1 Marking the Shift—
The Contemporary Moment

This chapter begins with a brief historical overview of modern art practice of the preceding decades within which the three artists in this study, Chitra Ganesh, Tejal Shah and Nikhil Chopra began their practices through a concerted focus on the following—new mediums, artist spaces and exhibitions that brought international visibility to Indian artists. After a short discussion of the period of the national modern (Kapur 2000) it moves onto the decade of the 1990s when neo-liberalization of the Indian economy brought in relatively newer contemporary mediums such as installation, video and performance art appeared in Indian art practice, discussing the pioneering works created in the new mediums, highlighting the disturbed politics of the nation. It then moves onto the spaces where some of the works in the new mediums were being created and signposts the founding of Khoj International Artists' Association in 1997, Khoj not only offered an experimental art space where global transcultural dialogues at its workshops and residencies facilitated innovative and collaborative experiments for artists, but also provided both Shah and Chopra with opportunities to introduce their practice in India through a Khoj residency after completing their art studies in the West. The contemporary exhibition space displaying contemporary works from India becomes the next point of focus of this chapter, especially the importance of curation and its ensuing dynamics via a discussion of two group shows of Indian artists, the *Indian Highway* (2007–2011) and *Paris-Delhi-Bombay* (2010). The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the India pavilion at the *54th Venice Biennial,* (2011), curated by Ranjit Hoskote, highlighting Hoskote's curatorial choices as an example of the first postnational critique of contemporary art from India.

1.1 The Post-independence Decades

The post-independence decades of art practice in India were marked by a need to 'catch up' with the modernism of the West as well as to simultaneously develop

a nationally conscious identity, these two concomitant moves underlay the creation of the category of the 'National Modern,' a term coined by Indian art historian and critic Geeta Kapur, this double discourse of the national and the modern couples nationalism with the category of tradition and modernism with internationalism. The national modern, therefore, did not simply create an Indian modern as a category but also functioned as a postcolonial critique to the West. Kapur further argued that the categories of modernism should not be viewed as a form of determinism to be followed to a logical end, rather as "trajectories crisscrossing the western mainstream."[73] In India, modern art had already made its presence felt in the 1930s in the works of Rabindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy and Amrita Sher-Gil, followed by the works of several artist groups in the 1940s and 1950s.[74] Some members of these groups had been educated at the Schools of Art established by the British at Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, modeled on the Royal Academy School in London, these schools strictly focused on teaching academic naturalism and western classical art. The art schools were but one of the western institutions introduced by the Raj among art societies, art salons / exhibitions, art journalism and public patronage—all of which played a role in overturning pre-colonial systems of private patronage. The artist as genius now gave a new status to Indian artists, and modernism played an important role in the anti-colonial period by attacking the foundations of naturalism which was very much part of both the dominant culture as well as colonialism. Mitter claims that "the ambivalent relationship between modernity, modernism and the primitive allowed Indian artists to put forward anti-colonial strategies and thus fashion their national identity, which they would not have been able to do with academic naturalism."[75] The nation was naturally at the center of this resistant strategy and yet for some of these groups, subsequent engagements and experiments with western forms of modernism were driven as much by a resistance to their education as by a desire to catch up with movements in the west and the universal western modernist canon. In her publication on the Progressives, Dalmia states that it was the Progressive Artists' Group consisting of F.N. Souza, S.H. Raza,

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73 For an extended discussion around the usage of the term, please see *When was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), 288. Kapur's categorization of parallel modernities, has, since then, been supported by similar analyses from other peripheral locations in the Global South.

74 These included the Progressive Artists' Group (1947), Young Turks (1941), Calcutta Progressives (1943), and the Delhi Silpi Chakra (1949).

75 Partha Mitter, "Reflections on Modern Art and National Identity in Colonial India: An Interview," in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005), 24–48.

K. H. Ara, M. F. Husain, H. A. Gade and Sadanand Bakre that was most "correctly" modernist. Their exemplars originated from Paris, Munich, New York and London. This impulse could be discerned in Souza's use of the line clearly inspired by Picasso, Raza's use of color in his Kokoschka inspired landscapes and Ara's pre-occupation with the language of paint, reminiscent of Cezanne.[76] For modern Indian artists, including the members of the Progressive Artists' Group, these were the decades when they tried to come to terms with a century of development in European art, from Realism to Cubism, especially drawing from Expressionism. However, it was not only international modernism that was driving art practice in India at this time, some artists were also simultaneously drawing from indigenous sources. It was perhaps Husain more than any other member of the Progressive Artists' Group that exhibited the indigenous rawness and elemental life of the village with works like *Zamin* (1955), and *Spider and the Lamp* (1956). His desire to go back to his roots and a strong commitment to the nation was demonstrated in works such as *Zamin*. The panoramic painting includes a pack mule, a woman with a sieve, a man with a pair of bulls, featuring myriad aspects of India's rural life, the frieze included a laborer, a peasant, and the artisan—all essential symbols to the new secular nation in its building process.[77] *Zamin* was painted by Husain in 1955 for the Lalit Kala Exhibition in the same year and sparked a major debate against its 'modern-ness' and modern art in general.[78] The Progressive Artists' Group reduced in numbers when some of the original members, Souza, Raza and Bakre left for England and Paris, and the group itself disbanded in 1954. Indigenity concertedly entered the frame in the following decade when the shared artistic and intellectual vision of Mexican Ambassador Octavio Paz and artist J. Swaminathan led towards the formation of Group 1890 in Bhavnagar, Gujarat in 1962. The collective of a dozen artists—including Jeram Patel, Raghav Kaneria, M. Reddeppa Naidu, Rajesh Mishra, Ghulam M. Sheikh, Jyoti Bhatt, Himmat Shah, S. G. Nikam, Eric Hubert Bowen, Balkrishna Patel and Ambadas—were led by Swaminathan. They proclaimed a strong desire to break away from the western academic realism being taught at the Schools of Art established in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, as well as the "the vulgar naturalism of Raja Ravi Varma and the pastoral idealism of the Bengal School." The Group emphasized the importance of artistic practice born out of choice,

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76   For a detailed study of the group please see Yashodhara Dalmia, *The Making of Modern Art: The Progressives*, 2001.

77   Dalmia, *Making of Modern Indian Art: Husain, A Metaphor for Modernity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 106.

78   Dalmia, *Journeys* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33.

rather than the accretions of a cliché that claimed the "Indianness" of identity, which had been a resistant strategy with the works from the Bengal School for example.[79] In his essay for the group exhibition catalogue in 1963, Octavio Paz commented that these young men had grasped the modern language and that the true subject of the exhibition was the confrontation of the vision of the painters with the inherited image,[80]—apparent in their critique of the traditions stemming from the Bengal School and Raja Ravi Varma's work. The formation of Group 1890 and its activities became an important intervention on the creative aspect of artistic choices born out of the artistic impulse rather than being driven by existing styles and canonical schools of thought in the west.

1.1.1 Locatedness and the Baroda School

While artists in India were referencing and creating parallel modernisms and seeking their own language in these decades, modernism had already been challenged in Europe and the US with the advent of Pop art and postmodernism. Through most of the twentieth century, Modernism in the west had been defined by tensions underlying both its acceptance and rejection of modern life, the coming together of aspects from high and popular culture, of traditional practices with the newly emerging mechanical means of production and the division of a formal modernism and a historical/critical/political avant-garde. It was during the middle of the twentieth century that these developments peaked and generated a productive synthesis that could be termed as the official beginning of contemporary art,[81] marking a conceptual shift in art-making. In India, a nation just emerging from colonial rule, governed by its own set of circumstances, there were no such clear-cut ruptures or concerted moves, rather the narrative and figurative modes continued to be employed by artists across genres even as characteristic features from pop art and the postmodern entered contemporary art practice.

In mid-twentieth century it was the establishment of a new art school at Baroda in 1949 challenging the curriculum of western art history being taught in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta that created a secular space in art practice for the first time. Contemporaneity entered the frame as wide-ranging national and

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79 Ranjit Hoskote, "Anxiety of Influence," *Art India* Vol. 3, Issue I, Quarter 1, (1998), 33. Hoskote comments on Swaminathan's work bearing the unmistakable franchise of Rothko and Newman.

80 Octavio Paz, *Group 1890*, New Delhi October 12, 1963. Exhibition Catalogue.

81 Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 4.

international issues from modern to contemporary art were addressed through the writings of artist-teachers, K. G. Subramanyan, Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh and Ratan Parimoo, as also through the lively discourse around developing art practices, especially in the 1970s and 1980s when artists from Baroda, Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh and Vivan Sundaram travelled to the UK and interacted with artists involved with the British pop art movement, Peter de Francia and R. B. Kitaj. The locatedness of the artist increasingly came up as a question, Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh returning from the Royal College of Art, London, and prompted by his own experiences, also questioned his choice of autobiography as genre as he said, "And then the question was—what image shall I paint? I like painting people but those I liked painting were people I knew: my family and friends […] so I decided to paint my mother, the house I lived in, and the prophet too, why not?"[82] Later, painting *Returning Home After a Long Absence* (1969–73), Sheikh included motifs from Mughal painting, an image of the prophet Mohammed on *Buraq*, angelic figures and angular rows of houses referencing 14th century Sienese painting, as well as a black and white photograph of his mother. *Returning Home* represents differing structuring elements: the pictorial space divided by a wall separates the group of houses from a factory in the distance, the wall becomes an important marker as that of containing the artist's childhood world, floating above the blue mosque are some angels painted in the style of Persian painting, these are headed by a faceless Prophet on Buraq. At the bottom of the painting is Sheikh's mother's portrait. This painting serves as an inaugural image to his visual autobiography, an art historical narrative stemming from his own filial ties to the Persian and Islamic tradition of which he was a part.[83] Sheikh's works in the 1970s and 1980s experimented with modes of representation adapted from pre-Renaissance European, Mughal and Persian painting. They included "quotations," to use his term, from reproductions of works from those periods, copied in oil paint in his own hand. Sheikh's work, appropriating signs, re-historicizing narrative histories, can be cited as one of the examples of adopting a transcultural approach in modern Indian art practice.

In Bombay as Gieve Patel, Nalini Malani and Sudhir Patwardhan began to place the figure within a felt experience of their own environment, the narrating of locatedness acquired political overtones stemming from class (Patel and Patwardhan) and gender (Malani). Politically the period of the 1960s and 1970s

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82 Yashodhara Dalmia, *Indian Contemporary Art Post-independence: Essays by Yashodhara Dalmia, Ella Datta, Chaitanya Sambrani, Martha Jakimovicz-Karle, Santo Datta*, ed. Yashodhara Dalmia (New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery, 1997), 19.

83 Karen Zitzewitz, *The Art of Secularism: The Cultural Politics of Modernist Art in Contemporary India* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2014), 105–106.

was marked by border wars, the exercise of draconian state power through the imposition of the Emergency, the growing influx of refugees in the East of the country after the India-Pakistan war in 1971 and also by mill workers striking work in Bombay. And these artists responded to the changing scenario both as citizens of a democratic state and as private subjects.

Back in Baroda, the growing need to engage with immediate and necessary realities of society was signposted with the holding of the landmark exhibition, *Place for People* in 1981. The exhibition included artists Vivan Sundaram, Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh, Jogen Chowdhury, Nalini Malani and Bhupen Khakhar and curator and critic Geeta Kapur as its core sixth member. Kapur's essay in the exhibition catalogue emphasized the artist's right and responsibility to address context specific human presence and engage with the current realities of society, she stated in the exhibition catalogue that figurative art could be a useful way to provide content to an empty notion of post-modernism.[84] An ideologically pitched exhibition, *Place for People* emphasized the *politics of place* with an insistence on figuration as against the formalist abstraction and neo-expressionism prevailing in the international art scene of the time. Works such as Khakhar's *Guru Jayanti* (1970s), Sundaram's *Guddo* (1980), Sheikh's *Waiting and Wandering* (1981), Malani's *His Life* (1979) series, and Sudhir Patwardhan's depictions of Bombay addressed the 'particular' of places and situations through a many layered 'reality,' in which were included the history of the world as a new lexicon of language, including the Italian Renaissance, western modernism and centuries old popular urban art from India. Rather than following a teleology of the modern, *Place For People's* significance lay in this break with Modernism, where instead of employing an exclusivist ideology linked with a particular and only valid form of history from where the 'national modern' could be frozen into its 'true' character in a homogenizing form—instead, for the first time the 'narrative' aspect of the telling was emphasized and particularized.[85] The narrative telling drew from the city as the new urban reality and fulcrum of modernity and it featured significantly in artworks in these decades across the country from multiple urban locations including Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi.

In Calcutta, artists Rabin Mondal, Jogen Chowdhury and Bikash Bhattacharya elaborated the social conditions of a city bursting at its seams, Ganesh Pyne, Paritosh Sen, Dharmanarayan Dasgupta and Ganesh Haloi used humor and satire to portray both the vulnerable and thick-skinned characters inhabiting urban

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84   Geeta Kapur, *Place for People*, 1981. Exhibition Catalogue.

85   Asish Rajadhyaksha, "The Last Decade," in *Contemporary Art in Baroda*, eds. Ghulammohd Sheikh and Belinder Dhanoa (Delhi: Tulika, 1997), 214.

spaces, while in Delhi Krishen Khanna and A. Ramachandran executed monumental murals focusing on the marginal plight of the migrant labor. For women artists the city offered a site of resistance, where they could claim autonomy.[86] The marking of the 'urban' location of the artist as subject and citizen became particularly significant with a sustained and concerted focus on local spaces and the forms of public inhabitation, especially the bazaar, where pictures of gods and goddesses, national leaders, film stars, shop signs, cinema theatres, restaurants, the streets with their shops filled with plastic wares, and cheap textiles, all comprised the growing urban narrative. In the light of a western pop sensibility that had arrived via the works of Hockney and Kitaj from Britain, the pictorial bazar aesthetic proved a rich resource. The registering of people's presence in the medium of oil painting itself became a political statement and provided visibility to the socially marginalized—the common *paan* shop owner, the wayside cobbler. This bringing of people back into the pictures[87] connected with India's rich visual tradition from the past, and with the Indian bazaar aesthetic, creating a dynamic and located contemporary narrative and Khakhar's pictoriality often drew from ordinary everyday life of the people who lived at the margins of representation, barbers, watch repairers, tailors.

