

LECTURE

"Myth, Politics and Gender in Contemporary Art by Women from India"

© Susan Platt excerpt from a lecture, Association of Art Historians, Exeter England, 1998

"There is no reason whatsoever for the rest of the world to subscribe to the vocational stringencies of the American neo-avant-garde. Certainly, there is no reason to condemn the sensuous or eccentric . . . acts of art making that attract non-Western artists. Greenberg's aesthetic meant very little in the Third World." (Geeta Kapur "Dismantling the Norm," *Traditions, Tensions, Contemporary Art in Asia*, Asia Society, 1996, p. 68)

Contemporary art from Asia has come into prominence in the United States and Europe in the last few years, a result of their burgeoning capitalism which has led directly to the marketing of art in lavish magazines like *Art Asia Pacific* and huge exhibitions like "Traditions/Tensions, Contemporary Art from Asia", curated by Apinan Poshyananda and Vishakha Desai. This year, in conjunction with the fiftieth anniversary of Independence from Great Britain, there were many celebrations and exhibitions that focused specifically on art from India. The only exhibition to focus on contemporary women artists from India was held at Mills College in Oakland California last fall and curated by Mary Ann Milford-Lutzker who overcame enormous obstacles to bring the work out of India. (In some cases the artists even carried the work to California). I would like to start by emphasizing the powerful, articulate identities of these women both as individuals and as a collective presence, for they profoundly impressed me. They ranged in age from their forties to their sixties, and came primarily from the urban centers of Calcutta, Bombay, and Delhi. They did not wear veils, although some wore a variation of traditional Indian dress, such as the sari. All but one has been in marriages, many of them arranged, although now some are divorced. Only one wore the traditional red dot on her forehead. (Bengali, had a red line in their part, which was red pigment mixed with lead, a gradual form of death to insure that the wife predeceased her husband.) One, Navjot had rebelled against that convention by having three black horizontal lines instead). Several are married to artists and two are living with a fellow artist. Although widely different in personality from Gogi's gregarious style to the barely audible words of Naina Dalal, they each had an exceptionally powerful presence-articulate, assertive and charismatic. As they spoke to me about their work, there was a deep current of political and social commitment as well as a sense of independence, and even defiance. All of them are privileged and wealthy enough to fly to California for the opening of the exhibition. They represent the contemporary identity of women artists in India and they are acutely aware of their position as international artists, sought after for exhibitions around the world. One artist, Vasundhara Tewari, for example, was going on to an international gathering of women artists in Iran immediately after returning from the United States.

Taking these assertive, independent artists as a focus, it is evident that Edward Said's model of Orientalism is no longer applicable to the current situation in contemporary Asia and South Asia. With the spread of capitalism and its infrastructure, television, faxes, e mail, the world wide web, jet planes, and rapid currency exchange through ATM machines is paired with increased opportunities for women to move beyond traditional social restraint. These artists have developed a complex cultural

discourse that intersects with many cultures; a "network of artistic exchange" as Rasheed Araeen puts it replaces the concept of a fixed archaic entity that only archeologists and antiquarians examine.

The bipolar model of the European hegemony defining Asia as the "Other" to Europe, an "imperial" enterprise in which Europe was able "to manage even produce- the Orient, politically, sociologically ... ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively" has been profoundly altered. The women I am speaking of today are part of this new internationalism (with a hyphen in the middle as Geeta Kapur posits, asserting the nationalism in internationalism). In their art they are continuing an Indian tradition that is well established throughout the twentieth century of negotiating between their own histories and those of the global art scene.

The concept of multiculturalism is also irrelevant to their art. These women are not tokens of a position, they are not ethnic samples. As Rasheed Araeen puts it, multiculturalism "full of promise for a brave new world of cultural harmony and integration...was disfigured at the outset by . . . a narrowness of vision and interpretation derived from the desire of western thought to structure a world devoid of all contradictions, which leads it into staging the world according to its own values and ideals without regard for the humanity and knowledge of other . . . It[multiculturalism] is the main hurdle we now face in our attempt to change the system and create an international paradigm in which what takes precedence is art work, with its own set of rules for production and legitimacy in terms of aesthetics, historical formation, location, and significance, rules not necessarily derived from any one or ordinary culture." Geeta Kapur states about contemporary Indian culture: "We admire history - over and above art history- as the matrix from which the notion of the avant-garde arises, then there are always plural histories in the reckoning." She continues that Indian art has "little to do with the fancy dress of multiculturalism and more to do with a major rethinking of historical experience through political reflexivity and cultural action." She sees in this art a "neo avant-garde" that opposes "the power structures of American art, academia and above all politics."