* 8 (Dec-Jan 1979): 85.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

with a certain tangible realism that disrupted the possibility of locating the sculptural expressions within the isolated a-historical frame of culture. It is here that the divide between culture and cultural action emerges and bears a direct historical correspondence to the linkages of art, culture, and activism as it had evolved in Kerala since the 1950s. Cultural action, as historian K.N. Panikkar sees it is:

...an intervention in daily life, directed at the transformation of social consciousness. It is not a cultural performance or a spectacle based on various art forms, though these are not ruled out as means of communication. Instead, it is conceived of as a continuous social activity capable of activating the cultural in everyday life. It is a form of intervention directed toward the radicalization of civil society. The purpose of cultural action, therefore, is to foreground human agency for what Antonio Gramsci has described as ‘unsettling the existing equilibrium’ in order to create conditions of life free from domination.⁵⁵

Culture within the anti-colonial struggles was constructed as the pristine dominion of the past. It articulated a reified field of indigenous knowledge that existed beyond the pale of colonial power yet its activation as a political intervention within the frames of Marxism was largely unexplored in the contemporary moment. Cultural action needed to be divorced from a notion of a hermetically sealed and unchanging culture. Its initiatives and insurgent possibilities were founded on the principle that culture was something that was changeable and productive. It is the differences between deployments of culture versus those of cultural action which would set the terms of the debate between the Radicals and those who were perceived by them as being “mainstream” artists.

⁵⁵ *An Agenda for Cultural Action and Other Essays* (New Delhi: Three Essays, 2002), 97. It is interesting to note that Panikkar was also born in Kerala.

By way of illustrating the ideological position of *Seven Young Sculptors* Dube invites a comparison between N.N. Rimzon's figural studies and those of the Baroda-based artist Dhruva Mistry (fig. 42). Though Anushman Das Gupta argues that Mistry introduced "the mundane into the world of the Indian sculptural argument," like Pushpamala N.'s *Girl with Shell*, Mistry's figural forms ironically seem to stand divorced from the world by virtue of their masculine and iconic assertions of self containment.⁵⁶ Although Rimzon echoes Mistry's own sculptural predilection for the nude male form there is, according to Dube, a fundamental difference. She positions Mistry's sculptures as being, "...more anxious to find their place in museums than to reach out and speak to their people."⁵⁷ Where Mistry's freestanding and stabilized male forms wear the cloak of the metaphysical to present a sublimated relationship with the world there is no denying the reality of Rimzon's life-size man in his *Man in a Chalk Circle*, 1985 (fig 43). The half nude figure sits with splayed legs as if unaware or indifferent to his disrobed state. Seemingly oblivious of the contact between the earth and his flaccid penis, his tightly fitted *banya* marks him as one of the labouring classes.

The chalk circle, which surrounds him, may be a reference to Bertolt Brecht's play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, 1944.⁵⁸ This play embraced Brecht's theory of Epic Theatre, which had at its heart the ability to shock its audience out of a passive position

⁵⁶ "Sculptural Embodiments: Unmaking and remaking Modernity," in *Twentieth-Century Indian Sculpture: The Last Two Decades*, ed. Shivaji K. Panikkar (Bombay: Marg Publications, 2000), 17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Brecht was deeply influenced by the German Expressionists and the play has overt Marxist overtones as it deals with the rights of ownership and a dispute over land.

Bertolt Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, trans. James and Tania Stern (London: Methuen, 1963). Also, Bertolt Brecht, "Model for Epic Theatre," *The Sewanee Review* 57 (July 1949): 425-36. See also Vasudha Dalmia-Luderitz, "Brecht in Hindi: The Poetics of Response," *Journal of Arts & Ideas* 16 (1988): 59-72.

into one of action. Brecht's theory pressed the spectator to develop a more critical engagement with what was happening on stage through his notion of the *Verfremdungseffekt* ("alienation effect"). This theatrical device included the use of disruptive techniques within the performance to serve as a reminder that what was unfolding on stage was an *enactment* of reality instead of reality itself. Rimzon's *Man in a Chalk Circle*, although stylized in its representation of the human form, breaks down the illusion of aesthetic sculptural body. The alienation effect is embedded in the visual markers of class origins that challenge middle class notions of aesthetic beauty. If the *Man in the Chalk Circle* is, as Dube suggests, "our urban icon" his isolation coupled with the suggestion of his overt sexuality marks out a social space which is less than ideal and rarely acknowledged.⁵⁹

The focus on the productive possibilities of disjuncture between expectation and expression is carried through in Rimzon's *Three Sculptures on a Shelf*, 1985 (fig. 44). The sculpture positions three heads—one woman and two men—floating above a shelf. Their placement reveals a dislocation from a system of structural support, asking the viewer to examine his/her visual assumptions and question the architecture of our governing worldviews. Dube notes, "The relations between the three are mysterious, but their class origin is evident, and as displayed trophies they are disquieting evidence of oppression."⁶⁰

The allusion to Brecht and the inclusion of Picasso's *Man With Sheep*, 1944 and Rodin's *Balzac, Nude*, 1883 (fig. 45) in the catalogue hints at the latent memories of the

⁵⁹ Dube, *Seven Young Sculptors*, np.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Kerala artists own contact with the art of the west. Dube notes that, "The artist, born in a quasi-urban context outside the matrix of tradition, can only intuitively apprehend it through larger experience and memory."⁶¹ Krishnakumar's life-size *The Thief*, 1985 with its gestural marks covering the body of the figure echo those of Rodin's, but if this sculpture is representative of a past memory, its borrowed language echoes the words of Marx himself (figs. 46 - 47).⁶²

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language.⁶³

As comparative literature scholar Sandy Petrey argues, the intertextual relationships between Marx and Balzac cannot be over-emphasized. He clearly states that Balzac's "*Comedie Humaine* [1831-1847] stands at the origin of the Marxist vision of society" and bears a direct correlation to "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon."⁶⁴ The heroic pointing motion of Balzac's arm is reconfigured in Krishnakumar's *The Thief* into an upraised arm -- is this a gesture of defiance? Was it acknowledging the

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² It is worth noting that the sculpture identified as *The Thief* in the *Contemporary Art in Baroda* is misidentified. The proper name of this life-size sculpture, executed at Kasauli, is *Rhinoceros* (1985-86). I thank Alex Matthew for this clarification.

⁶³ Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon," in *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenka (New York: Penguin, 1981), 287.

⁶⁴ "The Reality of Representation: Between Marx and Balzac," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 14, No. 3, *The Sociology of Literature* (Spring, 1988): 448.

traditions of dead generations? Or by conjuring up the spirits of the past was it signaling a revolutionary crisis of the present?

Rajadhyaksha indicates that *The Thief* was a seminal work for Krishnakumar and the handling of materials consistently played themselves out in later sculptures, though the references to Rodin are not favorably received:

The highly conscious representational nature of both figure and gesture equally consciously chooses to be out of step with any contemporary context other than the reality Krishnakumar comes from and which gives him his authority to speak: words like 'heroic' and 'revolutionary' rest easily with an arguably *devant-gard* interest in Picasso and Rodin.⁶⁵

Significantly, the English word "thief" when translated into Malayalam becomes "kallan," a word which has multiple meanings. The first connotation of the word implies impostor. In an interview with Zakkir Hussain and K.P. Pradeep, art historian R. Nandakumar seizes upon the title of *The Thief* to suggest:

The most amusing thing [about this sculpture] is the English title *The Thief*. Naturally, he [Krishnakumar] must have meant the connotations of the Malayalam word 'kallan,' (thief). Not in the sense of someone stealing, but in the sense that someone saying a lie. In the context of being a *liar, impostor, impersonator*, etc.⁶⁶

It seems to me, that by naming the sculpture as he did, Krishnamkumar openly acknowledges his 'theft' of Rodin's earlier work. Despite Nandakumar's use of the word to defame Krishnakumar, he does not acknowledge that the word "kallan" has

⁶⁵ "The Last Decade," 252.

