

EDGE  
OF  
DESIRE

RECENT ART IN INDIA

CHAITANYA SAMBRANI

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY KAJRI JAIN AND ASHISH RAJADHYAKSHA



CHAITANYA SAMBRANI

# On the Double Edge of Desire

**ENGAGING PLACES.** *How are we—in India, and elsewhere—located in a time of globalization and fundamentalist politics? What do we aspire to, and how do our locations channel or limit aspiration? Indeed, what are the limits of imagination in such a context, and in what ways is it possible to push at these limits? How does the work of contemporary artists participate in questions of location and desire? What are the relationships between location, desire, art practice, and an*

immanent politics of life? For surely, location and desire, taken as sensory, ideological, historical and existential categories, remain significant for the visual artist, especially when all other certainties are evacuated.

*Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India* presents the work of contemporary Indian artists to audiences in Australia, the United States, Mexico and Canada. The thirty-six artists and two collectives in this selection come from a wide range of generational and social contexts, and their work spans professional, material, and disciplinary boundaries. The oldest among them was born in 1924, the youngest in 1976.

Of these, there are some who have rarely strayed outside their district, and have never participated in the cultural life of India's university-educated elite. There are others with de-facto world-citizenship, and major international reputations. Some have written books and taught generations of art students, while others have never been past primary school. A few don't even identify as artists, no matter how broadly that category may be defined. Linguistically, the services of an interpreter would be required for some of these artists to converse with each other.

While embracing these diversities within the

frame of a single exhibition is significant to this project, the viewer will not find here a survey of contemporary Indian art. *Edge of Desire* does not pretend to a "potted history" of recent Indian art. Rather, it is hinged on a particular—and necessarily partisan—perspective on recent history; it results from a specific intellectual and emotional investment in the field. While aspiring to speak to a diverse audience, this exhibition offers an invitation to enter into the dialogues and arguments presented here, through a selection of work that is as polymorphous as it is sensual, challenging as well as uplifting. The questions that the artists repre-

sented here are concerned with are not only significant in India; they have something to do with the purposes of art in the world today.

The decade (roughly 1993–2003) addressed by this exhibition has been a time of upheaval in India. Within a national framework, this decade has seen the undermining of certitudes and aspirations fundamental to the struggle for self-determination and the establishment of a secular, socialist democracy. Meanwhile, this period has also seen a growth in India's international prominence as a military, economic, and technological power. These factors have inevitably influenced major changes in visual culture. While it is possible to fetishize the plurality and the fantastic spectacle that characterizes visual culture in India,<sup>1</sup> it is not my intention to use art to illustrate this decade in the manner of an ethnographic exposition. This would only play into the commodification of the contemporary to feed the ocular desires of institutions and audiences in the developed world. Nor does this project indulge in what has been termed "ambulance chasing" in another context.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I have chosen to ground the argument of this exhibition in the interplay of two binaries: historical processes of

globalization and fundamentalism, and ideational forces of place and desire. Reciprocities and causal linkages are implicit here: fundamentalist claims to place are fed by insecurities wrought by globalization and its accompanying exposure to other economic and cultural forms.<sup>3</sup> Concurrently, internal tensions generated by rising economic inequalities and perceptions of inequity enroute to economic restructuring have led to a retreat into racial, religious, and regionalist specificities in an expression of a desire for cultural security and purity.<sup>4</sup>

Place as a marker of location, of belonging and identity, is a complex accretion of factors ranging from gender and sexuality, language, class, caste, and religion to education and market access. Location as an act of choice or a force of circumstance forms the matrix for our comprehension of individual subjectivity and how it addresses the world. And while place and location afford a measure of belonging, they also convey a sense of limits: together with positive aspects of rootedness and empowerment, a physical, cultural, or historical locus also implies boundedness, containment, and limitation.

Desire and longing are corollaries to a sense of place and location. Desire as a category of the imagination has always played a major role in the ways individual subjectivity addresses itself to the world. At one level, all art-making has to do with the desire to transcend boundaries of the self and of historical location. Articulated variously in terms of sexuality, spirituality, politics, language, and the use of materials, desire and longing span the gamut of human activity, from the gutter to the heights of epiphany. Desire forms the necessary condition for creative endeavor. Desire is also volatile and susceptible to perversion. It has a double edge; with the potential for violence always near at hand. Longing can manifest in the will to power—over ideas, places, objects, and persons. Place and desire thus emerge as primary factors in a complex of relationships through which human beings engage with the world.

India is notoriously a multiverse of often-conflicting realities. Extreme conditions routinely coexist here, famously manifesting sensory overload, for seasoned inhabitants as well as visitors.<sup>5</sup> The nation's recent history has been dominated by forces that seek to regulate

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this plurality: the twin exigencies of economic globalization and political fundamentalism have distinctly altered relations of power, cultural identity, and aesthetic values both within and between communities. Across the globe, these exigencies, coupled with regimes of repeated reification—played out through over-saturated media that reduce reality to spectacle—have drastically transformed the ground rules for engagements with alterity.

The role that the artist may play in this network of over-determined signification shifts constantly between that of sham/shaman and witness/confessor. Much contemporary art practice, executed tongue firmly in cheek and irony perpetually writ on the brow, seems to reflect this. Some works play with “faking it,” casting the self as pretend representative of ideas or communities. Others rely on the dream of life-transforming action (when such transformation is manifestly already impossible). Occasionally, they essay the more earnest role of the witness, much like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, who is blessed with some paranormal or mystical faculty of vision that pierces through the veils of history. It is also this assumed, illusory, elusive vision that allows artists to play the role of confessor and healer, or of the fool who speaks the truth, albeit through subterfuge and humor.<sup>6</sup>

While not unprecedented, a project that presents varieties of the Indian contemporary—urban and rural, metropolitan and Adivasi (tribal indigenous),<sup>7</sup> fine art and folk art—within a single curatorial project remains experimental and contingent, since most institutions concerned with Indian art—art schools, museums, exhibitions, and publications—continue to maintain a degree of segregation in their practices.<sup>8</sup> These institutional divides reflect a deeper ontological divide implicit in the very nature of the discipline of art history as it is traditionally understood and practiced, in India and elsewhere.

Within regimes of global exposition, contemporary art—especially when it comes from a non-Western context—inevitably risks being projected as spectacle. The lure of the spectacular is central to the international reception of art from areas relatively unknown within First World economies of cultural production and consumption. The curatorial project inescapably involves mediations, reformulations, and translations across disparate contexts, sometimes implying a violation of contextually specific meanings. This is especially so if the audience is offered objects as visual artifacts (purportedly representative of a scantily understood culture) without the objects being anchored, their meanings readable through a set of historical filters. The desire for visibility implicit in an exhibition needs to be tempered with historical nuance to shift the gaze away from mere spectacle into a thematically linked argument about cultural practice.

Depending on who is looking, and from what vantage point, visual creativity in contemporary India can present seemingly irreconcilable facets. This faceting is one of the reasons for the longevity of the trope—primarily articulated by those observing Indian culture from a distance—about India being a welter of sensations, a succession of riotous spectacles always a little bit beyond the ken of rationality. But where kaleidoscopic variegation may present “a carnivalesque spectacle of contradictions”<sup>9</sup> from a distance, it can also resolve into a highly segregated spectrum with impermeable barriers between different areas of practice from points of view more invested—and therefore entrenched—in local economies of cultural production.<sup>10</sup>

There are historical reasons for this, which can be found in the particular means through which consensus on Indian history, including art history, was manufactured over the nineteenth century. The quasi-Enlightenment project of archaeology that the British Raj undertook in India led to the rediscovery of ancient monuments such as Ajanta, and their

subsequent canonization in a mainstream classical trajectory emphasizing Hindu and Buddhist art, with the later addition of imperial Mughal culture. As Tapati Guha-Thakurta has argued with respect to nineteenth-century publications on Indian architecture, a concern with pre-Islamic Buddhist and Hindu heritage dominated the antiquarian search for the “authentic” tradition of India. Participants in this process included not only British administrators and Indophiles, but also, significantly, members of the Indian elite who were eager to stake a claim to a classical and highly cultured past.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, what we understand as modern or bourgeois Indian cultural identity is rooted in this epistemological project, routed through the modalities of historiography, observation and travel, survey, enumeration, museumization, and surveillance.<sup>12</sup> The process through which the newly unearthed glories of ancient and medieval India became a vehicle for nationalist resurgence in the face of colonial rule also effected a divorce between the “great” and “little” traditions in Indian art history. The enterprise of fine art as it evolved through the late nineteenth-century struggle between academicism and revivalism thus ended up centering on a tussle between the polar opposites of Western influence and classical Indian culture. There has until recently been little space in such a historical model for folk, Adivasi, and popular visual culture to be taken seriously as art.<sup>13</sup> A major argument against this situation was developed through the exhibition *Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India*, organized by Jyotindra Jain (then Senior Director of New Delhi’s state owned Crafts Museum). The exhibition presented a powerful case for the ability of non-modernist work to participate in innovative contemporary practice on its own terms. In Jain’s words, *Other Masters* was concerned with “the sensibility of those contemporary folk and tribal artists . . . who neither see themselves as belonging to an imaginary ‘traditional’ society

## DESIRE—GLOBALIZATION—FUNDAMENTALISM

nor as waiting outside the precincts of the world of 'modern' art to be absorbed and recognized on the latter's terms. . . ."<sup>14</sup>

Despite a systemic segregation between folk/tribal and modernist art, Adivasi and folk traditions have remained a point of reference for a number of urban artists, whether as a recollection into modernist gallery spaces of the artist's own rural origins, or as a voluntarist invocation of folk forms in combination with modernist techniques as a means of generating an indigenist modernism.<sup>15</sup> More rarely, there have been artists like Meera Mukherjee, who immersed herself in the male-dominated *dokra* (a process of lost-wax casting involving spirals of wax built over a clay and sawdust armature) tradition of casting in the Bastar district, working through resistance both from her urban high-art antecedents and the reluctance of the master craftsmen of Bastar to allow her entry into their restricted sphere of knowledge.<sup>16</sup> A number of artists (including K. G. Subramanian, featured in this exhibition) worked as designers for the state-owned Handloom Board early in their careers; even more have looked to the robust forms of folk and Adivasi art as sources for indigenist principles in their own work.<sup>17</sup> As Subramanian put it, "The fulfillment of a modern Indian artist's wish to be part of a living tradition, i.e., to be individual and innovative without being an outsider in his own culture, will not come of itself; it calls for concerted effort."<sup>18</sup> With the help of a grant from the India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) in 1998, the Mumbai (formerly Bombay) artist Navjot Altaf has been working with a group of local artists from Kondagaon, in the Bastar district of Chattisgarh state. Among the outcomes of this project have been group exhibitions of the work produced in Kondagaon at Mumbai's Sakshi Gallery, marking a rare moment when Adivasi art has been exhibited as contemporary art in a mainstream gallery. Two of the artists in this group—Ganga Devi Bhatt and Raj Kumar—are featured in this exhibition.

Fundamentalism and globalization as historical processes operate on the emotional economies of place and desire. The appeal of fundamentalism relies on a sense of loss, premised on the myth of a pure past and the yearning for a glorious future. Through an invocation of racial, religious, or cultural purity, fundamentalism seeks to generate and enforce a narrow, sectarian version of national history. This perversion of desire manifests in a search for absolute power to eradicate difference and silence dissent. Globalization also subsists on a sense of location and limitation, especially in the Third World. A sense of disenfranchisement common to postcolonial contexts is made all the more acute by exposure to the lures of consumer culture. Remedies for limitations occasioned by underdevelopment are sought in globalization and its promise of prosperity.

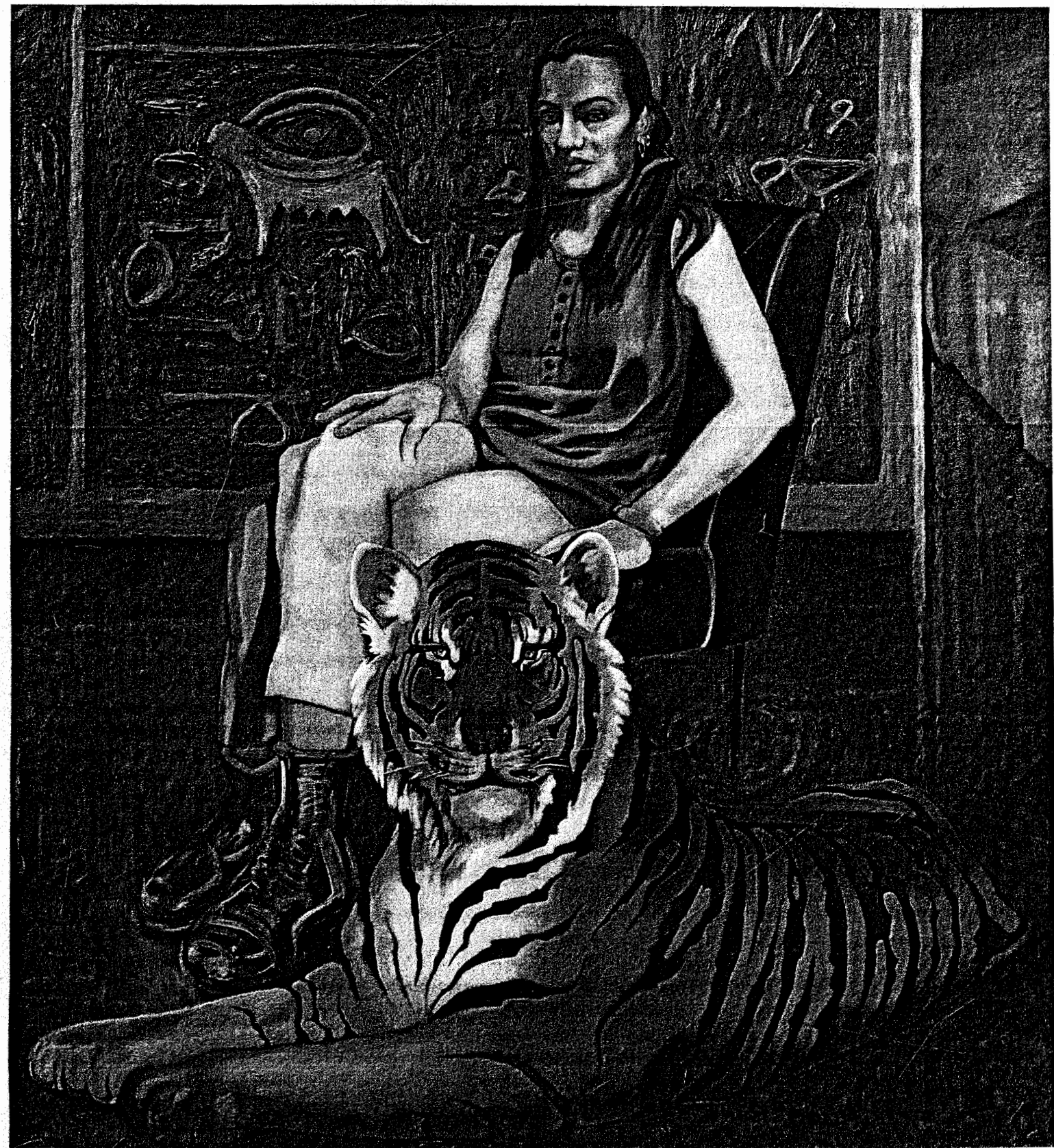
The early 1990s in India saw the simultaneous emergence of specific economic and political conditions. With the inauguration in 1991 of the New Economic Policy, the nation-state began to divest itself of the role of regulator in a quasi-socialist model. Investment opportunities were opened up in an unprecedented manner to private capital, domestic and international. Multi-national interests were quick to target the Indian consumer market, and a new lifestyle based on consumption and big-name labels became available to the aspiring urban bourgeoisie. The impact of these transformations on public visibility has been immense in the last decade, and has been felt most acutely in popular visual culture: from a new slickness in the production standards of India's mammoth film industry—the emergence of Bollywood—to advertising, television, and the preferred look among the young urban professional class.<sup>19</sup>