Why was this bringing of people into the pictures such an important marker for contemporaneity? Possibly the viewing of a space *vis-à-vis* another, through the prism of differing narrative histories and geographies gestured towards an inter-connectedness that was beginning to define the globalizing world, a bringing together of different times and experiences of time within the same present—an instantaneous yet disjunctive 'living' unity of the historical present as termed by Peter Osborne (2009). This shift towards contemporaneity and located-ness in the everyday would best be exemplified in the work of Bhupen Khakhar, India's first queer artist who had the courage to "come out" in the 1980s and create artworks foregrounding the queer body. As Kapur states,[88] it was Khakhar who set the agenda to think differently, audaciously, about what it meant to belong to a place.

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86   Roobina Karode and Shukla Sawant, "City Lights: City Limits – Multiple Metaphors in Everyday Urbanism," in *Art and Visual Culture in India 1857–2007,* ed. Gayatri Sinha (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2009), 192–197.

87   Parul Dave-Mukherji, "Horn Please," in *Horn Please: Narratives in Contemporary Art* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007), 29 -30. The Baroda School would later be critiqued by the Kerala Radicals for raising the level of aesthetics to political representation, there could be no place for people if nationalism as a discourse was not critiqued for its exclusionary practices and issues of class and caste inequality unaddressed. This critique would continue to dog artistic debates in the decades to come.

88   "Geeta Kapur: On the Curatorial in India Part II," in *Afterall*, October 3, 2011.

1.1.2 Bhupen Khakhar and the Queer Body

In the early 1960s, Khakhar began experimenting with collages, creating a series of works incorporating popular iconography employing materials that he continually collected and reconfigured in his works, following a cut and paste approach, there were "mirrors patterned with little divinities, cut from the lurid oleograph prints sold in the temple-bazaars," these were embellished with graffiti and some brushwork.[89] Kapur terms Khakhar a vanguard figure who employed neo-dada tactics to question the modernist aesthetic, adopting ethnographic modes of a nativist painter, he opened up local geographies with "allegorical narratives drawn from within the common culture."[90] In the 1970s, Khakhar 'performed' his photographs, his exhibition catalogue titled *Truth is Beauty and Beauty is God*, that was created for a solo show at Gallery Chemould in 1972 adopts self-parody to confront class and sexuality. With its tacky plastic cover, it included campy photographs of the artist as "a worldly man, spoofing commercial advertising," these photographs included him wearing sun-glasses, holding a cigarette, posing with tooth paste, with a toy gun.[91] And by the 1980s it was Khakhar who fashioned an "Indian" gay body, coming out through works like *You Can't Please All*, (1981) that showed as part of the *Place for People* exhibition in 1981. In this work, Khakhar employs the ancient fable of the man and the donkey in a form of an ongoing narrative against which a busy urban scene in a contemporary Indian town unfolds. It comprises myriad simultaneous actions set against varying tonal colored backgrounds—of a man repairing a car, another seated alone behind a grilled window, another man reaching out to pick mangoes from a tree. The lone watcher of these multiple scenes is the artist himself, the naked white-haired man dominates the right half of the frame as he stands on a balcony looking out, his back to the viewer and in a narrow cranny behind him rests a single mattress and pillow. Kapur describes the painting as "a replete illustration of a provincial civic life […] the aesthetic referred to here is that of the Italian primitives and other early Renaissance painters, as well as the manuscript illuminations in albums and folios from the Mughal and Rajput schools." With the artist-surveyor at its head the town is presented in detailed fragments

89   Timothy Hyman, "The Baroda Convergence (1964–72)," in *Bhupen Khakhar* (Mumbai: Gallery Chemould, 1998), 14.

90   Geeta Kapur, "The Uncommon Universe of Bhupen Khakhar," in *Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007), 111–135.

91   Nada Raza, "A Man Labelled Bhupen Khakhar Branded as Painter," in *Bhupen Khakhar: You Can't Please All* (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), 13.

and both men and beast in translucent grey float in a grey-blue space lifting the scene to the level of a dream,[92] the message in the title of the work connects with the fable itself and with the artist's personal life.

Hyman, marking Khakhar's coming out in the 1980s as the most courageous act of his life, attributes his art in this period a confessional tone through which the self as juxtaposed to the world as it "interrogates *and is interrogated by* the world."[93] With *Yayati* (1984) he draws on a myth from Mahabharata in which the son gives up his own vitality for the sake of his father, with *In a Boat* (1984), same-sex fantasies filled with explicit eroticism take center stage. Khakhar's lovers were often older ordinary men who he cared for with great devotion, in *My Dear Friend* (1983), and *How Many Hands do I Need to Declare My Love to You* (1994), Khakhar acted as both lover and beloved giving and receiving pleasure. In this decade, the staging of sexuality in Khakhar's paintings in religious settings such as mosques, temples and dargahs indicates a located-ness in his deliberate selection of sites where congregations served as pick-up spots for furtive couplings, as for example in *The Celebration of Guru Jayanti* (1980), *Jatra* (1997), and *Yagna/Marriage* (2000).

Writing to Timothy Hyman that these works were part of his effort to come out in the open, Khakhar mentioned that he had reached this juncture after spending a lot of time in England in the company of gay British artists such as David Hockney and Howard Hodgkin as well as R. B. Kitaj. Seeing homosexuality flourish in a normal community context in England gave him 'spirit and validation' which was further catalyzed by the death of his mother.[94] It is perhaps Khakhar's work that can be cited as the best example of the interweaving of the dynamics of the transcultural processes in these earlier decades as he engaged with Indian popular culture to create works inspired by styles in the West and participated actively in a transcultural dialogue with British Art.[95] Khakhar stated way back in 1978, "Human beings in their local environment, climate, provincial society; this should be the ultimate goal of the artist,"[96] Khakhar's words can be juxtaposed within the local/global debate to ask, "who can speak for a place or even speak the place? Is it the 'local' artist and/or community or is it conversely, the

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92 Kapur, Mercer, 120–122.

93 Hyman, 68.

94 Jyoti Dhar, "Love in the time of Bhupen," in *ArtAsiaPacific* May/June 2016, 104. Accessed on May 2, 2018. https://bhupenkhakharcollection.com/love-in-the-time-of-bhupen/.

95 For further examples of the ongoing transcultural dialogue please see Hyman, 1998.

96 Hyman, 78.

specialist cultural producer, dealing in intervention and/or site-specific strategies?"[97] Although Sheikh's question addresses the sense of place via the biennial and mega-exhibition spaces as interconnected relational spaces, I would apply it to Khakhar's work as it engages with this idea conversely as he **speaks** the place with his site specific strategies that gesture towards a belonging and yet, because of his queer positioning, is more of an outsider looking in as it were, the relationality of this belonging has as much to do with his own sexual orientation as with the everyday figures he chooses to represent.

With *Picture Taken on their 30th Wedding Anniversary* created in 1998, the staging of the male nude bodies in a homosexual marriage as if sitting for a wedding portrait follows the pictorial conventions relating to Krishna and his consort Radha in his choice of color palette. The impersonation through cross-dressing implying a fusion between male body and female soul mimics the traditions of open transvestitism in gay communities This work uses the popular convention of photography, a ritual celebration of eroticized worship and a folk-urban mode of painting to reiterate the presence of androgyny as part of Indian narrative.[98] Khakhar's work, therefore, not only foregrounded the queer body but also introduced androgyny in modern Indian art practice. And these artistic representations would not have been easy choices. His friend and mentor, Sheikh writing about Khakhar's double life says, "All day he played 'straight,' like everyone else around him, but he nurtured a secret world within. In the early 60s it was difficult to declare one's homosexuality—it would mean making an enemy of everyone—so he had no choice but to lead a double life."[99]

Kapur writes that "homosexuality in India is part of the ubiquitous system of lies and deprivation, part of religious performance, part of married life, part of popular culture […] the state of *abjection* is a marker of difference, but it is also a condition of being. It is the place where identity is recognized, but where categorical claims for that identity collapse. In a way, the space of difference is the space of collapse, of an encounter with the non-being. In that space between the pathetic and the spectacular—the well-known liminal space of the social outsider—also lies the space for *debonding* with the social order, for untethering the self, and thereby gaining a bid for transcendence."[100]

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97 Simon Sheikh, "Marks of Distinction, Vectors of Possibility," *The Biennial Reader*, 160.

98 Kapur, Mercer, 126.

99 Sheikh, *Buddy.* Accessed on April 10, 2017. https://bhupenkhakharcollection.com/gulammohammed-sheikh-essay/.

100 Kapur, Mercer, 131–132.

Khakhar's works in the decade of the 1980s present that debonding as he occupies the space of the social outsider—looking in as it were, a feature clearly visible in his works.

In the later years of 1980s and 1990s [Khakhar] was the restlessly transgressive provocateur revelling in taboo subjects such as the pleasure of homoerotic life and opening up a path of self-articulation for gay artists in India.[101] Homoeroticism is a lived reality of contemporary life, but it is kept at a distance and not allowed to jeopardize the heterosexual, patriarchal social system. Discussing Khakhar's queer sexuality, Panniker states that though Khakhar denied himself the role of the political activist, his artistic legacy is appreciated for its artistic merit. However, he argues that Khakhar's self-disclosure was restricted to the exclusive space of art galleries, museums as against spaces of political struggle for gay people. Even as he explored themes of religion and sexuality centrally, he did so from his upper caste location.[102] The classed Indian queer male body would also surface in Indian born Canadian artist photographer Sunil Gupta's photographs as he began staging his photographs in various locations. (*Exiles 1980s Delhi, India Gate 1987, Jama Masjid 1987, Manpreet 2011* among others).

1.2 The 1990s—Articulating Politics

In the early 1990s, India's economic liberalization altered print and televisual medias at an accelerated pace. The engagement with mediums was already in a state of flux when the 1990s arrived, a decade when the global art world witnessed an exponential growth. Art markets grew, and as modes of circulation changed, so did professional and political attitudes towards art in tandem with the circulation of art in Biennials and art fairs, as artists strayed from the studio and integrated their mobility into their work, there were other changes as curators shed the historical baggage of the museum's archive. Art institutions started to reflect upon themselves as a critical space.[103] These impactful changes would only gradually be felt by India as its economy began to open up. The decade was foregrounded not only by the nation and its politics through the

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101 Ranjit Hoskote, "Visit to Sri Lanka," in *Bhupen Khakhar You Can't Please All*, 2016, 118–119.

102 Shivaji Pannikar, "Kinky Issues': Gay Identity and High Art," in *Articulating Resistance: Art and Activism,* eds. Shivaji Pannikkar and Deeptha Achar (New Delhi: Tulika, 2012), 257–278. Pannikar discusses the works of Jehangir Jani as another example.

103 Lars Bang Larsen, "The Long Nineties," *Frieze* Jan 1, 2012. Accessed on April 14, 2018. http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the-long-nineties/.

rise of Hindutva and communal tension, but also marked the problematizing of identity and gender through the anti-Mandal agitation and the violent reaction to the legal system and the judgement on the Shah Bano case. These were important developments and some of them would be reflected in the early art works that would be created in the new mediums as they became available. One of the significant markers of the 1980s was the problematizing and conflating of gender with religion and the 1980s marked the emergence of religion as a major factor in Indian politics. In April 1985, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Shah Bano, upholding the High Court's decision to award Shah Bano a monthly maintenance from her husband after his divorce or triple *talaq*. This landmark judgment was, however, quickly nullified by the passing of the Protection of Muslim Women's Right to Divorce Act in 1986 that nullified their right to claim maintenance after divorce by claiming that divorced Muslim women were only entitled to *mehr* and maintenance during their *iddat* period. This act was a real setback to the status of Muslim women in India and was followed by many protests across the country.

The controversy underlined the role played by the state itself in perpetuating patriarchal relationships and the community. By its decision, the Congress Party "legitimized communal identities in terms both of state policies and of strategies for political mobilization," and this was very much in keeping with the Congress's policy of minority appeasement.[104] The demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in the same year was followed by communal riots in Mumbai in 1993–94 and almost a thousand deaths, the majority of who were Muslims. The presence of divisive politics based on religion not only questioned the secularism of national identity that was enshrined in the Indian constitution but also led to more violence ten years later in Gujarat, in 2002, when riots and massacres left thousands dead and homeless.[105] The prioritizing of the nation's identity along religious lines aimed to vest national identity and power within one community. The *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement that gained pace in the 1980s was the brainchild of various seers supported by Hindutva forces such as the RSS *(Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh)*, VHP *(Vishva Hindu Parishad)*, Bajrang Dal and BJP *(Bhartiya Janta Party)*. The movement enlarged the political base of the BJP and enacted a unifying role, forging a Hindutva identity across a vastly polarised Hindu society segregated along caste, class and gender with its patriarchal bias.

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104   Zoya Hasan, "Gender Politics, Legal Reform, and the Muslim Community in India," in *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicised Religion in South Asia* eds. Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu (New York: Routledge, 1998), 71–72.

105   Please see Siddharth Vardarajan, *Gujarat: The Making of a Tragedy* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2002), for further detail.

Bacchetta, discussing the queer formations of Hindu nationalism via her reading of the internal publications of the RSS and the BJP, states that the RSS employs masculinist terms to describe its citizen body as—"the men born in the land of Bharat," and as "sons of the soil"—in the words of M.S. Gowalkar the major RSS ideologue and second *sarsangchalak* or RSS supreme leader between 1940 and 1973. In its conception the ideal Hindu nationalist man is central to the Hindu People and is described as a virile, chivalrous Kshatriya warrior.[106] A successful outreach for Hindutva was aided by new media through a mass circulation of provocative audio tapes by Sadhvi Ritambhara and Uma Bharti that instigated incendiary sentiments. Interestingly Rithambhara's cassettes addressed men exclusively in the invocation to rise and fight: *Vir Bhaiyo jago* (Brave brothers, awake).[107] BJP leader Advani coopted Ram as the centrepiece of his campaign parallel to the broadcast of televised series of the epic Ramayana and right-wing fundamentalism configured multiple ideas around Ram to be presented as a symbol of one-ness. This cooption could also be evidenced in the careful handling of the *Ram Lalla* (the infant God Rama) legend and images.[108] The central strategy of the Hindu Right is to focus on religion and culture as the primary attributes of the nation and national identity, deploying the discourse of secularism, free speech and equality while at the same time pursuing an anti-secular agenda through the establishment of a Hindu state and pursuing the vision of casting the Muslim Other as intolerant and suspect in terms of his loyalty to the nation. Ratna Kapur also specifies how the womens' wing promotes a seemingly moderate position towards womens' rights, vocally opposing rape, dowry, sexual harassment while at the same time inscribing these roles within more traditional, culturally bound patriarchal family as wives and mothers who have to be honored and protected.[109] A detailed discussion of this highly charged politicised atmosphere is beyond the scope of this study, but suffice it to say that this was the complex and conflicted reality of the practice of politics in the Indian nation in the last decades as it opened up to new technologies of image production in arts practice and this was reflected in the artworks as well.

