

New-Context Media: A Passage from Indifference to Adulation

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The discourse on new media art practices in India, such as it is, originates in the transitional period of the early 1990s, when Western curators began to parachute into India, looking for idioms that they could recognise as “cutting-edge”, such as the installation, the performance, and video art. Not finding much evidence of these forms, many of these curators concluded that Indian artists were victims of a time lag, that they were hopelessly out of date and out of touch. Secure in their mainstream Western art-historical narrative, these visitors seemed unable or unwilling to accept that Indian artists had not quite exhausted the possibilities of the painted frame, and were grappling with their own specific issues of pictoriality, narrative, reception, and testimony.

For their part, a number of Indian artists were shaken by the suggestion that they were trapped in outmoded forms; they also took note of the retreat of painting in the global context at that time, and became convinced that the two-dimensional frame and its rules of viewership were indeed moribund. At the same time, the early-1990s conjuncture of nascent globalisation and burgeoning religious hyper-nationalism forced these artists to concede that they would have to improvise with a combination of media, beyond the ambit of the painted image, in order to develop a new cultural politic and communicate with a larger audience. They therefore decided that it was time to advance towards more improvisational and interactive forms; although, in fact, their practice has not always adhered to their theory, and they have continued to draw on their graphic and painterly gifts.

This narrative of the shift from an art situation dominated by painting, to one in which new media practices set the tone, is adequate as the snapshot of a decade. Unfortunately, it is rather simplistic: it shows us only piecemeal solutions, tactical choices, and often derivative reactions to fast-changing circumstances. And indeed, in early 2000, in the course of a series of lectures that I

gave in Germany and Austria, I realised that there were major issues that this narrative could not account for and that there was a gulf separating the mainstream Western history of new media art and the history of new media art in India. It seemed that the historical assumptions, chronologies of technical infrastructure, and regional histories of communication that I was proposing, as armatures for Indian new media art, were very different from the ones to which colleagues in Central Europe and North America were attuned.

It came to me there could be no global history of new media art, and that the history of new media art in any local context is dependent on the technological advances and the politics of communication as they prevail in that locale, a phenomenon for which I coined the term “new-context media”. [1] For instance, video art in India does not have a regional tradition going back to the 1960s and '70s, as it does in industrially advanced nations – where, of course, advanced communications technologies, powered by the needs of the military, espionage, and surveillance concerns of the Cold War military-industrial complex, became available far earlier. Technological advances were far slower in India during the Cold War and the central planning era; the belated arrival and dissemination of video in India during the 1980s ensured that video art could flower in this country only in the 1990s.

The mercurial nature of the emerging technoscape in the 1990s and its associated social matrix influenced artists who chose to work with new media. They began to consider the possibility of replacing the gallery object with the project, and the market with the community. Economic liberalisation changed the look and content of print as well as televisual media. Photocopy machines were already evolving into an everyday medium of data duplication and personal computers were becoming available. The technoscape was dominated by major information technology corporations, but their monopoly was challenged by the new heroes of cyberspace: hackers, copyright defying pirates, exponents of the internet. This marked a radical turn in contemporary Indian art: as against the gallery routine of painting-as-commodity, those aspects of

expressive and performance culture which had so far remained excluded were now given play in the new genres of video and performance art. These allowed for a far greater subjectivity, for an interplay between the illusionism of painting and the immediacy of performance, for the problematising of the iconic, for the generation of avatars and morphs, and for the politicisation of the private and the creation of solidarities and environments conducive to re-defining the role of art.

These initiatives used newly available media to insert themselves into situations beyond the existing purview of art practice, thus provoking into being new contexts for art: hence my term, “new-context media”. Significantly, new-context media art is peopled by artists whose education and interests are not restricted to a Fine Arts milieu, but enriched by diverse subcultures. It stands at the intersection between various disciplines, genres, media, audiences, and economies of production, including activist documentary filmmaking, social research, street theatre, satellite TV, philosophy of consciousness, and the internet.

At this point it is important to interweave the narrative with the crucial interventions in networking and infrastructure-building for alternative art made by two fortuitously complimentary catalyst figures, the American artist-turned-curator Peter Nagy and the arts manager and curator Pooja Sood. While Nagy promoted innovative gallery practice, Sood acted as a catalyst for an international artists’ workshop which liberated artists from the confines of the gallery. Nagy reformatted his New York gallery, *Nature Morte*, as a curatorial experiment in Delhi, in 1997. He cut right through the then prevalent debate in Indian art circles, between those who believed that painting was exhausted as a medium and installation art was the next big thing. Neither a purveyor of dogma nor a chaser of fashion, Nagy showed photographs and installations alongside paintings and drawings. More significantly, he brought photography, installation and video art into the conversation of the Indian art world, imparting to them both intellectual legitimacy and economic currency. In the same year that *Nature Morte*, Delhi opened its debut show, the *Khoj International Artists’ Workshop*

held its first exchange programme in Modinagar, Delhi. Khoj is a feat of cultural management, an artists initiative catalysed, facilitated and sustained by Pooja Sood (its first working group comprised Ajay Desai, Anita Dube, Bharti Kher, Subodh Gupta, Manisha Parekh and Prithipal Singh Ladi).