Simultaneously, the early 1990s witnessed a rise in the power of the Hindu Right in electoral politics. Perhaps the most decisive marker of this rise was the demolition of the sixteenth-century Babri Mosque in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992. Claimed by Hindu zealots

as the birthplace of Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, the mosque became central to a systematic mobilization campaign on the part of the VHP, or Vishwa Hindu Parishad (the self-styled World Hindu Council)—along with its affiliates, including the BJP, or Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party). The BJP headed a coalition government in New Delhi until the elections of May 2004, when a secular coalition, the United Progressive Alliance, gained power. The destruction of the mosque took place at the hands of a mob with pickaxes and spades, in contravention of a court order and with the police standing by. Perhaps no single event has contributed so largely to the loss of the secular values on which state policy and nationalism in India had been predicated from the time of the anticolonial struggle. Waves of violence preceded and succeeded the demolition, manifesting in systematic pogroms against minorities, especially Muslims.

Although globalization may presume to remove barriers and encourage a more thorough intermingling of practices and forms from different parts of the world, it also operates as a homogenizing force, making the survival of local cultures—not to speak of countercultures—increasingly unlikely. Simultaneously, it invests "authentic" forms of (foreign or ethnic) cultures with added value in the consumption apparatus of metropolitan venues. Aijaz Ahmad has defined this tendency as the ideology of culturalism, which "treats culture not only as an integral element in social practices but as the *determining instance*." For Ahmad:

It is one of the great ironies of ideological production in our time that precisely in the historical moment when capitalism has finally penetrated the farthest reaches not only of economic but also cultural production itself . . . we witness the rise of an ideology, propagated from all the famous pulpits of the Western academy, which shifts the locus of determination from the field of political economy to that of culture.<sup>20</sup>



Vasundra Thozhur, Secret Life: Tiger, 2000 (Cat. no. 52; detail). Oil on canvas (3 panels); 229 x 49 cm, 225 x 152 cm, 229 x 86 cm. Collection of Vikram Kiron Sardesai.



This privileging of authentic ethnic flavor may indicate a potential for heterogeneity within globalizing processes. It remains, however, an illusory heterogeneity, in that the survival of cultural forms—be they cuisine, languages, or visual art—can only be guaranteed insofar as these forms can neatly be assimilated into structures of marketing and consumption. To take Ahmad's argument further, to partake in culturalist rejoicing, indulging in an orgy of spectacles (where yesterday smug ignorance reigned) would imply unawareness of ongoing operations of imperialist domination that brook no dissent.

This exhibition explicitly rejects an "authentic" vision of Indian art. Instead, it argues against the dogmas and gimmicks of authenticity, foregrounding practice that is unabashedly cunning in sampling and in playing it cool, or otherwise so rooted in a multiform culture as to make an invocation of a singular authenticity untenable. National essences and traditions are manifestly inventions. Received knowledge is always already mediated, being produced from a commingling of several pasts and partaking of many truths in its production of authoritative fictions. Stylistic and ideational manifestations that are supposed to be uniquely Indian may in fact be of foreign—or at any rate mixed—derivation. The history of culture on the subcontinent is an eminent instance of syncretism. It is precisely this syncretism that flies in the face of homogenization.<sup>21</sup> As Hobsbawm has it, tradition is "essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition."<sup>22</sup> He argues that with the rapid transformation of society and the obsolescence of earlier traditions, this process of reinvention occurs with increasing frequency. The invention of tradition thus presents a Janus face: the emancipationist desire for a securely authenticated historical trajectory, or for a *fully mandated map of belonging* that tradition implies, is constantly beset by tendencies that seek to define tradition along insular, sectarian lines.

Tradition has remained a fraught notion, not least because of the manner of its constant reinvention in an unstable political climate. The Hindu Right mobilized the most strident of such reinventions in support of its reactionary and violent agenda of a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu Nation). Majoritarian communalism rests its appeal precisely on an insecure sense of Indianness that demands a purified, singularized tradition purged of both the libidinal unruliness of the bazaar and the syncretistic, polymorphous character of indigenous cultures. Concurrently, stressing the plurality of a dynamic, mobile tradition as a defense against the unitary fantasies of the Right, resuscitating elements of tradition that offer means of resistance, has become a growing concern for cultural practitioners. Indeed, as this exhibition suggests, some of the most formally innovative and historically significant work produced by Indian artists in recent years has had to do with mediations, improvisations, and reclamations of various aspects of tradition.

## LOCATION / LONGING

Desire for place can be articulated as both a relationship with current locations and an aspiration for real or imagined places in which the artist has made an emotional investment. Engagements with location and desire are perhaps all the more intense on the subcontinent, where national illusions of cultural continuity are most dramatically undermined by the occurrence of radically distinct formations under a purportedly homogenous rubric.

The experience of working-class life on the outer fringes and inner wastelands of a Third World metropolis has been a consistent theme in Sudhir Patwardhan's paintings and drawings since the early 1980s. Rooted in a Marxist perspective on social change, Patwardhan's paintings have borne witness to conditions perennially on the cusp of the heroic and the depraved. His investment in representations of the subordinated has resulted in a series of

remarkable large-scale works that capture the complexity of human interactions and political relations having to do with place. *Lower Parel* (2001; Cat. no. 3) presents a neighborhood under duress. Lower Parel is part of central Mumbai's textile-mill district; once the industrial heart of the city, and home to the most powerful labor movement in the country, it has been eviscerated through a policy of privatization and disinvestment following a doomed textile workers' strike in 1982.<sup>23</sup> The mill district is now a space of disenfranchisement, where mushrooming high-rise apartment blocks for the elite dot a surreal landscape of poverty and dysfunction.

Evisceration and disenfranchisement are raised to a keening poetry in Nilima Sheikh's painted scrolls addressing the issue of Kashmir (2003–04; Cat. no. 4).<sup>24</sup> Kashmir figures here as more than the contested Himalayan province ravaged by state policy and militancy. Kashmir is a marker of guilt, an object of desire, and a dream, its beauty rendered doubly unreal by its improbability and the violence of its recent history. Kashmir is an earthly paradise aflame, a shimmering fabric rent asunder.<sup>25</sup> For the artist, the sheer beauty of Kashmir necessitates a response beyond the banality of Bollywood;<sup>26</sup> hers takes the form of a series of hanging scrolls made specifically for this exhibition. Making references to several centuries of writings inspired by Kashmir, Sheikh seeks to merge the poetic with the political in a deeply felt and fluidly articulated response to a contemporary tragedy. Incorporating references to the writings of ancient scribes (Kalahana and Fa Hian) as well as modern poets and novelists (Agha Shahid Ali and Salman Rushdie), she paints a relationship to Kashmir as an extended meditation on desire and loss.

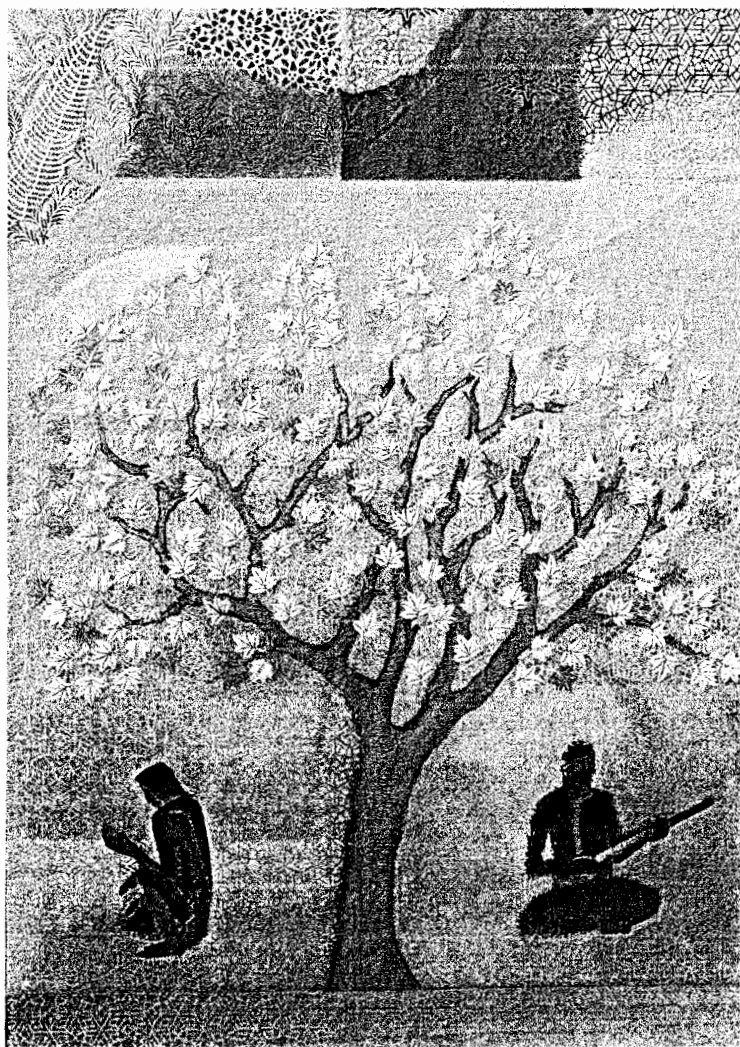
The selection from Vasudha Thozur's series *Secret Life* (1997–2001; Cat. no. 5) installed here creates spaces suffused with symbolic imagery, presenting edited metaphors for life. Thozur infuses the language of oil painting with something approaching an apotheosis of a self that exceeds the everyday real, even as she takes on the task of painting into being a home

for an itinerant, wandering between the enunciation of public life and the ineluctability of private obsessions. Obsessive desire for a narrative rooted in the intensely cultivated private self propels Thozhur's *Secret Life* across generic associations of still life, portraiture, and symbolic imagery. It partakes of and transcends a reiteration of heroic self-representation; it entertains the phantasms of places once inhabited and left behind, to manifest an accretion of alchemical transformations. Here, then, is proof that "imagination augments the values of reality," through a house that "furnishes us dispersed images and a body of images at the same time."<sup>27</sup>

Self-representation as a matter of cultural indeterminacy, of marginality produced by displacement and travel between cultures, emerges from Umesh Maddanahalli's video *Between Myth and History* (Cat. no. 2). The artist's agency here appears as the playful, mock-serious mediator between two varieties of truth and authority, sacred and secular. A temple priest from Bangalore, resplendent in beard and robes, holds forth in Kannada on the significance of a cave beneath a temple that will lead the faithful to sacred places in the north of India, several thousand kilometers away. The T-shirt-clad artist, candle in hand, ventures forth into the gloom and emerges from

an abandoned mineshaft in Austria, to complete his journey shivering and barefoot amid bemused stares. A social historian at the other end presents a gloss—in German—on the historical significance of the defunct mine in relation to World War II.

N. S. Harsha, in an ambitious new work made for this exhibition, *For You My Dear Earth* (2004; Cat. no. 1), reflects on location through the cultural meanings of plants. Plants are manifestly located in a way that animals, including humans, are not: rooted in the earth; they convey a secure, physical notion of belonging. Paradoxically, plants have traveled widely, from the ubiquitous floating coconut in the



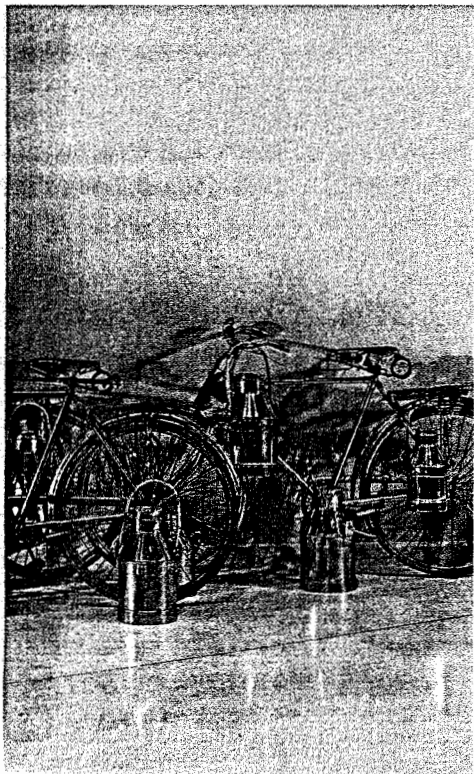
Left: Nilima Sheikh, *Firdaus III: Gathering Threads*, 2003–04 (Cat. no. 4c; detail). Casein tempera, stencil on canvas, 300 x 180 cm. Collection of the artist.

Above: Umesh Maddanahalli, *Between Myth and History*, 2001 (Cat. no. 2; still). DVD, 12 minutes (with audio). Collection of the artist.

Opposite page (top): N. S. Harsha, *For You My Dear Earth*, 2004 (Cat. no. 1; detail). Acrylic on cotton duck, canvas, plywood with goldleaf (in three parts); 137 x 563 cm, 137 x 563 cm, 137 x 46 cm, 137 x 1,172 cm (overall). Private collection, New York. Courtesy: The Artist and Talwar Gallery, New York.

