

Rethinking occidental paradigms in the discourse of art

An exploration of Geeta Kapur's  
*dialectical synthesis* in the context of  
the oeuvres of Nasreen Mohamedi and  
Alwar Balasubramaniam

- a challenge to the continued dominance of  
polarized thinking

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# Table of contents

Introduction	_____	p. 3
Body Chapters	_____	p. 6
I.    Run-up to Independence		p. 6
• Occidental orientations		p. 6
• Triumphant otherness		p. 6
• Revivalist vocation		p. 8
• Invented tradition		p. 9
• Hermeneutic retake		p. 10
• Urban progressives		p. 11
II.    Nasreen Mohamedi		p. 13
• The agency of modernity: the state		p. 13
• Modernity in the balance		p. 14
• Living solidarities vs. transcending particularities		p. 15
• 'Indian' modernism		p. 16
• Act of recuperation		p. 17
• Ethical placement		p. 18
• Limitations of terminology		p. 20
• The alternative of post-Minimalism		p. 22
• (Beyond) hegemonic representations		p. 23
• Dialectical synthesis		p. 25
III.    Alwar Balasubramaniam		p. 26
• Center at the margins		p. 27
• Dialectics of installation		p. 28
- 1-Bringing together contrasting ideas		p. 29
- 2-Challenging conventional boundaries		p. 30
- 3-Conveying notions of time and space		p. 31
- 4-Inviting viewer participation		p. 32
• Multiple engagements		p. 33
Conclusion	_____	p. 34
Bibliography	_____	p. 37
Appendices	_____	p. 42
Sources of appendices	_____	p. 56

# Introduction

The foundation for this thesis was laid in Sydney in 2008, when I was an exchange student at the University of Sydney, Australia. Thomas Berghuis—lecturer in Asian Art at the Department of Art History and Film Studies—familiarized me with the work of professor John Clark, his idea of plural modernities in art and the problems of particular art historical conceptions applied in ‘non-western’ contexts.

I remember him referring to Sydney’s social geography and demography as a kind of metaphor for the idea(l) of *interculturalism*—as opposed to that of *multiculturalism* embodied in, for example, the city of Amsterdam.<sup>1</sup> In my current work I build on this distinction in the sense that I advocate a nuanced reading of artworks contextualized in areas outside of the historical-canonical centers of art reception and criticism—an understanding founded upon revision of the actual framework rather than on mere acceptance and inclusion of their ‘otherness’. Therefore, like Berghuis, I “seek out artists who are capable of challenging the prevailing ideological commitment to categorization and historical classification of cultural objects and artistic movements” (p.1).

In this thesis, I focus on the work of two internationally acknowledged Indian artists of the post-Independence period: Nasreen Mohamedi (1937-1990) and Alwar Balasubramaniam (b. 1971). The research reflects on their position within the history of Indian modernism, as well as in the context of international avant-garde movements. Mohamedi’s oeuvre might be considered against the background of the foundation of the Indian nation state. Balasubramaniam’s work should be regarded in the context of more recent events, such as geopolitical changes, migration and globalization. Nevertheless, both oeuvres show significant analogies: an austere formalist aesthetic—ranging from the

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<sup>1</sup> The criterion on which Berghuis—with reference to Rustom Barucha—seems to have based this distinction comprises the nature of the incentives which have led to the co-existence of different cultures, which might be either controlled from above (in the case of multi-culturalism) or naturally occurring (interculturalism). In: Berghuis: 1.

resolutely abstract to the slightly indicative or representational—going with a quest for a meta-reality.

The abstract vocabulary of both artists might be related to various canonical modern art movements, as many critics suggest. Particularly Conceptual and Minimal art are being referred to. Mohamedi's oeuvre has frequently been weighted against that of her Canadian-American contemporary Agnes Martin (1912-2004). The works of Donald Judd and Joseph Beuys are often cited as Balasubramaniam's major influences. Yet, one generally recognizes particular divergences. In order to comprehend those differences, John Clark—author of numerous books on modern and contemporary Asian art—was one of the first theorists to apply the notion of alternative modernities (f.e.1993/1998).

The endeavor to go beyond Greenberg's canonical definition of modernism relies on the idea that different circumstances account for different experiences and interpretations. As the Indian art critic and curator Geeta Kapur explains with regard to India: "[The] modern is not an identical narrative in reckonings across nations: it has to be held in place in India by a contextualized and increasingly more critical stance" (p.45). The designation of an identifiable 'Indianness' may be used in order to touch upon issues of autonomy and authenticity. Thus, one may refute the representation of 'non-western' art as derivative of a western norm. Yet, the classification and categorization of works and characteristics in terms of 'Indian' or 'non-Indian' must also be regarded as problematic.

Several critics, like Ashrafi Bhagat—head of the Department of Fine Arts at Stella Maris College in Chennai—tend to define the 'Indianness' of the works of Mohamedi and Balasubramaniam by relating its philosophical contents to the indigenous spiritual tradition: "The conjunctions of opposites that Bala brings into play conceptualize a philosophy of transcendence of the phenomenal world, in other words, the shattering of all forms to get behind the veil or 'maya'. And here Bala brings his Indianness to the fore within the broad canvas of globalism" (p.46). In stressing the duality form/content, Bhagat seems to bring about a polarization between a formalist aesthetic with universalist (westernizing) connotations and some deeper implications that emphasize the local or national.

The research question structuring this thesis is whether the oeuvres of Nasreen Mohamedi and Alwar Balasubramaniam can be understood in terms of a synthesis of western

modernist abstraction and Indian spirituality. Through critical consideration of leading discussions on their oeuvres, my aim is to formulate an alternative for polarized thinking—the hallmark of which is an insistence on dichotomous choices like tradition/modernity, spirituality/rationality and local/global. I discuss the relevance of past and present terminology, while working towards an exploration of the ‘paradigm shift’ as proposed by Geeta Kapur—India’s most prominent emic voice at present—involving a model for dialectical thinking. What is more, this thesis relates Kapur’s ideas to more practical-orientated considerations, moving them into the realm of art production and critique. Thus, my contribution entails the definition of some explicit directions in order to transcend a mainly abstract ideal.

In the first chapter I outline the political and social climate in India until 1947 which forms the backdrop for the inception and early development of modern art in the region. The emphasis is on the different ways in which artists have responded to the experience of change and transformation, in particular the extent to which indigenous/national identity has been stressed. Two major trends are being discerned: a nationalist art of the modernizing state and a counter-establishment art which has frequently been formally modern.

In the second chapter I discuss some works of Nasreen Mohamedi in detail, with a focus on both her Indian and international lineage. Thus, a continuum/discontinuum dialogue is being articulated. The framework for doing so is established by the critical analyses of Kapur, particularly the essay named *Elegy for an Unclaimed Beloved: Nasreen Mohamedi 1937-1990*, and her notion of a ‘dialectical synthesis’ (pp.61-86).

The third chapter involves an examination of several of Balasubramaniam’s installations. Most of these artworks haven’t been released, or even created, until fairly recently. Therefore, they haven’t got hold of a firm position in the/an art historical discourse yet. By using the previous account on Mohamedi as a model, my interpretation is structured and the suitability and fruitfulness of dialectical thinking—as opposed to polemical thinking—beyond Kapur’s selected case studies is emphasized.

# I Run-up to Independence

## Occidental orientations

British influence in India had started around 1600 with the East India Company's recognition of India's strategic trading importance. Nevertheless, it was not until 1858 that colonial India passed from the control of the East India Company to the British Empire. During the nineteenth century government-sponsored art schools were established, built upon European models, in which the academic naturalism of nineteenth-century European painting was taught. The subtitle of Partha Mitter's 1995 book *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental orientations* can be related in the first place to this particular branch of art production in colonial India.

Mitter argues for a nuanced consideration of Occidentalism. Firstly, he reminds us that the Indian interest in western art did not start with British rule. This kind of cultural syncretism had already made up a key element since the sixteenth century, when artists at the Mughal courts had shown an interest in western styles and techniques (p.27). Besides, he guards against oversimplifying the relationship between ruler and ruled: a focus on western influence on Indian cultural practice should not deprive the colonized of their own voice. The adoption of foreign conventions and indigenous authenticity are not considered as mutually exclusive. As Mitter explains, Indian art in the nineteenth and early twentieth century "represented a dialogue between western ideas and a search for Hindu identity" (p.8). Even though other critics might not emphasize the explicit Hindu nature of Indian nationalism as much, many share the idea of a non-confrontational synthesis of two cultures.

## Triumphant otherness

As may be clear, Indian artists did not merely copy British models. The medium of oil-and-easel and western modes of representation were often appropriated as a means to the end of political nationalism and religious reform. Along with the imported stylistic devices an indigenous visual archive was articulated. Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906)—a protagonist of modernity, as Kapur remarks (p.145)—took his themes from the extensive reservoir of

indigenous, classical literature, principally the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. For example, his oil painting *Shakuntala looking back to glimpse Dushyanta* depicts a scene from the classical Sanskrit poet and writer Kalidasa's drama called 'Sakunthalam' (fig. I). As the Indian philosopher Rabindranath Tagore once stated, Ravi Varma's paintings thus "helped in restoring to Indians their own heritage, even if through a foreign medium" (in: Embree: 97).

The plasticity and naturalism of his images won Ravi Varma popularity with royalty, middle class, progressives, colonizers, nationalists and foreigners alike. His achievements were implemented as part of a mythology in the making. The idea that, in the words of Kapur, "a native, once he has been initiated into western techniques, proceeds with the redoubled pace of a prodigy and overcomes all hurdles" (p.149) was articulated and eagerly accepted as indicative of advancement—advancement from mere imitation to emulation.

Yet, his works have also been misinterpreted as being conservative, kitsch, or orientalist. Indeed, their voluptuous eroticism might invoke connotations of "religious pornography", as the leading American scholar on India, Aislie Embree, affirms (p.97). What is more, Ravi Varma's endeavor to transcend western privilege in the representational project by constructing an ideal pan-Indian vision based upon a golden past—like in *A Galaxy of Musicians* (fig. II), in which eleven women from different cultures living on the Indian subcontinent are portrayed while making music together—seems to implicate the homogenization of essentially complex subjects. In the process of modernization, the threat of reducing tradition to an "anthropological residue of lost culture" lurks (Kapur: 163).