⁶⁶ "Why the Radical Movement Did Not Take Root in Kerala. An Interview with R. Nandakumar," trans., Renu Ramanath, *Madhyamam* (March 2004): np.

another meaning that relates specifically to patterns of migration within the state of Kerala and the substrata of individuals who are faced with re-integrating themselves into their natal culture. The “kallan” is an “anti-social individualist, who, refusing to honour social obligations remains asocial and deracinated.”⁶⁷ Within this context perhaps the title of Krishnakumar’s sculpture stands as an articulation of refusal, a rejection of social pressures but also pointed critiques of the failures of Indian capitalism. Endemic unemployment within the state has forced a large portion of the male population to seek opportunities abroad. The pressures to migrate to the Gulf in order to gain upward economic mobility are expressed in Rimzon’s *Departure*, 1985 (fig. 48). In opposition to the “kallan” the “gulfan,” a migrant worker, is someone who exists in a world in between, an individual in perpetual exile. The memories of the past -- of what gets left behind -- are fully expressed in Rimzon’s sculpture. Seemingly disparate sundry items have an internal logic if one considers that the seaports of Kerala have always been a point of departure and return.⁶⁸ Plaster casts of a bedroll, a goat’s head, a book and an umbrella, a cloth sack and a wheel are clustered together in a semi-circle – a cul-de-sac. The bedroll, the tire and the sack signify transience, the goat’s head perhaps alludes to the Muslim festival *Bakrid* so avidly celebrated in Kerala and the umbrella and the book speak of pragmatic and intellectual shelter. These objects

⁶⁷ Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, “Migration, Money and Masculinity in Kerala,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* Vol.6 (March 2000): 118.

⁶⁸ “In December 1977 a total of 135,000 Keralites were employed in foreign countries. These adventurous migrants, in their quest for a wage, emigrated mainly from four areas in the state: Varkala in Trivandrum district; Thiruvalla in Alleppey district; Chavakkad in Trichur district; and almost all parts of Malappuram district.” R. Kurian and D. Thakore, “Gulf money in Kerala: Coping with the Problems of Plenty,” *BusinessIndia*, 34 (June 25-July 8, 1979): 20.

stand as the detritus of the victims of modernity - those who have to go into self-imposed exile because the capitalist system of their own country has failed them.

The prevalence of memory and dispersal continues through in Alex Matthew's *Memories of Mother*, 1984 (fig. 49). His over life-size sculpture represents the embodiment of memory by realizing it as a figural form rising out of the head of a man. Crudely coloured with oil paint and roughly hewn out of wood the sculpture expresses the abstract memories of childhood and feeling of loss. The female figure looming above the head of the man puts the intangible qualities of the seeable and the say-able in endless flux as if to ask how does one represent the un-representable? The attempt to capture the fleeting reality of sensory experience is perhaps best articulated by Krishnakumar's *Young Man Listening*, 1985 (fig. 50). A young man squats holding a shell to his ear, as if to hear the sea. A mountainous form looms behind him and acts as the foundation for an old fashioned loud speaker. The assemblage, perhaps more than any other work in the exhibition, challenges aesthetic value to present an amalgam of coarsely formed objects. It enigmatically appeals to sound, which in turn is countered by the reality of the sculpture's oppressive silence. One is left wondering why the young man privileges the sounds of the shell over the echo of the speaker, the sound of the sea and far off places over the machinery of modernity.

Without a doubt the work of *Seven Young Sculptors* seized upon a different visual expression. I have focused particularly on the work of the artists from Kerala because in my opinion they best express their ambivalent engagement with the west. The sculptures of the Kerala artists embraced a self-imposed exile from a system of artistic norms. Instead of negating the influence of the west they used it to their

advantage. Rasheed Araeen offers insight into this position by drawing on Edward Said's notion of exile. Exile, within Said's configuration, is not simply a rhetorical device but rather it is a lived experience within the unfolding conditions of modernity.

Araeen states:

If modernity creates a disjunction of an individual from the whole – an exile—it also provides the individual with an insight that goes beyond one's experiences of exile. It is this transgressive insight which empowers the individual, not only to compensate the loss but also to position him/herself critically in the world.⁶⁹

The selective repositioning of modern in the *Seven Young Sculptors* exhibition was a decisive move. The exhibition met head on the lingering issues of the modernism debate to ask if within India it were not possible to seize upon a radical modernity that despite contact with the west could allow the spaces of critical engagement to emerge.

Relocating the Modern: "Questions and Dialogue"

A dialectical situation arises in the cultural arena. A group of artists consciously reject the practices of the 'mainstream' and mobilize into a radical new-left collective to search for a pedagogy of art; an alternative 'philosophy of praxis.' This critical act turns the compound questioning eye on everything, seizes the present moment, stands crude, naked and knife-sharp, and will not allow anyone to pass.⁷⁰

In 1987 a number of the Kerala artists who participated in the *Seven Young Sculptors* exhibition would reunite with their regional comrades to stage the exhibition *Questions and Dialogue* at the Fine Arts Gallery in Baroda. The exhibition was openly

⁶⁹ "A New Beginning," 8-9.

⁷⁰ Anita Dube, "Questions and Dialogue," (Baroda: Faculty of Fine Arts Gallery, 25-29 March, 1987), np.

critical of the artistic and institutional predisposition toward narrative painting and shook the foundations of the school leaving a trail of “terror in certain quarters of the establishment.”⁷¹ The show had no curator and the individuals associated with the exhibition included K.P. Krishnakumar, Jyothi Basu, K. Hareendran, C. Pradeep, C.K. Rajan, M. Madhusudhan, Alex Mathew, Pushkin E.H., K. Reghunadhan, K.R. Karunakaran, Anoop B., D. Alexander, K. Prabhakaran, and Anita Dube who once again resumed her role as scribe to pen the polemical catalogue essay.⁷²

It is within the context of the *Questions and Dialogue* exhibition at the Baroda School that the Radicals fully articulated their desire to wrestle artistic practice out of the hands of an elitist bourgeoisie. Their attempts to create radicalized forms of artistic practice led them to deliver a decisive challenge to the now broadly recognized “Baroda idiom” in painting. Without a doubt, the success of *Place for People* created an artistic subduction zone in which the monolithic force of the past was driven underneath the present. The friction between these two temporal fields allowed a new aggregate vision of artistic practice to erupt and was evinced by the multiple frames and references within the painted images. Urged on by the force of the imagination and the ubiquity of the figure in Indian art, the revival of the narrative in 1981 introduced, “allegory and realism in mediated forms, and builds up to an epic position whereby the artist can introject [sic] his subject-matter into history.”⁷³ The claims on the unmitigated mythic imagination of the artist enabled narrative painting to successfully dislodge the

⁷¹ Panikkar, “Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors,” 622.

⁷² The catalogue was not illustrated. Accordingly, my discussion focuses primarily on the catalogue essay.

⁷³ Kapur, “Partisan Views,” np.

constraints of time. Its utopic vision was shot through its layered and heterochronic representations of the people of India. Yet the representational spaces of narrative painting were not only a utopian recasting of the nation-state but more specifically, their rejection of the temporal successfully bypassed the lingering problems of modernism. Pitching narrative painting firmly within the frames of postmodernism, Kapur observes, “...if post-modern art, preferring the spatial over the temporal dimensions, produces a flattened version of time and narrative, a cut-out image of the contemporary without its historical referent, there is already in Indian art an appreciation of these problems.”⁷⁴ However, *Questions and Dialogue* interrogated the logic of the postmodern turn to ask what was at stake in its adoption and the exhibition brought to the fore pressing issues around the epistemological position of modernism/postmodernism within artistic practice in the 80s. Working through the divisions between these two theoretical rubrics, the polemical exhibition exerted pressure on the fault lines between the configurations of the past and the present – between the time of modernism and the timelessness of postmodernism.