Opposite page (below): Subodh Gupta, *3 Cows*, 2003 (Cat. no. 7b; detail). Bronzed bicycles, aluminum-plated metal, 100 x 100 x 100 cm. Collection of Arani and Shumita Bose.





tropics to introduced species like corn and potatoes. A history of plants reveals much about culture in that some are regarded as weeds—unwanted foreign beings—while others are prized for their sustaining or healing properties. Harsha's involvement with the language of miniature painting and botanical rendering is located firmly in his surroundings in southern India. He associates the plants he draws with expressly local notions of pestilence and deification. His work rounds off the exhibition's engagement with location through an expansive contemplation of intertwinements between natural and cultural realms.

Though various exigencies following on the death of Bhupen Khakhar have made it impossible for his work to be featured in this exhibition, I place it here emblematically: Khakhar's work demonstrates that (be)longing can be a matter of fantasy, or of experience acutely perceived and reconstituted in reverie. Khakhar's ruminations on Sri Lanka (2002–03)—undertaken during the last two

years of the artist's life—are characterized by a dialogue between painterly effervescence, and a concern with mortality bordering on the morbid.<sup>28</sup> Like Nilima Sheikh's Kashmir, Khakhar's Sri Lanka is a land of unreal beauty, a place of fable, adrift between a bounteous past and a violent present. Khakhar's water colors are a luminous and ecstatic perspective on a visitor's relationship to the Golden Isle; focusing on sites of Buddhist pilgrimage, his approach to place and desire may seem altogether more straightforward than Sheikh's, and devoid of the self-questioning that she has engaged in. Playing the role of a naïve genius, Khakhar leads us on, as though without guile, into a fantastic place of dreaming Buddhas, serene monks, mysterious caves, waving palms, and trumpeting elephants. His approach to place is so overtly one of fabulation as to highlight the disjunctions between desire and physical location—between the Sri Lanka of the artist's dream and the contemporary reality of a nation torn by civil war.

## TRANSIENT SELF

Migration and transience are major features of contemporary experience. Even as economic processes, demographic movements, and technological change create new ways of envisioning the self, they provide renewed impetus for older contentions, such as the place of individual subjectivity and the construction of collective identities.<sup>29</sup> While taking into account physical movement within India, I interpret transience more broadly, in terms of psychological and social movement associated with individual aspirations for transformation. Works included under this theme range from realist commentaries and personal histories to fabulations that metamorphose the self into a zone of wonder and a site for historical agency.

Transformations of the self emerge as the leitmotif of Sonia Khurana's work in video, photography, and installation. She consistently tweaks self-representation, in order to make it rise to the task of self-transformation while continuing to emphasize the materiality of the body and the limitations of the flesh. In the performance video *Bird* (1999; Cat. no. 9), the inarticulate corporeality of the body meets the desire for transcendence in a ragged dance of metronomic movements. Khurana invokes notions of sexual difference, bringing her own naked body into interaction with the viewer's expectations of physical presence. At the same time, *Bird* becomes the scene of confession and abjectness—a recognition of limitations. Shot in grainy black-and-white and making use of a Man Ray-like look of solarized contours, *Bird* presents a remarkable contrast between the austerity of its form and the visual excess signaled by agitated corporeality.

Among Indian artists, Subodh Gupta is one of the few urban sophisticates who exhibits an uninhibitedly rustic persona. Gupta's work can be read as an extended commentary on his migration from his native Bihar (with all its associations with backwardness and corruption) to upwardly mobile Gurgaon and a kind

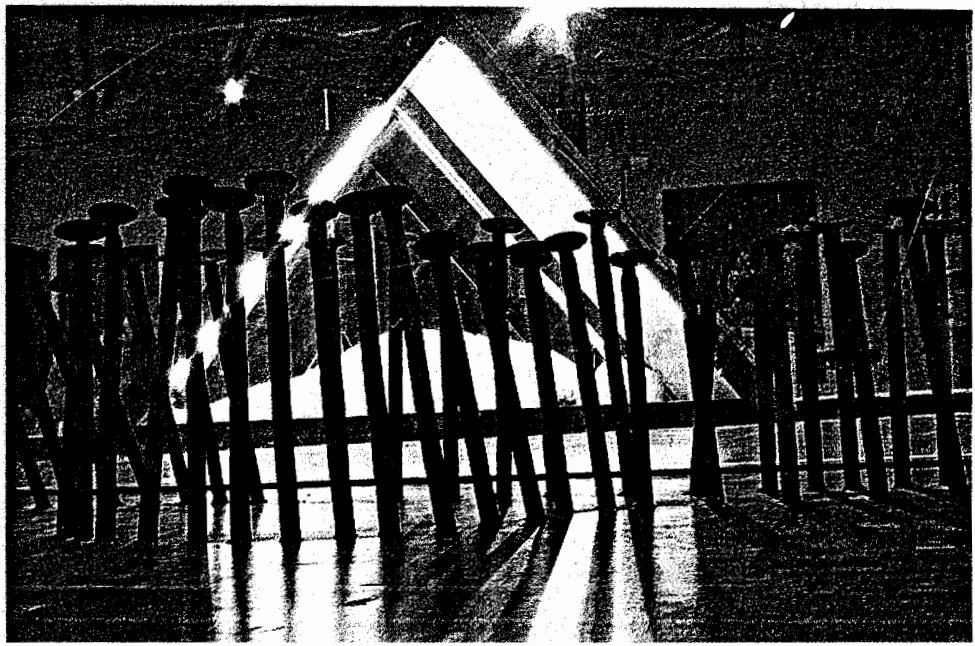


Raj Kumar Koram, *Apne Zindagi Ka Khambha (The Pillar of My Life) 1*, 2002–03 (Cat. no. 10a: detail).

Teak, iron wire, PVA sawdust; 207 x 85 x 35 cm. Collection of the artist.

of world citizenship. *Bihari* (1999) and *Vilas* (2000–03; Cat. no. 7) mark two distinct points on this passage: *Bihari* makes use of rural materials (cow dung, which has figured in a number of Gupta's projects) and low-tech gimmickry.<sup>30</sup> The blinking LED that appears as the label for a mug-shot self-portrait ensconced in a surface of hand-smearred cow dung spells out "Bi-Ha-Ri," a common term of abuse in India, implying stupidity and uncouthness. On the other side, the artist appears in a life-size photographic self-portrait as a Vaseline-smearred nude reclining in regal, erotic *vilas* (splendor) on a faux-leather couch. Gupta infiltrates the establishment of high art (dis)guised in dung or in slick lubricity. *Three Cows* (2003–04, Cat. no. 7b), a group of three life-size *doodhwalla*'s (milk supplier's) bicycles completes Gupta's scrupulously irreverent play on the bucolic in contemporary life.<sup>31</sup> Cast in brass (and completely nonfunctional), the bicycles along with shiny bronze milk cans complete a cheeky return to a low-tech substratum, mock monuments to the omnipresent milkmen from the "cow belt" of rural northern India.

Transience is given a remarkable dimension in Raj Kumar Koram's autobiographical wooden pillars, *Apne Zindagi ka Khambha* (*Pillar of My Life*, 2002–03; Cat. no. 10). Derived from a tradition of memorial pillars from Bastar,<sup>32</sup> these contemporary sculptures are used by Kumar much in the manner of narrative reliefs, on which he carves the story of his life. Carving in vertical and helical succession on the surface of a tree trunk, he fashions a heroic individuality for himself—a role rarely, if ever, associated with an Adivasi artist.<sup>33</sup> Raj Kumar's story, which he performs in the manner of an itinerant storyteller turning the pillar to highlight episodes, moves from his sojourn as a poor laborer breaking stones with a sledgehammer, exploited by a motorcycle-riding contractor,<sup>34</sup> to his interest in folk theater and gravitation toward a career as a sculptor as part of a team working on the IFA project. Raj Kumar's work extends across wall paintings (his own home has a remarkable series of life narratives



Vivan Sundaram, *Memorial*, 1993/2000 (Cat. no. 21, detail). Mixed media; 18 x 10 m. Collection of the artist.

painted on the walls) and public projects such as the *pila-gudi* (a shrine for children), one of a number of playschool spaces in and around Kondagaon.

Artist-activist Tushar Joag presents an enmeshed genealogy of the self in his video *Phantoms* (2002–04; Cat. no. 8). The artist has used a low-end editing technique on shaky footage shot with a hand-held camera to produce a narrative of his own life as abject victim and perpetrator—which is nonetheless suffused with the romance of heroic individual subjectivity. Made up of a jerky series of intercuts between the everyday rush of Mumbai's bursting commuter trains, pilgrims' illustrated maps of sites of belief, and scenes of violence (such as occurred in Ayodhya), the video is presided over by the apparition of the artist sitting on a chair as though in a bare interrogation chamber, placing the audience in the position of inquisitors behind one-way glass. The artist's voice leads us on a confessional journey between events in his personal life (an unresolved relationship with an absent father, for example) and the violence of recent history, enunciated as a series of numbers that could be

dates, or successive bids in the auctioning of a personal history that implicates the self fully in broader histories.

A serialized rendition of autobiography characterizes Ganga Devi Bhatt's two-sided works on paper *Vyaktigat Itihaas* (*Personal History*, 2002; Cat. no. 6). Bhatt, a self-taught artist from Kondagaon, comes from a Hinduised Adivasi background and started making art two years ago. Her sophisticated use of color and composition in this series marks the emergence of a completely new idiom in the tradition of Bastar. We are led through what seems like a fairly straightforward story of a young woman's life in an Indian village, until we realize the import of her vividly reimagined episodes. Here are stories of love and brutality, of domestic violence and separation, all rendered with an unnerving equanimity. In a gesture of unsettling generosity, she shares with us the breakdown of an abusive marriage, her struggle to keep custody of her child, the humiliation of judgment by the (male) elders of the village and subsequent thoughts of suicide, and the spring of new love and new resolution. Bhatt's paintings represent the sublimation of





*Pushpamal N. and Clare Arni, Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs: Lady in Moonlight (Raja Ravi Varma, 2002-03 (Cat. no. 11h).*

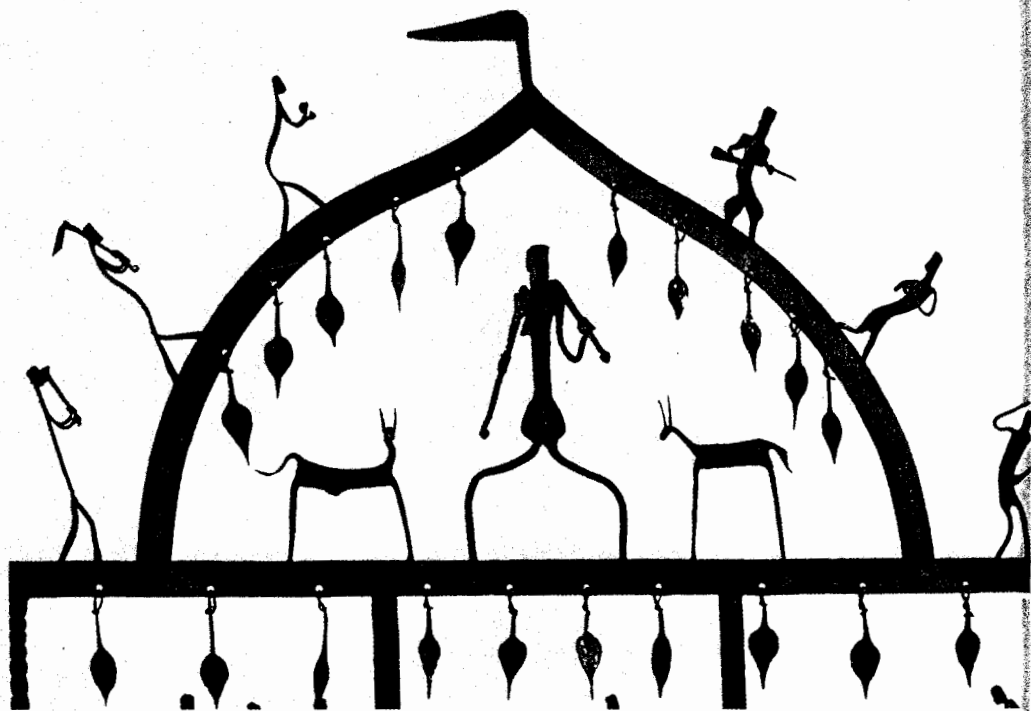
*Manual photographic print on metallic paper (edition of 20), 70 x 57.5 cm (framed). Collection of the artists.*

psychological scarring and the assertion of an independent subjectivity that again challenges urban notions of the simplicity and collectivity of rural life.

Public visual culture invariably subsists on generalizations, which frequently veil entrenched relations of power between objects of representation and their consumers. Using self-images that transit between markers of collective identity, Pushpamala N has collaborated with photographer Claire Arni to produce *Native Women of South India* (2002–04; Cat. no. 11). The artist appears in the photographs clad in the various garbs of a “native” woman, playing the roles of a Toda tribal, a villager carrying a pitcher, a camp film coquette being courted by an equally camp hero, a supernatural seductress from a Deccani miniature, and the nineteenth-century artist Raja Ravi Varma’s representations of Indian goddesses and beauties, which have been raised to the status of canon through their oleographic reproductions.<sup>35</sup> Using crude devices of studio photography in small-town India, such as painted backdrops, the photographs display the seams of their manufacture, gesturing toward the pervasive fabrication of images in the public realm. Some of the guises are subjected to fake anthropometry to evoke strategies of classification, enumeration, and hierarchizing, which, although introduced in colonial times, have demonstrated remarkable longevity as popular stereotypes in contemporary India.

## CONTESTED TERRAIN

I have argued earlier that contemporary Indian culture is beset by formidable pressures spawned by globalization and religious fundamentalism.<sup>36</sup> More than any reason intrinsic to art practice, it has been political change and the need to respond to the communalization of Indian politics—the politicization of membership in religious and ethnic groups and resultant violations of cultural values and human rights—that have propelled a



Sonadhar Viswakarma, Babri Masjid – Ramjanmabhoomi, 2003–04 (Cat. no. 22; detail). Iron; 175 x 200 cm. Collection of the artist.

number of artists away from conventional art practice.

Beginning in the early 1990s, artists began to move into the interactivity and play of multiple signifiers through video and installation art, often contesting the closed address of gallery-based practice. Simultaneously, the international funding and reception of experimental practices—in itself a by-product of economic and cultural globalization—has fostered the emergence of projects that are not financially viable within a domestic market enamored of more familiar objects. In a sense, works grouped under the theme “Contested Terrain” function as bridges between the concerns articulated by artists represented under the two headings on either side. A range of responses to fundamentalism is presented here, spanning the decade since the demolition of the Babri Mosque signaled the triumphant march of the Hindu Right to political center stage.

