

Interview with Natasha Ginwala on her reaction to the exhibition *Santhal Family: Positions around an Indian Sculpture*

CF: Considering the increased interest in Indian art and Indian art history in relation to modernism at that time (2008) seen in a number of curated exhibitions in Europe and the USA, how do you think the curatorial approach of the *Santhal Family* exhibition was different to other exhibitions at that time?

NG: While there has been a frenetic interest in Indian art and its histories, the sites of contextualization have tended to remain rather narrow. Mainly enacted as proposals of blockbuster scale by Euro-American institutions that literally pave a smoothed road from Modernism to “the Contemporary” for what is an extremely varied artistic milieu. Nuanced readings for: informal constellations of critical-artistic exchange, collective practices and cultivated exhibitory frameworks, the prominence of art schools and their distinct pedagogical approaches have mostly been lost to bombastic proclamations on “Indian Contemporary Art”. While there have been significant and sensitively made solo presentations of contemporary practices emerging from the Indian context, the logic of bundling an art scene (*that is a scene-of-scenes*) into an easily consumable paradigm has equaled an erasure of sorts. Since it resulted in limited articulations based on contrived thematizing and “artist countdowns” rather than any genuine navigations of cultural praxes and its social constituents. Thankfully, after an extensive roll call of such exhibitions, this tendency seems to have run its course.

Against this backdrop, *Santhal Family* still remains atypical for a variety of reasons. And this atypicality is what situates it as a crucial contribution to exhibition-practice in a broader sense and to reading Modernity ‘against the grain’ with and through the objecthood of Art. Unlike most blockbuster exhibitions presenting a flat horizon, it involved breaks, pauses, returns and re-positions. Filtering into discussions taking place amongst the art community in India as an imaginative common space to cite/sight historical positions from contemporary standpoints beyond a Western-Nonwestern dichotomy.

CF: When you heard about the project, what was your response to an exhibition which took a key work of Indian modernism as its starting point and ‘positioned’ the sculpture alongside contemporary international artists many of which were not from India? Furthermore how did you respond to the use of Indian art history by people (curators and artists) not from India?

NG: To begin from an artwork: here, an iconic modernist sculpture, which is a group portrait on more than one level – rather than launching an exhibition from the terrain of discourse was a refreshing proposition. I felt somewhat resistant toward the choice of work initially, since it carries a certain “heaviness” – materially, conceptually and socio-politically. Baij’s *Santhal Family* bears strong inherent claims that might have proved unyielding for a contemporary exhibition that framed itself as an open invitation in re-visiting narratives of Indian Modernism, universalist ideals that paralleled colonial rule, cosmopolitanism and artistic pedagogy. Yet what appeared to take shape was a tensile structure, a *rounding* of critical ideas and artistic interventions that are transverse readings of a rather monolithic form. The sculpture itself hence, *appears* as a tool (in the most positive sense).

If there wasn’t a careful selection of inter-generational and international contributors to this project (artists, critics, historians, curators) it would only amount to cultural asphyxiation, doing more harm to the impulse of Baij’s oeuvre, the setting of Santiniketan which sought to generate a universal pedagogy and to the vital

disalignments of Indian Modernisms¹. The exhibition seemed to provide a collective departure point while still crafting a dynamic non-secularity and counter-points to cut through an established vein of historical discourse. Finally, it prompts us into imagining a collective sociability between incommensurable times and material forms.

CF: Like many other exhibitions which focused on Indian art, *Santhal Family* was not able to be re exhibited in India as it was originally intended. With this in mind, how do you think exhibitions like *Santhal Family* or *Indian Highway* (Serpentine Gallery, 2008/2009) which might only be experienced through hearsay and documentation, feed back into the Indian art scene?

This question deserves significant consideration. While we frequently speak of a Global Art History, this emergent categorization is hardly ever met with rigorous analyses of access points. Does it count to have been an indirect audience to *Global Contemporary Art*? To have gained exposure mostly through a register of echoes: image slides, catalogues, talks and conversations rather than physical sites of exhibition and biennial making. The terrain of globality is a construction to address our commonality, however it may be functional only when conscious of its own contour lines: modes of tuning in and being tuned out of a glocality.