According to Kapur though, the stereotyped women in Ravi Varma's paintings demonstrate a level of (rebellious) subjectivity and reflexivity. With reference to *A Galaxy of Musicians* she states that the women depicted "refuse to serve the iconic function; there appears between the lines an inadvertent, or second-level allegory about representation itself" (p.174). However, notwithstanding the validity of this interpretation and the general enthusiastic reception by the public, others continuously and consistently rejected the approach of Ravi Varma and his followers.

### Revivalist vocation

Aside from those artists who eagerly accepted western academic influence, some—mainly Bengalese—nationalists considered the embracing of European naturalism as a disloyalty to their native tradition and heritage. The challenge, however, was to find a proper indigenous canon in order to counterbalance these currents. In the process of ‘purification’, the principal focus was on Hindu identity. Particularly the ‘true’ Indian, or Hindu, spiritualism was emphasized and contrasted with western materialism and industrialization, as Mitter articulates (p.478). This search for authenticity and autonomy might be related to the political arena in which swadeshi (self-sufficiency) and swaraj (self-rule) movements gained weight.<sup>2</sup>

The worldview of philosopher, poet and first ‘non-western’ Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and the actualization of his ideas in the school of Patha Bhavana and later university of Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan<sup>3</sup> may be regarded as emblematic for this category of cultural nationalism. Tagore, reflecting on the prominence of Hindu identity, stated that “India has all along been trying experiments in evolving a social unity within which all the different peoples could be held together, yet fully enjoying the freedom of maintaining their differences. The tie has been as loose as possible, yet as close as the circumstances permitted. This has produced something like a United States of a social federation, whose common name is Hinduism” (p.137). Hinduism was believed to be a common denominator, which accounted for India’s unity in diversity.

As Grant Watson—curator, writer and research associate at the Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva) in London<sup>4</sup>—suggests, the character of the art college of Santiniketan, Kala Bhavana, can be understood in terms of the overlapping concepts of orientalism, universalism and nationalism (2007: 2). It is important to note that orientalism

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<sup>2</sup> Strategies of the swadeshi movement involved boycotting British products and the revival of domestic-made products and production techniques. Swaraj refers to Gandhi’s concept for Indian independence from foreign domination. For a detailed description, see for example Arora and Awasthy.

<sup>3</sup> Located in West-Bengal, less than 200 kilometers north of Kolkata, former Calcutta.

<sup>4</sup> At Iniva, Watson contributed to the publication *Drawing Space: Contemporary Indian Drawing*, accompanying the 2000 exhibition at the institute including the work of Nasreen Mohamedi—which will be focal point of the next chapter.

did not carry similar connotations at that time as it does now. Rather, it defined the search for a particular ‘Indianness’, which was expressed through an indigenous romanticism and rooted itself in native (Hindu) subject-matter, ancient traditions, artisanal practices and rural morals. However, as Watson notes, in Tagore’s world view nature and culture are united and modernity stems from tradition (2007: 3). Thus, the apparent tradition/modernity dichotomy is falsified.

While Tagore and his followers dismissed academic naturalism and unquestionably criticized British imperialism, anti-western sentiments did not flourish. The cultural and intellectual center of Santiniketan was thought to fulfill the function of being a vehicle for the synthesis of Asian and western thought—or, to quote Tagore himself: “a conduit between Asia’s past and present, so that the ancient learning might be rejuvenated through contact with modern thinking” (in: Dutta, Robinson and Tagore: 178). Therefore, many artists at Kala Bhavana embraced western modernist idioms in their work. For example, Rabindranath Tagore visited the Bauhaus school at Weimar in 1921. Both he and his brother Gaganendranath were responsible for India’s first exhibition of European modernist painting—with a showing of the Bauhaus artists—in Calcutta in 1922.

Indeed, the underlying objective was that of connecting India to the world. “I have to found a world centre for the study of humanity there,” Tagore said in 1918. “The days of petty nationalism are numbered—let the first step towards universal union occur in the fields of Bolpur. I want to make that place somewhere beyond the limits of nature and geography” (in: Dutta, Robinson and Tagore: 179). Thus, Tagore’s vision reached beyond merely making alliances with other artistic vocabularies in order to deepen his own. Rather, in his pursuit of universal humanism and focus on good design, he connected with utopian practices occurring in various places around the world approximately at the same time.

### **Invented tradition**

After the First World War political strife had intensified. The response of the British Government to the high levels of nationalist activity encompassed a suspension of civil rights and the introduction of martial law in some areas. At that time the person of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had debuted on India’s political stage. Gandhi, a Hindu social and

religious reformer, advocated passive and nonviolent opposition. He considered ‘tradition’ to contain the power of resistance, having “emerged in the decolonizing process as an oppositional category” (Kapur: 49). This tradition, however, must be understood as being invented rather than merely given or received.

It is clear that there are at least two distinct aspects of this invented tradition that can be identified. Firstly, there was the quasi-classical art of Raja Ravi Varma, which aspired to restoring Indian civilizational pride. Also, there were the landed gentry like the Tagore family who brought in the art of the folk. And finally, there was an aspect which was—in the words of Kapur—“less indigenist [...], more bourgeois/metropolitan” (p.52). Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941), from Indo-Hungarian descent, was among the first of twentieth century Indian artists to be trained in Paris. At the juncture of the legacies of Ravi Varma and the artists in Santiniketan, she sought after an aesthetic which could encompass her split allegiance.

### **Hermeneutic retake**

Sher-Gil, child of a Hungarian mother and an Indian father, was born in Budapest. When she was at the age of eight the family moved back to India. While her mother encouraged Sher-Gil to start an academic training in Europe, her nationalist father—who advocated pride and knowledge of the Indian heritage—disapproved of her international aspirations. During her stay at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris in 1930-34 he wrote to her saying “that since she was not very interested in India and knew nothing of its philosophy or art, she should remain in Europe where she seemed to belong” (in: Sundaram: 1).

However, Sher-Gil’s attitude to contemporary European art may be regarded as ambiguous. She almost makes no references to avant-garde movements prevalent in Paris at the time. Rather, she connected with the neorealism which had reached her via Hungary. Reacting against modernism as a formalist ideology, Sher-Gil “saw this form of realism as a bridge for her projected Indian experience” (Kapur: 7). As the Indian artist Vivan Sundaram—nephew of Amrita Sher-Gil—suggests, she thus used the realist stance in a way comparable to that of Ravi Varma: to “interpret the life of Indians [...], pictorially” (p.6). Indeed, her 1935 work *Three Girls*—a stylized and simplified depiction of three young

women on the threshold of adulthood and marriage (fig. III)—shows Sher-Gil's keenness to observe and represent Indian villagers and their way of life.

At the same time, Sher-Gil produced what Kapur has called a “hermeneutic retake on modernism” (p.7) by equating early modernist with ancient Indian artistic production through the articulation of aesthetic affinities. Indeed, the mannerist stress and metaphorical brevity with which Sher-Gil composed may be considered as characteristic of both the modern and the (classical and medieval) oriental. In 1934 Sher-Gil wrote to her parents from Hungary, saying that “modern art has led me to the comprehension and apprehension of Indian painting and sculpture... It seems paradoxical, but I know of certain, that had we not come away to Europe, I should perhaps never have realized that a fresco from Ajanta or a small piece of sculpture in the Musee Guimet is worth more than the whole Renaissance” (in: Sheikh, Subramanyan and Sundaram: 112). And so, the foundation for a cross-cultural vocabulary and international idiom was laid.

Sher-Gil's self-conscious persona and mediation of varied art-historical sources might be better understood within the framework of an emancipatory agenda, both private and nationalist. As Kapur explains, “her biography took on the aspect of a cultural encounter where she presented, within a civilizational context, a struggle for self-determination” (p.6). Despite her father's reproaches of betrayal, Sher-Gil has proven loyalty and devotion to her (father's) fatherland. In her striving for an individual and sovereign artistic style through affiliations with western modernism, she functioned as a role-model for future generations, particularly the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group.

### **Urban progressives**

The 1940s were years of great upheaval, marked by famine and war. The demand for independence culminated in a plan to establish an interim government. This, however, failed as the result of disagreements between Gandhi's National Congress and the All-India Muslim League. When by 1946 tensions were not solved, a suggestion for the partition of India was made. The Indian Independence Act of 1947 included the establishing of India and Pakistan as independent dominions within the Commonwealth.

In the 1940s a number of artists' collectives were formed in India's major cities, of which the Progressive Artists' Group (PAG) probably is the most well-known. Founded in Bombay in 1947 the PAG was an initiative that, like Kapur says, "pitched into the heroic narrative of modern art and produced a formalist manifesto that was to help the first generation of artists in independent India position themselves internationally" (in: Fisher and Mosquera: p.66). The group wished to break with the revivalist nationalism established by the Bengal school of artists. Many of its members traveled to Paris for training, advocating modernist ideals and a cosmopolitan culture.

The three principal painters of the PAG—Francis Newton Souza, Maqbool Fida Husain and Sayed Haider Raza—were related to diverse minority religions and social class backgrounds. Thus, the myth of a 'pan-Indianness' based upon Hinduism was dismantled and the secular credentials of a nation in the making were marked. For instance, Husain produced a series of *Mother Teresa*, an Indian Catholic nun (fig. IV). Moreover, the members of the PAG worked in dramatically different styles, from the Expressionism of Souza (fig. V) to the pure abstraction of Vasudev S. Gaitonde (fig. XVI)—who will be recalled at a later point.

Despite their distinct identities and each in his own way, the members of the PAG fulfilled the function of being a visual spokesman for the national modern, consciously seeking a new form and individual style which could describe Indian reality immediately after independence. Yet, due to communal tensions in the aftermath of Partition many artists left their country and settled in Europe's metropolises—the life span of nearly all of these artists' collectives was short. Thus, a fundamental chapter in modern art history in India came to an end.