The concerns put forth in *Questions and Dialogue* highlighted some of the theoretical pitfalls of embracing postmodernism as a governing rubric for artistic practice in the 1980s. Within this moment of theoretical flux, it was the individual and historically bound intervention of the Kerala artists versus the omniscient voice of narrative painting that emerged as the point of rupture. The divide between the modern and the postmodern at this time was embedded in both a contest over representation and a dispute over semiotic management of history and culture. In a moment, which

⁷⁴ Kapur, “When was Modernism in India Art?” 320.

witnessed the promethean unleashing of history within their own work, the Radicals turned their compound eye upon the utopian expressions of culture found in narrative painting. *Questions and Dialogue* sets the terms of the debate by invoking Gramsci's comments on cultural action:

Creating a new culture does not only mean ones own individual 'original' discoveries. It also, and most particularly, means the diffusion in a critical form, of truths already discovered, their 'socialization' as it were, and even making them the basis of vital action...⁷⁵

The dispersal of accepted truths was at the heart of the Radicals' praxis. By aligning the narrative movement's deployments of a ubiquitous Indian cultural heritage in the form of miniature paintings and Buddhist sculpture, the Radicals located the gesture as one that found dangerous resonance with the elitist anti-imperialist stance of the Bengal School and its authoritative nostalgia for a past which never existed. In light of this, they saw the revival of craft and traditional arts within the Baroda school as being premised on an a-historical if not imagined foundation, which by default maintained the elitist status quo in India.

The Radicals claimed that colonialism, and later capitalism, destroyed the community minded bedrock of folk art. If folk art was the exemplary expression of India's little traditions then in no way could it be produced en mass to line the shelves of the many regional emporiums springing up in the urban centres.⁷⁶ Such gestures were not about celebrating tradition but instead were simply an exercise in nostalgia

⁷⁵ Dube, *Questions and Dialogue*, np.

⁷⁶ Malini Bhattacharya offers an interesting discussion on the status of the "rural artist" in her "The Rural Artist and Secular Culture in the Era of Globalization," in *The Making of History: Essays Presented to Irfan Habib*, eds. K.N. Panikkar, Terence J Byres and Usta Patnaik (Delhi: Tulika, 2000), 515-529.

feeding the consumption of the vulgar urban bourgeoisie.⁷⁷ Culture, if such a thing did actually exist, was diffuse and not readily available for appropriation. One needed to travel down the back roads of India to find such unique artistic expressions, to imagine them was to desecrate them.⁷⁸ Within this context Arjun Appadurai's comments on the relationship between patina and nostalgia are quite apropos:

Objects with patina are perpetual reminders of the passage of time as a double-edged sword, which credentials the 'right' people, just as it threatened the way they lived. Whenever aristocratic lifestyles are threatened, patina acquires a double meaning, indexing both the special status of its owner and the owner's special relationship to a way of life that is no longer available.⁷⁹

Dube states, "...to speak of a living tradition in art and culture, outside the perspective of socialism, is to parody, or to make a pastiche."⁸⁰ To be sure, the productive labour of the craftsperson ensures his survival, and the Radicals argument suggested that to confer it with a purely aesthetic or commercial value devalues both the historical circumstances of craft traditions in India and negates the economic reality of those individuals who rely on the production of crafts for their survival within a capitalist system.

⁷⁷ Perhaps it is worth mentioning here that the *Master Weavers* exhibition which was part of the elaborate 1982 Festival of India was faced with a crisis as the master weavers it hoped to highlight supposedly no longer existed. Jyotindra Jain openly admits that, "... traditional textiles of superlative quality were no longer available. Yet no one doubted that the skills to make such textiles were still extant. The crux of the matter was to find these skills and then create the proper channels for their utilization and appreciation." "Master Weavers," in *Pageant of India Art: Festival of India in Great Britain*, ed., Saryu Doshi (Bombay: Marg, 1983), 141.

⁷⁸ Dube notes: "Organic historic memory is a preserve of these pockets of culture, one which cannot be seen formally or appropriated or sold in a sophisticated urban context outside the organized vulgarization of history which has become a symptom of our times." *Questions and Dialogue*, np.

⁷⁹ *Modernity at Large*, 76.

⁸⁰ Dube, *Questions and Dialogue*, np.

In support of this, Fredric Jameson argues that the implementation of nostalgia replaces history with historicism. The advent of the postmodern in the 1980s witnessed the ascendancy of historicism, which at its core was the random cannibalization of style. The postmodern recast history as a “simulacrum the identical copy for which no original has ever existed.”⁸¹

Appropriately enough, the culture of the simulacrum comes to *life* in a society where the exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use-value is effaced, a society of which Guy Debord has observed, in an extraordinary phrase, that in it ‘the image has become the final form of commodity reification.’⁸²

Narrative painting was also implicated in the dangerous demise of history.

Dube states:

The paintings of the Narrative movement appear to stand in a critics’ court to argue their social and political consciousness, their scholarship and painterly virtuosity. The events and the characters portrayed are subordinated to principles of structuring and surface design and carry a causal relation to historical processes. With the use of multiple references what we have called ‘textuality’ with the use of pseudo historical content, with the use of narration, with the use of a rhetorical tone, a myth is created which says that, that which is being portrayed is reality and the ‘historical.’⁸³

The images of Sheikh and Khakhar in particular removed the dialectical relationship between the inside and the outside to effectively announce the death of the subject.⁸⁴

Rajadhyaksha acknowledges this by stating that *Place for People* celebrated “a new

⁸¹ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* I/146 (July- August 1984): 66.

⁸² Jameson, “Postmodernism,” 66. See also Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans., Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

⁸³ Dube, *Questions and Dialogue*, np.

⁸⁴ See my discussion in Chapter Two.

identity of the artist: as a vantage point for looking and assimilating, rather than as individual subjectivity” however, he fails to question what was really at stake in this visual tactic.⁸⁵ Though Shivaji Panikkar argues that the objectives of the group were never fully defined it seems to me that *Questions and Dialogue* clearly stated the position of the Kerala artists as an antagonistic force against both the rise of figurative painting and the institution which precipitated its birth. In his article the “Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association: The Crisis of Political Art in the Contemporary India,” instead of discussing how the Radicals actively attempted to step *outside* the founding principles of art historical discourse Panikkar’s analysis rests upon inserting the Radicals *back into* a national art historical framework. The first part of his essay delineates the development of modern art from the early twentieth century onward in order to contextualize definitions of radicalism. This rhetorical gesture sets the stage for his assertion, “[T]he specific ideological perspective of the group was largely founded upon the way they interpreted the development of modern art and society.”⁸⁶ However, his particularized chronology of their activities is presented in such a way that later initiatives of the group are used to undermine the earlier. The protests against *Timeless Art* in 1989 are conflated with the participation of a number of Kerala artists in the 1987 *Ālekhya Darśan: Young Sculptors and Painters from India* exhibition held at the Centre d’art Contemporain in Genève. In uniting two temporal moments, Panikkar suggests that this exhibition stood as an exemplary example of the Radicals ideological

⁸⁵“The Last Decade,” 213.

⁸⁶ Panikkar, “Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors,” 615.

inconsistency.⁸⁷ Moreover, he puts into play one of the most significant rumors about the Radicals' intervention: they were against the buying and selling of artwork.

According to Prabhakaran this was never the case:

At that time all people were against us – even the artists – because they felt we were attacking the gallery people. We didn't have any aim to attack any person running a gallery. It was not our issue. Artists make the work – finish the work—give it to a gallery man – he will sell it and give the money. That is the only aid. It's not a bad thing - because of course - it is like that. But cultural action – artists getting together and communicating and exhibiting means something is happening in the culture. Culture is not something we can sell. That's what we said. But all people even Gulam Sheikh – all painters became against us. They asked: then how do you get money?⁸⁸

Ālekhyā Darśan: Young Sculptors and Painters from India opened in 1987, a mere two months after *Questions and Dialogue* exhibition, and included K.P. Krishnakumar, Alex Mathew, N.N. Rimzon, V.N. Jyothi Basu, K. Prabhakaran and Rekha Rodwittiya. The exhibition was ostensibly conceived to highlight the work of younger artists who had yet to prove themselves within “the institutional hierarchy.”⁸⁹ Given the amount of planning it requires to stage an exhibition, there was obviously no way that the exhibition organizers could know that the Kerala artists had, by virtue of *Questions and Dialogue*, positioned themselves as institutional apostates.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 614.