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106   Paola Bacchheta, "Queer Formations in (Hindu) Nationalism," in *Sexuality Studies,* ed. Sanjay Srivastava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 125–128.

107   Tanika Sarkar, "Heroic Woman, Mother Goddesses," in *Handbook of Gender*, 348.

108   Ibid, 347.

109   Ratna Kapur, *Erotic Justice: Law and the New Politics of Postcolonialism* (London: The Glass House Press, 2005), 44, 46 & 125.

1.2.1 1990s—Articulating the Nation's Politics Through New Mediums

The 1980s art movements in Europe and United States were dominated by neo-conceptualism and neo-expressionism—women artists such as Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger were critiquing stereotypes and consumer culture through the medium of photography, the neo-expressionist paintings of Georg Baselitz, and Anselm Kiefer in Germany and Julian Schnabel in US, while referencing the war-torn violence from the previous decades were working with materials and mediums creating distorted figural forms. In India on the other hand artist experiments with other mediums in the preceding decades could be termed as individual and sporadic. Nancy Adajania's essay on the overtures in new media art begins with the 1960s, with Padamsee's experimental film *Syzygy,* terming it as a gemstone without a setting, she goes onto detail how artists like Khanna, Padamsee, Husain and Mehta working in film and photographs projects in the 1960s and 1970s remained unacknowledged because of a lack of patronage and support.[110] Sundaram had experimented with pop art as early as 1965 in works such as *Elephanta* before he left for London. In the 1970s, in his series, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoise*, Sundaram used the medium of oil painting and yet, in creating an apparent visibility of sorts through painting the shattered, frosted windowpane, he referenced the existing political situation in India and the menace of authoritarian rule. Discussing overtures in new media in these early decades, Nancy Adajania states that no single official narrative or universal model can explain the variety of Indian experiments in new media art and that these practices could not be framed within textbook Western norms,[111] because of their dissimilar trajectory. It was the decade of the 1990s that brought about larger, impactful changes in artistic mediums and genres in India.

Video, with its infinite potential to recontextualize and reconfigure narrative histories offered immense possibilities to traverse and mediate experiences, possessing the cinematic ability to transport the viewer into a deeper temporal experience and installation, as an ensemble of elements functioning as a singular composite entity, allowed the visitor to physically enter the artwork and experience it in its totality. Performance, with its fluidity, was a pertinent vehicle with which to question the construction of identity and systems of representations—all were powerful and expressive genres for artists to engage with and articulate their forms of resistance in a dynamic format. Boris Groys states, modern art was

110   Nancy Adajania, "New Media Overtures," in *Art and Visual Culture*, 270.

111   Nancy Adajania, "The Transfiguration of the Window," *Video Wednesdays@Gallery Espace* 29 July – 1 August 2009, 12.

working on the level of individual form, contemporary art on the level of context, framework and background—an installation piece would, therefore, demonstrate a certain selection, chain of choices and a logic in their exclusion and inclusion.[112] All of these mediums were free from the canonical traditions of western art history and played a key role in democratizing the production of images. Anyone could pick up a camera and make video art, video held the potential for cultural critique and was "understood as a technology for the production of anti-establishment imagery."[113] This democratization of the new genres played an important role in their adoption by artists. And in India, the foci of these early experiments were the nation and its politics as well as related socio-political issues drawing from gendered, classed identities within the nation.

1.2.2 Early Pioneers in Video Installation—Nalini Malani and Vivan Sundaram

One of the first artists to employ the medium of video as a cultural critique in India was Nalini Malani. Malani's shift to video-installation is particularly significant as it spans the generational shift that occurred with the artists working with modern traditional mediums to the next generation who worked increasingly with forms of new media. Malani's early work is particularly useful to understand how an artist working with traditional mediums, primarily as a painter, can move towards video and performance without losing one form into the other. Malani's first technological shift occurred as a reaction to the destruction of the murals at Nathdwara during the early 1990s at the height of the Hindu right-wing power. *City of Desires*, her first filmed video, was created at Gallery Chemould in 1992, where her work was continually being erased as she continued to work on it. The entire process was filmed and became in that sense her first video work. These were not Malani's first forays into film, before leaving for Paris, when she participated in the Vision Exchange Workshop in the late 1960s, Malani made three 16 mm films, including her first performance artwork *Onanism* (1969).[114]

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112 Boris Groys, "The Topology of Contemporary Art," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 76.

113 Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A sourcebook of artists' writings* (Oakland California: California University Press, 2012), 213.

114 Nancy Adajania, "New Media Overtures," 273–274.

With *Medeaprojekt*, her first multimedia installation created in 1993, Malani adapted one of Heiner Muller's stories in the Indian context. First staged when actress and director Alaknanda Samarth invited Malani to paint the décor for her performances at Max Mueller Bhavan Center in Mumbai in 1993, Muller's fiercely political text provided Malani with a series of historical contexts to work with—the Greeks and the barbarians, the holocaust and religious violence the world over—underlying all was the theme of power as global destruction. The "play became analogue for Malani," corresponding as it did to a series of tragic events in India such, including massacre of Muslims in Bombay in 1992–1993 following the demolition of Babri Masjid.[115] Malani's work in the new mediums continued to address the nation, *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* (1999) was Malani's response to the nuclear tests conducted by the Indian government, it was structured by Malani in a classical theatre setting with 4 video projectors, 12 monitors and a mirrored floor and the images were drawn from Hiroshima, Nagasaki as well as the partition of India.[116] In 2003 Malani's *Unity in Diversity* installation reconfigured Raja Ravi Varma's painting tableau in a *Galaxy of Musicians* (1889),[117] by adding images of violence referencing the recent religious violence in Gujarat in a painterly rendering of video animation of the original bejeweled tableau of female musicians. Malani's thematic focus on feminism, violence, politics, post-colonial legacies and social inequalities was once again apparent in *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain* (2005) a work in a dialogical relationship with Veena Das's text, "Language and the Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," tracing the unprecedented collective violence against women during partition in 1947 to the continuing sexual violence in Gujarat in 2002.[118] The plight of women as bearers of extreme sexual violence is a recurring theme that continues to preoccupy much of Malani's

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115   Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika 2000), 23–37.

116   Johann Pinjappel, *Video Art since 2000*, Apeejay Gallery, 26. Exhibition Catalogue.

117   For an excellent reading of *Galaxy of Musicians* please see Geeta Kapur's essay on "Gender Mobility: Through the lens of five women artists," in *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* (London and New York: Merell with Brooklyn Museum, 2007). The original work is an allegorical rendering of a colonial style photography of a group of bejeweled women musicians creating the nation in the form of a tableau. They are all arranged for the male gaze—the artist and the nation as the audience.

118   Nalini Malani in an interview with Johan Pinjappel in the iCon catalogue for the 51st Venice Biennale emphasises that the focal point of the sound and text in *Mother India* is the disjointed manner in which women have expressed or not expressed as articulated speech the experiences they have suffered through the trauma of Partition and

work. Malani's projected images are like "skins stained with the bloodiness of history,"[119] her transcultural multiplicity combines contemporary histories with past narratives on different registers and mediums, this reconfiguring myths into new avatars that dialogue with current issues gives them new meaning in the contemporary context.

Almost around the same year that Malani was creating *Medeaprojekt,* Vivan Sundaram created his installation artwork, *Memorial* (1993) almost in a textbook case of an installation artwork that functioned, as per Boris Groy's definition—as a space of aesthetic control and unconcealment.[120] Created after the Babri Masjid attacks, *Memorial* was inspired by a photograph in a newspaper of a dead journalist that Sundaram, as an archaeologist "inventoried, categorized and sealed in neat vitrine cases."[121] The visitor was 'guided' along a ceremonial beginning at the tripartite barrier of iron pipes that marked the entry to the work, along a pathway of flagstones that ended at an archway made of two piles of tin packing trunks diminishing in size. The pathway between the two was interrupted by a large glass prism shaped vitrine in which lay the plaster cast of a fallen body, obscured with varying materials, a three-dimensional representation of the journalist's photograph of the bombings in Bombay, the only 'evidence' of the actual event. Sundaram's inclusion of indexical press photographs into which nails had been pounded, further highlighted the gravity of the violence.

Sundaram's non-documentary aesthetic strategy created an alternate view of an event that transcended documentation and voyeuristic empathy, triggering remembrance and mourning by juxtaposing the photograph with found objects.[122] Vivan Sundaram's commitment to political and social critique is integral to his art practice since its inception in the 1960s. He has been closely involved as founder-member of the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT) founded in 1989 in solidarity against the murder of theatre activist and member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) Safdar Hashmi.

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subsequent sectarian violence. Accessed on April 15, 2018. https://www.nalinimalani.com/texts/venice.htm.

119   Adajania, "New Media Overtures," 274.

120   Boris Groys, "Politics of Installation," *e-flux journal* Issue # 02 (January 2009). Sundaram's first installation / sculpture work, *House/Boat* created in 1994 had been a minimalist sculpture comprising of a steel armature covered by walls of handmade paper in a honeycomb pattern.

121   Ajay Sinha, "Envisioning the Seventies and Eighties," *Contemporary Art in Baroda*, 174.

122   Andreas Huyssen, "The Memory Works of Vivan Sundaram," *Disjunctures* (Munich: Prestel, 2018).

The platform mobilizes artists, academics, journalists and activists in Delhi and from other parts of the country to "articulate dissent in moments of crisis." (*Hum Sab Ayodhya* 1993, *Anhad Garje* 1993), Sundaram organized the Artists Alert in 1990 and also a series of events as Artists Against Communalism to protest communal violence in India, he has curated several exhibitions for SAHMAT, including 'Ways of Resisting' in 2002 that took place after the riots in Gujarat in 2002–2003 and memorialized strategies adopted by artists during the 1990s, it included installations by Sundaram himself, Rumanna Husain, Navjot Altaf and Tejal Shah among others. Dutta terms SAHMAT's operation as a case study of *an entire national dispensation* of artistic practice "fighting a rearguard action within a significantly transformed media and news environment," with historians like Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib and artists such as Vivan Sundaram and Ram Rehman coming together and attempting to carve "a visual hagiography to build national consensus."[123] This building of a platform of solidarity among artists and intellectuals in defense of a secular cultural space *within* the nation has played a seminal role in Indian art practice.

1.2.3 Performing Gender and 'National' Identity—Rummana Hussain

While these first forays into the new mediums of video and installation by Malani and Sundaram brought together the nation and its politics, one of the first women artists to conflate gender, identity and the body with the nation in another genre new to India—live performance—was Rummana Hussain. As a secular Muslim from a cosmopolitan family with strongly political ties, Hussain suddenly found her 'Indian-ness,' in question by a hostile and discriminating society following the riots in Mumbai in 1992–93. She chose the genre of live performance to articulate her disquiet and performed *Living on the Margins* in 1995, in the open courtyard of the National Centre for Performing Arts, (NCPA) she stated that she wanted to "look at art as a vehicle for political action, to create a bridge from the seclusion of the studio and gallery to the real world, street and garden." Ritualistically coating her feet with indigo-colored Robin Blu, a washing detergent sold locally to whiten clothing, she walked around an inner square of the NCPA, cupping a halved papaya with its slimy black seeds exposed. After every few steps she stopped to emit a silent scream, through this gesture she highlighted the specific and victimization of women and children during

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123 Arindam Dutta, "SAHMAT, 1989–2004: Liberal art practice against the Liberalized Public Sphere," *Cultural Dynamic* 17 (2), 196–198.

periods of political instability, communal riots and a religious divide. Eventually she invited the gathering to splatter *geru* (fine red clay) and indigo powder onto the floor in a participatory gesture.[124] After the Babri Masjid demolition, Husain travelling [with Ram Rahman] to Ayodhya, photographed the residues of violence and mounted her installation piece *Home/Nation* (1996) at Chemould, combining various features and medias for this work. In a corner of the space, she placed a number of boxes labeled with individual words, 'Bind,' 'Bangles,' 'Peel,' and 'Ayodhya' and in another, a video of her performance played out. Architectural photographs mounted on wooden panels were placed next to sequenced black and white shots of a woman making chapatis or flatbread. On another wall, images referencing her earlier performance were interspersed with arched doorways from Mughal monuments. The space also included some unusual found objects evoking the intimate feminine, including menstrual pads, bangles and news clippings hung in plastic folders.[125] Hussain's installation combined objects from the inner space of the home to both emphasize and question the secular nature of female national identity.

In a later performance she would question her own identity as a woman as she revealed her mastectomy in *Is It What You Think*? which she performed in front of a live audience at Kaskadenkondensator in Basel, Switzerland in 1998. Hussain, casting off anxieties and inhibitions, sat in a chair wearing black lace underwear with a *parandhi* or long artificial plait, partially revealing the scars from her mastectomy and her prosthesis, underneath a black veil. As projected images of women holding guns flashed across her torso, she read a text slowly, as if chanting from a holy book, asking questions of the world around her.[126] Hussain made use of all her signs, her Muslimhood and scarred womanhood, as sites of resistance to societal concepts of nation and democracy[127] and continued to articulate her concerns for the changing political scenario through her performances and videos till her death in 1999. Hussain's performances problematized the politics of a gendered identity in direct conflict with the nation's secular politics.

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124   Swapna Tamhane, "The Performative Space: Tracing the roots of Performance-based practices in India," *C Magazine* 2011.

125   Jyoti Dhar, "Prescient Provocateur Rumanna Hussain," *Art Asia Pacific* (Sep–Oct 2014) Issue 90. Accessed on April 29, 2020. https://www.talwargallery.com/news/art-asia-pacific9.