Khoj (a portable model of transcultural artistic conviviality inherited from the [Triangle Arts Workshop](#), New York, 1982) was able to provide an alternative space to artists to experiment with media other than painting. Most importantly, it liberated artists from the commodity focus of the gallery system; its lively laboratory atmosphere brought Indian cultural producers into close communion with their colleagues from other countries, breaking down the nation-centric self-discourse then in force. Khoj emphasised the importance of process over product: sculptors could work with installations, painters with performance art and the rudiments of video art and public art were put into place here. Again, it was the indefatigable Pooja Sood who became the curator of The [Apeejay Media Gallery](#), the first new media arts space in the country, in early 2000. [2]

Most of the new-context media artists work between media, at interfaces between shadow installations and video (Nalini Malani), video and sculpture installation (Vivan Sundaram and Sheba Chhachhi), video animation (Navjot and Manjunath Kamath), the Net and painting (Baiju Parthan), painting and video (Ranbir Kaleka), in a variety of performance-based video art and video installations (Rummana Hussain, Anita Dube, Sonia Khurana, Subodh Gupta, Shilpa Gupta, Kiran Subbaiah, Atul Bhalla, Nikhil Chopra and Tejal Shah). Some collectives address the experimental re-socialisation of communications technology: [Raqs Media Collective](#), Delhi (Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi and Shuddhabrata Sengupta), [Camp](#), Bombay (Shaina Anand, Ashok Sukumaran and Sanjay Bangar) and the [Desire Machine Collective](#), Guwahati (Sonal Jain and Mriganka Madhukaillya). A node that has come to play an important role in this domain is the [Centre for Experimental Media Arts \(CEMA\)](#) at the [Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology](#), Bangalore, with its emphasis on transdisciplinary exploration and

pluralised creativity, which blurs the conventional 'hard/ soft' boundaries between the sciences and the arts.

Indian experiments in this field need to be seen as local improvisations and not as custom-made variants on a universal new media practice. The work of these artists is sustained by a renewed quest for autonomy in a historical period characterised by heavily increased yet largely imperceptible controls on individual choice and movement; restrictions on access and passage; surveillance; militarisation; as well as the constrictions of an often violent identity politics based on religion, ethnicity, and regional affiliation. Many of these artists seek to locate their being and their practice in alternative sites that are neither state nor market, neither gallery nor political party. The questions that they often feel compelled to address are: How to pursue a politics that is not compromised by the political? How to make cultural productions that are not neutralised by the art market? These questions remain important, despite the incipient support for new media art from some dealers and auction houses, and correspondingly, a cautious receptiveness towards it among some collectors and observers of the scene. **The Devi Art Foundation** marks an exception to the rule. Established by Lekha and Anupam Poddar, it is the first private museum for contemporary art in India. Anupam Poddar has consistently nurtured cutting-edge art forms, even at a time when no market context existed for them.

New kinds of convergences of interest and coalitions of desire have come into being: between the environmental activist and the documentary filmmaker, the photographer and the archivist, the animation specialist and the storyteller. Many of these artists are committed to democratising the resources of this epoch, the same resources that the controllers would like to use for domination: communications and imaging technologies, networks and access codes.

Here, one of the most remarkable public art interventions made in the realm of televisual reality and community networking is that of **Shaina Anand's** *Khirkeeyaan* made during an artists' residency at

Khoj. Anand produced collaborative conversations and performances among friends and strangers residing in different neighbourhoods in Khirkee village, through an open-circuit TV system deploying TV sets, cheap CCTV equipment and several metres of cable snaking through the streets.

Paradoxically, these ephemeral conversations, beamed as four views/performances on the TV screen, were marked by the stubborn and indelible fault lines of caste, class, religion and gender. This is undoubtedly the liveliest interface between technology, site and community in Indian art: Anand created a situation where the 'film' was made instantly, without the presence of a cameraman and editor; here, the participant was also witness-viewer and user. Not only did she stand the genre of classical documentary (the top-down approach to communication) on its head, but she also pierced a hole through the specious claims of the televisual media, which are believed to dole out democracy cheaply through SMS polls and hard-talking TV shows. [3]

Moreover, it is significant that this project took place in Delhi which lacks an active public sphere and the larger non-specialist public that will benefit from the production of such cultural expression? Instead of preaching to the converted, the specialist art audience who live in gated and guarded enclaves, Khirkeeyaan attempted to 'make' an audience? It is almost more important to produce an audience sensitive to radical art, than it is to produce radical art. How radical can an artist get in a vacuum of reception?

The Indian art world sorely lacks a cumulative model of knowledge and expertise. Many of us move from one novelty to another, in many cases even redundantly reinventing the wheel. In a strange way, the new popularity of these art forms will bury them in plain sight. Why do I make this paradoxical statement? While galleries today no longer reject 'new media art', and even include such practices as an extension of patronage, not enough discourse is generated around such questions as the demographics of reception, the politics and ethics of producing such art and the curation of dematerialised art. To paraphrase the radical historian D. D.

Kosambi - who informed Indian Communists that Marxism was not a substitute for thought - we would do well to recall that technology cannot be a substitute for criticality.

In the context of new media art, we have made the transition from indifference to uncritical acceptance, even adulation. Now is the time for quiet reflection and healthy skepticism.

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Notes: 1. Nancy Adajania, 'From One Crisis to the Next: The Fate of Political Art in India', in Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Monica Narula et al eds., *Sarai Reader 04: Crisis/Media* (Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2004), pp.86-91. Further, my formulation 'new-context media' should be read in parallel with the term 'no-context media', a term coined by me to allude to the experiments in film and photography made in the late 60s and early 70s which lacked a context and nomenclature and which were new media overtures before the designated new media practices of the 1990s. See Nancy Adajania, 'New Media Overtures before New Media Practice In India' in Gayatri Sinha ed., *Art and Visual Culture in India:1857-2007* (Bombay: Marg, 2009).

2. See Nancy Adajania, 'A Tale of Two Cities: In Pursuit of Intellectual Capital' catalogue essay for the exhibition 'Chalo! India: A New Era of Indian Art' (Tokyo: Mori Museum, 2008).

3. See Nancy Adajania, 'Probing the Khojness of Khoj', in Pooja Sood ed., *Ten Years of Khoj* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, forthcoming 2009).