One of the first projects to confront the waves of violence unleashed by the demolition was Vivan Sundaram’s installation *Memorial* (Cat. no. 21). First shown in New Delhi in 1993, *Memorial* is being reinstalled for this exhibition. Sundaram was inspired by a photo of the crumpled body of an unknown victim of a riot lying in a smoldering street, taken by Hoshi Jal and published in the *Times of India*: in Sundaram’s work, this fallen mortal becomes an everyman, and his death symbolizes the demise of a nation founded on equality and secularism. Through gestures of memorialization involving the construction of a modernist pyramidal cenotaph for a life-size plaster representation of the fallen man, and a ceremonial archway made of weathered tin trunks, typically used by migrants and refugees on the subcontinent, *Memorial* evokes the unfolding of a continuing tragedy. Vitines around the transparent cenotaph subject the photograph to a meticulous process of museumization. The



photographed body of the innocent dead is wreathed in iron nails: in death, it is afforded an iron shield, a prickly coat of armor, and provided with a funeral pyre of nails.

The work of the late Rummana Hussain occupies a singular space in the narrative of contemporary art's confrontation with fundamentalism. The riots of 1992–93 impelled her to alter her practice dramatically, from allegorical figurative painting to performance and installation. Implicit in this transformation was

two terms in her title in a relationship of opposition and conflation, Hussain sought in this work to invoke not only a national space, but also a more personal domestic one, exploding the certitudes of their presumed meaning while simultaneously holding forth the self as a site of contestation, the arena and psychological space where the battle for a secular home was and still is being waged.

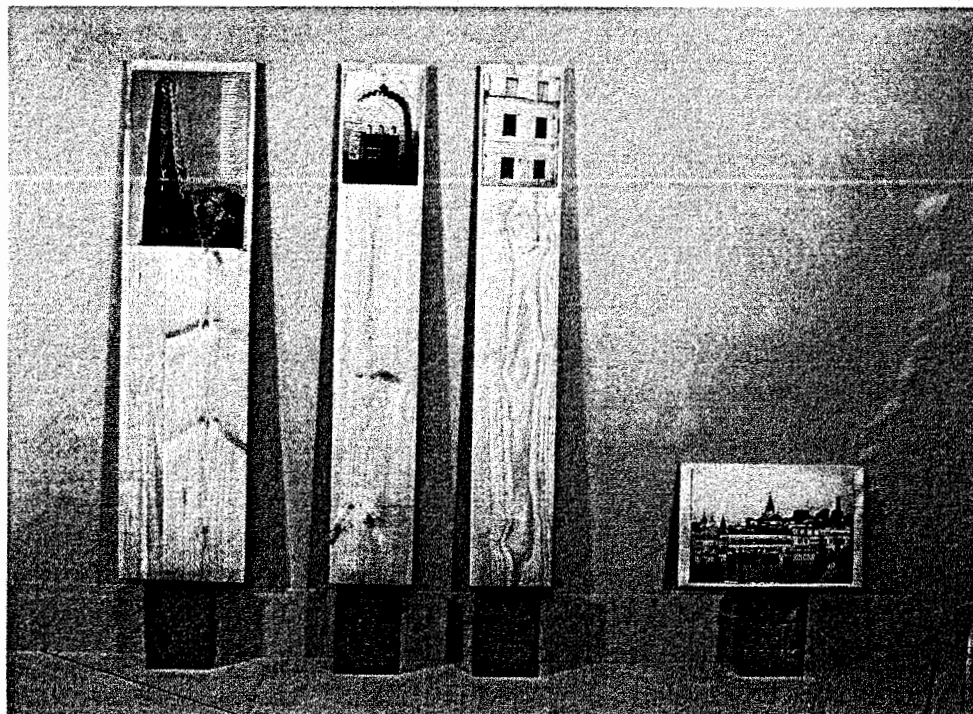
Both Sundaram and Hussain take on the role of witness in their installations addressing

face and eyes, in the midst of a circle of rough stones. Surrounded by these ruins, the abject figure personifies a sense of helplessness coupled with a refusal to countenance barbarism in the name of religion. At one level, the stones are ruins, symbolic of the destruction of the Babri Mosque. They speak at the same time, of shattered lives, broken homes, and the impossibility of piecing together what has been sundered. Each of the stones rests on a partly concealed laminated image, documentary photographs from a variety of sources highlighting persons and events in India's decline into sectarian violence during the 1990s.

Nevertheless, resistance to fundamentalism is not the sole preserve of an urban, university-educated intelligentsia. Sonadhar Viswakarma is a senior artist from Kondagaon, Bastar; along with some colleagues, he spent several days in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) while tension gripped the city following the demolition of the Babri Mosque. His response to the destruction came years later, in the form of an ironwork partition *Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhoomi* (2002–04; Cat. no. 22) that contains a compressed narrative of the events leading up to December 6, 1992. Viswakarma is one of a number of artists from Chattisgarh who works with scrap metal—heating, cutting, and beating it into functional or decorative objects, primarily for an urban market eager to consume authentic tribal artifacts.<sup>38</sup>

Viswakarma has used the form of a folding partition—the kind inspired by carved wooden screens from Rajasthan and used in middle-class Indian homes to divide living spaces—to create a flowing narrative that can be read in rows from the bottom up. We are shown the mobilization of people and animals through *rath yatras* (chariot processions),<sup>39</sup> resulting in rioting and finally in the attack on the mosque itself, with the three domes overrun by pickaxe-wielding mobs while armed policemen/demons keep watch.<sup>40</sup>

Santosh Kumar Das's work offers another instance of a mutable store of traditional knowledge and techniques in transformation.



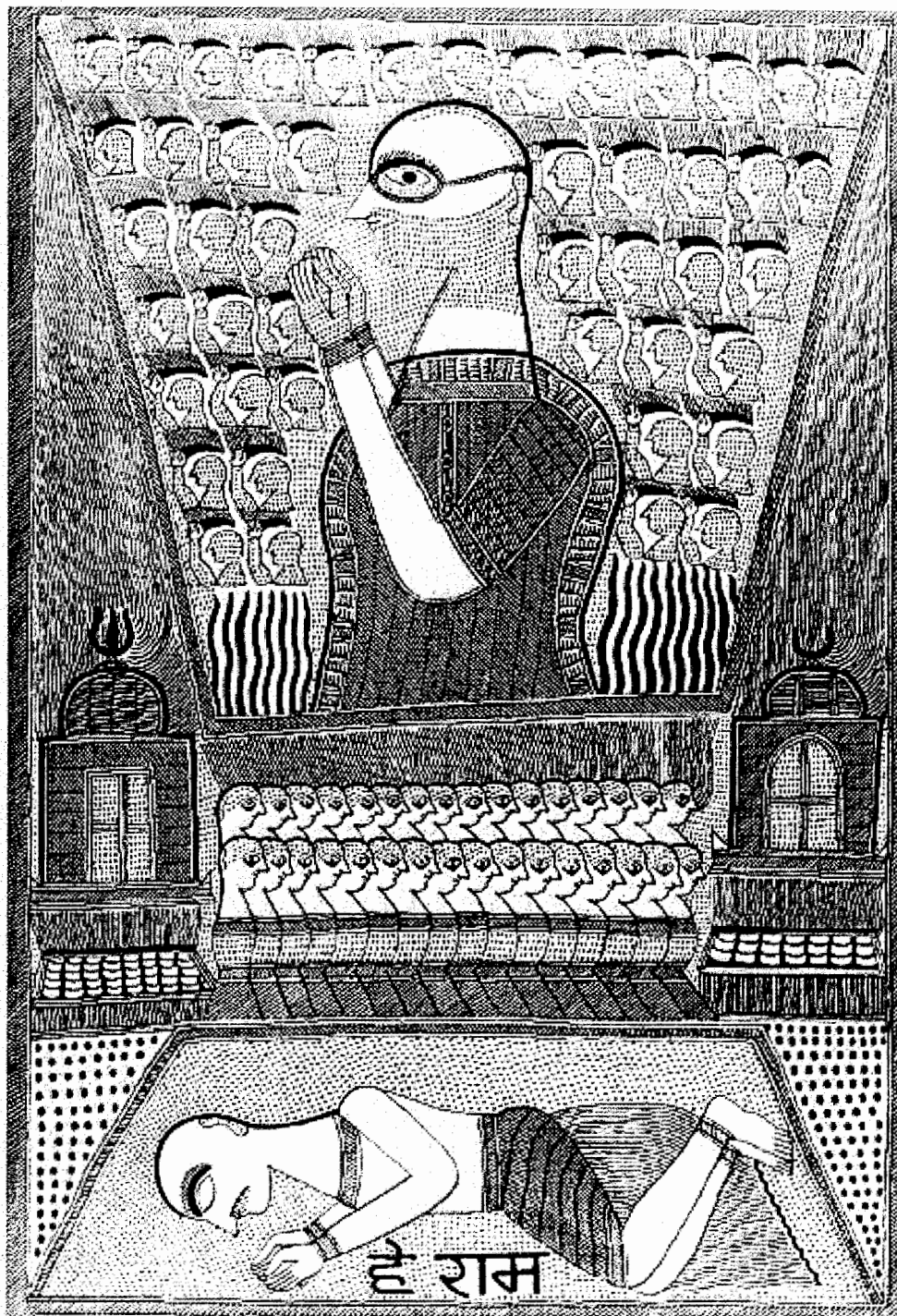
Rummana Hussain, *Home Nation*, 1996 (Cat. no. 17; detail). Multipart installation (including wooden planks, plastic folders, photographs, glass bottles, cloth); 5.6 x 4 m. Courtesy of the Estate of Rummana Hussain.

a radical realignment of the artist's persona: Hussain began pitching herself as Muslim, woman, Indian, and artist, in a gesture of channeling political expression through a visceral exhumation of a complex, multilayered historical self. *Home/Nation* (Cat. no. 17) first shown in Mumbai's Gallery Chemould in 1996, made use of photographs alongside text and ephemeral materials examining the notion of belonging in a fragmented world. Placing the

contemporary violence. The work of N. N. Rimzon also poses questions about the role of the witness, fore-fronting the presence of the citizen-subject in our democracy. This presence for Rimzon, is hardly a heroic one, is marked distinction to the euphoric valorization of the citizen in nationalist and state-sponsored representation.<sup>37</sup> *Speaking Stones* (1998; Cat. no. 20) presents the normative citizen in the form of a crouching, life-size male figure shielding its

As an artist with family links to the celebrated Madhubani paintings of Mithila, Bihar, Das is among the few folk practitioners to have been through university-based art education, having studied at Baroda's famous Faculty of Fine Arts. Returning to his maternal idiom of Madhubani painting, his work as artist and teacher is geared towards finding contemporary relevance for tradition in a highly commercialized domain where Madhubani immediately evokes visions of ritual and religious paintings produced on paper in response to constant demand from urban consumers. Das's 2003 series of work responding to communal violence in Gujarat is represented here (Cat. no. 14). The works make use of the notational figuration of the Madhubani tradition in juxtaposing recent events with historical figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, whose ideals of peace and non-violence are being undermined in the state of his birth.

Nalini Malani's practice, characterized by a fluidity of materials and techniques, is represented here through *The Sacred and the Profane* (1998), an installation using the low-tech devices of a shadow play to construct an array of transient images that envelops the viewer. With sources culled from the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma and the early modern folk forms of Kalighat painting,<sup>41</sup> Malani reflects on the irrevocable fusion between the sacred and the profane in Indian traditions of narrative and imagery. Images painted in thin acrylics on transparent Mylar cylinders merge to create a palimpsest that challenges notions of separation and insularity. Their shadows on the wall conjure up a parallel proto-cinematic experience. Two single-channel video works represent a continuation of Malani's formal and ideological concerns in a time of systematized brutalization. *Stains* (2000; Cat. no. 18) presents a constant coalescence and dissolution of forms that is mesmeric in its organic beauty, even as it evokes the fascination with pervasive violence that perpetuates its recurrence. *Unity in Diversity* (2003) takes as its leitmotif Raja Ravi Varma's painting *Galaxy of Musicians* (ca. 1889), which orchestrates typically attired



Santosh Kumar Das, Chief Minister Narendra Modi Inciting Religious Intolerance While Gujarat Burns and Gandhi's Death is Forgotten, 2003 (Cat. no. 14b). Ink on paper; 38.1 x 55.9 cm. Ethnic Arts Foundation

women from diverse ethnic and religious groups from across India in an allegory of national unity.<sup>42</sup> The presumed harmony of Ravi Varma's composition dissolves into the brutality of the anti-Muslim pogrom of Gujarat in 2002, implicating the failure of the state to guarantee a secular and syncretistic culture, but also hinting at more basic failings—hatred, violence, greed, jealousy—to which we are all inherently susceptible.<sup>43</sup>

Swarna and Manu Chitrakar are members of a community of *patua* (scroll-maker) painter-performers from the village of Naya in West Bengal, who use *pat* (painted scrolls) for storytelling. (The surname "Chitrakar," meaning "painter," is a trade name that all painters from this community use.) While their work tends to be categorized under the rubric of folk art, with implications of decorative, naïve, and unchanging practices, Swarna and Manu have harnessed their traditions and skills to articulate responses to contemporary situa-

tions, much as other contemporary artists have done. The communist government of West Bengal has often made use of their skills and their access to rural communities in campaigns of public education aimed at removing discrimination against the *shishu kanya* (girl child), for example. The *Shishu Kanya* narrative is a prominent presence in Swarna's practice, and became the starting point for her interaction with another woman artist, Archana Hande from Mumbai, also featured in this exhibition. Swarna's work—and that of other painters in the community including her brother Manu—is not, however, confined to traditional storytelling or to issues of social justice. There is something of an anarchic freedom in her appropriation of seemingly foreign narratives, as demonstrated in her scrolls based on the Hollywood blockbuster *Titanic* (2001–03; Cat. no. 13). Manu Chitrakar is represented here by a scroll responding to the war in Afghanistan (Cat. no. 12). Presenting a strong case for the

inherent fluidity and flexibility of a traditional idiom, Manu is able to use the episodic format of the vertical scroll and the notational simplicity of *pat* painting to enlarge the potentials of contemporary art practice within a rapidly transforming society and information economy. The vertical format of the scroll allows for a narrative laid out in horizontal registers or bands. The Chitrakars use this format to isolate key moments in their chosen narrative, which are then sung aloud, while the scroll functions as a sort of proto-cinematic device, one hand rolling it from the top while the other unrolls it from the bottom.<sup>44</sup>

In response to the work of the Chitrakars of Midnapur, Mumbai-based artist Archana Hande has undertaken a video and artist book project for *Edge of Desire*. Hande and Swarna Chitrakar met in late 2002, and have been in regular contact since. Working parallel to each other, the two artists have explored through their individual media issues surrounding fundamentalist violence, disenfranchisement, and the continuing oppression of women in a patriarchal society. Hande's *An Epic* (2003–04; Cat. no. 16) presents a formal as well as structural foil to the vertical narratives in Swarna and Manu Chitrakar's scrolls. Featuring documentary footage from India's recent history interleaved with interviews with various contemporary *patuas*, Hande's work presents layers and registers of imagery to create a complex, polymorphous narrative. The work addresses systemic violence against women and minorities in contemporary India, as well as political affiliations and creative concerns on part of the artists of Midnapur. The other of Hande's videos—*A Tale*—is a more immediate accompaniment to the scrolls, illuminating for viewers the context for this practice and the immediacy of its responses to a volatile public sphere.