126   Dhar, Ibid.

127   Geeta Kapur, *Rumanna's Question: Is it what you think?* Lecture, SAHMAT New Delhi 2009.

1.2.4 Video Installation—Navjot Altaf

Their contemporary, Navjot Altaf's artworks in the new mediums also reacted to the instability in the political situation but by circumventing the representational paradigm altogether in large-scale installations such as, *Links Destroyed and Rediscovered* (1994), created after the communal riots in 1992, and *Between Memory and History* (2001–2002), and *Lacuna in Testimony*, after the riots in 2001. For the first installation, Navjot placed two monitors running two political documentaries, '*I live in Behrampada'* by Madhushree Datta and '*Bombay A Myth Shattered'* by Teesta Setalvad, but without running their audio, she surrounded the monitors with meters of pvc pipes, plaster sculptures and heaps of soil, using just their powerful images to communicate with the audience. *Between Memory and History* comprised of a large metal structure of wire mesh containing paper ribbons containing notations from her personal file, plus various studies on the dangers of fundamentalism and dehumanizing politics that the public was asked to untie.[128] *Lacuna in Testimony* an evocative media installation comprised of three channels of video and 48 mirrors tries to portray the horrendous nature of the events by capturing the psychological block and recovering fragmented memory. For creating the work, Navjot spent six months in Gujarat after the riots and a week in a transit camp, talking to affected residents. She recorded conversations with their consent and consciously avoided use of the camera. In the three screen videos on display at the installation she included other images, for example the abusive scribbling on the walls and footage from events like the Holocaust and the Partition, the Delhi Sikh riots etc. following a conscious process of representing fragmented memory,[129] incarnating a desire to "speak about the political by making an attempt to transcend the political."[130] With Navjot, art and activism started to interweave in her practice as she moved towards interactive and collaborative modes in a new critical context. Her quest led her to Bastar in 1996, where she lived at Shilpigram at the invitation of tribal artist Jaidev Baghel, engaging with locality and site, situation and participation in order to build possible "communities," dislocating herself from the metropolis. Working directly with Adivasi groups of artists / artisans

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128   Johan Pinjappel, 25 & 31.

129   "Navjot Altaf in conversation with Shaina Anand," *Khoj Book 1997–2007: Contemporary Art Practice in India* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2010), 226.

130   Nancy Adajania, "Piercing Reality, Interpreting Boundaries: Video as a Testing Ground for Ched/Bhed" in *Navjot Altaf: The Thirteenth Place* (Mumbai: The Guild Art Gallery, 2016), 144.

on a series of collaborative art projects involving functional, site-specific struc-
tures,[131] Navjot helped to create projects of self-emancipatory labor for women.

While Rummana's Hussain's response to right-wing violence focused on
the performance of her gendered, classed identity, another artist from India's
earliest forays into video art in the same decade used the medium to portray
an anti-aesthetic, exploring taboo subjects such as gendered sexuality to con-
front the nation and its gendered imaginaries. Sonia Khurana created *Bird* (1999),
while she was at the Royal College of Art in London. The video clip is about the
failed attempts of a nude overweight woman (the artist herself), trying to fly, to
attempt a take-off from a room without doors. Khurana "turns the performance
into a tragicomic play."[132] The rolling of her body on the ground and the quick
abstract montage of body parts turns her body into a weapon against the beauty
contest economy[133] Swapna Tamhane likens its erratic, clumsy filming as the
artist's reference to Artaud's theatre of cruelty and the abject body, and to Jenny
Saville's studied paintings of flesh smushed against panes of glass.[134] Khurana's
practice would continue to focus on inner experience and the polemics of being
in the world through live performances as well as performative video.[135]

Some artists who began using new mediums like video, installation, live
performance and so on in this decade had been exposed to the genre while being
educated in the west, in Australia, the United States, or Europe, places where
they had first encountered the art form.[136] Artists, critics and curators benefited

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131 Geeta Kapur, "Navjot: Holding the Ground," Lecture, *Critics on Art* at Lalit Kala
Akademi, New Delhi. July 19, 2010. Accessed on February 2, 2018. https://cdn.aaa.org.hk/_
source/digital_collection/fedora_extracted/20833.pdf.

132 Nancy Adajania, *Art and Visual Culture*, 276.

133 Nancy Adjania, "Rival Aesthetics of Solidarity: Indian artists and their public sphere,"
Springerin Issue 4, 2002. Accessed on May 25, 2018. https://www.springerin.at/en/2002/4/
rivalisierende-asthetiken-der-solidaritat/.

134 Tamhane, 2011.

135 In *Flower Carrier* (2000–2006) Khurana travelled for six years in different cities all
over the world while carrying a plastic flower, revealing every place in a visual and acous-
tic manner, through a cacophony of street noises. *Lying-down-on-the-ground* (2006–2012)
invited people comfortable with the experience of lying down in an outdoor public space,
as participants lie down, their shapes were traced with a piece of chalk in a simple,
non-threatening form of social interaction to initiate some thinking about an awareness
of the spaces we occupy.

136 The genre of video / installation was taken up by Sonia Khurana (Royal College of Art),
Kiran Subbiah (Royal College of Art), Subba Ghosh (Slade), Tushar Joag (Rijksakademie),
Ranbir Kaleka (Royal College of Art), Ayesha Abraham (Rutgers), Surekha and Eleena Banik

enormously from the cross-fertilisation of ideas that took place in residencies, workshops, conferences, collaborations and exchanges held in India and overseas. The most revolutionary outcome of these experiments was a total change in the perspective of these artists who abandoned the center-periphery model as being always recipients and imitators, permanently apprenticed to contemporary culture. Rather, according to Hoskote, these artists were socialized "into the world as an assembly of multiple, improvisational, self-renovating modernisms, a conversation among regional trajectories of the contemporary."[137] Some of these conversations had already begun in the Asia-Pacific region in the 1990s with the founding of the Asia-Pacific Triennale in 1995 and the emerging discourse around post-colonial and subaltern studies. Apart from individual experiments and initiatives that were being taken, what kind of institutional spaces were available to contemporary artists in India itself to create and showcase art in these new mediums?

The National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) and Lalit Kala Akademi (LKA)—both centralized organizations—had been established in the early 1950s to provide sufficient infrastructural support to artist initiatives in post-independent India. Both institutions struggled to balance the contending claims of various artist groups and cliques. The NGMA retracted into an insular historical institution, suffering, especially in the first two decades, from a lack of direction in building a national collection and equally the lack of public interface via exhibitions. The LKA, on the other hand, given the task of making sense of the contemporary art movements and providing infrastructural support to artists, became an embattled site with artists and critics of various cliques trying to stake their claims on these organizations, cancelling each other's decisions, complaining about policies and programmes, budget allotments, exclusions and inclusions in exhibitions, among other things.[138] In a nation where state institutions and state initiatives were moribund, the possibilities to activate art practices could come only from private initiatives, and these included the establishment of galleries that encouraged the visibility of experimental art practices in the new mediums.

(Glasgow), and by Sheba Chachchi, Shilpa Gupta, Umesh Madanhalli, Subodh Gupta, Archana Hande, Shakuntala Kulkarni among others.

137   Ranjit Hoskote, "Signposting the Indian Highway," in *Indian Highway: Musee d'art contemporain de lyon, Indian Highway IV* (London: Koenig Books, 2011), 292–293. Exhibition Catalogue.

138   Vidya Sivadas, "Mapping the field of Indian art criticism post-independence." Accessed on April 27, 2018. https://cdn.aaa.org.hk/_source/Collection_documents/mapping-the-field-of-indian-art-criticism-01-progress-report.pdf.

American-artist-turned curator Peter Nagy reformatted his New York gallery, Nature Morte as a curatorial experiment in Delhi in 1997 and began showing photographs and installations along with paintings and drawings, bringing these new genres into direct conversation with prevailing art practice. Primarily showing lens-based and video works, the gallery brought international artist works to India and also brought the work of Indian artists to international attention. Recognizing the need to nurture a non-commodity art form, new gallery spaces like Apeejay Art were established in 2000. Negotiating the relationship between video and the art gallery / museum space itself involved effort in a country where the comfort zone of the moving image so far had been the cinema hall or auditoria. Sakshi and Chemould Contemporary Art, established in 2007 in Bombay began exhibiting works in new mediums. Gallery Espace in New Delhi hosted a year-long programme between 2008–2009 and called it *Video Wednesdays*, guest curators were invited to discuss and display their selection of video works once a week. Also in 2008, Lekha and Anupam Poddar set up the Devi Art Foundation, the first privately owned museum of art in India with a special emphasis on extended sculpture, inter-media installations and video art, showing works of artists not only from India but also from other countries in the region. These private initiatives brought in a more focused professionalism towards the arts and the desire to connect with the expanding international art scene. However, these initiatives were few and far between and mostly followed in the wake of the seminal role played by the founding of Khoj in 1997.

1.3 Alternative Art Spaces—Khoj

Khoj was established by artists Anita Dube, Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher, Manisha Parekh and Pooja Sood at a workshop in Modinagar (near Delhi) with financial aid from the Triangle Arts Trust UK to "function as an experimental art laboratory that would bring artists together from different parts of the country, from the sub-continent and from around the globe [...] where dialogue, exchange and transfer of information, energy and skills could take place as an intensely lived experience." Gupta, describing the art scene of the time, says, "At that point, there was no real gallery system and hardly any kind of atmosphere. So little was happening on the contemporary art scene. Bringing a dozen international artists changed things. Everyone felt as if this was a place to do something."[139]

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139   Vandana Kalra, "Art Quest," *Indian Express*, April 20, 2017. Accessed on April 12, 2018. https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/art-quest-khoj-pooja-sood-eicher-gallery-4620148/.

Khoj "provided the possibility for young practitioners to create an open-ended experimental space for themselves on their own terms, a space where they could make art independent of formal academic and cultural institutions and outside the constraints of the commercial gallery. It offered the chance to establish international networks without institutional support."

Founded with support from the Triangle Arts Trust UK, Khoj receives funding from Hivos, the Ford Foundation and the Tatas (NSRTT) among others.[140] Functioning as "part laboratory, part academy and part community centre" with the artist squarely center stage as practitioner, curator, critic and friend, the Khoj workshops, usually comprising 20–24 artists and occurring over two weeks and residencies which were slower paced and lasted 6–8 weeks, began in 1997 at Sikribagh estate in Modinagar. The first Khoj workshop in 1997 had 22 artists, 12 Indian, 10 non-Indian, the second expanded to include artists from Japan, Singapore and Israel apart from continuing alliances with artists from Africa and West Indies. The venue of Sikribagh was retained till 2001. Keen to develop connections with the "Global South"—Khoj drew further on artists from mainland China, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Japan, working from the beginning towards the empowerment of the so-called 'third world' artists.[141] As all of these artists foraged the local market for their modest manufacture of art works, an informal everyday practice took root. Kapur comments on the "consciously depleted objecthood of artworks with a quotient of wit," a quality missing in the Indian art world that created an alternate art practice. It was at Sikribagh that Australian indigenous artist Fiona Foley piled *neel*, turmeric and chillies to create an aboriginal earthwork drawing from the tantric mandala. In 2000, Tapfuma Gutsa from Zimbabwe covered a felled tree from the estate with cowhide to play a gigantic drum for his residency friends in a jam session organized by Indian musician Punita Singh and in 2001 Tania Bruguera fashioned herself a cape out of the workshop's used tea bags. Khoj inaugurated an art practice embedded in nature and communal culture, artists living in a temporary commune with basic facilities functioned in an environment where art experience inscribes itself within site and space, creating a "phenomenology of unexpected encounters."[142] The first Khoj workshop in 1997 comprised of a wide range of art practitioners working with diverse materials and mediums—Dube used enamel votive eyes, C.K. Rajan created photomontages, Prithipal Ladi worked with clay and fiberglass, Radhika Vaidyanathan with local wickerwork, Manisha Parekh with mirror, glass and

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140   Sood, *Khoj Book*, 5, 14 & 23.

141   Sood, *Khoj Book*, 7.

142   Kapur, "Phenomenology of Encounters," *Khoj Book*, 49.

acrylic, Walter D'Souza with woodcuts. The mediums and materials varied, sometimes the experiments undertaken by these artists at a Khoj workshop would also translate into the direction that the artist's practice would take. At this very first Khoj workshop Subodh Gupta made a pungent smelling enclosure/installation of cow dung pats, titling it *With my mother and me*, recalling "childhood memories of the gathering of cow dung cakes to make fire, a fire to cook frugal meals, achingly redolent of rural middle class imageries."[143] In India cow dung has very contradictory connotations, within spiritual belief it assumes the hallowed position of cleanser/atoner, whilst on the other hand its day-to-day associations are those of waste element/defiler. Gupta's early experiments in the Khoj workshops were driven by a desire to reconcile an understanding of this contradiction, asking, "Where does belief end and ritual begin?"[144] Two of his works at Khoj in 1999 centered around his own body—at the second Khoj workshop, Gupta smeared a bare patch of land as well as his near naked body with an ochre lining of mud and cow dung and lay down under a blazing blue sky, rigid like a corpse. The Khoj residency site at Sikribagh offered Gupta a propitious site "to flesh out his nativist metaphors,"[145] a direction that would dominate his subsequent art practice substantially. In another iconic representation at Khoj in a video performance titled *Pure* (1999) Gupta appeared in a shower with the video running in reverse, cow dung slapped onto his body completely covered him from head to toe as he walked out of the shower to enter an elevator. Using his body as the subject and the object of the scene, *Pure* played out the ritual of purification in an urban context.

Also in the 1999 Khoj workshop, artist Shilpa Gupta cleaned up an abandoned toilet for women workers in an outhouse and embedded on each side of an outer wall a row of tiny bulbs and cement casts of breasts covered with aureolic hair at the end of each row; while Sonia Khurana paired with Punita Singh to produce *Wailing Well* (2000),—a conceptual site-specific work willing the extension of her asthma-laden breath into the water-filled rotunda of the estate's community well accompanied by Punita devising recording techniques for its relay. Pushpamala N., using the aesthetic and ideology of photography to transform her practice, got herself photographed in a series of masquerading fantasies, producing a set of film stills titled *Sunehre Sapne* in 1998. The final picture in the hand-tinted frames portrayed her as a cornered vamp, her head topped with a sleek bouffant as she

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143   Caption text from Subodh Gupta's Retrospective at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, 2014.

