

REIMAGINING BOUNDARIES: MAPPING INTERNATIONALISM IN THE VISUAL ARTS BY INDIAN DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT

New economic and political realities have had a profound impact on the practices of art and the institutions of cultural display. Disciplinary narratives, in turn, have shifted in the wake of globalisation toward both a more complex perspective on cultural difference in the aesthetic realm and a more intricate and multifaceted picture of the intertwined nature of modernism's discrepant historical trajectories. This paper discusses how these processes of global transformation and the responses to them within history, theory, and criticism has influenced the organisation and display of the visual arts.

Keywords: Internationalism, diaspora, visual arts

In today's increasingly globalised, multi-cultural landscape, the notions of freedom and autonomy have evolved into something very different than what they might have been even a mere half-century ago. The idea is to take a look at how the Indian subcontinent and its diaspora have transformed over the years, and also to strengthen the artistic ecologies of these spaces by allowing for closer cross-cultural collaboration.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were characterised by rising nationalism, imperialism and war. But they were also marked by movements for international cooperation, a developing international infrastructure, and experiments in transnational ways of living. The arts were central to this dialogue between nationalism and internationalism. Artists were expected to play their part in the building of national traditions, but their lives and

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practices were often cosmopolitan. Yet, despite the vigour of internationalist thinking, historical enquiry in the arts has been largely preoccupied with national traditions.

In the mainstream of the visual arts ‘International’ has become a term synonymous only with Western Europe and the USA. This limiting Western / Eurocentric definition has meant that in practice the vast majority of the world’s cultures (including minority cultures with western states) [sic] have been excluded from exhibitions and from the history of art.

‘New internationalism’ addresses this discrepancy by placing the achievements of the majority cultures of the world into the discourses, the exhibitions and the history of contemporary visual arts. More importantly it offers the visual perceptions, the philosophies and the histories of non-European and majority cultures as new and challenging contributions of the mainstream of the visual arts.

Essentially it reflects a changing moment in art history, resulting from post-war migration and the shifting of cultural and ideological boundaries. It is subject to evolutionary change and therefore cannot be narrowly defined or fixed, principally because it reflects this transitional moment in history.

It has emerged as a concept which poses questions to the world of art and its audience about the nature, their perception and interpretation of contemporary art practice. It aims to bring the issues of cultural difference and cultural hybridity into the dominant discourse as a vital contribution to the development of visual art in the twenty first century. ‘New Internationalism’ is not exclusive. It will not disregard the achievements of Western Europe and the USA. Neither does it seek a negative confrontation with Western Eurocentric art history. It desires instead to broaden our understanding of the history of art beyond the narrow confines of the past. Thus, the aim of New Internationalism is to replace the ‘old’ internationalism of the art world, which was practically confined to the West and which has tended to make use of a double-standard system, where non-Western art is judged differently than Western art. Rasheed Araeen calls in his study a New Internationalism “a true international platform/movement, from to/which all cultures make their unique contributions”

According to a recent report by the United Nations, 15.6 million people who were born in India now live elsewhere, making it the world’s largest diaspora. Some of those people happen to be artists. In an exhibition at New York, “Memory and Identity” features 14 Indian

artists who left their native country to live and work abroad. This was a group show which engages with ethnicity, nostalgia, and the identity of the Indian-born diaspora artists. Their paintings explore what it means to be native, to belong, and the ways the past leaves an indelible mark on any artist, regardless of nationality. Paintings of artists like, the avant-garde painter F.N. Souza (1924–2002), often called the “Indian Picasso,” and Modernist painter S.H. Raza (1922–2016) who made a distinct impression on the European art scene were featured in this exhibition. While overt nationalism is absent from the featured works, hints of “Indianness” run through their paintings. Western art critics have a tendency- fairly or otherwise- to interpret these works through a foreigner’s lens and, thus, to frequently classify Eastern works as “exotic.” Still, it’s hard to deny that some degree of ethnic identity is indeed present in these works.

It is clear that the modernism of the preceding decades prefigured the tone of Indian artistic practice in the late eighties and nineties. However, during this time, the preoccupations of the earlier part of the century were considerably attenuated and, with some younger artists, even become a non-issue. The hard facts of disappearing borders and a globalised economy made post-modernism the preferred artistic mode. In keeping with the tenor of the times, photo and hyperrealism, installation art, new media creations, and digital representations found their way into Indian artistic and public awareness. The "hybrid mannerisms" became "hybrid signs", and ironically, began to seem normal and familiar.

However, even as many of the earlier divides blurred, and the borders between imported and indigenous seemed to suture, some rough edges continued to show. During the 1990s, a pluralist and fragmentative mood dominated the creation of contemporary art, highlighting the difficulties associated with the dawn of an age of information and instant gratification, and with the emergence and novel concerns of 'the global Indian'. Dually charged by the excessive information they received and their personal responses to this environment, the work of Both Indian and Indian diaspora artists like Gajanan D. Bhagwat, Balraj K. Khanna, Yashwant Mali, S. V. Rama Rao, Lancelot Ribeiro, and Ibrahim Wagh responded to newer and greater numbers of stimuli than any of their predecessors could have imagined.

With the old, outmoded dualities loosened, Atul Dodiya's metaphoric montages took cognisance of the space in which Indians found themselves face to face with other citizens of

the world, while Subodh Gupta used his paintings and installations to filter and magnify the everyday experiences of rural and middle-class Indians for a global audience. In the work of Baiju Parthan, the past and the present cohered without dissonance in a new, digitized realm, and Anju Dodiya's personal struggles with the violence of the creative process were spelled out for viewers in her watercolours.

With this contemporary wave came the opening up of the market for Indian art abroad, as also the profusion of art galleries within the country, meaning that the Indian artist now had no choice but to address a more diffuse audience, through themes that resonated with the local as well as the global. Today, the work of artists from the Indian diaspora, the blurring of design and art, and the videos, installations and digital spaces of an even younger generation of artists have all added new dimensions to Indian contemporary art, a seemingly nebulous concept ever-receptive to growth and change. To conclude, through the trials and tribulations of its practitioners, Indian art has yielded a picture of a vital and vigorous creative practice over the last century. It is this frequently bewildering heterogeneity, this multiple and plural nature of Indian art which, perhaps, will eventually deliver up the insights its practitioners continue to pursue so dedicatedly.

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