⁸⁸ K. Prabhakaran, interview by author, tape recording 28 December 2004. Calicut, Kerala.

⁸⁹ C. Raman Schlemmer, “Six Contemporary Artists from India,” in *Ālekhyā Darśan: Young Sculptors and Painters from India* (Genève: Centre d'art contemporain, 20 May – 20 August 1987), 7. I thank N.N. Rimzon for sharing this catalogue with me.

The show was conceived at the time of *Seven Young Sculptors* when C. Raman Schlemmer was captivated by the group of young Kerala artists.⁹⁰ In writing about his first encounter with their work, Schlemmer expresses his concerns about conceiving an exhibition of regional expressions and his essay reveals some of the tacit tensions already in place regarding the north south divide:

I was fascinated that all of them had gone through the Trivandrum College of Arts, [with the exception of Rodwittiya] but also concerned that this could cause further antagonism and the selection could be dismissed as regional. This obstacle was soon to be diffused when it was understood in Delhi that a regional concept could never be my endeavor and that in fact I had not taken this group into consideration due to a visit to Kerala, but had come across their work in the North, mainly in Delhi and Baroda.⁹¹

That Schlemmer encountered the work in Delhi, prior to the *Questions and Dialogue* exhibition in Baroda, suggests that at least initially, the Kerala artists were accepted as the products of the North Indian matrix. Despite Schlemmer's concerns, the works in the exhibition *were* representative of a certain region. In highlighting the life of the village or the worker-peasant the expressions of the Kerala artists included in *Ālekhyā Darśan* set themselves apart from the images of urban India so predominant in the work of the artists associated with narrative painting. To be sure, the sculptures and paintings in this exhibition shifted the ground by representing those who are often disallowed social or political representation. In contrast to later readings of the Kerala artists'

⁹⁰ Schlemmer is the grandson of German Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer (1888-1943).

⁹¹ Schlemmer, 12.

retrograde interest in western modernism, at the time of *Ālekhya Darśan* art critic Santo

Datta writes:

The artists here share among themselves this human concern and the daring to experiment with the potential expressiveness of human forms. They have fought their own battles to become free from the mannerisms of the established elders, and the viewers will notion that their knowledge of the various art movements in the West is not lost on them. They are selected not because they are the best or most successful, they are here because they make a small but significant group, representing new trends, particularly in sculpture, and having faith in the humanist tradition.⁹²

The plight of the human condition finds full expression in K. Prabhakaran's *A Harijan Woman*, 1986 (fig. 51). His delicate portrait of a young 'untouchable' or Dalit woman and her identification as such seems almost an unprecedented gesture in contemporary art. Its unromantic portrayal and the uncertainty registered in her eyes bespeaks her tenuous social position. Her registered presence within the picture plane becomes a political gesture in and of itself and harkens back to the issue of caste politics within Kerala. Similarly Jyothi Basu's painted portrayal of life within the villages and the backwaters of Kerala offers sensitive insight into life beyond urban centres. His *Untitled*, 1987 reveals three women in the middle ground offset by a man with an upraised arm in the fore; a double-ender and palm trees in the background delineate the Kerala coastline (fig. 52).⁹³ The horizon reveals a distant ship perhaps acknowledging a migrant male population. One woman stands with breast exposed while another drops seeds into the open mouth of another man. While this image could easily be read as

⁹² "Ālekhya Darśan," 22-23.

⁹³ A type of boat specifically used in Kerala for transportation.

expression of the Radicals' "barely concealed gender chauvinism behind their moralist façade," I believe that it actually acknowledges the matrilineal social structures of South India.⁹⁴ By centering their attention on those who lived on the social margins Prabhakaran and Basu introduce the possibilities of reviving social realism in the 1980s.

The concern for the social and geographical environment carries through in the work of Krishnakumar to illustrate the Radicals' preoccupation with the labour and plight of the proletariat in Kerala. *The Boatman*, 1986-87 melds the body of the figure and the tools of his trade – the boat (fig. 53). The two are inseparable suggesting that the man's identity is both defined and confined by his occupation. Krishnakumar's work was consistently life-size and his choice of fibreglass resin made them light weight and easily transportable. His freestanding works carried with them the capacity to articulate an alternative regional history that disallowed the assertions of an undifferentiated trans-national culture. In my opinion, Krishnakumar's sculptures disrupted the tyranny of the stabilized narrative image to ask if one can represent real rather than imagined spaces of resistance.

Refiguring Radicalism

The tragic death of Krishnakumar has figured prominently in the limited discourse around the Radicals. In their jointed authored article Panikkar, Nair and Das Gupta suggest:

The suicide of Krishnakumar, the moving spirit and the leader of collective, epitomizes several truths at the same time. Tragedy was the result of the failure of the self in

⁹⁴ Rajadhyaksha, 260.

revolutionizing and politicizing art, in conflicting theorization and praxis, inability to stand 'within' and without' of [sic] a social system— an inability to creatively use a schizoid existence.⁹⁵

Whereas, Kapur offers the following:

Before he takes his own life, Krishnakumar (1958-1989) leader of the group introduces an avant-garde move: by inverting the metropolitan modernist (and postmodernist) artist back into an exile status so that what is figured is the early anarchist rebel and hero who thrives in bourgeois society on near nihilist strategies of survival - through art, through politics.⁹⁶

These assessments effectively undermine the importance of Krishnakumar to suggest that he was a victim of his own naiveté and use his tragic death as evidence of the Radicals' failure to articulate a sustainable form of artistic radicalism. However, when these opinions are set against the backdrop of the Calicut exhibition and its deliberate use of Malayalam in the catalogue the words of Aijaz Ahmad seem to ring true: "[E]nglish is a *national* document; all else is regional, hence minor and forgettable."⁹⁷ Though the limited discourse around the Radicals seems to endorse the idea that they were minor and forgettable, it seems to me that they successfully inverted a top-down model of Indian art history. If they are not recognized for their endeavors then by default it reveals the hegemony of the English speaking intelligentsia.

If there was, in fact, a schizoid existence at play within the Radicals praxis, as Panikkar suggests, then it was one that fell along the fault line between the modern and the postmodern and the regional and the national in the 1980s. The focus on history

⁹⁵ "Art, Subjectivity and Ideology: Colonial and Post Independent India," *Nandan* vol. 17 (1997): 38.

⁹⁶ Kapur, "Contemporary Indian Art," 43.

⁹⁷ *In Theory*, 75

formed the backbone of the Radicals praxis. Deeply suspicious of the historicism of the postmodern they rejected the lure of time unbound so embedded in the turn toward narrative figuration. Historicism without a doubt creates a utopia. Unmoored from temporal constraints it is the ultimate articulation of no-place. Within this configuration, narrative painting with its improbable viewpoints and multifaceted surfaces created a utopic fiction and an omnipresent now.⁹⁸ The Radicals tried to revolutionize and politicize art but perhaps they were doomed to failure, but not in the sense that Panikkar has argued but rather it was because they raged against the utopic narrative representations of contemporary life. As Ashis Nandy points out,

. . . no dialogue is possible with a utopia claiming a monopoly on compassion and social realism, or presuming itself to be holding the final key to social ethics and experience. Such a vision not merely devalues all heretics and outsiders as morally and cognitively inferior, it defines them as throwbacks to an earlier stage of culture and history, fit to be judged exclusively by the norms of vision.⁹⁹

Without a doubt the postmodern within India (or perhaps more specifically the Baroda School) let loose a new force of aesthetic engagement that enabled relief from the historical constraints of western modernism and the avant-garde; but what was at stake in abandoning historical modernity? Rasheed Araeen observes,

. . . if we abandon the idea of modernity, because of its colonial connections, then there is little left with which to challenge the disturbing aspects of modernity. The world is still dominated and controlled by the eurocentric structures of modernity, despite all the rhetoric of

⁹⁸ Here I draw on the ideas of Louis Marin in his "The City's Portrait in Its Utopics," in *Utopics: Spatial Play*, trans., Robert A. Vollrath (London : Macmillan, 1984).