144   Subodh Gupta, "*Video Art in India*," (New Delhi: Apeejay Media Gallery, 2003), 76. Exhibition Catalogue.

145   Kapur, *Khoj Book*, 54.

arrived at a scripted denouement for the fake mystery and pointed a revolver at her assailant. Sheba Chachchi engaged actively with local history and interviewed dozens of unemployed steel factory workers before she installed *Itbari Khan ke Haath* in 1999—an installation with photographs of the workers surrounded with projected images of a ruined factory with its abandoned machines.[146] The possibilities to undertake these transcultural experiments at Khoj provided a space in this decade for artists to create, devise and innovate artistic experiments with fellow practitioners from India and internationally. Situating its practice within a neighborhood (Khirkee) and simultaneously within a wider network that spans not only South Asia but the whole world, Khoj played a key role in enabling the articulation of located and national histories and avantgarde performances. The activities of Khoj gradually extended into a series of collaborative workshops over the sub-continent and developed parallel artist initiatives in the *Vasl International* at Gadami near Karachi (2001), *Theertha International Artists'* near Columbo (2001), *Britto* at Tepantor near Dacca (2003), and *Sutra* near Patan (2004). Khoj also provided support to autonomous projects such as Periferry in Guwahati, (Desire Machine Collective), to CAMP in Mumbai (Shaina Anand) and to 1 Shanthi Road, Bangalore. The creation of an alternative learning space outside of formal learning educational institutions provided artistic communities with a platform. Supporting both emerging artists and emerging art with its slippages between dance, theatre and the visual arts, some radical performances and performative pieces have emerged at Khoj. In *Keywords* performed by Anita Dube in 2005, the artist carved out the words, "avant garde," "sexual love," "permanent revolution," from buffalo meat placed on muslin draped slabs in an almost ceremonial offering.[147] Dube's performative engagement with language as text was an important showcasing of the merging of conceptual art language with experimental art practices. The Khoj workshops and activities have, over the years continued to evolve and provide momentum to the weaving of the transcultural elements that underlies most contemporary art practices today.

1.3.1 Tejal Shah—Early Beginnings at Khoj

It was at Khoj that two artists from this study established their presence in the mediums of their choice as soon as they returned to India after studying abroad. Tejal Shah (b. 1979 in Bhilai, India), newly returned from Melbourne, collaborated with fellow artist Marco Rolla in 2004 to create a short video work, *Trans-*. The

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146 Kapur, *Khoj Book*, 51–52.

147 Kapur, *Khoj Book*, 59.

Fig. 1. Shah, Video Still, *Trans-*, Dual Channel Video Installation, 2004–5. Courtesy the artist, Project 88 Mumbai and Barbara Gross Galerie Munich.

focus in this work was the ambiguity of gender through facial transformations in every frame—Shah "grew" a beard using glue and fake hair and then shaved it much like Rolla. From certain angles, the two were indistinguishable (Fig. 1). Both artists faced the camera with their shaved faces, preened in the same props, first as a man, then as a woman—the two-screen video-mimes "wove a web of narcissism around the spectator." At the same workshop, Shah leapt briefly into live performance with *Sleep*. Though very few did, Shah's live performance in this homeless tramp avatar, remote yet connected to "the strangely sympathetic near-lumpen crowd walking about their business below, brought up questions about boundaries, about the outside / inside of art practice and the artist's experiments with self,"[148] that characterizes the genre of performance and its radical nature and precarity in contemporary art.

Tejal Shah took drawing lessons early in their school years in Bhilai—what they enjoyed working on most were the science diagrams, for their crisp sharpness, geometry and order (interests which would resurface later in their art practice). Shah's teenage years were also the years of the Gulf War, cable TV and the opening up of the Indian economy. Their shift to Poona when they were fourteen exposed them for the first time to metropolitan life. It was the move to Mumbai in 1995 that got them seriously interested in photography. They obtained a student

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148   Kapur, *Khoj Book*, 47.

membership at the National Centre for the Performing Arts, which exposed them to Hindustani and Western classical music, to experimental movement and performance work and to the genre of photography at the Piramal Gallery. The membership in general gave them a keen awareness of folk, modern and classical arts and crafts. Through meeting Simon Nathan, a photographer from USA specializing in wide-angle photography, Shah developed a keen interest in photography at a time when there were very few serious women photographers in India. It was also during this time that Shah started getting involved in feminist, lesbian and bisexual groups and officially 'came out.' Therefore, their understanding of themself as a queer-feminist and as a photographer came almost simultaneously. Leaving India in 1999, at the age of seventeen to obtain an undergraduate degree in commercial and illustrative photography at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Shah found themself not so interested in commercial or fashion photography. An exchange program that allowed them to spend a year at the School of the Art Institute, Chicago, played a key role in changing the direction of their practice. The flexibility of the American art education system allowed them to enroll in classes across a wide range of inter-disciplinary subjects, including film, video, performance, printing and art and technology, shifting their interest towards fine arts rather than commercial photography.[149] It was at Chicago that they started to conceptualize video, film, installation and performance within a postmodern framework and created *Chingari Chumma/Stinging Kiss* (2000), one of their earliest works, starring themself in the lead role, along with fellow artist Anuj Vaidya. In this 08:30 minute short work, the queer performative body took center stage for the first time as Shah and Vaidya dragged in a kitsch, campy style to deconstruct the gender binary.

1.3.2 Nikhil Chopra—Early Beginnings and at Khoj

Nikhil Chopra's (b. 1974, Calcutta) first live performance in India was also at an art residency at Khoj in 2007. For this six-hour performance, Chopra donned the character of *Yog Raj Chitrakar* for the first time, basing it partially on his grandfather Yog Raj Chopra who had studied art at Goldsmiths in the 1930s and had been an amateur painter of landscapes. He diligently researched through the family archives to pick out the costumes his grandfather had worn. Dressed in a tweed jacket, plus fours, tie, socks and polished shoes, beard trimmed, and moustache tweaked, from this very first performance Chopra emphasized the role that costuming played as a marker of the colonial encounter with its subject—the

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149   Interview with artist, 2013.

Fig. 2. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar : Memory Drawing I*, New Delhi, 2007. Courtesy the artist.

dressing serving as a boundary mechanism to connect with the Other. He entered the performance space, unwrapped a brown parcel under his arm and proceeded to copy his grandfather's landscape painting of a Pahalgam landscape onto the twenty-five-meter wall (Fig. 2). The ritual transformation of self that he followed in this first performance became an integral part of his later performances. After finishing the drawing, Chopra shaved off his beard with an old-fashioned razor and opened up the mysterious brown paper wrapped parcel he had carried into the performance space to reveal the next costume. Stripping down to his boxers, he changed into a tube skirt and a white blouse with puffed sleeves, dressing while posing coyly in front of the mirror (Fig. 3 & 4). The scarf around the neck, the black tights, the careful application of makeup and jewelry and finally the donning of a curly shoulder length wig completed the transformation of masculine to feminine as the crowning finale of his performance.[150] The gender transformation that he wrought highlighted the conceptual critique he was making, that identity itself is a construct and always in flux, that gender itself is performative and that clothes are an essential part of who we are or can become.

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150   Nikhil Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar Memory Drawing I*. Accessed on July 3, 2018. http://www.nikhilchopra.net/home/?p=262.

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Fig. 3 & 4. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar : Memory Drawing I*, New Delhi, 2007. Courtesy the artist.

In November of the same year Chopra performed for three hours as *Yog Raj Chitrakar visits Lal Chowk* during another Khoj residency at Kasheer, Srinagar and made a charcoal drawing of the Clock Tower in the center of the city. The immense attention this simple act attracted, highlighted the inherent uncontrollable dynamics in public spaces which will be discussed in the following chapter in greater detail.

Nikhil Chopra's early life was typical of an upper middle class family life in a 1980s India, epitomized by idyllic family holidays visiting Europe, visiting art museums, this lifestyle was deeply ingrained on Chopra, who grew up with a strong sense of this western aesthetic. After doing a bachelor's degree in Commerce, Chopra began his art education at Maharaji Sayaji Rao University in Baroda, but left for the Maryland College of Art after two years to complete his undergraduate degree in fine art. The educational syllabi in Maryland allowed him to select a wide range of courses to broaden his knowledge-base and experiment with various art forms. During the second year of his Master of Fine Arts at Ohio State University he was assigned to assist artist Ann Hamilton. This provided him with a one-off opportunity to interact simultaneously not only with Hamilton herself but also with performance greats such as Coco Fusco, Elenor Antin and Marina Abramovic when they visited the university and Chopra's interaction with them was a significant event that propelled him towards live performance. Chopra's first performance was enacted for his master's thesis project and took place in an old warehouse in 2003. The adoption of the persona of Sir Raja as the first iteration of his persona was prompted by his study and critique of the Indian aristocracy as depicted in nineteenth century and early twentieth century British photographs. In their portraits, Indian royals, powerless bureaucratic puppets under the British rulers tried to project dignity and valor but appeared exaggeratedly overdressed and pompous instead.[151] Chopra, staged the performance with a careful selection of fabric and lights, wearing a rented *Sherwani*, fake moustache and turban fashioned out of an old saree, he positioned himself as *Sir Raja II*, posing still for five hours—as if for a portrait "silent and motionless at a chandelier lit dining table laden with food, fruit and wine, reminiscent of a Dutch still life painting"[152] (Fig. 5). Chopra's choice of persona emerged from his personal experience of studying in the west, ethnic stereotyping had sometimes been part of his graduation experience and reacting

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151 For an overview of photography of Indian royals during British rule, please see Julie Codell, "Photographic Interventions and Identities: Colonising and Decolonising the Royal Body," in *Power and Resistance: The Delhi Coronation Durbars* ed. Julie Codell (New Delhi: Alkazi Foundation, 2012), 110–141.

152 Nikhil Chopra, *Khoj Book*, 636.

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Fig. 5. Chopra, *Sir Raja II,* Columbus Ohio, 2003. Courtesy the artist.
Fig. 6. Chopra, *Sir Raja III,* 2005, Courtesy the artist.

to this attempt at the exoticisation of his origins, he felt a need to connect with and critique those cultural origins. In 2005, on his return to India, his strong sense of nostalgia of childhood summers spent at his grandfather's cottage near the Lidder river led him to create a series of black and white photographs ([Fig. 6](#)), and one in color—titled *What Will I do with all this land?*—much in the style of eighteenth-century British photographer Samuel Bourne who had traversed the Kashmir valley, making the most exquisite colloidal prints of the magnificent landscape for their commercial sale back in England.

Chopra's next character *Yog Raj Chitrakar* would be inspired by his own family history and adding the epithet of *Chitrakar* or picture maker provided a clue to what would be the central act of every performance—the creation of a drawing. In contrast to Shah and Chopra, the third artist in this study born and brought up in New York comes from the diaspora.

1.3.3 Chitra Ganesh and the South Asian Womens' Creative Collective

Chitra Ganesh not only shares a lot with Shah in terms of her practice as a queer artist but also offers the perfect foil to the practice of the other two artists from India in terms of genre. Ganesh works across medias, with paper, large mural works, wall drawings, collages, animation, computer-generated imagery, and so on and among these, it is her work with digital collages that are the focus of this study.

The South Asian Womens' Creative Collective or SAWCC provided Ganesh an artistic platform to connect with her diasporic roots, Ganesh's involvement with the SAWCC occurred almost from its founding in 1997. Founded by Jaishree Abhichandani at a time when there were few resources for South Asian women artists to find themselves a voice in a predominantly white world, the Collective drew inspiration from other activist groups such as the Black Arts Movement in the UK as well as the progressive South Asian arts festival *Desh Pardesh* in Toronto. With a commitment to the advancement, visibility, and development of emerging and established South Asian women artists and creative professionals, it provided a physical and virtual space to profile their creative and intellectual work across disciplines. Over the years the Collective created a reputation for showcasing cutting-edge work dealing intelligently with issues of gender and cultural representation.[153] Ganesh became a Board Member of SAWCC between 1998 and 2003. It was

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153 South Asian Women's Creative Collective. Accessed on January 15, 2018. http://www.sawcc.org/about/.

through SAWCC that Ganesh was introduced to a network of peers and mentors that continue to be a part of her networks. Ganesh has shown with them often and participated in shows curated by the founder of SAWCC, Jaishri Abhichandani.[154] Ganesh also worked with the Sexually Liberated Asian Artist Activist People! or SLAAAP!!, a queer Asian arts-activist collective, right from its inception in 1997. The collective was active till 2001 and produced activist print media projects with camp and humor to engage issues such as HIV / AIDS, sexuality, immigration and homophobia in the Asian community. SLAAAP!! coordinated with many other community-based organisations like the Audre Lorde Project, Gay Asia & Pacific Islander Men of New York, South Asia Lesbian & Gay Association, Kilanin Kolektibo and the Queens Museum of Art. One of the earliest group shows that Ganesh participated in as part of SLAAAP!!, was in 2001—*Crossing the Line*—at Queens Museum. Spaces such as SAWCC and SLAAAP!! provided Ganesh to develop as an artist and experiment with a variety of visual languages and signifiers beyond the Euro-American context that had been a major part of her art education.

Chitra Ganesh's (b. 1974 Brooklyn, New York) childhood memories include an eclectic mix of reading influences, from reading Archie, X-Men, Doonesbury and *Amar Chitra Katha* comics from India. As a child of first-generation immigrant parents coming from a conservative Tamilian Brahmin background in India, Ganesh's growing years in New York were tempered with exposure to South Indian classical forms like carnatic music and Bharatnatyam and drawing *kolams* with her grandmother (Fig. 7),[155] her parents also encouraged her to take drawing classes at an early age where she learned to draw and paint and work with pastels and color pencils. She received her bachelor's degree in semiotics and comparative literature from Brown University in Providence, RI. In 2001,

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154 Ganesh has shown with SAWCC founder Jaishri Abhichandani in *(em) Power Dynamics* in 2015 and participated in exhibitions curated by her — *Anomalies: From Nature to Future* 2009 and *Stargazing* 2012 at Rossi & Rossi, London; *The Emo Show* New York 2013; *Her Stories* Fifteen years of SAWCC Queen's 2012. She has also exhibited with SAWCC regularly: 2007 *Sultana's Dream: Collaborative Art by S. Asian and Arab Women* (Index with Mariam Ghani 2004–); 2008 *Fire Walkers: Contemporary Artists from India and S. Asia* (*Untitled* mixed media installation 2008); 2013 *Be/Longing* (*Thirsted, Howling* photograph series: *The Awakening*); 2016 *Welcome to what we took from is the state* (*Index Light Box Index of Democracy is the Interval between Inquiry and Image* 2013, *Her Nuclear Waters* 2013).