## II Nasreen Mohamedi

### **The agency of modernity: the state**

The 1947 transfer of power had included a cabinet formation and the initiation of Jawaharlal Nehru as prime minister. Nehru—in his speech on the granting of Indian independence—stressed the idea of the start of a new era, marked by the founding and evolution of the modern nation state.<sup>5</sup> His modernizing agenda integrated a quest for democracy, socialism, secularism and cultural diversity. Furthermore, Nehru sought after a way to serve India's economic interests. Science and technology, an institutional structure and bureaucratic rationality were considered instrumental in the pursuit of his political philosophy.

In fact, Nehru thus drew the rationale of his thought and action from 'alien' principles. As the Indian political scientist Subrata Kumar Mitra explains, equality and individual rights "flagrantly contradicted the custom of the land, which was steeped in hierarchy and an organic worldview" (p.765). Moreover, there is a paradox in the implementation of religious neutrality in a society which operated overwhelmingly through religion. Nehru, like other members of modernizing elites, considered religion to be a vestige of tradition and hence an obstacle to progress. Nevertheless, he also searched for ways to provide a bridge between these apparently conflicting values—tradition and modernity, religion and reason.

In his endeavor to solve the dichotomies, Nehru took (his utopian understanding of) the *renaissance man* as a role model: "an inquisitive, rational, and cultured person who balanced materialism and aesthetic sensibilities; a believer in scientific progress who humanized the harsh angularities of the scientific method with the gentle coating of a countervailing mystical-romantic faith in historical evolution and continuity" (Mitra: 765). Nehru's vision, which constituted the axis of Indian political, social and economical

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<sup>5</sup> "A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance." In: MacArthur: 234.

developments at the time, may be considered as emblematic of the spirit of the age. Therefore, a characterization of the modern period in India needs to be twofold: it can be typified by, on the one hand, extreme intellectuality and, on the other hand, intensified sensuality.<sup>6</sup>

### **Modernity in the balance**

As with regard to the arts, these contradictory/complementary aspects may also be distinguished. The official cultural policy was based upon rationalization, conceptualization and standardization. As Kapur notes, “culture was sought to be institutionalized precisely in order to carry out the overall mandate of modernization” (p.202). Art was understood as a vehicle of social meaning, having the power of both confirming and denying stories of nationhood. Even though the association of art and sheer nationalism had been diminished, Embree explains that what did not end was a “concern with cultural identity, a search for what is authentically Indian” (p.98). Fundamental to this investigation was Nehru’s occupation with the identification of a national body of art. National institutions were founded in order to represent these distinctively Indian collections.

Unmistakably, the unambiguous definition of the distinctiveness of modern Indian art is questionable, since “even if art practice is ostensibly harnessed to the operation of the ideology or cultural policy of the new national state, creative practice is usually heterodox” (Kapur: 202). Again—as was the case in most instances referred to in the previous chapter—artists found themselves confronted with the dilemma of choosing between speaking in the name of tradition and privileging culture as a means of cohering contemporaneity. However, as the philosopher and sociologist Ernest Geller already noted in 1965, “the dilemma is quite spurious: ultimately the movements invariably contain both elements—a genuine modernism and a more or less spurious concern for local culture” (in: Chatterjee 1986: 4). The Indian scholar Alka Pande has written in great detail about these two optional approaches.

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<sup>6</sup> These characteristics might be considered symptomatic of ‘modernity’ in a general sense—as described in the positioning paper of the Pallas Institute for Cultural Disciplines at Leiden University: 2.

### Living solidarities vs. transcending particularities

In her article *The Age of Shifting Demographies: East West Encounter* Pande explains that “at one end there was sustained regard to indigenous, living traditions and to merge the tradition/modernity aspects of contemporary culture through a typically postcolonial eclecticism” (p.1). Indeed, selective acceptance of foreign influences left space for the articulation of native practices and worldviews, often with a spiritual core. For many, ‘Indianness’ was considered as a synonym to a metaphysical aesthetic. Yet—unlike with the Bengal school of art—this was not specifically related to the promotion of Hindu identity. Thus, it did not collide with the contemporary political vision of cultural diversity and secularism.

Kapur agrees that a “creative relationship between the classical, the mystical and the everyday secular which demands what I called living solidarities, is precisely the range of contradictions contemporary Asian artists constantly tackle” (p.56). However, the common use of terms like eclecticism to describe this category of art production is attended with several objections, as will be emphasized in later paragraphs.

Conversely, as Pande describes, there was a “desire to engage from the overarching politics of the national by a reclusive attention to formal choices that seemingly transcended both cultural and subjective particularities and enter the modernist frame” (p.1). During the 1950s, many Indian artists literally crossed the threshold of mainstream Euro-American modernism. These artists, following the first group of émigrés to live and work in Europe’s metropolises, fully embraced the idea of the universalist project of modernism. Others, without physically transcending the borders of their home country, also gave expression to this quest for a globalized, detached, objective and non-hierarchical aesthetic.

However, the seemingly universalist quality of modernist art movements must be critically considered. Most of these movements are generally thought to have originated in the west and subsequently spread from the center to the margins. This model inevitably implies a standard against which everything else is being measured as an offshoot. As Sinha—professor of Asian Art History at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts—points out: “in order to justify its avant-garde status, they search for its difference from progressive art

movements in the West. Discouraged by its references to mainstream modernism, they inscribe it as derivative of that with which they are more familiar” (p.31).

Despite these discouragements, modernism in India differed qualitatively from the Euro-American phenomenon. In order to comprehend these differences, a particular terminology is put to use, which—apart from the previously mentioned *eclecticism*—includes the notion of *alternative modernisms*. Yet, in the overwrought hunt for autonomy and originality, oversimplification lurks. Stressing their *otherness* through the articulated display of ethnic moorings, “many artists developed a self-ethnologizing visual language that was a complete anti-thesis of the universalist framework of modernism”, to quote Sinha once more (p.34).<sup>7</sup>

### **‘Indian’ modernism**

One of the most well-known approaches to a tentative Indian modernism is embodied in Jawaharlal Nehru’s urban planning program for the city of Chandigarh, capital of the states Punjab and Haryana. Chandigarh is home to numerous architectural projects of the Swiss-French Le Corbusier (1887-1965) as well as of several other western-educated architects. Commonly considered to be an exemplary conceptual city, it was commissioned by Nehru to reflect the new nation’s modern, progressive outlook.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the overall master plan is characterized by rational neutrality. As Watson’s account<sup>9</sup> shows, its site was altered into a *tabula rasa* through the evacuation of 500 villages

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<sup>7</sup> In doing so, these artists associated with several principals and ideological biases constituting the orientalist mode. Therefore, these tendencies are often referred to as ‘inverted orientalism’.

<sup>8</sup> However, as the significant 1995 incident shows, the regulated neutrality of Chandigarh did not merely answer Nehru’s ideal of functioning as a model for an ultimate open and secular society without sectarian violence: chief minister Beant Singh was assassinated outside his office in Chandigarh by Sikh separatist activists of the Babbar Khalsa group on August 31.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to his contribution to the Iniva publication *Drawing Space: Contemporary Indian Drawing*, Watson has published a few other articles on the Indian artist Nasreen Mohamedi. Along with the writings of Geeta Kapur, these constitute the most substantial part of the critical literature regarding Mohamedi’s oeuvre. In *Moderate Modernism. On Tagore, Le Corbusier and Nasreen*

(2007: 3). Le Corbusier conceived its scheme as analogous to a human body and the plan was laid down in a strict rectangular grid pattern (fig. VI-VII). The dominant material employed is naked reinforced concrete, which establishes bold forms sensitive to light and shade. The buildings appear to be constructed out of pure geometric forms (fig. VIII-XI). By many, Le Corbusier's so-called *International Style* was regarded as an objective, nonaligned aesthetic which could be randomly implemented in whatever context.

Thus, Chandigarh's master plan did not leave much space for the distinguishing (il-) logic of an archetypal Indian city. As Jane Ridley—expert on the architect Edwin Lutyens—explains, "Le Corbusier showed an insolent disregard for the traditions, social order and climate of India" (p.3). Adversely, according to the architect himself, the plans for Chandigarh certainly were informed by an Indian (Hindu) aesthetic.<sup>10</sup> It is true indeed that numerous Indian architects were invited to cooperate. Moreover, we might try to read the 'Indianness' referred to by Le Corbusier as a conscious reformation or redefinition of what is (identifiably) Indian—a suggestion to be explored further in the next few paragraphs.

### **Act of recuperation**

Notwithstanding the general criticism, Chandigarh has also been praised by many artists and intellectuals for its pure geometry and sculptural forms. Nasreen Mohamedi—born into a prosperous Muslim family in Karachi (now in Pakistan) in 1937—appears to connect with Le Corbusier's aesthetic intuitively. Mohamedi was raised in Bombay (now Mumbai). From 1954 to 1957 she attended St. Martin's School in London and during the 1960s she spent a few years in Paris. Accordingly, Mohamedi returned to India well schooled in European modernism. In Bombay she joined the Bhulabhai Memorial Institute for the Arts. Her abstractionist tendencies were at a far remove from the dominant figuration and narrative painting in India at that time.

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*Mohamedi* he explores the underlying correlations between these three influential artists and intellectuals. It is precisely his capability for looking beyond the obvious which I admire him for, even though I consider several of his propositions as rather speculative.

<sup>10</sup> Statement in letter written in 1951 to his employees, in: Watson 2007: 4.

In addition to her oils, collages and fine-line pen and ink drawings, Mohamedi took numerous black-and-white photographs, mostly of architecture, landscapes and light.<sup>11</sup> In the 1970s she produced a series of photographs of Le Corbusier's concrete buildings in Chandigarh. Through the practice of framing, Mohamedi reduced structures and spaces to an abstract visual language—the pure balancing of form/forms without explicit context (fig. XII). As the New York-based art curator and writer Klaus Kertess—who curated the Whitney Biennial in 1995—indicates, Mohamedi thus sought “an art revelatory of the underlying patterns and forces of nature as well as those of human endeavor” (p.3). Similarly, in her photographs of another planned city, the sixteenth-century Mughal city of Fatehpur Sikri, she also succeeded in bringing intelligibility to disarray by means of good design (fig. XIII).