Since its establishment in 1999, the Open Circle (Cat. no. 19) artists' group has organized public actions, exhibitions, and workshops aimed at bridging the divide between institutionalized spaces of art practice and the wider sphere of political activity. The concerns

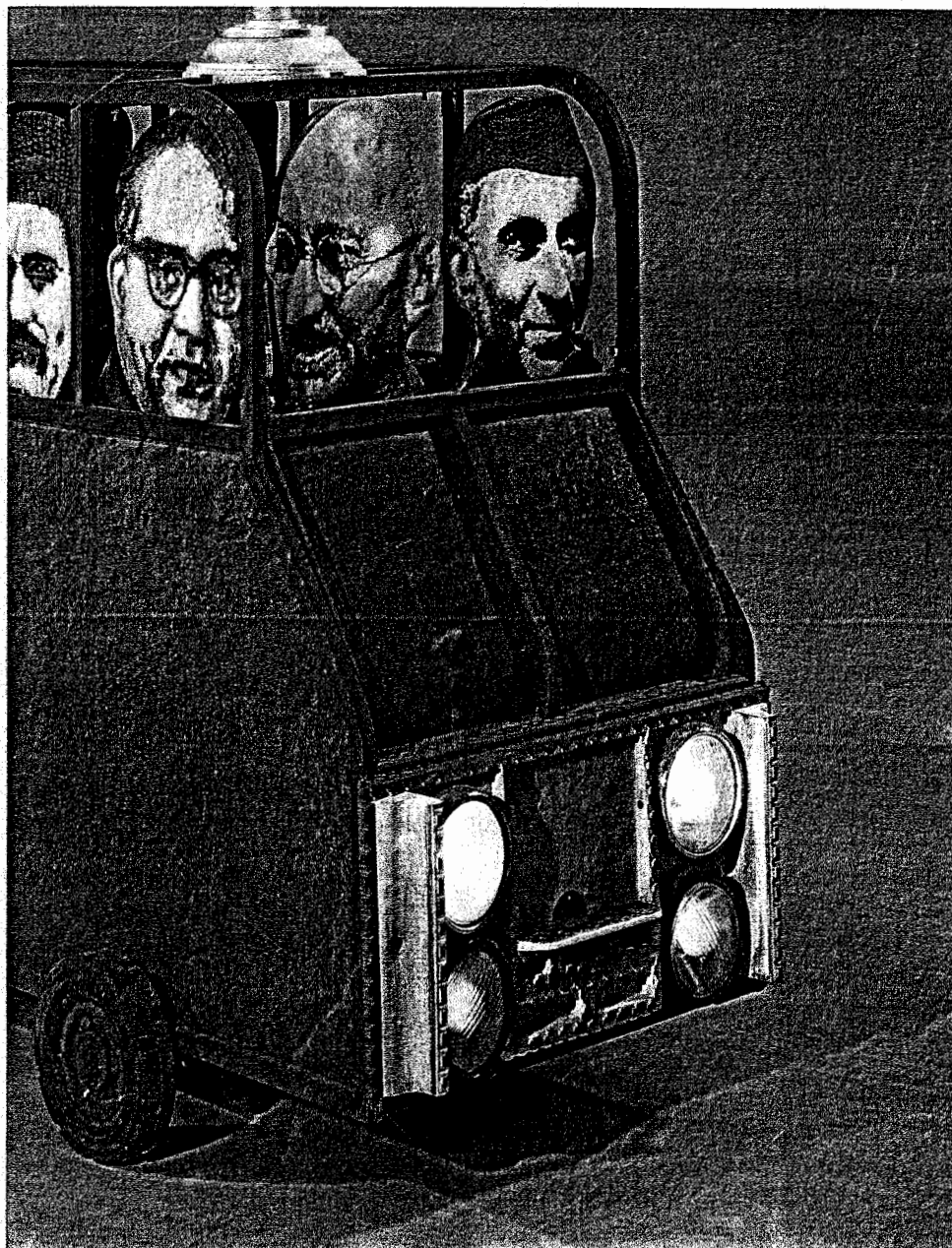


Swarna Chitrakar, *Shishu Kanya* (Girl Child), 2004 (Cat. no. 13a; detail). Poster paint on paper; 240 x 75 cm. Collection of the artist.



articulated in their public projects span protests against corporate globalization and consumerism, disenfranchisement of marginal communities in the name of development, as well as against the drive of fundamentalist politics. Through the production of cheap, mass-produced objects, such as posters, T-shirts, and stickers, coupled with large-scale hoardings and public action, Open Circle has worked with trade unions, students, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Mumbai. This exhibition brings their projects into Australia and North America, where some of their concerns will readily find echoes in the current unease over corporate globalization and the dispensations of interventionist international policy. Taking the form of a three-dimensional soundscape using simultaneous playback of multiple recordings, this project introduces aural elements of manifestly “foreign” or “exotic” origins into public environments.

Shilpa Gupta’s *Blame* project (2002–03; Cat. no. 15) was formulated in the wake of such recent events as the conflict in Kargil when India and Pakistan came perilously close to all out conflict, the U.S.-led “war on terror,” and the violence against Muslims in Gujarat. The *Blame* project was part of *Aar-Paar 2002*,<sup>45</sup> an artists’ initiative linking Mumbai, India and Karachi, Pakistan: once neighbouring ports on the Arabian Sea, crossroads of economic and cultural interchange, now rivals in a fratricidal conflict between twins separated at birth.<sup>46</sup> Riding on commuter trains, Gupta posed as a salesperson for blame—a commodity in mass-produced oversupply in our times. Commuters are offered packaged blame in little bottles filled with a blood-red fluid, much in the manner of hawkers of cosmetics and panaceas that frequent suburban transport in India. Save that Gupta hawks the very effective product—proven by recent history—that ensures an illusion of security obtained through an apportioning of blame onto others, who are out there, but also, constituents of here; in your “home.” The associated poster or label expounds the soothing virtues of blame (“Blaming you makes me feel so good: so I



Nataraj Shamra, *Freedom Bus (Or a View from the 6th Standard)*, 2001–04 (Cat. no. 26a; detail). Iron, wood, electrical motor, oil and enamel paint on paper, ink jet prints, rubber tires, electroplating; 103 x 237 x 76 cm. Collection of the artist.

blame you for what you cannot control . . .”) in an inversion of the grotesque machinations of contemporary policy whereby those designated as other—nations; communities, belief systems—are held responsible for present ills in any given condition. Gupta has explored

the potentials of presenting *Blame* in a gallery setting, with the *Blame* bottles accompanied by a TV monitor that continuously spells out a message expounding the cure-all properties of this magical potion, and documentary footage of the artist’s interactions with the public.

## RECYCLED FUTURES

As I have suggested earlier, *Edge of Desire* is not some sort of shorthand for contemporary Indian visual culture; this exhibition does not purport to offer a survey of masterpieces from the last decade of Indian art. Experimental and contingent work that may not have been possible under normal market circumstances is a vital aspect of this project. I want to suggest here that the contradiction in the title of this section—that futures are a matter of recycling, and also that small-scale, semi-official economies of recycling are physically vital to our continued existence—is indicative of our historical condition. A conflation of recycling and renewal introduces a body of work that is playful in its use of tradition, even as it offers a sharply satirical account of consumer culture in the modern metropolis. For what is tradition but everyday practices legitimized as universal through their omnipresence? And how shall we separate the urban weakness for consumption from its more rustic counterparts? In the course of achieving this, all kinds of objects and imagery that constitute the stuff of daily life get subsumed within the category of the traditional, explicitly highlighting the mobile nature of this term.

Subhash Singh Vyam comes from a family of Adivasi artists who have migrated to the city of Bhopal, capital of Madhya Pradesh. Alongside work as a clerk in a government office, Subhash Singh maintains a prolific art practice, mainly in drawing. Executed on commercially available paper with Rotring drafting pens, these drawings preserve the “look” of traditional craft within a contemporary market economy. Vyam’s work represented here originated in a series of drawings the artist made in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

There is of course no dearth of responses to September 11, artistic and otherwise. In Subhash Singh’s work, however, it is not the event that is paramount, but a meditation on technology and the natural world. In a large canvas executed specifically for this exhibition



Atul Dodiya, *Tomb's Day*, 2001 (Cat. no. 29, detail). Enamel paint, varnish on laminate: 191 x 129 cm (framed, each panel). Collection of the National Gallery of Delhi

(Cat. no. 28), the artist presents us with the somewhat cryptic image of an aircraft tangled among the topmost branches of an immense tree—a tree of life, so significant across a number of Indian artistic traditions. At the base of the tree are assembled all kinds of denizens

of the forest, as though in wonder at this extraordinary spectacle.

Sharmila Samant’s practice, like that of several of her colleagues, is rooted in a critique of consumer capitalism, the major revolution that her generation has experienced personally





Left: K. G. Subramanyan, *Black Boys Fight Demons* (Cat. no. 27a; detail), 94 x 63.5 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi.



Right: Ravi Kashi, *Everything Happens Twice*, 2002–04 (Cat. no. 31; detail). 100% cotton rag acid-free paper, gauze cloth, photocopy transfer and acrylic lettering, stamps, ptyvinyl acetate glue; 158 x 220 x 2.5 cm (overall, 9 units, each unit 40 x 60 cm). Collection of Peter Mueller.

while growing up during the 1980s. With *A Handmade Saree* (1998; Cat. no. 25), Samant takes the language of conceptualist art and infuses it with a political charge that points to the status of the handmade in economies built on a superabundance of surplus mass-production. Painstakingly crafted from eighteen-hundred Coca-Cola bottle caps fastened together with steel shackles, *A Handmade Saree* is draped over a display stand in the manner of a boutique display. The patterns on the “fabric” are immediately recognizable as traditional mango motifs: it is only on getting closer to the work that the nature of its constituent parts can clearly be discerned. On the floor, three framed texts à la Joseph Kosuth inform us of the formal meanings of the terms “handmade,” “saree,” and “coke,” teasing out the complexity of their meanings.

Nataraj Sharma’s *Freedom Bus: or a view from the 6th standard* (2002–04; Cat. no. 26) draws

on images of Great Leaders as legitimized in textbooks (he actually refers to his daughter’s sixth-standard history text) to concoct a galaxy of two-dimensional cutout national heroes within the confines of a school bus—an iron-framework contraption that carries, in addition to its flattened and illustrious occupants, a dysfunctional megaphone and lights that flash on and off periodically. The liberties that Sharma’s work takes with nationalist nostalgia, veneering it with cool cynicism mingled with trenchant political critique, makes it unique to our time, in the sense that such work would not have been possible even a decade ago. On the other hand, perhaps Sharma’s cynicism is born of a generation that has experienced the presumed euphoria of liberation, and its undoing within a decade. Sharma is also represented here by a set of drawings begun in 2000, in which he continues his dialogue with the fraught relationship between urbanization, the

landscape, and human presences at the interstices of modernity. Simultaneously ephemeral and enduring, *Mumbai Structures* present vignettes of an urban environment in the throes of transformation, ensconced within the doubled figures of human survival and the persistence of technologically obsolete structures.

Kausik Mukhopadhyay’s practice presents a different play with the idea of recycling—among other things, his work signals pervasive practices of recycling in the Third World, where nothing goes to waste in a structure of ethnically determined employment.<sup>47</sup> Working with discarded or outmoded objects such as household implements and utensils, basic electrical and electronic devices, and other urban detritus, Mukhopadhyay offers up a mobile collection of modern aids to urban survival and happiness (Cat. no. 23), laced with humor in the manner of the Japanese Chindogu group.<sup>48</sup>

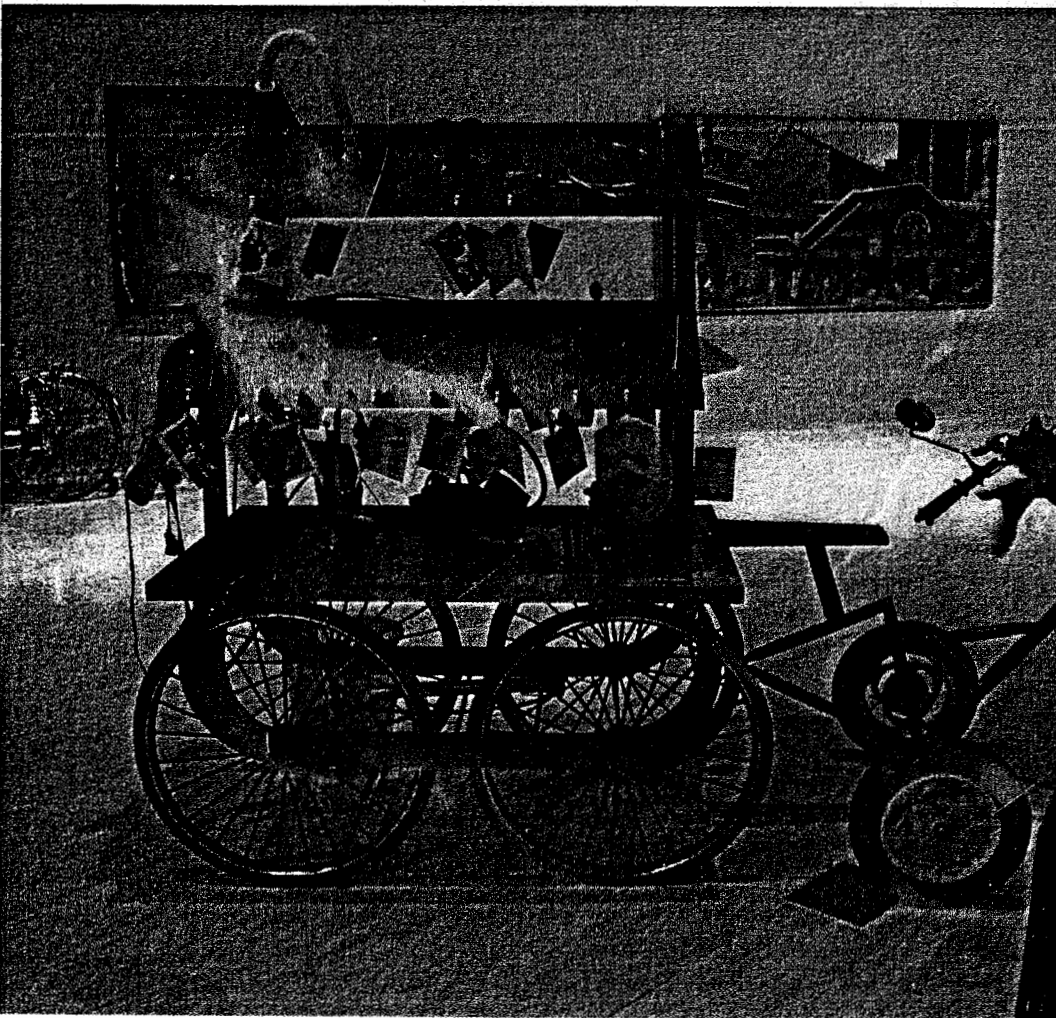
Mounted on a trolley linked to a tricycle rickshaw, these quasi-functional gadgets offer solutions to all kinds of issues significant to the contemporary bourgeoisie, from insomnia to fitness, and from alienation and loneliness to personal hygiene and appearance—all presented as commodities that can be acquired by professional members of an urban middle class constantly seduced by the latest fad, their lives suspended between morbid reality and impossible fantasy.<sup>49</sup>