155 Kolam is a traditional art form practiced in Tamil Nādu in South India, the geometrical line drawings composed of lines, curves and loops are created by women early every morning with finely ground rice powder to decorate the floors and thresholds of homes and temples, simultaneously providing food to the local ant population. These ephemeral patterns are erased under passing feet every day and are newly created early morning.

she attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and received her M. F. A. in visual arts from Columbia University in New York, in 2002. Ganesh's study of semiotics in Columbia has helped her to draw her visual vocabulary from Surrealism as also from a broad range of material including the iconography of Hindu, Greek and Buddhist mythology, 19th century European portraiture and fairytales, archival photography, and song lyrics, as well as contemporary visual culture such as Bollywood posters, anime, and comic books.

Ganesh probes this visual and textual material to connect seemingly disparate narratives and reveal uncanny moments of absence and buried desire. Fragments of poetic language cohere with her visual iconography to produce nonlinear narratives of "unforeseen desire and untimely loss," offering audiences untold tales from both collectively imagined pasts and distant futures.[156] In most of her work, the female body becomes the site where social codes and ensuing conflicts get played out. Ganesh is very interested in the hand-made quality of her work. In her paper works and murals, Ganesh uses diverse materials from glitter, hair extensions braided into plaits, plastic eyes, fishing baits, fishnets, marbles and many others to denote the objectification of the feminine. Her wall drawings and installations often create a three-dimensional effect and spill out to the floor in the form of color, paint or textiles in an attempt to offer the viewer an entry point (Fig. 8).

Showing primarily in the US, Ganesh has built up a parallel trajectory of showing as an artist from India / South Asia,[157] along with her shows and collab-

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156 Artist website accessed on March 12, 2018. https://www.chitraganesh.com/artist-statement/.

157 Ganesh first showed internationally in 2001 in a group show titled *AlieNation* at Quay Gallery Toronto (a show at which Indian artist Dhruvi Acharya was also exhibiting, she would later collaborate on a work for IAF with Dhruvi Acharya in 2015), she showed along with Tejal Shah in two shows on Indian art in 2006 and 2007 (*Subcontingent: The Subcontinent in Contemporary Art* at Turin, and *Contemporary Indian Art: Between Continuity and Transformation* at Milan). The latter shows were perhaps the first few larger shows featuring contemporary artists from India, and the inclusion of Ganesh's works in them connected with her peers in India. In 2007 Ganesh showed as part of a group show at Nature Morte in Delhi. The following year she showed at Bodhi Art Gallery also in a group show, *Everywhere is War and Rumours of a War*. In 2009, she showed once more as part of a group show with Tejal Shah in *Shifting Shapes Unstable Signs* at Yale University. The same year also saw her participate in *Hotter Than Curry* at OED Cochin and as part of a collateral event for the Indian Art Summit in 2009, in an exhibition titled *Moment to Monument*. She was part of the huge Saatchi Gallery show, *Empire Strikes Back* in 2010. In 2011 she was back in India with two shows—with Nature Morte as part of a show *Seduction by Masquerade*, and at the Prince of Wales Museum in Mumbai as part of *Future of the Past*. The same year saw her take part in *Concurrent India*

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Fig. 7. Ganesh, *Kolam Views.* Courtesy the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris. Fig. 8. Ganesh, *Ramp Drawing,* 2005 (Detail). Courtesy the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris.

orations locally in the US. Ganesh's diasporic upbringing allows her to identify with diverse groups and identities, from Asian-American to Black radical feminist artists who have undergone experiences similar to her own while growing up. For Ganesh, concepts of belonging, home and communities are plural—there is more than one nation at stake, more than one history and more than one community she belongs to. (Mohanty 2011) From among the wide selection of mediums that Ganesh works with, this study focuses specifically on two sets of graphic collage works stemming from the comic genre, the first of which is *Tales of Amnesia* (2002–2007), a series of 21 digital c-prints that were created when she returned to the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics as an artistic resource.

Ganesh, Shah and Chopra began their practices almost around the same period, the first decade of this century, and by this time, other artists from India had gradually begun to show on the global art circuit, also in India specific survey shows, Shah and Chopra also participated in some of these shows. These carried with them their own dynamics of curatorial selections and dialogic interactions that underpin the global artworld everywhere but before discussing their participation, an understanding of these new developments will provide a suitable context.

1.4 International Visibility

In India, international art officially entered with the First Triennale held in 1968 at the Lalit Kala Akademi that brought in artworks from 40 countries, since 1992 the Festival of India was flagged off in the Royal Academy of Arts in London, beginning a series of exhibitions showcasing Indian art. Artists from India had already been part of the international exhibition circuits, often in their individual capacities,[158] Husain for example had been a special invitee at the Sao Paulo

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at Helsinki and in *India is Now* in Göttingen Germany. In 2013 she was part of a show in Philadelphia titled *Salaam Bombay*, in 2014 she showed in Bochum *Sensual Wisdom, Hindu Ritual and Contemporary Indian Art.* In 2015 she was back in India at Chennai with *False Alternatives* and in an IAF curated project at the India Art Fair with Dhruvi Acharya. This is but a select overview of Ganesh's India-related showings, for more detail, please see the artist's website.

158   Artists from India had already held solo shows for example, Prabhakar Barwe in 1963 at Wisconsin, Narayan Bendre had a solo show in Windermere gallery New York 1948, Bikash Bhattacharya had participated at the Paris Biennale in 1968, Jatin Das showed in Paris in 1971, in Venice in 1978 and at Documenta in Kassel in 1975. There had been a group show on *Ten Contemporary Indian Painters* at Trenton US in 1965, of *Seven Indian Painters* in Gallery One London 1958, and *Indian Painters* in Zurich 1970. Husain

Biennial in 1971 along with Pablo Picasso and had won international acclaim at the Venice Biennale way back in 1954.[159] In the last decade of the twentieth century regular artistic exchanges increased and artists from India and their works opened up to the West and to global networks. In the global artworld, a growing infrastructure of artists, curators, gallerists, buyers and collectors from the global art circuit brought in art professionals with specific socio-political agendas[160] who would not only play a key role in establishing public profiles of some Indian contemporary artists, but also position them in the international art market. As artists started showing simultaneously across locations and became far more mobile, the group exhibition space became the main space for curatorial experimentation, country specific shows became hugely popular in these last decades of the twentieth century and in the first decade of the twenty first. As the curatorial role in this decade also expanded to become a more critical one, it was these curatorial initiatives that provided the spectator with some directional clues to decipher the object signs employed as representational strategies by artists at international mainstream locations.

Curators emerged as 'global agents' in this period as they presented international, even regional contemporary art to a travelling, cosmopolitan audience in increasingly new venues, this was the new professional image of the curator who as Belting states, was realizing "projects."[161] The curator's role as the conceptual organizer of these mega shows was charged with the responsibility of not only situating them within particularized interpretative systems already in place, but also with providing them with a legibility related to local issues, negotiating the distance between "the value system traditionally established by critic and art historian, and on the other, the ideological pressures and practices corresponding to the institutional setting in which such events emerge."[162] In her study of the global art world, Bydler also acknowledges that in these international presentations of artworks the audience lacks knowledge about the conception and production of the works and knows little about their geographical, social, political and inter textual relations to various cultures and it is the

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was a special invitee with Picasso at *Sao Paulo Biennial* in 1971, Tyeb Mehta showed at *Deuxieme Biennale International de Menton* in 1974, *Modern Indian painting* showed at Hirschhorn Museum Washington 1982. For a comprehensive listing, please see *Horn Please: Narratives in Contemporary Indian Art* 2007, 65–77.

159   Dalmia, *Making of Modern Indian Art*, 107.

160   Bydler, 68.

161   Hans Belting, "Introduction," in *The Global Contemporary*, 7.

162   Carlos Basualdo, "The Unstable Institution," in *The Biennial Reader,* 131.

curatorial framework that provides the key towards creating an understanding and interpretation of a work's value within the art world system.[163] The curator therefore served as an informed mediator to interpret art from art from various parts of the globe and the exhibition space foregrounded this space of mediation.

The visibility of the artist in a global art world is intimately tied to his/her being embedded in its networks, and the exhibition space becomes the single most defining feature of this visibility. It is the core space for the distribution and reception of an artwork, the space where art is mediated and experienced. The proliferation and mutation of the exhibition form has been almost the single most transformatory feature of contemporary art practice across the globe. Enwezor, discussing the frightening *Gesamkunstwerk* evident in mega-exhibitions, delineates certain historical effects that have accelerated since the 1990s.[164] In the postcolonial art world, the proliferation of exhibitions has enlarged the knowledge base of contemporary art, creating new networks between hitherto separated spheres of art productions, both in everyday engagements with the art world and in its texts, images and narratives, creating "new geographies of culture."[165] Enwezor states that a clear impetus for many large-scale international exhibitions has been to propagate a certain "will to globality." By so doing, such exhibitions seek to embed the peripheral spaces of cultural production and institutional articulation in the trajectory of international artistic discourse.[166] Along with the exhibition spaces, the infrastructure of artists' residencies, the freelancers, educational exchange programs, occasional recruitment of non-citizen curators or directors at prestigious art institutions—all constitute a globalized professional

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163   Bydler, *Global Art Worlds,* 70.

164   In the years between 1980 and 2005, the number of large survey shows, including Documenta, biennales and triennials grew from six to forty-nine. The Biennial foundation directory lists the number of biennials happening across the world as around 235 in 2018.

165   Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellations: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition" *Research in African Literatures,* Vol. 34, No. 4 (Winter 2003), 57–82.

166   Okwui Enwezor, "Biennials of Resistance: Mega-exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Forum," in *The Biennial Reader* 2010, 437. Enwezor's argument on the phenomena of mega-exhibitions has been critiqued by Baker in the same volume (448–452), who claims that the mediation of art actually bars access to local audiences and provides full access to an increasingly narrow cadre of experts and professionals. Baker asks who and where is the audience for mega-exhibitions and dismissing the Trauma and Nation model concepts, claims that shows like Documenta existed for years mainly as forums for exported American art, Baker also questions how the same works being shown and repeated in biennales, now become new models for counter-hegemonic spectatorship.

network in which new examples and references to authoritative literature and art works unfamiliar to the western art concept are constantly supplied.

Although exhibition practices, texts and even casual talk on the globalization of contemporary art have universalized particular art definitions, artistic practices, audiences and art history from the west, the event horizon of institutions in the European and US core avant-garde has nevertheless expanded, placing new regions on the map as it were.[167] This claim can be substantiated with a few examples of the appointment of non-western curators in the first decade of the twenty first century, primarily Okwui Enwezor's curation of Documenta 11 in 2002 that followed a method of diffused curatorship—working closely with a team of collaborators that included Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash and Octavio Zaya—Enwezor consciously affirming his post-colonial position as a critique of the west emphasized the geographic dispersal of art through a series of "Platforms" in which international debates, conferences and closed seminars took place over two years in Berlin, Vienna, New Delhi and Lagos. Further, the appointment of Ranjit Hoskote with Hyujin Kim to co-curate the Gwang Ju Biennial (2008) with Okwui Enwezor as Artistic Director. Four authors of the so called "Position Papers" and "Insertions," based in Korea, the Phillipines, Morocco and New Orleans, selected works from all over the world, this curatorial strategy to open up the structure of the exhibition was very much in line with Enwezor's at Documenta 11. A series of selected traveling exhibitions were invited to use the biennale as a destination which was divided into three strands: "On the Road" a collection of traveling exhibitions that were produced elsewhere in 2006/2007, "Position Papers" that involved curators in dialogue and "Insertion" that featured works specially commissioned for Gwangju. This "parliament of narratives" had unexpected starting points co-produced by actors "working not only in New York, Berlin, Tokyo, Singapore, Delhi and Vilnius, but also in Asmara, Jogyajakarta, Alexandria and Isfahan" and acted as a platform for interpretations in its reading across cultures, as a translation platform for transformatory experiences.[168]

It was in these decades that the continent of Asia, which had been far from the mainstream art world operating out of New York, Paris, London and Berlin, now became visible in this art world system through its participation in exhibition spaces, including biennials, art fairs and festivals. New definitions of 'contemporary' Asian art were tested in various fora including conferences,

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167   Bydler, *Global Art Worlds*, 243.

168   Ranjit Hoskote, "Biennials of Resistance: Reflections on the Seventh Gwangju Biennial," in *The Biennial Reader*, 314–315.

symposiums, exhibitions and publications, some important biennales and trien-
nales included The Indian Triennial (1968), Bangladesh (1981), Gwangju, South
Korea (1995), Shanghai, China (1996) and Taipei, Taiwan (1998), the Asia Pacific
Triennial, Brisbane (1993) and the Fukuoka Triennale (1999).[169] And these spaces
became the frames within which Indian contemporary art initially circulated.
The Japan Foundation and New York based Asia Society played a significant
role in creating this initial visibility and it was through or as part of one of
these institutions that the first group of Indian artists showed at New York—sig-
nificantly, in the first instance, it was the regional that defined the global. Till
that time there was an almost total lack of awareness of Asian art biennials.[170]
One of the earliest shows to display Asian art in mainstream New York was
Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia curated by Thai curator Apinan
Poshyananda in 1996 and organized by the Asia Society. The timing seemed
fortuitous and in tandem with the powerful international trade winds blowing
from an Easterly direction, all things Asian had now become hot property to
Western cultural institutions with Asia's integration into a global market econ-
omy, generating vast new wealth and accelerated urbanization. *Tradition/Ten-
sions* was the first major exhibition of contemporary art from Asia shown in
the US featuring the work of 27 artists from five countries, India, Indonesia, the
Philippines, South Korea and Thailand. The objective of the exhibition was to
generate greater awareness, information and scholarship about contemporary
Asian art in America through exploring a series of intersecting, and often com-
peting issues that find common ground between cultural regions. The works
of Indian artists displayed in this exhibition included Bhupen Khakhar's iconic
Old Man from Valsad and *Sakhibhav* with its radical overtones highlighting gay
sexuality and the transgendered body, also Sheela Gowda's *Work in Progress*
(1996) an avant-garde experiment with cow dung as an artistic medium, a highly
unprecedented gesture emanating from a nation where the material possessed
purifying sacred properties. Both these works were far removed from any ref-
erences to the nation's tradition, to a civilization mired in an art from the past
that was mostly the only kind of art displayed in museums in the west and they
simultaneously signaled the juxtaposing of the modern medium with contem-
porary art forms.