In an attempt to position Mohamedi's work in relation to her Indian inheritance, Jonathan Griffin—editor of *Frieze Magazine*—notes: “perhaps it is in this respect that Mohamedi's work responds most clearly to the overwhelming chaos, color and noise of her contemporary India—by reacting against it, rather than reflecting it” (p.2). Likewise, one might typify the ‘Indianness’ of the architecture in Chandigarh. By juxtaposing this exemplary modernist architectural project with a traditional Mughal one, Mohamedi has drawn a line connecting Le Corbusier's “supposedly alienated creation to an Islamic heritage of architecture and abstraction, as if on reflection his great work can after all be integrated through a quite [sic] act of recuperation into the generous fold of India's material culture”, as Watson says (2007: 4). Once again, the unfeasibility of unambiguous identification, attribution and classification of features and those features' origins is underlined.

### **Ethical placement**

There are some difficulties in historicizing Mohamedi's work. Current endeavors to define Mohamedi's complex relation to both her Indian and international lineage do not focus on seeking a posthumous legitimacy though, for she already has her place within Indian art history as well as within the modernist canon. Rather, as Watson emphasizes, it is a question of “establishing an ethical placement of her practice that meets the needs of a contemporary

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<sup>11</sup> However, Mohamedi never considered those photographs suitable for public exhibition. Rather, they seem to have functioned as a kind of preparatory sketch or study.

paradigm” (2009: 5). What precisely comprises this contemporary paradigm will be explored in a later stage.

Griffin explains her problematic positioning well when he writes that “Mohamedi’s work is not identifiably Indian, or female, but neither is it possible to ignore her status as one of the very few female Indian artists building on a modernist tradition that was initially forged almost exclusively by western males” (pp.1-2). Indeed, Mohamedi’s works are deficient in obvious referents, thus encouraging availability to a wide and international audience. Moreover, the visual economy and restraint characterizing her work sharply contrasted with the principal style of painting in India at that time, exemplified by Bhupen Khakhar and Gulammohamed Sheikh’s colorful and expressive figurative paintings.

Indeed, a comparison between Mohamedi’s *Untitled I* (fig. XIII) and both Khakhar’s *Hamam Khana* (fig. XIV) and Sheikh’s *Meghdoot* (fig. XV) brings to light some fundamental differences. Each of those works depicts a particular Indian subject: a detail of a traditional Mughal building, the royal baths at Chaul—near Mumbai—and a scene from the classical Sanskrit writer Kalidasa’s play ‘Meghdoot’ respectively. Yet, while Mohamedi reduces her representation to an apparently objectified presentation of mere formal features in terms of lines and planes, the other two artists search for means in order to give expression to their utterly subjective perspective. Using intense colors, agitated brushstrokes and a disjointed depiction of space, they arrive at detailed figurative depictions of realistic persons or objects—Khakhar’s nude woman and the oldtimer car, as well as Sheikh’s various buildings—while at the same time violently distorting any illusion of realism. Through these characteristics, they connect with both western expressionism and traditional indigenous practices such as mural and miniature art and illuminated manuscripts.

However, despite her deviation from contemporary mainstream Indian art practice, she did not hold an isolated position in her native country. It was through her mentorship with the abstract painter Vasudev S. Gaitonde that she developed her own sense of the sublime in abstraction (fig. XVI). His use of very few ground lines and numerous almost monochrome layers of paint—resulting in the absence of any clearly defined focus and an apparent hovering of its watery spaces—clearly influenced Mohamedi’s painting. She also

initiated a dialogue with the younger Jeram Patel (fig. XVII), whose animated and thick abstract strokes particularly resemble Mohamedi's ink on paper works (such as fig. XVIII).

### **Limitations of terminology**

Nevertheless, Mohamedi's familiarity with western modernism—encountered during her education and travels abroad—should not be neglected. Clearly, parallels with several international avant-garde art movements might be discerned. With the Minimalists in Europe and America, Mohamedi shared an austere formalist aesthetic. Like the Futurists, she was drawn to modern technologies and urban architecture. And through her belief in the transformative power of form—the power to effect positive change—Mohamedi associated with a modernist idealism which was particularly popular with the Russian Constructivists. Yet, to routinely apply to her the label of modernism must be considered as disputable, for her work was made later than modernism in the usual chronology. The category of alternative modernism, habitually used to account for this, "can be helpful in thinking beyond the Euro-American paradigm and outside of a strict sense of period", but in itself can be a catch-all term which does not tell us anything about its particularities, so says Watson (2009: 5).

Owing to formal features, particularly those of works produced during her 'classic phase'<sup>12</sup>, a more specific terminology has been put to use to describe Mohamedi's oeuvre. Her works have frequently been labeled as *minimalist*. Indeed, her stripped-down forms and fundamental geometric figures, patterns and series (such as the grid) bear in mind the Minimal Art of American artists such as Frank Stella (born 1936), Donald Judd (1928-1994) and Carl Andre (born 1935) (fig. XIX). Yet, like with the blanket term of modernism, the applicability of the term may be criticized. Considering its original characterization and

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<sup>12</sup> The oeuvre of Mohamedi may be classified in three phases. During the first period—roughly embracing the 1960s and early 70s—her works still contain referential or even representational features (fig. XVIII). The second or 'classic' phase is characterized by distillation. By then, every hint of figuration has been eradicated, with the grid being used as a template. Eventually, in the 1980s, other geometric forms were added: arcs, ovals, circles and triangles, floating freely within an empty space.

geographical demarcation—in the strict sense, the term Minimal Art refers to a specific art historical movement, which originated in the United States during the 1960s as a reaction against Abstract-Expressionism and subsequently spread into Europe—one might even conclude that Mohamedi's oeuvre does not match its definition at all.

But even if one acknowledges the term to include times and regions beyond this narrow definition, certain discrepancies in contents are to be noted. Stella, Judd and Andre considered the grid as a readymade, accordingly working against expression or emotion (fig. XX). However, this minimization of artistic content—exemplified by Stella's famous remark *a propos* his own work saying that “what you see is what you see” (in: Glaser: 59) and Andre's description of his own oeuvre as “atheistic, because it's without transcendent form, without spiritual or intellectual quality” (in: Battcock: 107)—does not answer to Mohamedi's intentions. Mohamedi's grid is not as strictly ruled. Rather, through the appliance of subtle shifts in pressure, her lines seem to hover and shift in space. Diagonals, which were often banned from systematized versions of abstract twentieth-century art because they were considered as being too illustrative or indicative of movement or mood, were also included (fig. XIX). Therefore it may be said that—even though Mohamedi drew on a limited visual vocabulary—her works are not minimalist, for they appear to give expression to some deeper implications.

A comparison between interpretations of Mohamedi's work and the oeuvre produced by the Canadian artist Agnes Martin (1912-2004)—with whom Mohamedi was paired in Documenta 12 in 2007—may be helpful in shedding some light on this matter.<sup>13</sup> In addition to visual affinities (such as the hovering lines: fig. XXI) Martin is also commonly believed to convey—through her abstract paintings—a pull towards the metaphysical. “It is not what is seen. It is what is known forever in the mind,” Martin has stated, thus formulating a counterpart to Stella's statement “what you see is what you see” (in: Krauss: 77). As the textile artist Angela Moll suggests, Martin's emphasis on mental rather than on physical being might be interpreted as being related to Taoist reflections (p.2). Similarly, Mohamedi is often said to

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<sup>13</sup> Mohamedi's familiarity with the oeuvre of Martin apparently had been gained in a late stage though. Therefore, it is unlikely that it has acted as an influence.

be inspired by her studies of Zen Buddhism and Sufism. Indeed, she considered (visual) qualities like harmony and coherence as to be attained in an intuitive or mystical rather than reasoned or scientific fashion.<sup>14</sup>

### **The alternative of post-Minimalism**

In the pursuit of finding a solution for the inadequacy of the terminology as described above, an alternative idiom has been explored. Already in 1971 the critic and modernist art historian Robert Pincus-Witten came up with the term post-Minimalism, which can be typified as the “grammar of the ‘parent style’ being deployed in a range of new and interesting ways that undermined its logic, while at the same time still making use of its possibilities” (Watson 2009: 2). According to Watson, Mohamedi’s work meets each of Pincus-Witten’s criterions indeed.<sup>15</sup> Particularly its relation to post-Minimalism’s first phase, characterized by the re-emergence of an interest in subjectivity, should be noted. Abandoning the pure formalism of Minimal Art, Post-Minimalist artists often made explicit the psychical processes involved in the actualization of art and often reflected personal and social concerns in their work.

Moreover, the idea that a particular phenomenon or trajectory may develop autonomous from its original derivation once it has been implemented in a different context might be helpful in formulating an alternative for modernism’s spatial narratives of a predetermined western center and ‘non-western’ periphery. Rather than thinking of Indian modern/modernist art as reproductive of a model, “we should see our [Indian] trajectories crisscrossing the western mainstream and, in their very disalignment from it, making up the ground that restructures the international”, as Kapur proposes (p.297). What Kapur argues for is a comprehensive paradigm-shift, which encompasses a different argumentation with regard to legitimating the inclusion of ‘non-western’ artists in the dominant art historical canon. Clearly, the ‘spell’ of continuous framing by reference to the first or global world is hard to

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<sup>14</sup> As Kertess articulates, “the Zen Buddhism she embraced fostered an emphasis on wisdom based on experience and achieved through meditation” (p.4).

<sup>15</sup> Pincus-Witten describes the progression of post-Minimalism as threefold: pictorial/sculptural, epistemological, and ontological. For details, see Pincus-Witten.

take away. Yet, as Kapur indicates, inclusion should not occur on the basis of affinities, or in spite of one's differences. Rather, what is demanded by Kapur and others is respect for oneself as different. Thus, the emphasis is on discrepancy—regularly considered as synonymous to authenticity.