Variouly a medieval city, an agglomeration of semi-urbanized villages, an imperial capital,

and the seat of economic and political muscle, New Delhi over the last decade has been reinvented through ever more brash financial clout. A group of intellectuals working at Sarai, a new media laboratory and research and publication center, have taken on the task of comprehending the changing status of the citizen-subject in this new scenario.<sup>50</sup> The Raqs Media Collective (Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta), physically based at Sarai, collaborated with Mrityunjay Chatterjee to create the web-based work *Global Village Health Manual* (1999; Cat. no. 24). Rigorously

chaotic and multifocal in its sourcing of imagery, the *Manual* greets the on-line visitor with images from the *bat-tala* prints of early modern Bengal, and product packaging from the nineteenth-century, using these as frontispieces to an eccentric array of linked "pictures, stories, news and rumor, speculation and skirmishes in info-wars, databases and image banks, hard facts and harder fictions" from the contemporary arena. The *Manual* quotes Walter Benjamin's assertion that "in principle a work of art has always been reproducible,"<sup>51</sup> before employing the anarchic right of the web-browsing subject to appropriations that embrace the past, and project a manifestly recycled future.

Where Raqs' digital work makes use of opportunities afforded by popular prints at the turn of the last century, K. G. Subramanyan's dazzlingly inventive oeuvre spanning five decades has been concerned with the mutable nature of culturally defined narratives, including religious ones. Subramanyan's work is marked by a fluid trespass between the incidental and the universal, between folk and fine art, between the sexual and the sacred. His work has embodied the desire for roots in what he has called a "living tradition," even as he advances a trenchant critique of a modernist history focused on the autonomous practice of individual geniuses.<sup>52</sup> Over his long career as an artist, teacher, designer, historian, and critic, Subramanyan has opened out new challenges to understanding the nature of Indian visual traditions.<sup>53</sup> Subramanyan's work in this selection (Cat. no. 27) reinterprets mythological narratives in a contemporary setting, transporting the revels and adventures of the child Krishna, or the battles of the goddess Durga, into settings populated by mechanical demons or scenes of political rioting. Characterized by a peripatetic, notational figuration that is anarchic in its sourcing of imagery, his work stands here in dialogue with Swarna Chitrakar's *Shishu Kanya* and with Nalini Malani's *The Sacred and the Profane*. As a testament to the mobility and dynamism of tradition, his work demonstrates



Kausik Mukhopadhyay. Assisted Readymades: Alternative Solutions, 2003–04 (Cat. no. 23; detail). Handcart, tricycle, assemblages of discarded household objects with manuals; 180 x 306 x 92 cm. Collection of the artist.



Ranbir Kaleka, *Windows*, 2002 (Cat. no. 30; still). Video/sculpture with sound; 243.8 x 121.9 x 121.9 cm. Collection of the artist.

the intrinsic overflow across the categories of past and future, affirming the manifold character of contemporary Indian experience, born as it is of the interleaving of convention and invention.

## UNRULY VISIONS

This section of *Edge of Desire* is concerned with artists' involvements with the many guises of popular culture in contemporary India: the visual culture of television, news and advertising, cinema and Bollywood, museums, mausoleums, shrines, and the unruly, mixed-up visuality that characterizes the street. This unruliness does not, however, imply a lack of sophistication: as Kajri Jain indicates in her essay in this volume, the unruliness of the popular is subject to its own semantic codes and referential orders. The emotional economies of place and desire that this exhibition is premised on are closely tied up in the manufacture of unruliness.

Ravi Kashi's set of nine cast-paper televisions, *Everything Happens Twice* (2002–04;

Cat. no. 30) inverts the relationship between television as witness of the everyday and the artistic imagination in its concern with a broader sweep of history. Taking the impulse of the readymade image to its logical conclusion, Kashi refuses to draw or create new imagery. His visual material is entirely derived from elements of popular visual culture such as news reportage, advertisements, and movies. In direct contrast with this use of the readymade image is his practice of paper casting, which demands meticulous attention to manual craftsmanship. Evoking multiple television sets ranged in a shop, each offering an unending stream of tragedies and triumphs for voyeuristic consumption, Kashi's work conjures up the ultimately farcical effect of living in an image-saturated environment, where an image of a man begging for his life holds only as much weight as one promoting a new brand of lifestyle clothing.

Atul Dodiya's triptych *Tomb's Day* (2001; Cat. no. 29) makes parodic references to the status of one of India's stereotypical icons, the Taj Mahal, as a symbol of a civilization. The

tomb is glorified by visits from the Clintons, the Putins, and, finally, by the famous Indian illusionist P. C. Sorkar, who promptly makes it dematerialize. The possibility of reading the title as "doomsday" and the juxtaposition of images of world leaders with an illusionist suggests alternative readings. Is this work about the webs of illusions and falsehoods that politicians foment? Is it about the status of civilizational icons in a media-saturated environment (imagine versions featuring, say, the Tower of Pisa, the Great Pyramid at Giza, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, or New York's Twin Towers)? Is it about the culture of diplomacy and the furor that the successive visits of Clinton and Putin created in India, read as a recognition of India's increasing international clout? Executed in the language of billboard painting, using clichés and gimmicks particular to the trade, and deliberately exposing the incomplete translations between photographic image and painted surface, Dodiya's work claims connections with all of these questions and more.

Mallikarjun Katakol is a photographer and graphic designer based in Bangalore. His professional work places him at the coalface of the urban elite's desires for transmogrification in globalizing India, complete with glamorous models promoting glitzy products. A more personal involvement has been with the garish, awkward, and fantastic imagery populating the interiors and exteriors of auto-rickshaws—motorized three-wheeled taxis that can be found in every Indian city and small town—in Bangalore and Mysore. Katakol's photographs bring into the gallery space a prolific area of subordinated visual culture, which features the work of master painters whose clients, the rickshaw owners, line up to have their vehicles decorated with messages, including aphorisms about broken hearts, slogans about religious harmony, and the inevitable images of heroes and heroines. That these painters are represented here by proxy, through Katakol's agency, is perhaps an indicator of how the marginal finds its way into the mainstream (and vice versa): the interpenetration of "high" and "low"

cultural forms shapes a matrix of fraught issues having to do with the power to represent, in which the curatorial project is also implicated.

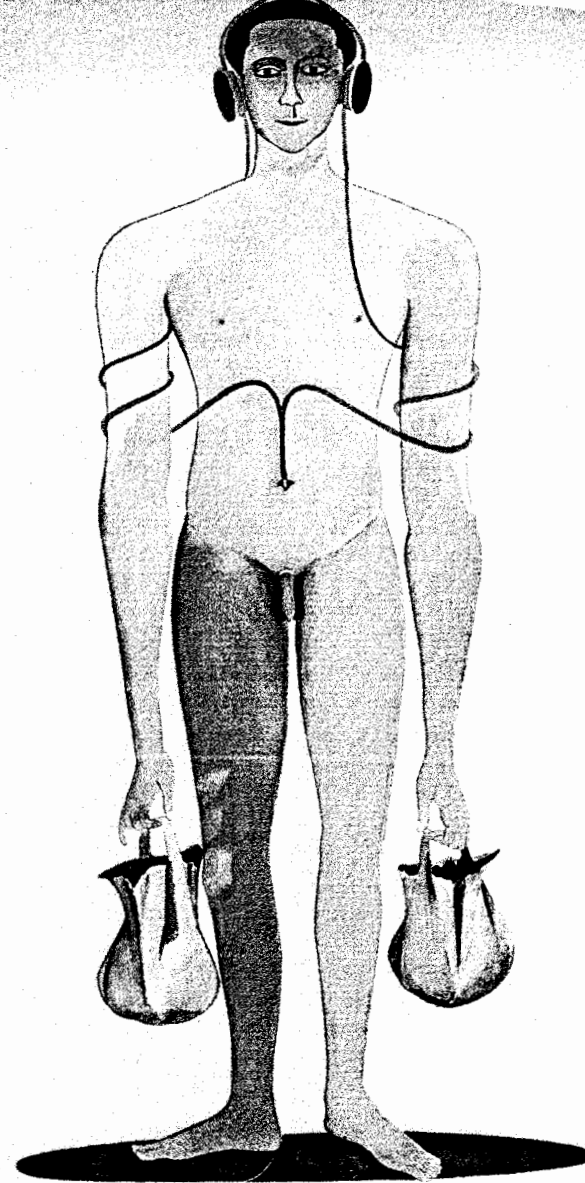
Part of the systems regulating popular visual culture is the marshalling of images of national heroes by the intellectual apparatus of museums and memorials to create shrines that invite obeisance, theaters where rituals of patriotism and faith may be played out. Dayanita Singh's photographs addressing memorialization (1999–2000; Cat. no. 36) create a meta-narrative about the simultaneous presence and absence that these regulated spectacles construct around the image and belongings of a departed leader. Ubiquitous images of a grinning Mohandas Gandhi and a pensive Jawaharlal Nehru are in fact by-products of a project of national imagination.

Though set up by official sanction, the reincarnation and dissemination of these imaginary currencies often takes place in the common realm: a *dalit*<sup>24</sup> cobbler hangs a portrait of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the *dalit* architect of India's constitution and the founding figure of *dalit* resistance in modern politics, amidst a display of footwear, even though the association of footwear with such images in other circumstances has led to violence: garlanding an image with footwear implies desecration, and incidents involving images of Ambedkar have resulted in rioting in recent years. Tableaux of museumized, mummified leaders in Singh's work are juxtaposed with another set of tableaux that cast the spectacular in celebratory aggrandizement. Heroic soldiers climb to victory on the heights of Kargil in Kashmir; the Taj Mahal rubs shoulders with the Eiffel Tower in a wonders-of-the-world backdrop to a wedding. Finally, screen idols Twinkle Khanna and Ajay Devgan recline on a crescent moon in the festering eroticism of Bollywood, in a dream sequence on the sets of the film *Jaan*.

The introduction into India of global satellite television in the early 1990s created one of the greatest visual revolutions in recent history. The average urban home now boasts several dozen channels streaming locally produced and imported content in about a dozen different

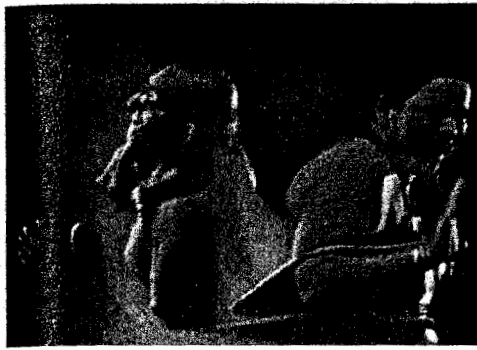
languages. State censorship and regulation seem to be always two steps behind this revolution, which constantly stretches the boundaries of acceptable morality and civilizational values. The entry in 1996 of MTV in its Indian avatar into this heady mix was a pivotal event in fostering a new yuppie imagination. Cyrus Oshidar and the creative team at MTV India are represented in this exhibition by a selection of fillers and promos produced over the last decade (Cat. no. 34). Housed in a street-side small-goods shack, the monitor plays a riotous

succession of colorful noise in a display of irreverent takeoffs on sacred and profane material from public visual culture. The footage features invented characters that blur the distinctions between historical and mythical, actual and fantastic: political satire mingles with faux fetishism, lissome models transmute into goddesses, Elvis is Indianized to hawk events, and didactic tales are subverted through cheap jokes. There is a story to be told here about how the *desi*—South Asian living abroad<sup>25</sup>—becomes “cool,” and how bourgeois



Surendran Nair, Precision Theatre of the Heavenly Shepherds, 2002–03 (Cat. no. 33b; detail). Watercolor on paper, 65 x 50.5 cm. Collection of Nitin Bhayana.





Cyrus Oshidar/MTV India, Video Filler Compilation  
(Cat. no. 34; DVD still). DVD, cigarette/small goods stall roadside shop  
(complete), wooden bench, television monitors; duration 30 minutes (approx);  
installation: 240 x 126 x 187 cm. Collection of MTV India.

culture mutates into local strands, shedding all pretensions to universality in the context of globalization.

A significantly different take on the song-and-dance vitality of popular culture is embodied in the thoughtful, joyous as well as melancholic work of Ranbir Kaleka. His video *Windows* (2002; Cat. no. 30) features here under a colorful circus tent, and is projected on a wheeled screen, as though ready for travel as part of a wandering village show. *Windows* can be read as a bittersweet love story, with its evocative soundtrack of lilting melodies from vintage Hindi movies. It is at one level a commonplace story without heroic grandeur. At the same time though, the work suggests potential for the extraordinary. Kaleka takes up everyday dreams, joys and sorrows as his material, and extracts from it an essential, existential sorrow, and a meditation on the fleetingness of emotion even as light fleets across the screen to create images. Kaleka's work in video is distinguished by its insistence on holding the momentary, acknowledging its passing nature, meditating on its impermanence, gently grinding away at two ends of the video—first as incomplete narrative and then again as impermanent apparition.