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169 Caroline Turner, "Critical themes: Geopolitical Change and Global Contexts in
Contemporary Asian Art," in *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities
and World-making*, eds. Michelle Antoinette and Caroline Turner (Canberra: ANU Press,
2014), 13–14.

170 Gardner & Greene, *Biennials, Triennials and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created
Contemporary Art* (West Sussex / Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 112.

In this same decade, the Asia Pacific Triennale held its first exhibition at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane in 1993. Economic changes, the same pragmatic impulse that had driven *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions Tensions*, clearly led Australia and New Zealand to promote the idea that they were part of the "Asian family" marking the beginning of a new era that also encouraged "Asian band-wagonning," from nations in Europe and America, with art functioning as a "slippery lubricant" making political mechanisms function with greater ease.[171] Turner reminds us that the term Asia Pacific was used in a purely geographical sense, there was no collective identity called Asia, let alone Asia Pacific. However, considering the global importance of this part of the world from a strategic, political, social or cultural perspective—such a grouping extended the regional focus *outwards*, rather than *inwards*. Turner further observed that the issue of colonialism was no longer seen as central, rather the focus was on environmental and ecological issues, issues of participation and democracy, of women in society and other important issues relating to religion and spirituality which had long been absent in the western art tradition. Claiming that artists are no longer between two worlds as in colonial times, Turner claimed that, "Today regionalism (in terms of locality) emerges as something to be proud of [...]and an appropriate starting point for new definitions of national and cultural identity."[172] The Asia Pacific Triennial's aim in 1993 was to "provide a forum of discussion of diverse practices, experimentation, as an intellectual platform for the presentation of local and regional perspectives." It provided a platform at a time when there were very few biennales or forums to debate the development of Asian contemporary art in the world.[173] Nalini Malani, Mrinalini Mukherjee, N. N. Rimzon, Nilima Sheikh and Vivan Sundaram represented India in the Second Triennale, from the Third Asia Pacific Triennale, all of South Asia entered the frame, including Sri Lanka and Pakistan. One of the Triennale's most distinctive features was that artists and scholars from the region itself selected and curated and wrote about the artworks. The selection of works was guided by a coterie of university based or free-lanced professionals, intellectuals including Jim Supangkat in Jakarta, Geeta Kapur in New Delhi, T. K. Sabapathy in Singapore and Somporn Rodboon in Bangkok—who with their knowledge of cosmopolitan local artists

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171 Apinan Poshyananda, "The Future: Post-Cold War, Postmodernism, Postmarginalia (Playing with Slippery Lubricants," in *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the* Pacific, ed. Caroline Turner (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1993), 4–5.

172 Caroline Turner, "Internationalism and Regionalism," *Tradition and Change,* xiii–xviii.

173 Michelle Antoinette & Caroline Turner, *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions*, 20.

decided whose works would be most 'legible' to roving curators and who were most often consulted.

As art from India began to show in the West, the interest generated about Indian art culminated in numerous exhibitions.[174] Among them, some were fashioned to provide an overview of the art scene in India, while others like *Body City: Citing Contemporary Culture in India*, dealt with specific themes.[175] In her essay in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Kapur situated Indian artists in an uneasy 'subterrain,' in the 'dug-outs' of the contemporary, positioning the body in a contiguous relationship with the city in metonymical and indexical ways.[176] I draw upon two specific shows to discuss this international visibility of Indian art—*Indian Highway*, a series of travelling exhibitions on Indian art between 2008 and 2012 and *Paris-Delhi-Bombay* in 2011, both these shows included works by Tejal Shah and Nikhil Chopra though they were not the only international shows in which these artists participated.

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174   Exhibitions on Indian art in the first decade included *Horn Please: Narratives in Contemporary Art,* Bern Museum (2007–08); *Tiger by the Tail! Women Artists of India* Rose Art Museum Brandeis University (2007), *New Narratives* Chicago Art Centre (2008), *Public Places Private Places: Contemporary Photography and Video Art* Newark (2007), *Where Three Dreams Cross: 150 years of Photography from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* Whitechapel Gallery (2010). There were some specifically on video art *SELF* at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane (2002), *Indian Video Art: History in Motio*n (2004), at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan.

175   The first decade of the new millennium opened with *Body City: Citing Contemporary Culture in India* in Berlin 2003, with works like Nalini Malani's *Remembering Toba Tek Singh*, N. N. Rimzon's *Speaking Stones*, Navjot Altaf's *Lacuna in Testimony*, *Between Memory and History*, and Atul Dodiya's *Broken Branches*, addressed the nation allegorically, photo-documentary images by Jitish Kallat documented the city of Bombay's growing violence and tragedies, Subodh Gupta critiqued notions of purity with *Pure* 1998, and sexuality with the photo-based installation *Vilas* 1999. *Edge of Desire* in 2005 exhibited works that were still closely entangled with the nation and its histories. Vivan Sundaram's *Memorial*, Nalini Malani's *Unity in Diversity*, Atul Dodiya's *Tomb's Day*, derived as much from present-day politics as did Pushpamala N's *Native Women of South India*, and L. N. Tallur's *Made in England* from the thematics of postcolonialism. Subodh Gupta's *Bihari* and *Vilas* were staged as significant interventions of an aggressively raced and sexualized performative 'Indian' body.

176   Geeta Kapur, "Sub-terrain: Artists Dig the Contemporary," in *Body City: Siting Contemporary Culture in India,* eds. Indira Chandrasekhar and Peter C. Seel (Berlin and Delhi: House of World Cultures and Tulika, 2003), 46–83.

1.4.1 Shah and Chopra—Indian Highway 2008–2012

In the traveling exhibition *Indian Highway*[177] showing at various venues between 2008–2012 at London, Oslo, Lyon, Rome and Beijing,[178] both Shah and Chopra's artworks were on display. National histories were in the central frame with M. F. Husain's *Rape of India* (2008) dedicated to the 2008 terror attacks, the work was made specifically for the show and covered the entire external façade of the Serpentine gallery in the first iteration of the exhibition. The nation continued to occupy center stage with works like *National Highway No. 1*, *Tryst with Destiny*, (Shilpa Gupta 2008, 2007–2008), *Reversed Gaze* (N. S. Harsha 2008), *Tales of Good and Evil* (Nalini Malani 2008), *Dream Villa II* (Dayanita Singh 2007–08), *Nemesis of Nations* (Bharti Kher 2008), and *Lightning Testimonies* (Amar Kanwar 2007). The term 'highway' in the title reflected artistic pre-occupations towards a greater engagement with their environment, migrations caused by rapid urbanization accelerated by superfast technologies, the importance of the road in migration and movement and as the link between rural and urban communities, others referenced technology and the 'information superhighway,' central to India's economic boom.[179] The first *Indian Highway* exhibition showcased Chopra's first considerably long performance in Kensington Gardens lasting 57 hours in the thick of winter. He spent two nights in a tent outside the Serpentine gallery he had set up at the beginning of the performance, Chopra's oilskin costume referenced the histories of explorers from the early part of the century

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[177] Curated by Julia Peyton-Jones, Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Gunnar B. Kvaran together with Giulia Ferracci, Assistant Curator MAXXI Arte, *Indian Highway* was organised in collaboration with the Serpentine Gallery, London and the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo, Norway and produced in conjunction with the Serpentine Gallery in London. The exhibition was the second chapter in the gallery's focus on three major cultural regions, China, India and the Middle East, it followed *China Power Station: Part I*, presented in Battersea Power Station, London in 2006 and at Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo in 2007.

[178] For a detailed ethnographic investigation of this series of exhibitions, please see Catherine Bublatzky, *Along the Indian Highway: An Ethnography of an International Travelling Exhibition*, India: Routledge 2019.

[179] Works such as Subodh Gupta's *Across Seven Seas* (2006), *Everything is Inside* (2004), Jitish Kallat's *Autosaurus Tripous* (2008), Sheela Gowda's *Dark Room* (2006), referenced migration and movement, while works such as Ashok Sukumaran and Shaina Anand's *Everything is Contestable* (2006), *Khirkee Yaan* (2006), Kiran Subbaiah's *Use_Me.EXE* (2003), foregrounded India's economic boom and its growing international presence as an information superhighway. Works such as *Immersion. Emergence – 24 Images* (2007), explored artist Ravi Agarwal's relationship with the Yamuna river in Delhi.

(Fig. 9). Chopra made a drawing of the Serpentine gallery from the surrounding park in Kensington Gardens (Fig. 10), over two cold days in December—battling the elements—and the canvas was displayed as part of the first group exhibition. Chopra's next iteration as *Yog Raj Chitrakar Memory Drawing V Part 2* (2009) was considerably shorter and lasted for 8 hours at the Astrup Fearnly Museum Oslo. In this performance, he walked from the museum to the pier on a chilly but sunny spring morning, his canvas in a sack on his shoulder (Fig. 11) and made a drawing of the harbor and its buildings. This performance was a test in endurance as he worked in sub-zero temperatures outdoors, executing a near perfect replica of the sea harbor in view (Fig. 12).

In 2011 in *Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory Drawing V Part 3* at the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, he performed as part of *Indian Highway* for the last time for 48 hours. In this performance he drove to a village in Lyon with his supplies and pitched his tent on a rise overlooking the river and created the landscape in color with the river a vivid blue (Fig. 13 & 14). He came back to the museum with the completed drawing and hung it between the other two landscapes, completing the series. At the end of this performance he transformed into an androgynous gentleman, replete with top hat and makeup as he posed on a chair in front of his work (Fig. 15).

In this image can be seen some of the composite elements of each performance, the steel bucket and basin, part of the washing up process that transform the 'picture-maker' as he changes into his formal attire. In the three performances during the *Indian Highway* exhibition, he used the same costumes for all three performances and these almost covered the gamut of his persona as *Yog Raj Chitrakar*, the explorer, the draughtsman, the hardy adventurer, his final transformation focused on the visible ambiguity of gender, sharpening the post-colonial critique even further. The thematic connect with the series of exhibitions was clear, the Indian highway as a road to travel, migrate and create vistas of his travels in his post-colonial persona. In this series of performances, the choice of sites offered vantage views, a famous English park in the heart of the Empire, a bustling sea-port in Scandinavia, and a body of water in an idyllic French country town, all of these became spaces for his post-colonial body to inhabit and re-create into ephemeral vistas.

In the series of *Indian Highway* exhibitions, Tejal Shah's iconic and contentious work critiquing democracy *I Love My India*, created after the Gujarat riots was on display. The 2002 Gujarat riots were a three-day period of inter-communal violence in the western Indian state of Gujarat. According to official figures, the riots resulted in the deaths of 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus. Other sources estimate that up to 2,000 Muslims died. In the 3 years following the Gujarat riots more than 22 short films and documentaries on the communal riots were produced. The work was exhibited at all venues. Shah filmed *I Love My India* at
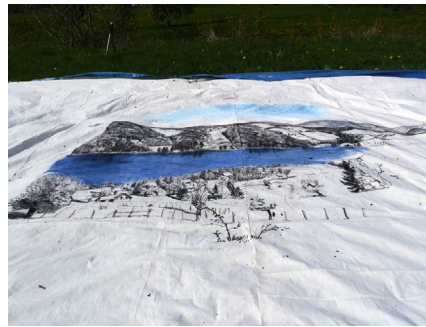
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Fig. 9. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar : Memory Drawing V Part 3,* Lyon 2011.
Fig. 10. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar : Memory Drawing V Part 1,* London 2008.
Fig. 11 & 12. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar : Memory Drawing V Part 2,* Oslo 2009.
Fig. 13, 14 & 15. Chopra, *Yog Raj Chitrakar : Memory Drawing V Part 3,* Lyon 2011. Courtesy the artist.
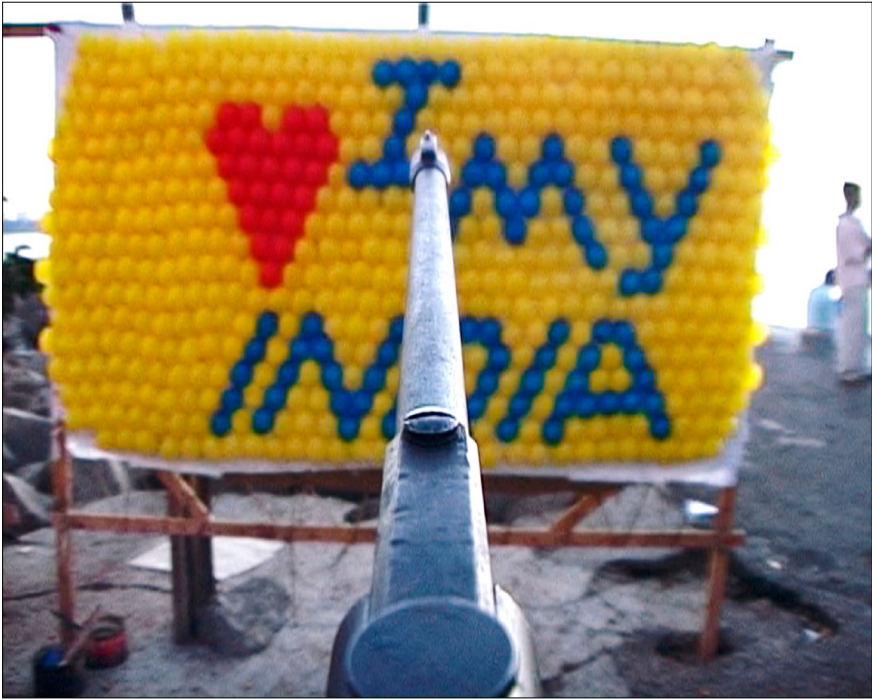
Fig. 16. Shah, *I Love My India,* Single Channel Video, 2003. Courtesy the artist, Project 88 Mumbai and Barbara Gross Galerie Mumbai.

a recreational public space close to the sea in south Mumbai. It engaged visitors by having them, as a game, shoot popguns at balloons designed to spell *I Love My India* (Fig. 16), and then asked them questions related to the state of democracy in India. This video work travelled to London, Oslo and Rome as part of the Indian Highway show. However, when the show was inaugurated by the Indian Ambassador in Beijing on June 23, the video was removed from display after 4–5 days citing technical problems. It was officially believed that the video had some "politically controversial overtones."[180] The responses to the work effectively demonstrated not only the existing apathy towards everyday violence in contemporary India but also raised questions around the relationship between politics and contemporary art and how the two fields align so closely in contemporary culture.