⁹⁹ Ashis Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 11.

postmodernism. The difference between earlier modernity and the present structures of modernity is that these new structures are camouflaged by the spectacles of postmodernism to which everyone is allowed to enter and play their own games. These games are now being played on the assumption that this has given us the freedom to express ourselves; but what we are in fact doing is only targeting the camouflage, leaving behind the structures of domination almost fully intact.¹⁰⁰

Araeen suggests that the spectacular lure of the postmodern veils the structures of dominance and conceals how the real issues remain largely unresolved. If the turn toward narrative painting was indeed a radical gesture as Kapur suggested, it was in the eyes of the Kerala artists a radicalism that rehearsed the dangers of asserting a homogenous cultural identity that failed to recognize regional difference.

Postscript

I would like to conclude with an image by Vivan Sundaram, one of the artists who participated in *Place for People*. Sundaram is now an artist of international import and his installations have become the hallmark of his practice. His large triptych entitled *In Memory of Krishnakumar* was part of his 1992 installation *Collaboration/Combines* exhibited in both New Delhi and Bombay (fig. 54).¹⁰¹ The mixed media assemblage visually quotes a photograph of Krishnakumar with his unfinished sculptures taken in 1986 at the workshop in Kasauli (fig. 55). Sundaram's sensitive *momento mori* utilizes an overlapping visual schematic to order the image

¹⁰⁰ "A New Beginning," 7. In light of Araeen's comments one wonders if postmodernism is merely the new mask of Orientalism. Postmodernism's eclecticism and a-temporality finds surprising correlation in Said's characterization of Orientalism. "In the system of knowledge about the orient, the orient is less a place than a *topos* – a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seem to have its origins in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone's work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining, or an amalgam of all these." Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 177.

¹⁰¹ *Vivan Sundaram: Collaboration/Combines* (New Delhi: Shridharani Gallery, 14-26 February, 1992).

structurally. Through the three planes of action Krishnakumar's sculptures are represented in paint. A reference to architectural structures is made through the corrugated tin canopy with the metal support rod that cuts across through the left side of the image. The painting is both ambiguous and ironic. Although its structuring principles and multiple frames of reference evoke a narrative style of painting, a figure bows in supplication in the centre panel, perhaps finally posthumously acknowledging Krishnakumar's contribution.

EPILOGUE: INTERRUPTING INTERNATIONALISMS, NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Young artists working in Kerala today often face the decision of whether to stay and work within the state or migrate to larger metropolitan centres such as Delhi or Bombay. Given the recent surge in market prices for contemporary art situating oneself in an urbanized milieu allows greater exposure and facilitates easier access to the growing commercial market. However, the number of artists who self-consciously stay in Kerala remains surprising. Most are very vocal about their choice to live and work in the state and actively participate in establishing a vibrant local scene. Galleries in Fort Kochi also work hard to develop an artistic infrastructure that can exist independent of nationalized models.¹ These efforts highlight the possibilities of “intracultural” engagement in contradistinction to the “intercultural” and seemingly uphold the legacy of the Radicals’ resistance to broader undifferentiated assertions of a national artistic identity.² The distinctions between the “intracultural” and the “intercultural” proposed by Rustom Bharucha offer interesting ways to think about some of the tacit tensions between the regional and the national. However, while I was in Kerala conducting research it became evident that the points of differentiation between the “intra” and the

¹The Kashi Art Gallery has played a pivotal role in developing a local infrastructure for the arts. Dorrie Younger and Anoop Skaria opened Kashi in 1997 and over the years have expanded their endeavors to include additional gallery spaces, Artist Residency Programmes and competitions for young emerging artists.

²As Bharucha (2001) notes on page 12:

The ‘intra’ is useful precisely because it has the potential to debunk such organicist notions of culture by highlighting the deeply fragmented and divided society of India that the multicultural rhetoric of the state refuses to acknowledge.

See my Chapter Three for a fuller discussion of Bharucha’s theoretical assertions of the “intracultural” versus the “intercultural.”

“inter” are often complex especially when they are manifest within the domains of artistic practice.

In January 2004 I curated the exhibition *Zakkir Hussain: Recent Works*, a large one man show at the Draavidia Art Gallery in Fort Kochi.³ Like many young artists in Kerala, Hussain had trained at the Baroda School but returned to Kerala immediately after completing his Studio degree. His show opened in February in tandem with the exhibition *Bombay x 17* held at the Kashi Art Gallery. Although the two galleries are walking distance apart, at that time I had no inkling that the exhibitions themselves would represent a fascinating gap between the artists who stay versus those who choose to leave. *Bombay x 17* not only marked the arrival of the “art centre” of India in the “backwater peripheries” of the South but it also functioned as a homecoming for some of the artists who had made the decision to leave Kerala in the pursuit of greater artistic opportunity. Seven of the seventeen artists participating in the show – T. V. Santhosh, Riyas Komu, Justin Ponmany, Anant Joshi, Basiju Parthan, Bose Krishnamachari and Jyothi Basu - originally hailed from Kerala and their return was likened to that of the prodigal son. The opening was attended by various state officials and celebrated Malayali intellectuals and was followed the next day by artists’ talks.⁴ The exhibition itself offered a catalogue, with a short introductory essay written by Bose Krishnamachari, one of the participating artists.

³ Zakkir Hussain, *Recent Works* (Kochi: Draavidia Art and Performance Gallery, 2-29 February, 2004). I wish to extend a debt of gratitude to Santhosh S. in Baroda for introducing me to Zakkir Hussain and also to Kabita Mukhapadhyaa and K. Prabhakaran for our fruitful discussions during my first trip to Kerala.

⁴ Sunanda Khanna reviewed the exhibition in “Art for Our Sake,” *The Hindu* (Thursday, February 5, 2004).

In the past few years, Krishnamachari has enjoyed a growing reputation for being the new *enfant terrible* of contemporary art. This designation rests largely on his notion of “de-curating,” an exhibition strategy that emerged in his 2003 show *De-Curating — Indian Contemporary Artists*, held at the Sakshi Gallery in Bombay. The underlying premise of “de-curating” is to reject the role of the curator as one who determines the scheme and intent of an exhibition in favor of privileging the artwork and allowing it to speak for itself.⁵ In light of this approach, *Bombay x 17* was “conceptualized” by Krishnamachari. The artwork was not contextualized or theorized by him and was instead left to construct its own particularized narrative within the space of the gallery. It is interesting that the strategy of downplaying the role of the curator finds an unacknowledged yet distinct correspondence in Kapur’s *Pictorial Space* (1977) and the *Place for People* exhibition (1981). Still, the absence of curatorial frames indeed allowed the work to speak for itself, but instead of fostering an open-ended and free flowing dialogue between object and audience it betrayed some of the unspoken tensions between the local and the global.

In his essay, “Bombay x 17, We Artists Live and Work in Mumbai,” Krishnamachari asks the question, “. . . can these small scale works make a difference to Kochi?”⁶ He writes,

⁵ For more on the exhibition see Abhay Sardesai, “Accommodating to a Fault,” *ArtIndia: The Art News Magazine of India* 8 (2003): 78. See also Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta, “A Tribute and a Swipe at . . .” *The Hindu* (Sunday, September 28, 2003) <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mag/2003/09/28/stories/2003092800240200.htm> Krishnamachari also staged his exhibition *De-Curating—Indian Contemporary Artists* at the Durbar Hall in Ernakulum, Kerala in 2003. Renu Ramanath, “The Colour of Success,” *The Hindu* (Wednesday, January 3, 2007), <http://www.hindu.com/2007/01/03/stories/2007010313550400.htm>.