The location of "fine art" within such a seemingly dislocated, multifocal spectrum of possibility remains an unsettled question. Recent challenges to the institutionalized nature of gallery-based practice—often articulated by

artists who are themselves operating within the gallery—have made for a concocting of unfamiliar brews. Surendran Nair's practice as a painter participates in this maelstrom of influences and attributions. Through an intensely located study of sources, he distils a growing pantheon of images, partaking equally of the profound and the nonsensical. His *Precision Theatre of the Heavenly Shepherds* (2002; Cat. no. 33) seemingly personifies signs of the zodiac. Each of these invented personae is sourced in historical antecedents, including identifiable iconographies from Indian art history, a play of riddles and quotations that invites solutions. At the same time, the images taken together represent a fusion of European ideas of celestial forces with Indian forms of the divine, invoking the presence of one in the other, and arguing gently that given our histories, to be precise about essences and directions is a fallacy. His *Mephistopheles* (2002; Cat. no. 33a) represents the thirteenth sign for this zodiac, the sign of our times—the age of falsehood. Derived from the image of the Buddha calling upon the earth to witness the moment of his enlightenment, *Mephistopheles* becomes a personification of the violence, deviousness, and secrecy by which rulers across the world have distinguished themselves in recent years.<sup>56</sup>

L. N. Tallur's inflatable vinyl installation *Made in England: A temple design for India* (2000; Cat. no. 37) addresses itself to the mania for shrines, the search for roots and concrete fountainheads of the faith.<sup>57</sup> Made during his postgraduate studies in Leeds, Tallur's temple is an inflatable contraption complete with Nandi, Shiva's bull-vehicle, which shudders in compressor-induced tumescence, playing on the phallic associations of vertical constructions that are not necessarily limited to Indian temples. Brightly colored, like a fairground canopy, and inviting the viewer to enter its darkened sanctum sanctorum to study graffiti-like drawings, this is a temple seemingly on the move. Expressly designed for travel, its presence within the gallery already announces its impending departure: it's all ready to be

deflated, boxed, and reinflated at its next location on a tour of the world.

Traveling shrines are of course not unknown in India. There are traditions in western India of village storytellers who carry on their torsos miniature shrines with unfolding panels that can be successively opened out to reveal painted narratives, so that the performer's body becomes a stage—a practice that within its folk forms crystallizes the philosophical attitude of seeing the divine in all, and all in the divine. Gulammohammed Sheikh, whose work as artist, teacher, and historian has drawn on the itinerant and persistently porous spirit of Indian culture, has created a series of four traveling shrines for this exhibition (Cat. no. 34). Addressing various aspects of contemporary culture—mobility, knowledge, places, and desires—these shrines signify a traveling compendium, a multifaceted distillation of painting languages that are supple and polymorphous enough to address contemporary experience in India. Also implicit in Sheikh's shrines are observations on recent Indian history, which unfold as successive layers of painting are revealed through an opening out of doors that is at once a practical device and a symbolic one.



## EPILOGUE

As the first major appraisal of contemporary Indian art to be commissioned by either of its two organizing museums, *Edge of Desire* represents a significant development in the institutional consideration of its subject in Australia and the United States.<sup>58</sup> Economic and political developments over the last two decades have contributed to a signal shift in the appraisal and consumption of contemporary art from non-Western contexts—especially from Asia and the Pacific—in the art institutions of the developed world; as the Thai art historian Apinan Poshyananda pointed out more than a decade ago, “selling nations’ as works of art has become like slippery lubricants that make political mechanisms function with ease.”<sup>59</sup> It is now commonplace for high-profile international exhibitions to feature several members of Asia’s new globetrotting artist elite, who are routinely executing projects via e-mail, living between serialized productions across a burgeoning number of art hubs. For a while, there may have been cause to celebrate this newfound visibility. However, under current regimes of commodification and marketing, uncritical celebration may be at best naïve—and at worst, obfuscatory and condescending.<sup>60</sup> To celebrate this phenomenon unconditionally would presuppose that we remain shy of questioning the motivations and modes of cultural traffic, with platitudes replacing analysis. We would also fall prey to renewed exoticization under the garb of a shallow multiculturalism: the cultural policy of globalizing states. This is what would imply an attitude of condescension, with newly visible practices (and practitioners) being reduced to the status of fragile, immature entities from partly comprehended places, in need of the benevolence of the more enlightened.

It is impossible to explain the increasing international visibility of Indian art unless we consider several historical factors. Coupled with the more generalized gravitation toward contemporary art from non-Western contexts (in itself concomitant with economic

globalization), these factors have included India’s emergence as a major market for Western consumer goods; its emergence as a regional military power; and paradoxically, the intensification of separatism, sectarian conflict, and human-rights abuses over the last two decades. The occurrence of this exhibition needs to be firmly placed within economic and political processes that have altered the lineaments of power both nationally and internationally.

This exhibition is predicated on diversity and celebrates the survival of pluralistic cultural forms. Engaging with a diversity of contemporary practices and creative conditions, it seeks to question cultural structures that segregate and hierarchize visual practices. It argues for both/and rather than either/or, making a case for a polycentric aesthetic of difference rather than the rhetoric of identity and development.<sup>61</sup>

Polycentrism and a rejection of institutional hierarchies cannot, however, imply an unbiased survey of visual production. My own biases as curator are obviously on display here. I am also aware that it may be only a matter of time before “polycentrism” as a term, or as a slogan—like “multiculturalism,” “marginality,” and “postcoloniality”—comes to be assimilated into existing vocabularies and catchphrases to the extent that it loses any critical edge.

At a time when the avant-garde is supposedly long exhausted, or has been co-opted into simulacral projects that preserve only the look of insurgency, and when any potential for art practice to make the heroic statement (except by way of the clever pun, or asides addressed to the knowing, which are still very fashionable) has been leached away, it may be useful to consider the work of artists active in India and similar locations. Work from such contexts often tends to be appreciated for its fantastic look—for its continuing vitality—but it is important to remember that the fantastic is in itself a troublesome category in postcolonial histories. Recourse to the fantastic and the magical patently offered postcolonial artists a route into historical empowerment, but it cannot be allowed to become yet another of

those stereotypes that are used to categorize, tame, and therefore control Otherness. This irreducible Otherness, with its propensity toward unpredictability, its ability to say several things at once, and its infuriating tendency away from the singular and canonical toward the multiple and heretical, can be raised as a bulwark not only against Orientalist homogenization and exoticization, but also against the anti-pluralist strictures of globalization and fundamentalism.

I have worked on this exhibition with colleagues in Perth and in New York over the last three years. The preceding catalogue text has been formulated over this time, through successive revisions. In May 2004, India conducted a General Election (reputedly, the largest exercise in participatory democracy anywhere in the world). Broadly speaking, the Elections of May 2004 resulted in an increase in representation for the Left and Centrist parties, at the expense of the Right. A coalition of fifteen political parties, the United Progressive Alliance formed government under the leadership of the Congress party. Dr. Manmohan Singh, a member of the Sikh community who had served previously as Finance Minister, became Prime Minister.

Certainly, at the level of Parliament and Central Cabinet, there has been a major transformation in recent months. This transformation has been reflected in state rhetoric as expressed in the Common Minimum Programme of the United Progressive Alliance, and in the Prime Minister’s statement of vision spelled out most recently, in his Independence Day speech delivered from the ramparts of Delhi’s Red Fort on August 15, 2004, which emphasized an equitable, prosperous and peaceful India.<sup>62</sup> Given the agenda of secular politics, economic “development with a human face,” and an allocation of resources toward employment, education, and welfare of India’s poor majority, it would seem that there is still hope for the secular ideals of independent India. It may be that history would consign the previous decade and half of violence and inequity to the status of an aberration. But

that is yet to be seen. There has been a change in government in New Delhi, but tensions and fractures at communal, sectarian and regional levels continue to dominate local politics.<sup>63</sup>

Like any exhibition with an ideological position, *Edge of Desire* has sought to situate the work of participating artists within an intellectual and historical framework. However, it remains true that great art invariably escapes such attempts at framing. Not only are works of art not built to a "program," they also involve a degree of excess, a surplus of meaning that curatorial or art historical devices cannot hope to fully encapsulate. And that is how it should be. Among other things, this excess allows works of art to be meaningful to audiences that may be far removed from those of their "home" culture.

*Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India* is certainly about a certain period in India's recent history, and has resulted from specific preoccupations. More important perhaps, it is about artists making art in difficult times; it is about artists harnessing myriad traditions from different parts of the world; it is about artists responding to immediate realities with degrees of organic fluidity and passion that are uplifting.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Thomas McEvelly, "Exhibition Strategies in the Postcolonial Era," in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996, pp. 54-59. See also Ajay J. Sinha, "Contemporary Indian Art: A Question of Method", *Art Journal* (Fall 1999), pp. 31-39.

<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Kuss, et. al., "Curators' Introduction," *Awas! Recent Art from Indonesia*, Yogyakarta: Cemeti Art Foundation, 1999, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Claims to place have found various articulations in calls for the "liberation" of holy places like Somnath and Ayodhya, militarist fantasies of a greater India encompassing neighboring nation-states, assertions that India is the exclusive homeland of Hindus, and the persecution of minorities.

<sup>4</sup> This retreat into insular identities and the phenomenon of sectarian violence resulting from this is not particular to India. Similar situations can be observed in Indonesia and Thailand, among other places. See Jayati Ghosh, "Perceptions of Difference: The Economic Underpinnings," in K. N. Panikkar, ed., *The Concerned Indian's Guide to Communalism*, New Delhi: Viking, 1999, pp. 112-13.

<sup>5</sup> As Gulammohammed Sheikh put it, "Living in India means living simultaneously in several cultures and times. One often walks into 'medieval' situations, and runs into 'primitive' people. The past exists as a living entity alongside the present, each illuminating and sustaining the other." "Among Several Cultures and Times," in Carla Borden, ed., *Contemporary Indian Tradition*, New York: Smithsonian Institution, 1989, p. 107.

<sup>6</sup> I am thinking here of a very diverse body of practice, which includes some of the artists represented here (Umesh Maddanahalli, Shilpa Gupta, Sharmila Samant, Pushpamala N, and Subodh Gupta, for instance), and others active elsewhere (Yasumasa Morimura, Mella Jaarsma, Dadang Christanto, and Christian Boltanski).

<sup>7</sup> Adivasi (literally "first dwellers") is the generic term for the large number of tribal societies that live in India, for the most part quite separate from caste Hindu societies. Though subject to constant transformation in

recent years—including aggressive assimilation into the lower orders of caste Hinduism which does play a role in the articulation of contemporary Adivasi identities—in recent years, Adivasi societies have been characterized either by nomadism or by an economy based on subsistence agriculture and food-gathering, as distinct from largely settled, intensively cultivated or pastoral settlements and, more recently, industrial development in the mainstream. Adivasis, racially classified as Dravidian people, have presumably lived on the subcontinent since before the arrival of Sanskrit-speaking "Aryan" peoples from the northwest, in about 1500 B.C.E. These distinctions, it must be stressed, are by no means settled, and remain subject to debate. The fact remains, however, that contemporary public policy, itself of British colonial origin, continues to classify Adivasi peoples separately under "Scheduled Tribes," "Nomadic Tribes," etc., and that in terms of indices of development, education, life expectancy, and access to government services, Adivasi peoples constitute some of the most disenfranchised groups in the world.

<sup>8</sup> The divide between art and craft is quite pronounced in India, manifesting not only in institutions, but also in ontological structures—the strength of art-historical research, for example, which rarely, if ever, ventures into the crafts. The most prominent museums devoted to visual art in New Delhi, for instance, give evidence of a division of responsibilities commensurate with the ontological divide. The Crafts Museum concentrates on folk and tribal traditions, and exists as a separate institution under the jurisdiction of the Office of the Development Commissioner for Handicrafts. The National Museum and the National Gallery of Modern Art, governed by the Ministry of Culture, are devoted to the classical traditions of Indian art and urban fine art, respectively. The only major institution in India to collect and display urban and Adivasi art under a common umbrella—albeit in discrete spaces—is the Roopankar Museum at Bhopal's Bharat Bhavan arts complex, established in 1982. Its inaugural director, artist and ideologue J. Swaminathan, argued passionately for a recognition of contemporary Adivasi art as contemporary art. See his *The Perceiving Fingers*, Bhopal: Bharat Bhavan, 1987.

<sup>9</sup> See Ajay J. Sinha, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> See Kajri Jain, "Identity, Indigeniety, Dissonance: Sonabai at the APT" *Artlink*, vol. 20, no. 2, July 2000, pp. 52-55.

<sup>11</sup> See Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The making of a new 'Indian' art: Artists, aesthetics and nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 118-20.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. 5-11.

<sup>13</sup> A small number of recent exhibitions have featured folk and Adivasi art alongside urban practice. See *India Songs*, curated by Victoria Lynn, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1993; and *New Indian Art: Home-Street-Shrine-Bazaar-Museum*, curated by G. M. Sheikh with Jyotindra Jain, Manchester Art Gallery, 2002. Sheikh and Jain were also involved in the selection of Indian artists at the *Third Asia-Pacific Triennial*, Brisbane, 1999, where Rajwar artist Sonabai was featured alongside urban contemporaries, albeit in a separate section, *Crossing-Borders*, whereas the urban artists were represented under the national label. Implicit here was the acknowledgement that Sonabai's inclusion was indeed a crossing of boundaries, at least within the institutional apparatus of Indian art.

<sup>14</sup> *Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India*, New Delhi: Crafts Museum and The Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India, n.d., p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> The Tagorean elite of the Bengal School started collecting folk objects in the early twentieth century, as artists and as connoisseurs. (Jaya Appasamy, "The Folk inspiration in Modern Indian Painting," *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 34 [New Delhi], 1987.) Writing in 1908, E. B. Havell, British administrator and advocate of the Bengal School, pointed to the "survival of genuine folk-art" in India, exhorting Indians to "take an intelligent and serious interest in them, [as they] would be the surest foundation on which to build up the revival of Indian painting." (E. B. Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, London: John Murray, 1908, p. 239 [cf. second edition, 1928]). The interaction between urban fine art and traditions of folk, tribal, and popular art remains one of the

most fraught aspects of modern art in India. The careers of artists such as Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, K. K. Hebbar, Meera Mukherjee, and Bhupen Khakhar present evidence of this unsettled relationship, which nonetheless has been productive of a significant portion of the modern Indian canon.

16 For more information on the late Meera Mukherjee, see Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Meera Mukherjee: Recasting the Folk Form," in Gayatri Sinha, ed., *Expressions and Evocations: Contemporary Women Artists of India*, Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1997, pp. 48–55.