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180   Accessed on May 15, 2016. https://www.hindustantimes.com/world/beijing-art-gallery-removes-godhra-video-installation/story-APpgQ6YuiM489UyTaZ6bjK.html.

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1.4.2 Shah and Chopra—Paris-Delhi-Bombay 2011

That these large-scale survey exhibitions also became spaces for promoting discursive polemics and reflexivity was demonstrated by the highly debated and critiqued *Paris-Delhi-Bombay* exhibition held at Centre Pompidou Paris in 2011. Curated by Sophie Duplaix and Fabrice Bousteau, it placed an almost exclusive reliance on social and political themes to present contemporary Indian art, establishing the show as an ethnographic display. One critique stated that entering the central space was somewhat akin to wading through a cobbled-together Wikipedia entry.[181] The entire exhibits were fashioned in concentric circles around Ravinder Reddy's *Tara* (2004), a gigantic golden head at the epicenter and surrounded by the introductory text panels for the six main social and political themes which were not intended to introduce the history of Indian art traditions or artists, rather to 'set out to depict society in India.' The six main themes were, *Democracy, Environment, Religion, Domestic Space* or *Home, Identity* and *Craft* and this "sensory experience of materials, textures and colors," mapped out a western understanding in line with the stereotypical narrative in which India was depicted in the exhibition's literature as an exotic resource that the French artists accessed and responded to. Introducing India via themes and then encountering works that only speak to those themes, the exhibition packaged a product 'India' that, despite its dynamism, acts in predictable ways.[182] While national, political and social histories were very much in evidence, it was Pushpamala N's photographic take-off on Delacroix's nineteenth century painting that defiantly reversed the colonial gesture as the artist defiantly held aloft the French flag recalling Marianne's pose from the original work by Delacroix. Within the section on **Identity**, violence against the transgender community received a voice with Shah's powerful portrayal of the community in *Untitled (-On Violence),* raising disturbing questions around the marginalized status of the community and their rights as citizens,[183] in this exhibition, Chopra closed himself off in a small room for 54 hours and over the course of this duration he created charcoal drawings on the walls of the gallery in an attempt to capture the typified cityscape of Paris, as viewed from a small aperture cut into the wall (Fig. 17). The deliberate creation of an aperture as the only viewing vista referenced the narrow-ness of

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181 Chanchal Dadlani, "Paris-Delhi-Bombay…" *Art Forum*, 50 (2) October 2011. Accessed on April 21, 2016. https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201108/paris-delhi-bombay-29037.

182 Tracy Buck, "Framing India: Paris-Delhi-Bombay." Accessed on May 21, 2017. https://recollectus.berghahnbooks.com/exhibit_reviews/files/assets/basic-html/page9.html.

183 For a detailed discussion of this work please refer to Chapter 2 of this study.

the colonial gaze, a viewpoint that the exhibition itself foregrounded. At the end of the performance, he dressed his "black" charcoal covered body in the style of a flamboyant Paris showgirl, aka Josephine Baker and walked out into the main square and foyer of the building, striking poses for audiences with cameras, transforming himself into an exotic object, just as Josephine Baker had, many years ago (Fig. 18). It was also during this performance that cloaked himself in anonymity wearing a white body suit, simultaneously paying homage to Yoko Ono's *Cutpiece* performance as he concentratedly snipped off pieces from the white body suit to reveal another orange-hued body suit below.

While Chopra engaged with the reality of French history and the city landscape, Leandro Erlich's installation *Le Regard*, offered parallel views of India and France, recreating a French room with a bourgeois setting lit by two windows (one showed a view of Paris from Gallery 1 of the Centre Pompidou, the other overlooked a lively street in Bombay). This installation amplified the problems with this exhibition, as the two differing viewpoints remained distinct, the juxtaposing of artist works did not encourage a dialogue. Even though the exhibition spoke of globalization and mobility, as also the ease and rapidity of cross-cultural influences, the structured themes allowed no space for artists from the diaspora and made the experience a territorially bound one, denying the experience of permeability that is such an important part of the experience of globality. India was positioned as other, a 'mystery' waiting to be explored by the French and explained by the Indians.[184] The most outspoken exhibitors made no secret of their distance from the core subject and their distrust of the commission. Stéphane Calais turned down the invitation to travel to India, ensuring that his drawings retained all the exotic spice of popular fiction, deliberately conjuring up a wholly imaginary vision of India.[185] This vision of attempted transcultural multiplicity remained one-sided.

Writing in the Arken Museum catalogue in 2012, Hoskote expresses a "productive disquiet with regard to the exhibition form of the national survey," claiming that, the limiting of defining within a "particular representation of a nation premised on such pseudo-primordial notions of identity" if done uncritically, could lapse into an ethnographic mode,[186] and this view aligned closely with

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184 Dadlani, 2011.

185 Harry Bellett and Philippe Dagen, "Paris-Delhi-Bombay Review," June 14, 2011. Accessed on May 15, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/jun/14/exhibition.

186 Ranjit Hoskote, "Kaleidocopic Propositions: The Evolving Contexts of Contemporary Indian Art," in *India: Art Now* (Ostfildern/Ishøj, Denmark: Hatje Cantz/Arken Museum, 2013), 54. Exhibition Catalogue.

Fig. 17 & 18. Chopra, Broken White II, Paris 2011. Courtesy the artist.

critiques of the *Paris-Delhi-Mumbai* exhibition in the previous year. Clearly in these decades, country specific shows seemed to have been curated according to western expectations of 'Indian-ness,' reflecting well-known conditions and of concern to the west. A similar model also applied to works from China, wherein political repression, economic growth and consumerism, subjugation of women, and control of family size—overtly 'Chinese' conditions expressed in recognizably Western modes produced a manifestly hybrid object. Stallabrass claims that "*the Western gaze is only comfortable with otherness as long as it is not really other,*"[187] and this is a view that can well be applied to the reception of exhibitions such as *Paris-Delhi-Bombay* and other shows in the West in this period.

Apart from these large-scale exhibitions that took place in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, there were smaller initiatives as well as artworks from India itself became part of the larger circulation as auction houses from the west arrived in India, creating an emerging market for the works and a coterie of art collectors from India and the west that drove their value. In other words, a mediated artworld was already falling into place. However, despite the pitfalls of thematics, curatorial vision and other factors within the limited shelf-life span of an exhibition, when art works are collectively viewed, however briefly in an exhibition, they supposedly contextualize the region, the nation, the locality as the site of a transcultural artistic discourse.[188] This contextualization in the case of India came into the frame with Hoskote's curation of the Indian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2011.

1.5 Curation as Postnational Critique

Among the best-known large-scale exhibitions that utilize the nation as a framework and dominate the global artworld, the *Venice Biennale*, founded in the 19th century with its country pavilions, offers a prime example. The representation is underscored by each represented country's national economic interests, budgets, and organizational structures. Once again, I quote Bydler's study who argues that the economic strength of nation states determines who can dispatch representing artists to international exhibitions, studio programmes and residencies and their cultural budget also allows for the possibility of high-profile

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187   Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 63 & 70.

188   The exhibitions as contextual spaces feature at various points in this study later on, as well in conjunction with the works of the three artists as and when required to reinforce the argument being made in this study.

events, placing a country on the contemporary art world map.[189] In the case of India, artists have participated in the Venice Biennale as individuals rather than as part of a country pavilion. Hoskote who had previously co-curated the 7th Gwangju Biennial in 2008, was invited to curate India's first official pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale by the Lalit Kala Akademi and the National Academy of Fine Arts. This was for the first time that India was represented as a nation in a professionally conceived and curated exhibition.[190] In a country where Indian art had been internationally recognized mainly through gallery, individual artists and private initiatives, this official bid for international participation was a brand-new initiative. Prior to that, India's exhibitions at the Biennale were mediated through the Embassy in Rome and presented an 'official' view of Indian art as part of the Italian display. For the choice of representation for the exhibition, there was no interference from the government agencies and the idea of what kind of art should be presented was not a fleshed-out concept.

This raised the question of defining 'national' culture, in a country as diverse as India, taking up Khilnani's "idea" of India as a proposition rather than as a territorial entity, Hoskote sought to address and broaden the sense of belonging, referencing Bhabha's contention that artists work within a "nation space,"[191]—therefore the affiliation to a nation could be understood to imply a matter of choice, Hoskote's curatorial idea chose to explore how would diasporic imagination conduct itself in relation to a place with which it has a certain connection. Hoskote focused on India as a "proposition" rather than a territory traversing diverse economies of image and narrative, asking what commonalities can be traced between art practices marked by shared practices, especially in moments of transcultural encounter and collaboration.[192] His position was marked by a refusal to be interpellated by entities such as nation state, religion or region, the emphasis was on floating contexts and enduring collaborations[193] within transcultural contexts, implying a fluidity in curatorial choices. Questions

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189 Bydler, *Global Art Worlds,* 208.

190 This view has been disputed by Manuela Ciotti who, at a talk at the Foundation for Contemporary Art in Bangalore on August 8, 2013, demonstrated the presence of an Indian pavilion at Venice, inaugurated by Sir Ronald Adam in the presence of Luther Evans, then Director-General of UNESCO, she states that nearly 40 Indian paintings were sold at this event- a retrospective of 59 paintings by 32 artists, including M. F. Husain, S. H. Raza, Jamini Roy, Amrita Sher-Gil and F. N. Souza. Accessed on April 12, 2018. https://www.facebook.com/events/217659738390966.

191 Hoskote, Arken Museum, 56.

192 Hoskote, Arken Museum, 57.

193 Hoskote, "Biennials of Resistance," *The Biennial Reader*, 308.

that guided Hoskote's choices stemmed from India's specific context—in terms of how the art world becomes available to the audience in India, the roles that the auction house and gallery system play in creating a certain narrative of arrivals, recognition and success, how the selections for exhibitions and the programming cycle of galleries rely on the pricing index—all of these guided his desire to critically engage with the field through the idea of the *non-sequitor* in order to insert a break in this art world conversation.[194]

The India pavilion was given space in the Arsenale area, one of the most visited parts of the Biennale. Rather than presenting a large number of artists to 'illustrate the burgeoning art scene' as India survey shows had been doing, Hoskote instead decided to present four artists—Zarina Hashmi, Praneet Soi, Gigi Scaria and the Desire Machine Collective—forming four powerful positions, working across New York, Amsterdam / Kolkata, New Delhi / Kerala and Guwahati, to demonstrate the linkages between Indian contemporary art and the global art world. This curatorial proposition of creating the pavilion as a laboratory for exploring, opening up 'the idea of India' as against received notions of Indian-ness as a fixed *apriori* national identity allowed an expansion of the notion towards "plural anchorages of belonging." Hoskote's choice of Hashmi was a deliberate interjection into the association of the contemporary with a certain younger generation of artists and their engagement with new mediums. Hashmi's work, signaling both independence and partition also brought in questions of the legibility of language, her diasporic experiences of identity, living in New York as an American citizen, brought up questions of cultural citizenship and how displaced individuals respond to the predicaments, anxieties and urgencies of what it means to be Indian. As a South Asian Muslim, she makes the journey and the border her recurrent motifs, holding onto memory through naming with works like *Home is a Foreign Place* (1997), *Noor* (2008), and *Blinding Light* (2010). Praneet Soi's transcultural practice consisted of fluid situations and multiple interactions across locations in Europe and Kolkata, working with local craftsmen in the marginal economy of Kolkata, pre-occupied with war as an existential condition through figures of refugees, people escaping catastrophe. For the Biennale his slide projection work *Kumartuli Printer* (2010–11), was accompanied by a 54-foot, L shaped mural painted on site. Gigi Scaria incarnated the predicament of "the internal migrant." Coming from Kerala in the deep south, but living in Delhi, he encountered a variety of social, linguistic and existential questions on which he based his sculptures, installations and videos. His

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194   Hoskote's talk at Asia Art Archive. Accessed on May 23, 2018. https://aaa.org.hk/en/programmes/programmes/everyone-agrees-its-about-to-explode-curatorial-reflections-on-the-india-pavilion-54th-venice/search/actors:wang-molin/period/past/page/14.

reflections on the complexities of everyday life across social strata were visible in his video works like in the three-screen interactive video installation *Elevator from the Subcontinent* (2011). The last part of the curatorial selection included the Desire Machine Collective, comprising of Mrigank Madhukaillya and Sonal Jain, who originate from the Northeast of India and work across film installation and public space projects. The Northeast is a region that has always been considered as removed from the mainstream, it has been under effective military rule since the mid-1950s. Working with video and still photography, the duo reinterpret Deleuzian ideas on the 'desiring machine,' working "within the fabric of the North-East's broken down assemblage, putting together things that have been scattered because of newer constructions of nationhood and autonomy."[195] Self-consciously connecting their work to Southeast Asia, they reformulate the notion of where India belongs. But rather than creating overtly political art, they layer the viewing encounter with "intensities of awareness and sensation," inviting viewers to be more acutely aware of the sensorial environment through sound installations, with, for example, *Residue* (2011/2012), a film based on a power plant. All of these artists, states Hoskote, return us to starting points, to see if we can re-imagine what it means to belong to India, not merely as citizens but as participants and contributors—without being constricted by the narrow ideology of the nation.[196]

Hoskote's curatorial choices represented art practices that were increasingly part of a larger move in contemporary art practice, his curatorial position was significant due to its perceptible shift away from the nation and for practically articulating that the nationalist genie, never perfectly contained within the boundaries of the territorial state was now itself diasporic.

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195   Shaina Anand, "Desire Machine Collective Interview," *Khoj Book*, 518.

196   Ranjit Hoskote, "Everyone agrees it's about to Explode," Accessed on May 23, 2018. http://www.india-seminar.com/2014/659/659_ranjit_hoskote.htm.