⁶ Bose Krishnamachari, *Bombay x 17, We Artists Live and Work in Mumbai* (Fort Kochi: Kashi Art Gallery, 2004), np.

The works are abstract, narrative, assemblage, and digital. The styles are reframed; and we could see them as representing a 'trans-conceptual' methodology in practice. They are not about movements, but they are definitely transparent and consistent in thinking.⁷

To be sure the works *were* reframed through their various reconfigurations of mass media images. For example, T. V. Santhosh's two *Untitled* works seized upon post-911 fears of nameless and faceless terrorists roaming the globe to represent armed men replete with box cutters (figs. 56, 57). Like a trip through the "looking glass" (of the *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* variety) the split canvases were painted to resemble photographic negatives. The topsy-turvy restaging of newspaper images of *Al-Qaeda* although evincing a show of painterly virtuosity did not make any clear conceptual statement beyond their aesthetic exquisiteness.⁸ Critiquing this tendency in the artist's work Girish Shahane states:

Santhosh focuses on the big political and ethical issues of the day, like Islamic terrorism, wars conducted by the United States and new advances in cloning technology. Unfortunately he employs ready-made images and symbols to explore these themes and fails to interpret them and raise them above cliché.⁹

If one were to assume an adversarial position to *Bombay x 17* it would be easy to dismiss the images of Santhosh and others included in the show as operatives of a new decorative reality. Despite the self-proclaimed interventionist stance of the exhibition as a "framed disturbance" the reliance upon mediascapes as a resource for many of the

⁷ Krishnamachari, *Bombay x 17*, np.

⁸ See also Girish Shahane. "An Image of an Image of an Image," *ArtIndia: The Art News Magazine of India* VIII (2003): 77.

⁹ Shahane, "Image of an Image," 77.

images included in the show complicated their ability to challenge or critique the social acceptance of ubiquitous mass media images.¹⁰ As Arjun Appadurai observes, the production of mediascapes is determined by a set of social relationships and cultural experiences:

The lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes they see are blurred, so that the farther away these audiences are from the direct experience of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds, that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other world, some other imagined world.¹¹

Though mediascapes exemplify notions of permeable boundaries vis-à-vis trans-global media flows they do, as Appadurai points out, create parallel imagined worlds. Santosh's "imagined world" wove through the global experience of terrorism; however, in a world which is often shot through the constrictive frames of mediated images their ability to critique is a matter of debate. While on the one hand his images of images, stood as "chimerical" or "aesthetic" expressions unmoored from their social and political circumstance on the other they reflected a shift of visual resources for younger contemporary artists – one that had its sights firmly set on international rather than national horizons.

At least since 1990 artists in India have combined mass media images with painting; however, the interface between the two has warranted some criticism for its formulaic application. Nancy Adajania, for example, asks hard questions about whether or not this decisive method of interfering with the world of images has now devolved

¹⁰ Krishnamachari, np.

¹¹ *Modernity at Large*, 35.

into a decorative style that easily transposes itself into the spaces of commercial gallery.¹² Anita Dube, in another context, has also expressed concern over the return to the decorative in contemporary Indian art and how it is implicated in the art market.

What seems to condition everything is of course the invisible force—the market. More specifically a national market—which now wants to define what is ‘art’ in ‘Indian’ terms and in terms that suit its ideology i.e. ‘no problem paintings and sculptures’ — pleasant stuff that causes no disturbance. Of course, this art should be formally of a high standard, skilled, labour intensive wherein resides its value. This particular understanding of art via the market makes it resemble more and more a decorative status-enhancing commodity—a fetish of the haves—which has little concern for what we have said earlier—the political, creative democratic rights of everyone.¹³

Dube’s earlier involvement with the Radicals resounds in this statement through her critique of the art market; however, it is the question of “no problem paintings and sculptures” that I believe takes on a certain resonance within the *Bombay x 17* exhibition. Although it would be easy to assert that thirty-two small works, both painting and sculpture, that formed the corpus of *Bombay x 17* seemingly privileged aesthetic engagement over social or political content, it might be more productive to position the exhibition as a way to broaden discussions around the politics of style or perhaps the differences between focusing ones sights on the local as opposed to the global. Although these are issues that resonated within the Radicals own artistic

¹² Nancy Adajania, “The Mutable Aesthetic of New Mediatic Realism,” *ArtIndia: The Art News Magazine of India X*, Quarter IV (2005):34-42.

¹³ “Is Installation Irrelevant to India?” *ArtIndia: The Art News Magazine of India IV* (April – June 1999): 60.

practice it seems that the matter still finds correspondence with a new and younger group of artists.

Given that the union of art and politics still informs the visual engagements of many artists working in Kerala today, this show could not have been more antithetical to its environment. The work had no apprehensible meaning beyond its aesthetic value and in fact the exhibition exemplified what the Radicals were rejecting when they emerged in the 1980s. Their national, public protest against the Sotheby's *Timeless Art* auction in 1989 and their expressed concerns over the dangers of forsaking social content for lure of capital could not have found greater resonance in 2004.¹⁴

Although Bose categorizes the work in *Bombay x 17* as a “framed disturbance” in the wake of the exhibition I was left wondering what was more interesting—the images themselves or what they potentially stood for and it is a question that warrants further investigation. Given that many of the artists working in Kerala today still hone their artistic practice around issues related specifically to regional concerns this show could be read as being completely antithetical to its surroundings. But I believe that the matter is much more complicated. It was the conceptual differences in approach between the Bombay artists and those in Kerala that were highlighted during Sanjeev Sonpimpure's artist talk. Mid way through the presentation an audience member piped up to ask about his image, *Over Wine & Cheese*, 2003 and the strange configuration of the hand in the bottom left corner of the painting (figs. 58, 59). The foreshortening of the finger was simply wrong. Was this the artist's intent? Was it a disruptive gesture

¹⁴ Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association, “Against the Imperialist Exploitation of Art,” *The Times of India*, 15 March 1989, np, Bombay Edition.

meant to critique our ready acceptance of mass media images? Sonpimpare's answer to the question was surprisingly devoid of self-consciousness. He stated matter-of-factly that it was simply because that was the way the finger appeared when the original, taken from an advertisement, was projected through the slide projector.

The question remains: do the images of Santhosh and Sonpimpare, in particular, represent a dangerous acceptance of the simulacrum and an inability to fully represent one's own experience? Clearly as "intercultural" expressions they privileged expressions of a pictorial "elsewhere" unmoored from a specific historical or geographical locality. Without a doubt this is a decisive visual strategy that may serve to further arguments about the universalism of art in a trans-global moment; however, within Kerala these images articulated a divide between the approaches and intents of so-called metropolitan artists and the localized expressions of the artists who continued to live and work in the state.

Zakkir Hussain represents one such artist who has continued to live and work in Kerala and the representation of his own local experience resounds in his work. At the time of the two exhibitions the differences between Hussain's work and that of *Bombay x 17* troubled me as I could not fully account for the differences in both approaches and style. Not only did I find myself in the uncomfortable position of being a "foreign" curator (in contrast to Bose's strategy of de-curating), Hussain's work was decidedly rooted in a different set of concerns. Deeply influenced by the legacy of the Radicals, Hussain and I had many conversations about his work and his experience growing up

and living in Kerala.¹⁵ Over the span of my four-month stay in Kerala, our discussions consistently coalesced around a similar theme – life in Kerala has changed socially and economically. Hussain’s image, *Shitting in the Cooking Pot*, 2003 articulates the dangers of forgetting the importance of ones own cultural circumstance and its essential function as a binding force of community (fig. 60). Kerala is still a largely rural state; however, its social landscape has been deeply affected by the global flows of capital brought into the state by *gulfans* (migrant workers). Consequently arable land stands untouched and age-old self sufficiency has been supplanted by the *gulfans* desire for packaged and imported goods. Hussain comments upon this complex situation in his ironic portrayal of a masked man defecating in a cooking pot. The image is crudely drawn; the hatches of the pen underscore its satirical quality. The figure sits with his back to us; he looks over his shoulder in a way that suggests that his act was meant to go unseen. His identity is concealed by a horned mask suggesting that there is a measure of duplicity at work.