17 See Appasamy, *op. cit.*

18 K. G. Subramanian, *The Living Tradition*, p. 85.

19 I use the word Bollywood here to denote the post-liberalization transformation in the Indian film industry. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha has argued in this volume, "Bollywood . . . can be validly seen as an industry that is not so much about the cinema as an evocation of cinema for the purposes of creating a slew of new culture industries including fashion, music, consumption, tourism, advertising, television and the internet—industries that, as it were, reproduce the cinema outside the movie theatre.

20 Aijaz Ahmad, "Globalization and Culture," in *On Communalism and Globalization: Offensives of the Far Right*, New Delhi: Three Essays Press, 2002, pp. 95–96.

21 For an analysis of syncretism in one aspect of Indian tradition—miniature painting—see G. M. Sheikh, "The Making of a Visual Language: Thoughts on Mughal Painting," *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 30–31 December 1997; special issue, "Sites of Art History: Canons and Expositions," guest editor Tapati Guha-Thakurta), pp. 7–32.

22 Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 4.

23 About 250,000 workers from Mumbai's (then) 60 textile mills went on strike over a period of 18 months commencing January 1982, demanding better working conditions, wage raises and the abolition of the *badli* system for hiring temporary workers. The eventual failure of this strike, led by Datta Samant, is regarded as the death knell of the organized labor movement in India, and its repercussions can still be felt.

24 The artist's recent work, in miniature format, has been engaged with understanding the reality of Kashmir through painted responses to the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali. See Nilima Sheikh, *The Country Without a Post Office: Reading Agha Shahid Ali*, exhibition catalogue, Mumbai: Gallery Chemould, 2003, text by Peter Nagy.

25 The Mughal emperor Jehangir (1605–1628) is said to have exclaimed, "If there is paradise on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here!"

26 Conversation with the author, Baroda, 1 February, 2003.

27 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (tr. Maria Jolas) Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, p. 3

28 At the time of writing, loan agreements pertaining to the inclusion of Khakhar's work in the exhibition were still in progress.

29 This exhibition does not engage with the work of expatriate Indian artists living in other countries; that would be a separate field of study in itself. Some projects, however, especially those made by the younger artists here, were made during residencies, typically in art institutions from the developed world.

30 As an everyday material of rural life, cow dung finds myriad uses: it is used to plaster walls and floors, as an insect repellent, and as fuel in the form of sundried cakes. The format of Gupta's *Bihari* of course also signals the official document—the identity card, passport, or police record.

31 Gupta has also cast other "vehicles" in metal, including a Vespa scooter complete with the jute sacks used by small-town merchants to carry goods to market.

32 There is a tradition of memorial pillars across several Adivasi groups in the Bastar region. Memorial pillars of the Maria people, as noted by Swaminathan, are elaborately carved with images of animals, birds, plants, and humans, and are frequently painted in bright colors. Set by the wayside so that passersby can see them and reflect on their own lives, these pillars routinely merge local reality with influences from the outside world, as well as creatures of myth and fable. See Swaminathan, *The Perceiving Fingers*, p. 44.

33 It is one of the great myths of modernism that tribal artists live in an abstracted, depersonalized collective consciousness, and that their art is a reflection of a pre-linguistic consciousness articulated through a timeless zone of innocence and childlike wonder.

34 As in other Adivasi areas in India, it is commonplace in the Bastar, where Raj Kumar comes from, for disenfranchised Adivasis to work as itinerant laborers for a paltry daily wage; their employers are contractors who are almost always non-Adivasi caste Hindus. With limited access to education and government services, and lacking entrepreneurial resources (capital, training, and infrastructure), Adivasi societies have continued to rely on external sources for wage employment as well as manufactured goods. In the market street of Kondagaon, for instance, every one of the shops that provides packaged and manufactured goods is owned by Jain or Hindu traders from outside Bastar, though it must be pointed out that they are descendants of migrants from other parts of the country who moved to Bastar as early as the fourteenth century CE. For further details, see Michael Postel and Zarine Cooper, *Bastar Folk Art: Shrines, Figurines and Memorials*, Mumbai: Project for Indian Cultural Studies, 1999.

35 See footnote 37 below for a note on Ravi Varma and his significance to Indian visual culture.

36 For an introduction to these pressures, see Pannikar, *op. cit.*, and C. T. Kurien, *Global Capitalism and the Indian Economy*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1994. For the rise of religious fundamentalism, see Tapan Basu, et al., *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: a critique of the Hindu Right*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993.

37 India is not unique in having produced a large body of revolutionary images, in sculpture, print, and film that project the everyday anonymous citizen as hero, as an agent of inevitable social transformation, as a force for good.

38 That this practice of metalwork is peculiarly modern both in terms of the materials used and in its relationships with market forces and mass-produced objects—seems not to deter consumers enamored or enchanted by the appeal of "age-old crafts." The work of Bastar metalworkers—or for that matter any number of producers of folk and Adivasi art—provides an acute barometer of urban culture and the aspirations of the

upwardly mobile. See Jyotindra Jain's texts on the exhibition *New Indian Art: Home Street Shrine Bazaar Museum*, published in *Art South Asia*, Manchester: Shisha, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Several of these *yatras* were mounted by the BJP and allied organizations to stir up fanatical devotion to the cause of *Ramajanamabhooni*, the presumed birthplace of the Hindu god-king Rama. Bypassing the several hundred temples in the town of Ayodhya that claim the distinction of marking the spot, the Hindutva brigades pinpointed the site of the Babri Mosque as the one true birthplace, where a magnificent Rama temple is to be built. Hinduism, it should be emphasized, is a manifestly polymorphous body of belief; its consolidation into a singular religion is of relatively recent manufacture. With its multiple (and often conflicting) deities, and its plethora of holy places and holy texts, Hinduism may seem intrinsically opposed to fundamentalist perversion; in this sense, the narrow, monotheistic version of Hinduism championed as the ideology of Hindutva patently goes against the grain of the Hindu ethos.

<sup>40</sup> Viswakarma's workshop in Kondagaon has been producing several versions of this work in response to a growing demand from urban collectors. That this remarkable narrative has been crafted out of the form of a decorative element in the middle-class homes that are representative of the largest vote bank in fundamentalist politics adds to the poignancy of the work.

<sup>41</sup> Kalighat painting: a signal manifestation of modernity in Indian art, created by painters catering to a new market in the bylanes around the Kalighat temple

<sup>42</sup> Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) hailed from a minor princely family in Travancore, Kerala, and is known as the first Indian painter to master the technology of European illusionism. Working in oils on canvas, Ravi Varma was able to sustain himself as a professional painter with commissions from aristocratic families and princely states in the late nineteenth century. His project of recasting Indian mythology and ethnic types in a neo-classical garb, as well as his portraits of wealthy patrons, can be seen as part of a significant tendency in colonial culture, where appropriating the cultural values and forms of the coloniser becomes a route to national consciousness. See *Raja Ravi Varma:*

*New Perspectives*, New Delhi: National Museum, 1993?. See also Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, New Delhi: Tulika, 2000.

<sup>43</sup> For a longer discussion of Malani's recent work, see my "Apocalypse Recalled: the recent work of Nalini Malani" in *Nalini Malani: Stories Retold*, exhibition catalogue, New York: Bose Pacia, 2004.

<sup>44</sup> It is important to note that Swarna and Manu Chitrakar are illiterate and their knowledge of the world has relied on images and oral narrative. Television is quite new to their experience, and their understanding of phenomena such as Hollywood films or global affairs has been mediated via cable television.

<sup>45</sup> Aar-Paar = here and there, this side and the other, across borders. Coordinated by Shilpa Gupta from Mumbai and Huma Mulji from Karachi, the 2002 edition of the project involved artists from either side of the border producing graphic work which was emailed to their counterparts, to be mass-produced as offset prints and inserted within the public domain in the form of leaflets, newspaper inserts, and posters.

<sup>46</sup> The separation at birth I refer to is, of course, Partition, which came as a necessary condition of independence from Britain in 1947. For details on the *Aar-Paar* project, including images of artwork from participating artists from India and Pakistan, see <http://members.tripod.com/aarpaar2>. See also my "Printing across borders: the Aar Paar project," *Art Monthly Australia*, July 2004.

<sup>47</sup> Thousands of recyclers work the streets, railway tracks and garbage bins of every major Indian city everyday, collecting refuse in woven plastic sacks to sell to recycling contractors. Sifting through all manner of refuse from the industrial to the intimate, these workers supply the world's largest recycling industry with its daily fuel. Other kinds of recycling consist in the innovative use of scrap and outdated machinery which is used to construct new contraptions by street-side mechanics, welders, and fabricators.

<sup>48</sup> *Chindogu*: chin=odd; dogu=tool. A phenomenon initiated in the mid-1990s by Kenji Kawikami. See his series

of publications including *101 Unuseless Japanese Inventions* and *99 More Unuseless Japanese Inventions* (tr. Dan Papia) London: Harper Collins, 1995 and 1997 respectively.

<sup>49</sup> It is interesting to note the appearance within the art gallery of vernacular forms of transport from the Third World during recent years. From Asia alone, there has been truck art from Pakistan (through the work of Durrani Kazi and David Aelsworth), cycle-rickshaws (Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba's *Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam, towards the complex for the courageous, the curious, and the cowards*, 2001), and *tuk-tuks* motorized three-wheeled taxis—from Thailand (Navin Rawanchaikul's project featured in *Cities on the Move* (1999) and other exhibitions). Mukhopadhyay has also previously worked with cycle-rickshaws in 2000.

<sup>50</sup> The name Sarai comes from the Persian *Serai* or *Caravan-serai*, meaning a wayside inn, a place of pause, a temporary residence, a place of meetings. See <http://www.sarai.net> for details on various projects and publications produced by Sarai and their collaborators.

<sup>51</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, p. 220.

<sup>52</sup> In perhaps the most celebrated of his books, Subramanyan has written, "Most of us in the modern art world have a slightly exaggerated image of our creative independence." *The Living Tradition*, Introduction, Kolkata: Seagull, 1987, unpaginated section.

<sup>53</sup> Subramanyan has written several books, including *Moving Focus*, New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1978; *The Living Tradition*, Kolkata: Seagull, 1987 and *The Creative Circuit*, Kolkata: Seagull, 1992. For commentaries on Subramanyan, see Geeta Kapur, *K G Subramanyan*, New Delhi, Lalit Kala Akademi, 1987; Niiima Sheikh, "A post-colonial initiative," in G. M. Sheikh ed. *Contemporary Art in Baroda*, New Delhi: Tulika, 1997; and R. Siva Kumar, *K G Subramanyan: a retrospective*, New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art, 2002.

<sup>54</sup> *Dalit*: literally, downtrodden. A term of political identification used by members of communities from the



lowest strata of Hindu caste hierarchy. Though social-religious strictures that imposed untouchability on these communities have long been outlawed, direct and indirect discrimination remain endemic, and it is still not common for persons of *dalit* origin to enjoy contemporary bourgeois lifestyles.

<sup>55</sup> *Desi*; literally "countryman" or belonging to, or in the countryside—a name South Asians of all backgrounds living abroad use for themselves, as an expression of solidarity. Within the Indian context, *desi* also has derogatory connotations, implying a lack of sophistication.

<sup>56</sup> For a discussion of this painting, see my "Under the Skin of Simulation: three contemporary painters," in *Under the Skin of Simulation*, exhibition catalogue, Berlin: The Fine Art Resource, 2003.

<sup>57</sup> The Hindu Right's campaign for the "liberation" of sacred sites and the construction of a foundational temple for Hinduism (itself a contradiction for such a multifaceted system of belief) was characterized by posters and stickers depicting a muscular, militant Rama striding forth, with a massive temple in the background marking his presumed birthplace. Large donations to this project came from expatriate Hindus in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Canada. A "temple design for India," "made in England," then, carries more than a hint of irony.

<sup>58</sup> Both the Art Gallery of Western Australia and the Asia Society and Museum have previously shown contemporary Indian art, and both institutions have works from India in their collections. However, this is the first time that either has mounted a large exhibition exclusively concerned with contemporary Indian art.

<sup>59</sup> Apinan Poshyananda, "The Future: Post Cold-War, Postmodernism, Postmarginalia (Playing with Slippery Lubricants)" in Caroline Turner, ed., *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1993, p. 5.

<sup>60</sup> I have developed this argument more fully elsewhere. See "Home and Away: contemporary Indian art in the international arena," *Art Monthly Australia*, September 2002, pp. 7-11.

<sup>61</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a polycentric aesthetics," in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 27-49.

<sup>62</sup> India's Prime Ministers have traditionally addressed the nation from this location since the moment of Jawaharlal Nehru's famous "Tryst with Destiny" declaration of independence at midnight on 14-15 August 1947, which announced the birth of the independent nation. The following excerpts from Manmohan Singh's 2004 speech are significant in that they clearly echo the Nehruvian vision of a secular socialist democracy: "*Our strength derives from our unity in diversity. The principles of secularism, social justice and the equality of all before law are the defining feature of our nation . . . Our policies for higher economic growth and modernization will be combined with an emphasis on social justice, communal harmony, rural development, regional balance and concern for the environment . . . We must fight all anti-national and anti-social forces that try to disrupt normal life. Be they terrorists or communal and other such divisive forces.*"

<sup>63</sup> *Edge of Desire* is certainly not the only exhibition to have highlighted these tensions in recent years, a fact that highlights the tremendous impact of economic and political transformations on an artists' community that has found it imperative to engage in their present environments and to claim a place for art practice as inherently political. This decade has been the subject of at least two other exhibitions in the last few years. The first focused on the city of Bombay/Mumbai. India's primary metropolis during the 1990s was featured in *Century City: Art and the Metropolis in Modern Culture*, the opening exhibition of the Tate Modern in London in 2001. Curated by Geeta Kapur and Ashish Rajadhyaksha, the *Bombay/Mumbai 1992-2001* component of *Century City* presented Bombay as "the stage for acting out fierce contradictions in the nation's encounter with modernity" in the wake of the violence of December 1992 and January 1993. See Geeta Kapur and Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "Bombay/Mumbai 1992-2001" in Iwona Blazwick, ed., *Century City: Art and the Metropolis in Modern Culture*, London: Tate Modern, 2001, p. 19. The second exhibition, *Ways of Resisting* was curated by Vivan Sundaram for the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT, which has organized several events against

communalism over the last decade) at the Rabindra Bhavan Galleries of the Lalit Kala Akademi (India's peak state-owned fine arts institution), in New Delhi in 2002. This exhibition specifically featured work from across the country that had responded to fundamentalism and violence during the 1990s.