### **(Beyond) hegemonic representations**

However—as the research of the American scholar Saloni Mathur shows—the elementary question is how to value these forms of difference “outside of modernity’s hegemonic representations” in which precisely those aspects comprising the ‘otherness’ are sought to be defined as traditional, primitive or at least non-modern (p.99). The following enquiry may function as a guideline for the critical examination of several presumptions concerning the attribution of features. Wondering what the ‘Indianness’ of Mohamedi’s art constitutes, the Swedish curator and director of the Malmö Art Academy Anders Kreuger asks himself: “where is the silver foil, the golden thread, the brocade? Is it fair to describe her pared-down visuality as ‘un-Indian’? Could it not just as credibly be labeled ‘Oriental’ and traced back to Sufi and Zen sensibilities, which we know influenced her?” (p.3). Indeed, one must guard for an oversimplification of correlations which may further naturalize the persistent and decidedly normative polarization between a rational west and a magical east.

Broadly speaking—as articulated in the previous paragraphs—the complement aspects of the duality form/content in Mohamedi’s art have provoked distinct and nearly opposite associations and connotations. The abstract formalist aesthetic, inviting critics to typify the work as intellectual and reasoned, is said to be rooted in a western context. What is more, rationality is habitually considered to be unambiguously connected to a set of largely qualitative values and characterizations such as ‘enlightened’, ‘progressive’, ‘universalist’, ‘objective’ and thus ‘modern’. On the contrary, Indian art has often been portrayed as being essentially figurative, ornamental or embellished—indicative or expressive of personal, national, ethnic or religious subjectivity. As seems to be the case with Mohamedi, even if a formal minimization is acknowledged, critics still tend to recognize some deeper implications behind the veil of pure and objective physicality. Then, these supposed metaphysical contents are unequivocally being associated with the indigenous spiritual traditions which—in their

turn—are characterized as merely intuitive and mystical, explicitly irrational and thus definitely non-modern.

Yet, even though the concept of rationalism came to the fore front in Europe during the Enlightenment period, reasoned discourse has always been at the core of the Indian tradition.<sup>16</sup> Considering the majority of reflective practice in India though, religion and reason are not seen as definitely incompatible. Rather, as explained in Arindam Chakrabarti's article 'Rationality in Indian philosophy', Indian ways of thinking are characterized by a passion for intra-traditional polemics in which even "the most orthodox traditionalists are the harshest critics of mystical intuition or even divine omniscience" (p.268).<sup>17</sup> In short, the ostensible rationality of Mohamedi's work must not necessarily be traced back to her European educational background: there are also points of reference to be found in her indigenous inheritance.

Similarly, her abstractionist tendencies might be considered against the background of a wide variety of applied arts that can be encountered every day in India, ranging from the geometric patterns of wall mosaics in mosques to the ornamental metalwork window trellis. Moreover, Mohamedi frequently visited the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, nearby Bombay. Therefore, Watson's suggestion that perhaps her "closest aesthetic allies in abstraction" were the students and teachers at this institute carries plausibility indeed (2009: 3). In fact, as Mohamedi's following diary entry indicates, the relationship to design comprises a key element of her work: "one day all will become functional and hence good design. There will be no waste. We will then understand basics. It will take time." (in:

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<sup>16</sup> In his book *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity*, Amartya Sen supports this view with a diverse range of evidence, for example from the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Buddhists and the Carvakas, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Gupta-era science and mathematics, the intellectual links of the first millennium between India and China, the liberal-plural regimes of Ashoka and Akbar, the egalitarianism of Hindu Bhakti and Muslim Sufism, and so on.

<sup>17</sup> Still, the emphasis on spirituality generally prevails. Robert Sharf, a prominent scholar on Buddhism, has argued that this vision is due in part to "the manner in which it seemed to offer a defense against secular critique" (p.231). Thus, it may be understood as largely apologetic, reflecting the encounter of the Indian tradition with Western science and philosophy.

Watson 2009: 3). Additionally, as Kapur suggests, Mohamedi's handling of series shows remarkable affinities with the structural scheme of typical Oriental music, in which sequences of repetitive sounds are being displaced in time (p.81). Finally, the sparseness of her visual vocabulary may be related to the Muslim suspicion of figurative art as idolatrous, for—born a Muslim—Mohamedi's original frame of reference must have been constituted by the Islam, notwithstanding her probable referencing to Hinduism and Buddhism.

### Dialectical synthesis

To conclude, it is essential to note that "to see India as overwhelmingly religious, or deeply anti-scientific, or exclusively hierarchical, or fundamentally unsceptical involves significant oversimplification of India's past and present" (Sen: 214). What is more, an adequately pluralist understanding of the Indian cultural legacy and intellectual traditions should converge with a far more critical and acute reading of artworks contextualized in India—a reading that is founded upon dialectic solutions for apparent dichotomous choices like tradition/modernity, spirituality/rationality and local/global. This proposition—developed by Kapur into a new model for the discussion and evaluation of artworks produced beyond the historical-canonical centers—offers an alternative for current insistences on eclecticism and hybridity, or the notion of an alternative modernism.

For—as highlighted in Mathur's review of Kapur's *When Was Modernism*—"the story that Kapur tells of Indian modernism is [...] not an easy account of an alternative discourse; it is a highly mediated, ambivalent, awkward hike through the century—a story of Indian artists 'riding on the backs of paradoxes'" (p.99). As articulated here, Kapur stresses notions of contestation and contradiction. For her, modern Indian art does not involve a fluent or compromisial synthesis of two non-overlapping elements [of western modernist abstraction and Indian spirituality]—as would have been implicitly suggested by the 'older' terminology of *hybridity* and *eclecticism*. Rather, it comprises a dynamic dialogue between

numerous opposing forces, of which the generating sources are irreducible to one singular and clearly definable aspect.<sup>18</sup>

The heterogeneous model thus constructed is typified by fragmentation, marginality and difference, “in which India’s various historical fragments [...] open up the paradigm of nation to include new subject positions based on a dialectical synthesis of these countercultures”, to quote Sinha once more (p.34). Accordingly, Kapur offers a critique of homogenizing stories such as the essentializing of India as a static and a-historical entity on the one hand and the emphasis on a globalized, transcultural notion of the Third World at the expense of local and regional diversity on the other. In Kapur’s own words: “once they are unstrung from the logic of a Euro-American master discourse on advanced art, Third World vanguards can be seen to be connected with their own histories and to mark that disjunction first and foremost” (p.56). Thus, the relevance of the proposition put forward in the introduction—the idea that different circumstances account for different experiences and interpretations and require a different theoretical framework—is emphasized.

Yet, the question remains of how to apply these theoretical insights in the context of art practice. In *When Was Modernism*, Kapur comes up with the medium of installation as the prominent means of expression and accommodation of a critical, pluralist and dynamic perspective. In the following chapter this proposition will be further explored. A focus on one particular contemporary installation artist—who literally crosses borders and boundaries by living, working and exhibiting alternately in India and in Europe—is designed to examine the practical applicability and potential of the set of ideas recalled, thus aiming for the eventual transcendence of a merely abstract ideal.

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<sup>18</sup> John Clark underwrites this idea when he says that “the modern is open to a range of interpretations and this very flexibility is part of the artist’s and the audience’s relation to the work. The claim of traditional authority or the national authenticity of form types, technique or content can only mean a closure of the intertextual domain that is the discursial content of the work. By implication and extension this also implies a closure of the art discourse in which the work is deployed” (1998: 274).

### III Alwar Balasubramaniam

#### Center at the margins

Having started the previous chapter with an introduction on the foundation of the Indian nation state and ended that same chapter with the proposition made by the Indian art critic Geeta Kapur to “open up the paradigm of nation” (p.56), in this finishing chapter the developments that characterize the decades following the 1980s will be considered. Recent years have been marked by profound geopolitical changes, a transformation which has been underway roughly since the end of the Cold War. Following Japan—at the peak of its economic power during the 1980s—China has probably constituted an even greater challenge to the United States. Currently, China makes up the second-largest economy in the world. What is more, as the Australian economist Ian Macfarlane indicates, “China is the big story just as India will probably be the next” (in: Turner: 123).<sup>19</sup> To be brief, there has been an unmistakable shift of influence eastwards.

On the one hand, the recent emergence of those Asian countries into global importance might be attributed to the successful implementation of a capitalist economy. The worldwide expansion of capitalism, in conjunction with the advance of information technologies and digital communication networks, accounts for a certain degree of unification and integration—habitually defined in terms of ‘globalization’. This might be associated with a set of objections and challenges, for example with regard to the framework in which to produce, describe and evaluate art. To quote Kapur once more, “the task for artists, according to some commentators, is no longer to respond to the imperative of nation-building, but to resist being gobbled up by the universalizing, homogenizing work of the global economy” (p.56). Indeed, as articulated before, Kapur and others argue for the redefinition and recontextualization of prevailing conceptions of, for example, modernism—thus defying simple theories of (cultural) hegemony.

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<sup>19</sup> Not to ignore the power of the East Asian ‘Dragons’ or ‘Tigers’: Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is often referred to as the ‘Asian Century’—as opposed to the ‘American (20<sup>th</sup>) Century’ and the ‘British (19<sup>th</sup>) Century. See Dicken.

On the other hand, immense changes in world politics and economic relationships have given rise to numerous instances of tension, violence and conflict, resulting in disintegration and fragmentation—of which the modern ‘war on terror’ is but one example. What is more, the term globalization should not be considered as a fixed notion. Or, in the words of Peter Dicken, author of the book *Global Shift: Reshaping the Global Economic Map in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*: “[...] globalization is not some inevitable kind of end-state but, rather, a complex, indeterminate set of *processes* operating very unevenly in both time and space. As a result of these processes, the nature and the degree of interconnection between different parts of the world is continuously in flux” (p.xv). Consequently, if there is such thing as an emerging ‘global world’, it should be defined as an ‘in-between’ place, typified by ambiguities, inconsistencies and dislocations.