The notion of disassociation from ones environment carries through in Hussain’s *Man Checking the Pulse of a Dead Fish*, 2003 (fig. 61). The inert fish lies in the man’s lap yet he seems oblivious to its presence.¹⁶ He impassively looks out of the picture plane while his hand rests against his neck checking for his own pulse. The gesture of the man and the title of the painting suggest the perils of psychological egoism through

¹⁵ The following discussion draws from my catalogue essay, “The Destabilized Image,” *Zakkir Hussain: Recent Works* (Kochi: Draavidia Art and Performance Gallery, 2004).

¹⁶ An article appearing in the Kerala edition of *The Hindu* observed, “Up to 6.5 million cubic metres of industrial effluents are discharged into rivers and estuaries of Kerala daily. Discharge of heavy metals such as copper, mercury, zinc and cadmium above permitted levels was reported from several places.” “Coastal Environment Under Threat: Study” (Wednesday, Sep 13, 2006), <http://www.hindu.com/2006/09/13/stories/2006091303440500.htm>

which one is unable to recognize the world beyond the self. Though the political environment in Kerala has changed since the formative days of the Radicals, there are entirely new sets of problems arising out of environmental and social concerns within the state which have a direct bearing upon the visual engagements of Hussain. Endemic unemployment and the relatively recent liberalization of the Indian economy precipitated an influx of foreign multi-national corporations such as Coca-Cola into the State. In 2000 the Coca-Cola Company opened a 40-acre bottling plant in the Palakkad region of Kerala to produce both soft drinks and bottled water.¹⁷ In a short time, the plant succeeded in draining all the ground water in the area leaving the local farmers with nothing. Adding insult to injury The Coca-Cola Company began selling its by-products to local farmers as “fertilizer.” This miracle nourishment for the soil was in fact laced with carcinogens and has left a trail of birth defects in its wake.¹⁸

Despite this, glossy tourist brochures promote the notion of Kerala as “God’s Own Country.” Slick television advertisements continue to endorse a pristine and ecologically balanced state. However, these ubiquitous visual representations of an *untouched* Kerala mask the real issues. Spectacular advertisements function as the arbitrator of tourist perceptions and efface the differences between the lived reality of Keralites and those who journey to the state for a brief holiday. Kerala in this context is presented as the land of Ayurvedic medicine and beautiful backwater retreats and poses a simulated reality that is perilously contrary to tangible experiences. Within

¹⁷ Paul Vallely, Jon Clarke and Liz Stuart, “Coke vs People” *The Independent* UK (July 25, 2003), <http://www.countercurrents.org/glo-coke250703.htm>.

¹⁸ “Coca-Cola’s ‘toxic’ India fertilizer,” *BBC News* (July 25, 2003), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3096893.htm.

Hussain's work, the untenable impasse between capital and consumption looms large to ask: has humanity forgotten its symbiotic relationship with the natural world?

Guy Debord argued that modern capitalism not only alienated the worker from the objects he produced, but also that daily encounters with spectacular images alienated us from everyday life.¹⁹ The spectacle can take many forms; perhaps the tourist images of the unspoiled backwaters of Kerala serve as an appropriate example. The net ideological effect of these images is to seductively lure one away from the reality of life with all its disparities and incompleteness. Spectacular images have the potential to ensnare us into a hypnotic state crippling our perception with the sheer representational force of a pristine world. Resplendent and complete, these images represent an impossible fantasy. If the spectacle is so complete and impenetrable, then how does one move beyond to see and experience the world as it is? Or perhaps it is more important and relevant to the discussion at hand to ask: how does an artist, as a producer of images in his own right, challenge rather than perpetuate this problematic relationship? It was within this context that I found the work of Santhosh and Sonpimpare particularly troubling.

Debord maintained that if we are to reclaim our tangible experience of the world and make a valid foray toward change, we must dismantle the illusion of the spectacle by reclaiming the spaces of everyday life. Personal expressions and the revival of the banality of our lives are one way to challenge the completeness of the spectacular

¹⁹Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans., Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994). Debord observes on page 29, "The Spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see – commodities are now **all** there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity."

image. It is in this capacity I believe Hussain's work serves to articulate an oppositional and disruptive stance. His works are often anti-aesthetic and fragmentary in their expressions and seem to embrace the Situationist strategies of *dérive* and *détournement*. *Dérive* literally means to drift through the urban environment, engaging in random acts and encounters; whereas, *détournement* is the visual juxtaposition of chance objects aimed to undermine the observer's sense of the spectacularly driven reality.

Hussain's two-dimensional expressions often unite random objects within the same visual field, juxtaposing the real and the imaginary to foreground the disjunctive relationship that one experiences everyday. His language of disruption functions to destabilize our perception, to rouse us out of our complacency. Traces of his process: smudges, hesitations, and erasures scar the surface of his images and claim their status as constructions—as representations—rather than mirrors of reality. These are not pretty pictures. They are unapologetic and challenge us to reclaim the elusive or ephemeral aspects of life.

He states:

My images are documents of my travels. They attempt to open the unknown/known meanings of human life experiences, which at times overwhelm the silent, disturbed existence of the world. The street, its noise and its life are related to me. My images are the result of what I witness around me. The beginning of an image is like a lightning bolt – charged with electricity and life. I claim what I see – what I want to represent and dip it into the acid of thought. When it emerges onto the paper the image takes on another life. Just like a tree, a newborn baby, or anything sprouting from the earth, the images bear their own happiness, melancholy, drama and mystery.²⁰

²⁰ "The Destabilized Image," 2.

Fragments from a Devastated Land II, 2003 (figs. 62, 63) accentuates Hussain's approach to image making. This image functions as a visual travel document, recording the real and imagined spaces of the city. The urban landscape is ordered not by the architectural structures but rather by furniture. Upon the tables sit visual fragments: half bodies, amorphous creatures, and disembodied heads. The umbrella, a banal and everyday object is paired with a fish, a burning bus, and a man shitting. Its recurrence in the image is a testament to its ubiquity as a functional object in the world; however, its peculiar visual pairings give us pause. What does it mean to put an umbrella over a fish? Disparate vignettes make up life on the street, sights and sounds ignite our memory and agitate our thoughts. Hussain documents how the shape of one thing often reminds us of another. Stating that he is interested in the dialectical relationship between image and thought, Hussain visually records the processes of his deliberations to illustrate how the external environment influences his internal meanderings.

The union of human and animal is a recurrent motif in Hussain's images. These metamorphic figures are disquieting and their fluid identities work to remind us that the world is not easily apprehensible. Sometimes what we see is not what we get. Despite their apparent mystical and mythical appearances they are not meant to be celebrations of fantasy or escape.²¹ Instead, they embrace the visual language of *détournement* – the incongruous and the disjunctive share the same visual field in an effort to awaken our senses. Work such as *The Shelter*, 2003 presents a man stoically staring out from the picture plane (fig. 64). Two birds, symbols of death for the artist, are placed mask-like

²¹ The issues of the mythical and mystical in artistic practice arose out of a conversation I had one day with Rajan M. Krishnan. His observations on this point were not specifically related to Hussain's work; however, they have given me much food for thought. I thank him for his insight and input.

upon his face. Their immobility is at once iconic and ironic. The tree that fills the background of the image recalls the map of a human heart – its veins and arteries coursing with lifeblood disturb the staid and stable stance of the figure. The central, steady form of the tree persists in *The First Lesson of Failure*, 2003 (fig. 65). In this image, the trunk of a tree presses against the outer-most reaches of the picture plane. Amidst the arterial appendages of the tree, wingless misshapen birds fall to the ground. Succumbing to gravity in an Icarian gesture their bodies ironically are not designed for flight.