When an exhibition is surveyed as a gestural substance, we can refuse to flatten the materiality of distance and levels of reception. *Santhal Family*, like so many other global exhibitions is felt as a set of "returns" - an echo presence in the experience of contemporaneity as we re-negotiate relations with Modernism(s).

When viewing the catalogue of *Santhal Family*, we find ourselves in the throes of a liminal undertaking, rather than being amidst the mandated translation of a successive tracking – a zigzagging into cultural histories as acts of ‘sculpting.’

The unfortunate reality is that international exhibitions that have aimed to travel to the local contexts that form the very basis for their research, often fail to do so. It is best to acknowledge this and develop appropriate frameworks for exchange than maintaining grand illusions of parallelity between international and local contemporary scenes.

CF: The exhibition was centred around Ramkinkar Baij’s public art work the *Santhal Family* sculpture, thereby the work was not physically a part of the exhibition, rather the audience was only able to experience the original artwork through documentation, artist interpretation and the sculpture’s historical context. How do you think this absence of the sculpture acted as an enabling gesture and what do you think it allowed to happen in the exhibition?

NG: I’m interested in the notion of void as a conscious echo chamber, one that allows for the permeation of polyvocality. The exhibition too can be such an immersive site, where an ecology is generated not only from artistic contributions and historical content but the co-presence of fragmented reverberations from those very expressions.

Further, this discrepancy between the subject of address and the address of the subject seems crucial not only to the overall framing of this project but also more prominently to socio-cultural conditions that generated Baij’s practice as well as ongoing states of contemporaneity in the Indian subcontinent. It could be said, perhaps, that a disjunctive viewing is the only view of consequence.

CF: When I first began researching the exhibition to put together the archive, my basis and limited knowledge of Indian art and Indian Modernism was perhaps centred around Geeta Kapur's essay 'When was modernism' (2000). Having spoken with Grant about this text, he also acknowledged that there were certain aspects of it that were influential to his conception and realisation of the Santhal Family exhibition. For you as a curator working both internationally and in India, what do you think Kapur's influence has been in terms of Indian art history and is her text still important for you as a 'young curator'?

NG: I see Geeta Kapur as a key commentator within the contemporary cultural field and at a personal level, a mentor. I use the term commentator in a holistic sense, as someone who has constantly observed, re-evaluated and spoken from within. Being a significant presence in the Indian arts scene, yet always conscious that her frame of address is not construed as a myopic geography but one that embraces cross-generational and multi-site dialogue.

I conducted an interviewⁱⁱ with Kapur just before leaving India to pursue de Appel Curatorial Programme in Amsterdam. Here is an extract from the interview, which I consider a central comment on 'When Was Modernism' and its enduring relevance in framing critical vocabularies.

GK: My book, When Was Modernism deploys different terms of reference, from Third World to postcolonial to globalisation, yet belongs firmly within a nameable ideological mind-set. In a globalised world, terms such as transnational and transcultural have greater purchase, but let me add: there is little that is contestatory about 'trans' – it covers gaps and differences, thereby creating an illusion of a continuity-in-difference... The point to reiterate is that discourse is now so mobile as to be slippery and that one must learn to enunciate both firmly and flexibly in order to be heard.

Kapur's text continues to inform my ongoing curatorial trajectory, especially in regards to the current assignment: Museum of Rhythm within Taipei Biennial 2012. Here the Politics of Modernism unfolds as "a site of permanent ambivalence" and transgressive modes of involvement with international historicisms. Folding in archival documents and artefacts of material culture in a manner evoking Kapur's use of 'traditions-in-use' and not as inclusions that involve the setting up of false universes.

ⁱ *When Was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, Geeta Kapur, Tulika Press, New Delhi, 2000

ⁱⁱ An extended interview appeared a year later in two parts on Afterall Online: <http://www.afterall.org/online/geeta-kapur-part1> ; <http://afterall.org/online/geeta-kapur-on-the-curatorial-in-india-part2>