To sum up, in this hypothetical ‘global world’ retribalization is being silhouetted against globalization—or, to quote Benjamin Barber, political scientist and author of the 1992 article ‘Jihad vs. McWorld’: “the planet is falling precipitately apart and coming reluctantly together at the very same moment” (p.53). Naturally, these binary features and forces find their echo in the art of the contemporary age. However, existing terminologies have proven to meet the requirements of the paradigm-shift as proposed by Kapur insufficiently. In order to counter the false celebration of the “carnivalesque spectacle of hybridity” (p.56), the Indian critic has sought to identify an artistic idiom through which to demonstrate her notion of a ‘dialectical synthesis’ in an adequate way.

### **Dialectics of installation**

As Kapur articulates, installation art seems to accommodate to the fragmental and complex nature of modern experience. The term encompasses a diverse array of works—involving a “heterogeneous cluster of sculptural, pictorial, and sound elements”, in the words of Sinha (p.34). Evoking multiple associations, thoughts and feelings and inviting sensory experiences that go beyond the visual, installation art defies simple categorization.

The oeuvre of Alwar Balasubramaniam—born in 1971 in Chennai—may be considered as exemplary for the contemporary generation of installation artists. Balasubramaniam received a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the Government College of Arts in

Madras. After, he continued his education in printmaking both in Scotland and in Vienna. His works, be it painting, sculpture or installations, break their conventional boundaries—habitually even literally, as will be explained further in the next paragraph. Thus, the oeuvre answers most of the key principles that constitute the genre of installation art:

### **1-Bringing together contrasting ideas**

Many critics—in their attempts to find a traditional formalist definition of the genre—have tried to classify installation art by its medium alone. Installation art was thus considered as an art of display or installation of objects. Several artists, however, have been undermining this objectification of mere physicality by emphasizing their non-object orientation. Indeed, an installation art work entails an *experience* rather than a *thing*—in which paradoxes are rampant.

In Balasubramaniam's work called *Secrets* (fig. XXIII), numerous large 'seeds' nestle together. On a formal level, the work seems to explore material qualities, spatial concerns, and the language of abstraction. Therefore, its visual vocabulary may be called minimalist. Yet—as the Bangalore-based art writer Giridhar Khasnis remarks—in the oeuvre of Balasubramaniam "there is always an objective, a questioning, and a revelation behind the piece that he wants to communicate to the viewer" (p.4). For example, the aforesaid seeds contain secrets that can only be revealed through the act of breaking them open. Thus, the work joins a conceptual nature with sensuousness, the evocation of human psychological response with physicality.

Another of his works, *Energy Fields* (fig. XXIV/XXV), comprises a 22 karat cast gold apple placed atop a fiberglass pedestal. Leading from the apple is a live electrical wire. On the one hand, the altar-like setting may be associated with a religious context. Also, the risk of electric shock punishment when touching the fruit might refer to Eve's temptation. On the other hand, the inclusion of electronic devices brings to mind scientific and technological practices. As Chatterjee—co-owner of the Mumbai-based gallery Chatterjee & Lal—suggests, the artist "is clearly thinking about the apple as signifier for Newtonian laws of motion as

well as the invisible yet real force of electricity" (2007: 59). Thus, Balasubramaniam erases the line between art and technology, science and metaphysics.<sup>20</sup>

*Energy Fields* was included in the 2009-2010 exhibition show *(In)Between* at Talwar Gallery in New Delhi. The title of this show is just one more example of how Balasubramaniam succeeds in playfully reflecting his interest in dualities and almost literally expressing a state of in-betweenness—so characteristic of our contemporary, global world.

## 2-Challenging conventional boundaries

Installation art is, as noted before, a particularly eclectic and diversified genre. Most installation artists consciously refuse to accept fixed boundaries. They prefer not to rely on one particular material or medium. As Balasubramaniam explicitly says: "if one sees the works together with the medium I selected, it becomes clear that my choice was always based upon the project with which I was dealing, and not whether I was familiar with that specific medium" (in: Sands: 2). Thus, he explores his ideas through the means that best suit it.

Besides being eclectic in media application, installation artists also assess and push the boundaries of the entire 'discipline' of contemporary art, for they frequently inscribe their 'visual' arts in other and sometimes even non-art related fields, such as science, technology, or biology.<sup>21</sup> This interdisciplinary approach forges relationships of exchange, accounting for the formation of new categories and perspectives. What is more, the often impermanent, ephemeral nature of installation art and its related focus on 'the process' does not easily conform to a world in which product marketability and sales take a position of dominance. Thus, there are new dynamics between artists and institutions being developed as well.

Moreover, apart from those challenges to preconceived notions and established conventions, Balasubramaniam's work often literally breaks physical boundaries. In several of

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<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the artist has declared that "art, for me, occupies the space between science and spirituality. The big question I am always trying to answer is apparently simple: do we really see things? Consider the elements essential to our life: light, gravity, electricity, air... all of them are invisible, but that does not mean they aren't there" (in: Mukherjee: 1).

<sup>21</sup> In this context, it might be worth considering the concept of bio-art, an art practice in which the medium is living matter.

his works, he seems to manipulate the wall surfaces of the exhibition gallery, treating it as a ductile space and creating the illusion that its surfaces are soft and pliable. For example, in his 2002 work called *Self in Progress* (fig. XXVI), a life-sized fiberglass cast of the artist himself painted plaster white emerges from both sides of a freestanding wall. The seated figure thus seems to be caught inside the wall—merging with its surroundings and apparently permeating solid and inanimate matter. Clearly, its setting challenges ‘rules’ of physical feasibility.<sup>22</sup>

For Balasubramaniam, the eschewing of definite demarcations is a particularly conscious choice. In his quest for a universal aesthetic which could represent the nature of human existence, he “avoids any attempt to be overtly Indian or exotic in his work”, as New Delhi-based writer and art curator Minhazz Majumdar remarks (p.36). Similar reasoning applies to numerous other aspects. Disdaining of parochialism, Balasubramaniam prefers the global to the local, the universal to the particular and affinities, or ambiguities, to differences. According to the artist, “we divide things that are not really divided” (in: Sands: 3). Moreover, as he says, this polarized thinking did not bring the world any good—it has brought us chaos, confusion and conflict rather than clarity and order.<sup>23</sup>

### **3-Conveying notions of time and space**

Installation art has frequently been alternatively described as, for example, project art, process art or temporal art, thus giving expression to a sense of impermanence. Narrowly-defined, installation art consists of those art works which literally take form on-site—consequently

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<sup>22</sup> What is more, even though the figure comprises a truthful copy of a living human being, it lacks distinctiveness, for the head—and consequently its individual facial features—is invisible. And despite its actual static nature, the installation invokes the illusion of movement and interval through the hint of a forward dropdown to be about to occur. Once more, an apparent in-between condition—a state of being and non-being—is embodied in his work.

<sup>23</sup> “We’ve created our own mess by defining reality, calling it nation, religion, etc. I don’t think there’s chaos, we introduce the chaos, the confusion and the conflict. It’s because we’ve moved away from the natural way of life because of our minds” (Balasubramaniam: 113).

becoming inscribed in this particular exhibition site. Therefore, the process of creating is generally considered to be more relevant than the final creation, which will often impede to exist once it is being removed from its surroundings. In any case, its positioning within a broader setting comprises a fundamental component of an installation art work and another of its cumulative layers of meaning. It may even be said that installation art has no autonomous existence. It should always be looked at in relation to something else. Or, in other words, it is precisely its contextualization in time as well as in space which grants an installation art work its visual relevance. Accordingly, the emphasis is on relativity and variability.

As the Chennai-based art writer Ashrafi Bhagat remarks with regard to the work of Balasubramaniam, a concept "does not end with one creation, but rather, becomes an instigator or a reflector for the next. The process goes on" (p.47). As one might notice, this idea of continuous flowing and evolving over time meets Dickens characterization—put forward in the beginning of this chapter—of recent and worldwide processes of globalization and transformation. What is more, similarly to contemporary developments in the fields of economy and politics, this transformation is at least twofold, involving disintegration on the one hand and creation on the other. Such is the case, for example, in Balasubramaniam's work called *Emerging Angels* (2004). A pair of transparent boxes is positioned within the exhibition space. Both boxes contain a simple geometric cube, resembling a marble block yet actually consisting of slowly evaporating compound. In the process of dissolution, angels—initially embedded in the ambient material—start to emerge (fig. XXVII). So, the two opposite practices of creation and destruction are unified. What is more, the 'birth' of the angels would not even have been possible without the destruction of their containers. Thus, those seemingly contradictory forces constitute components of the same dialectical cycle.

#### **4-Inviting viewer participation**

Installation art works usually invite viewer participation, either on a physical or on a psychological level. Through the conscious mediation of space, for example, artists invite viewers to actively explore the work's spatial dimensions. In other works, the materials used evoke the desire to touch its polished or textured surfaces, as is the case with the tempting

brilliant apple in *Energy Fields* (fig. XXIV/XXV). Also, some works are only realized through a participant's physical action within a responsive environment. In those particular cases, the role of the audience is not confined to mere response—rather, they co-create, for instance by influencing image and sound output from a computer.<sup>24</sup>

What is more, even if the factual/physical contribution or response is restricted, the multi-interpretability which generally characterizes the genre of installation art still encourages viewers to become the author of their own meaning. As suggested before, personal and subjective perception and interpretation thus form an intrinsic part of the work. According to Sumana Mukherjee—editor of the cultural supplement of the online Mint business newspaper—it is precisely this aspect which “for him [Bala] is what closes the circuit, completes the process of art” (p.1). Once more, the emphasis is on the cyclical nature of the installation art works constituting the oeuvre of Balasubramaniam, in which ambiguities and paradoxes fulfill a constructive role.