Another amnesiac function of the spectacle is to bury history in culture.²² And while I am not negating the importance of cultural heritage as I have argued throughout my thesis it is a problematic term that must be firmly positioned within a temporal, social and geographical frame. Today, more than ever history is unmoored and free-floating. As Rustom Bharucha points out, “Culture is not the mere instrument of politics; it is the site upon which politics is made, unmade, abused and appropriated. Far from being neutral, culture is the battleground of politics today.”²³ The rise of fundamentalism across the globe seems to have forgotten the legacy of blood spilled in the name of culture. Culture changes but it does not exist beyond the pale of time. To forget the past is to invite hubris, not unlike that which brought Icarus plummeting to the earth. Hussain’s *Exiled Homes*, 2003 addresses the political and social problematics of deploying culture in the political realm (fig. 66). Produced in response to the post-Godhra riots in Gujarat, the image reveals the torso of a woman weighed down by an

²² Debord, 137.

²³ Rustom Bharucha, “Axioms in Search of Independence,” *Secular Challenge to Communal Politics A Reader*, ed. P.R. Ram (Mumbai: Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, nd), 287.

excess of houses.²⁴ Hussain has stated that the image identifies the victims of violence as women and children and his image adamantly point to the perils of cultural wars. Its style is meant to be reminiscent of a child's drawing, a strategy meant to highlight rather than to diminish its impact. This large charcoal and conté drawing attests to the burden of history and questions the promotion of a worldview myopically defined by religious or cultural beliefs. To revive the home, as a site of personal history and individual memories, challenges the authority of a single reified culture and points to the dangers of its deployment within the political realm.

The rights of minority groups and the violence directed toward them continue to vex perceptions of India as the world's largest democracy. Within Kerala it has been the Adivasi community that has suffered at the hands of a government which consistently refuses to address their long standing land claims in the state.²⁵ In the 1960s the Kerala government promised to repatriate land back to the Adivasi community—this has yet to happen. In the last few years, the situation has approached critical mass.²⁶ In February 2003, at the Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary in the Wayanad District Kerala police indiscriminately opened fire on a group of protesting Adivasis, leaving over one hundred men, women and children dead. After the massacre, C. K. Janu the leader of the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGM) was taken into police custody and brutally beaten. The rights of citizenry have been repeatedly denied to the Adivasi

²⁴ In 2002 communal riots rocked Gujarat in which mobs of Hindus attacked the Muslim minority leaving over a thousand people dead. For more see Achyut Yagnik, Suchitra Sheth, "Whither Gujarat? Violence and After," *Economic and Political Weekly* (March 16, 2002): 4844-4849.

²⁵ Adivasis literally means "original people" or more specifically those who belong to the tribal and/or indigenous populations of India.

²⁶ Subhash Gatade, "No Land Even for Burial... Any Meaning Living on this Land?" India: Interview with Ms. C.K. Janu, Leader of Tribals in Kerala (March 18, 2005), <http://www.sacw.net/Nation/gatade18032005.htm>.

community.²⁷ Questions of citizenry and the right to it under the Indian Constitution is an issue that Rajan M. Krishnan took up in his November 2004 exhibition *Little Black Drawings*.²⁸ Like Hussain, he is an artist who has deliberately chosen to stay in Kerala and his works also consistently address the social and political problems within the state. The large charcoal drawings included in *Little Black Drawings* were inspired by both *in situ* encounters and mass media images. The point of distinction between the use of mass media images in Krishnan's work versus that of Santhosh and Sonpimpare rests on a larger concern for tangible and identifiable social problems.

Krishnan's *Citizen*, 2004, for example, takes up the problem of social and physical displacement (fig. 67). A lone man sits against a wall. Arms and legs are held close in a protective gesture. A hat sits low upon his head urging the play of shadow within the emaciated hollows of his indifferent expression. A signpost rises out of the pavement, its vertical strength contrasting with the crumpled vulnerability of the man's solitude. Incomplete words inscribed on the wall narrate a fragmentary and fleeting social reality. The material opacity of the black charcoal is subject to erasure and it is the subtractive process of the artist that constructs the image. It is the in-between spaces of gray, rather than the areas of black and white that articulate form and the residual shading functions as the connective tissue of the image. The charcoal sits like a dusty membrane, a fragile skin, covering the surface of the handmade paper. Undulating areas of gray evoke a sense of restless movement. As if to arrest the endless

²⁷ See also Arundhati Roy, "You have blood on your hands: A letter to Kerala Chief Minister Antony," *Frontline* Vol. 20, Issue 06 (March 15 - 28, 2003), <http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl2006/stories/20030328002104500.htm>.

²⁸ What follows is a reworking of segments of my catalogue essay for the exhibition, "The Task of Translating in the Work of Rajan M. Krishnan," (Kochi, Kashi Art Gallery, 6-21 November, 2004).

drift, the red screen-printed word CITIZEN sits like an anchor in the corner of the image. The commanding durability of the red is incongruent with the perpetual flux of gray in the drawing. The stamp-like quality of CITIZEN recalls a logo or a trademark yet the permeability of the letters undermines its own authority as a visual marker of possession. The juxtaposition of CITIZEN with the ephemeral and delicate tissues of the portrayal compels dialogue and discussion and seems to pose the question: what does it mean to be a citizen?

Krishnan also produced a series of drawings which were collectively titled *Citizens* to address the issue of protest within the public sphere (fig. 68). Within the frame of this drawing the figures challenge the practice of aborting female children.²⁹ Fueled by the inclusion of truncated words and underscored by the ebb and flow of the gray spaces, these images not only undercut the formation of a stable narrative but also call to mind a social fabric in a state of endless change. Their ambiguity and strategic dislocation urge the viewer to seek out a context – a frame of reference to ease understanding. It is through the visual embrace of the fragment that these images undermine the possibility of a cohesive and unproblematic social text. They do not cover the reality of the people represented, but rather through the medium of charcoal, they translate and allow the light of human protest to emanate.

A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure

²⁹ Although for many years the practice of female infanticide was not always an issue in Kerala in recent years it has experienced an upsurge. See Vibhuti Patel, "Adverse Juvenile Sex Ratio in Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly* (June 01, 2002), <http://www.epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2002&leaf=06&filename=4525&filetype=html>. See also Radha S. Hedge, "Marking Bodies, Reproducing Violence: A Feminist Reading of Female Infanticide in South India," *Violence Against Women* (1999): 507-524.

language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully.³⁰

Translation, for Benjamin, is an act that preserves the meeting with an original form as a fluid and contingent process rather than a stable outcome. A successful translation does not block or cover the original but instead allows it to shine through. The nuances of Krishnan's drawings express a visual cadence that underscores the contradictions of social circumstance and perceived reality. I find the play on the corporeal, the social body, the body of humanity and the dismembered texts that float through the images most provocative.

In juxtaposing the work of Hussain and Krishnan against that of *Bombay x 17 I* have highlighted some of the extant tensions that still exist between the centre and the periphery or between the "intracultural" and the "intercultural." Although it seems to me that *Bombay x 17* was an example of how some Indian artists had capitulated to a dominant model of aesthetic practice I also realize that this show could be seen as the positive outcome of significant shifts and changes that have occurred in India over the last forty years. However, on the threshold of the twenty-first century although the pressing issues of postcolonial identities and cultural difference are largely discursively resolved there seems to be a new leviathan lurking in the wings promoting a normative discourse under the banner of trans-global artistic internationalism. The question of normative artistic practice is an issue that I have repeatedly returned to in my analysis. India's presence at the *Venice Biennale* in 2005 and the growing market interest in contemporary Indian art are two of many examples signaling India's unproblematic

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 79.

membership in a post-modern international arena. If these examples are any indication, the moment of India's arrival is paradoxically the moment of its loss. I am not suggesting an essentialized identity should be preserved but rather I am questioning how the "spectacle" of the postmodern operates within its own neo-colonial logic to fuel amnesia.³¹

³¹ "The Spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images." Debord, 12.

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