### **Multiple engagements**

Thus, Balasubramaniam's oeuvre seems to connect—intuitively or consciously—with Kapur's envisioning of a dialectic and subalternist mode as put forward previously, in which the marginalized and displaced acquire a voice and in which complexity, heterodoxy and transformation replace teleological and polarized thinking. Through a dynamic and non-objectifying dialogue of various fragments and counter fragments, (his) installation art has the ability to “draw the viewer vicariously into an area of true historical conflicts, giving the diverse, partially erased fragments of India's historical experience a contemporary semantic value”, to quote Sinha once more (p.34).

The significance of this particular case study might thus be conceived in terms of its functioning as an exemplary illustration of the practical applicability and potential of Kapur's ideas. Clearly, this potential is not confined to the contemporary medium of installation yet can—and should—also be brought into play in retrospect, in the context of the evaluation of a diverse range of modernist art works as presented in the first and second chapter.

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<sup>24</sup> To read more on this category of audio and video installations, see Winkler.

# Conclusion

As Donald Preziosi—Emeritus Professor of Art History at the University of California, Los Angeles—indicates in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, the dominant art historical discourse has originated in the west.<sup>25</sup> The various theories and practices constituting this occidental discourse are founded upon a by now institutionalized set of beliefs—Involving, among other things, the objectification of (cultural) difference. This objectification, taken to the extreme, seems to have accounted for a significant degree of polarization, in which dualities like tradition/modernity, spirituality/rationality and local/global have been presented as mere dichotomies. What is more, the edifice of dichotomous choices has proven to be instrumental in producing, upholding, emphasizing or undermining particular narratives or ideas. Thus, the ‘Art’ of art history must be considered as a construction rather than teleology.

Despite the fact that modern conditions have accounted for an increasing significance of the arts of regions beyond Euro-America and the current critical discourse is often said to be characterized by practices of inclusion, the fabrication of qualitative distinctions between a formulated norm and its deviations and derivatives has continued. Only recently may one have noticed a relational change. As articulated by Guido Podesta—professor of Latin American literature, cinema and cultures at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, United States—a valuable evaluation of artistic works produced or contextualized in regions beyond the west requires something more than mere instances of inclusiveness: “the correction of mainstream theories necessitates the construction of a completely different theoretical framework. It is not sufficient to extend the scope of these theories by incorporating data from non-European societies and minorities” (p.396). What might be helpful in the formation

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<sup>25</sup> “Art history was a complex and internally unstable enterprise throughout its two-century-long history. Since its beginnings, it has been deeply invested in the fabrication and maintenance of a modernity that linked Europe to an ethically superior aesthetics grounded in eroticized object-relations, thereby allaying the anxieties of cultural relativism, wherein Europe (and Christendom) were, in their expanding encounter with alien cultures, but one reality amongst many” (in: Preziosi: 503).

of such a paradigm shift is the rising of an emic voice. In India, this role of a spokesman for the national modern has been fulfilled by Geeta Kapur.

Kapur's research aligns with the work of John Clark in terms of the acknowledging of modernism to be constituted through multiple tracks. In other words—as the Dutch professors of art history at Leiden University Wilfried van Damme and Kitty Zijlmans put it—both oeuvres are characterized by the recognition that “the global landscape of modern art derives its diversity from the emergence of a multitude of modernities in art all over the world [...]” (p.6). Rejecting the commonly held idea of the modern as a kind of linear determinism—in which the west is regarded as being constitutive of the standard—in the “new theoretical framework” the focus is on processes of de-centering. To begin with, entirely new centers of cultural practice and criticism have come to light—resulting in literal/geographical de-centering. Yet, also conceptually/metaphorically the notion of a secure and determined course is destabilized—for there no longer is conceded a “common, universal conception and interpretation of artistic and cultural modernity”, as the Nigerian-born American art critic, curator and director of the eleventh Documenta in Kassel Okwui Enwezor remarks (in: Ogbechie: 82).

Indeed, the main proposition put forward and supported in the course of this thesis comprises the definition of particularly this feature of de-centering/de-stabilization as fundamental to an adequate and acute reading of works of artists recalled here—and, in consequence, of any artist who finds him- or herself confronted with the ‘dilemma’ of having familiarity with a multitude of incentives, pressures and influences. Clearly, the quest for definite classifications and demarcations has proven to be rather infertile. Considering works in terms of a harmonious synthesis of a set of dichotomous aspects has often led to mere oversimplification or erroneous reductionism. In order to do the semantic value of those art works justice, a provoking dialogue between multiple fragments and counter-fragments must be called for.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Or, as Kapur explains with regard to the prevailing polarization between for instance national/global and east/west: “the question, then, is not of reinventing discrete national traditions nor of manufacturing something like an integrated Asian/global tradition. This politics requires the

Moving these theoretical insights into the arena of art practice and evaluation first and foremost entails the acknowledgement and articulation of multi-interpretability. For both the artist and the art critic an anti-traditional stance is to be sought after. Firstly, both should allow their work to reach beyond *re*-presentation—a literal sensory description—and find a means through which to present their ideas of a (visually) complex and rich world. Both in the processes of making and interpreting art the concept of objective transmission of meaning is to be supplanted by the overt recognition of the role of people's biases and assumptions in the creation of plural structures of interpretation. Through a conscious and continuous shifting of frames of reference, the desire for an authoritative voice to deliver the definitive meaning of an art work must be let go of. Only if accepting each of the ideas comprising an art work—as well as the diverse responses to it—as equally significant, a genuine destabilizing might be arrived at.

To conclude, the oeuvres of Nasreen Mohamedi and Alwar Balasubramaniam deserve thorough consideration of their complexity, with attentiveness for their essentially contradictory nature. As we have seen, the abstractionist tendencies of both artists might be associated with various (and disparate) sources, of which western modernism is just one. Similarly, a contextualization of the metaphysical contents of those works within the indigenous spiritual tradition carries plausibility indeed, yet Indian philosophy is unlikely to be the only incentive.

Having heavily drawn upon Geeta Kapur's theorization of a model for *dialectical thinking*, my personal contribution entails the conversion of these theoretical insights into practical considerations—thus having arrived at the definition of an exemplary *dialectical creative practice* (in terms of the medium of installation) as well as some explicit directions for giving substance to *dialectical interpretative practices*. Above all, I have formulated what might be the greatest challenge to the contemporary art historian—yet should also be his/her ultimate objective: the avoidance of the temptation to fall back on a position of authority, in conjunction with the attainment of feeling comfortable with uncertainty and open-endedness.

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harnessing of countercurrents—currents that carry and sublimate civilizational values crisscrossing those that painfully desublimate them" (p.386).

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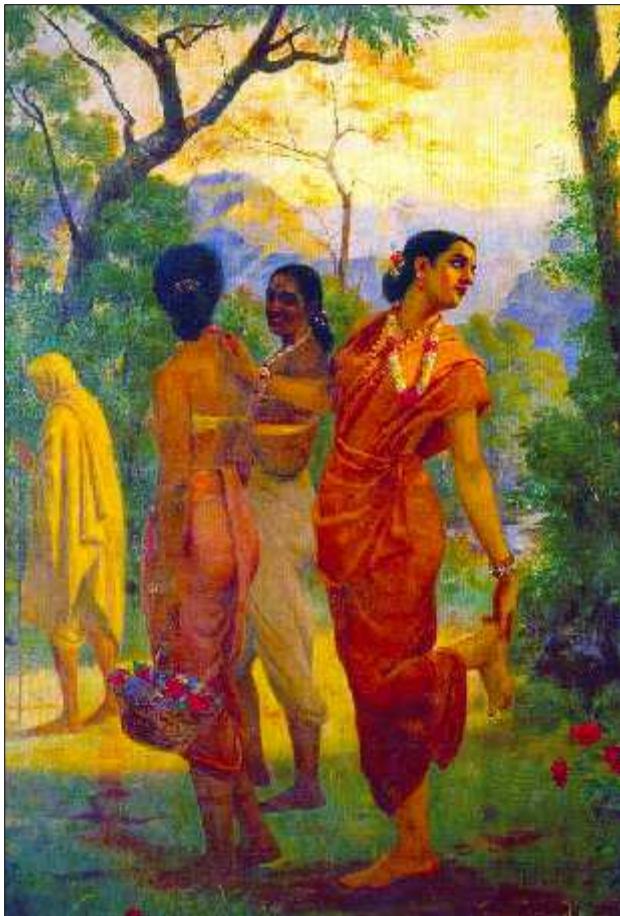
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## Appendices



**Fig. I:** Raja Ravi Varma, *Shakuntala looking back to glimpse Dushyanta*, 1870, oil on canvas, circa 90x53 cm.



**Fig. II:** Raja Ravi Varma, *A Galaxy of Musicians*, circa 1889, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown.



Fig. III: Amrita Sher-Gil, *Three Girls*, 1935, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown.



Fig. IV: M. F. Husain, *Mother Teresa*, 1997, acrylic on canvas, 233x128 cm.



Fig. V: F. N. Souza, *Weeping King*, 1963, oil on canvas, 50x80,5 cm.



Fig. VI: Plan of Chandigarh, India (analogous to human body), 2004.

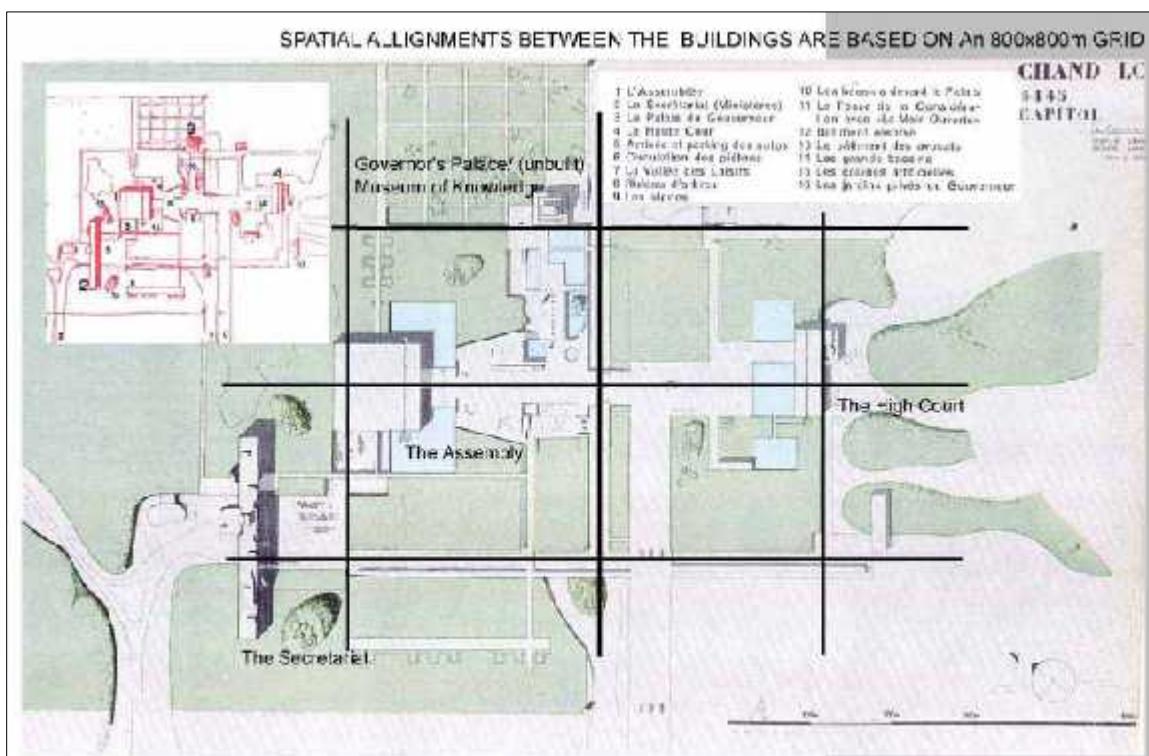


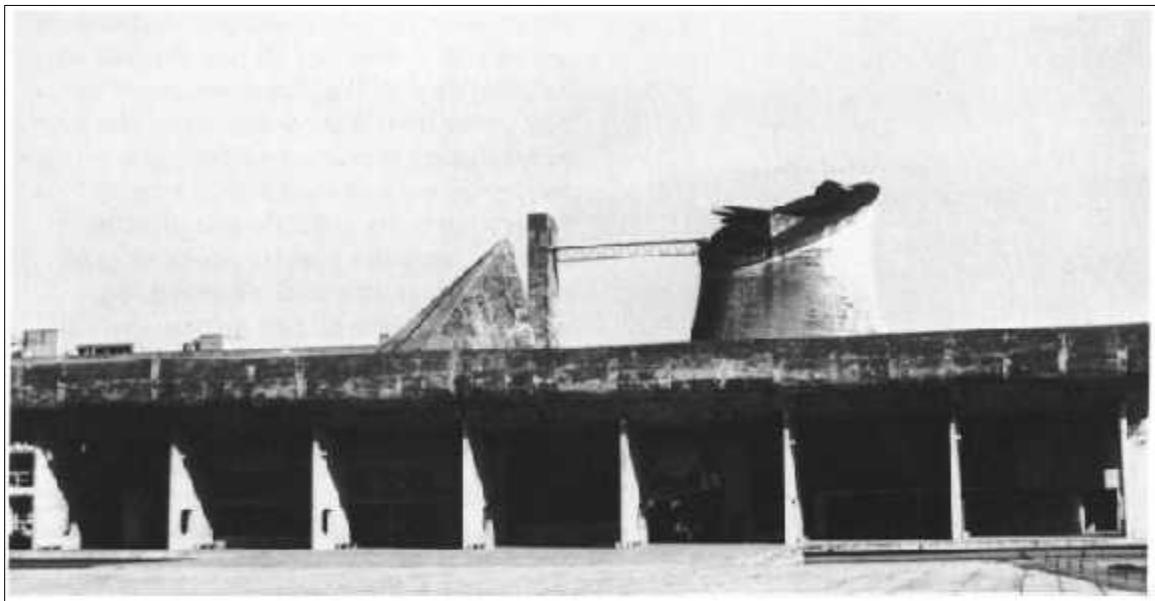
Fig. VII: Plan of Chandigarh, India (based on 800x800m grid), 2004.



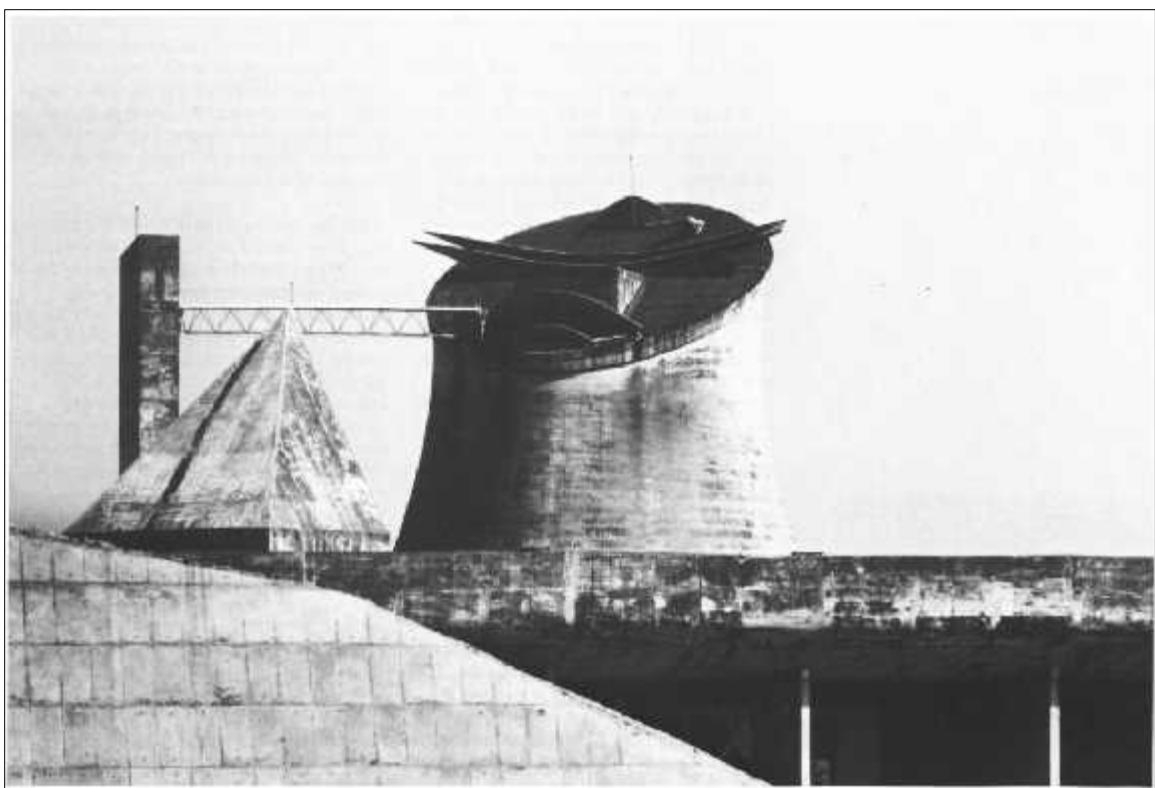
**Fig. VIII:** Le Corbusier, High Court, Chandigarh, India, 1951-55.



**Fig. IX:** Le Corbusier, Secretariat, Chandigarh, India, 1951-58.



**Fig. X:** Le Corbusier, Parliament Building, Chandigarh, India, 1951-62.



**Fig. XI:** Le Corbusier, Parliament Building (detail: roof structures), Chandigarh, India, 1951-62.

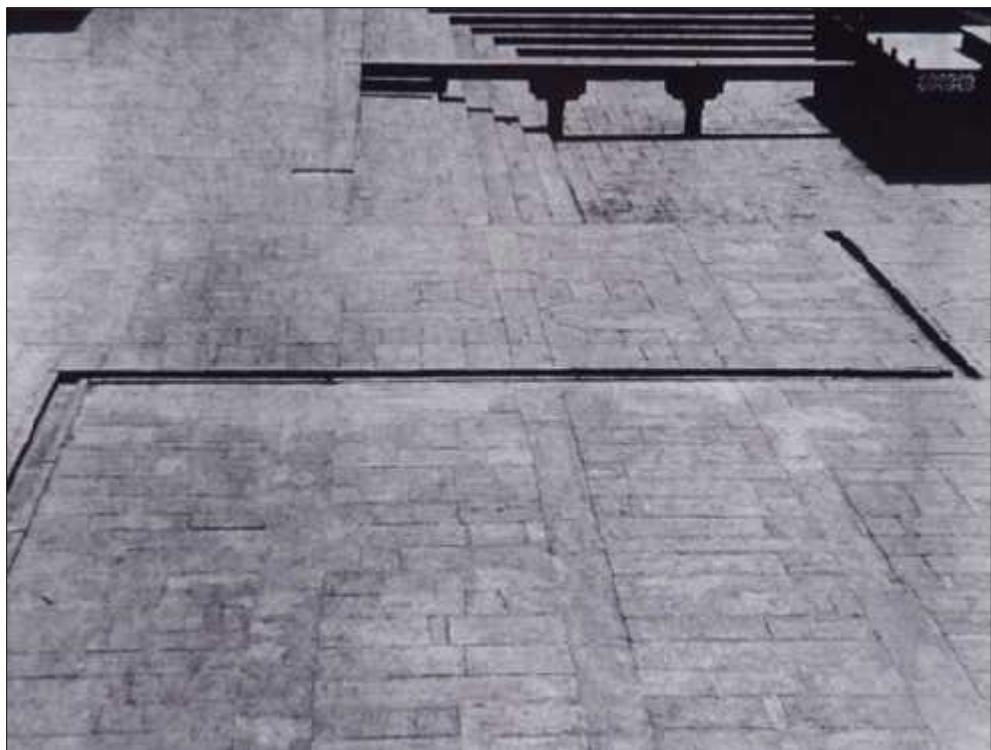


Fig. XII: Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled XIV* (detail), circa 1971, photograph, 35.5x21 cm.

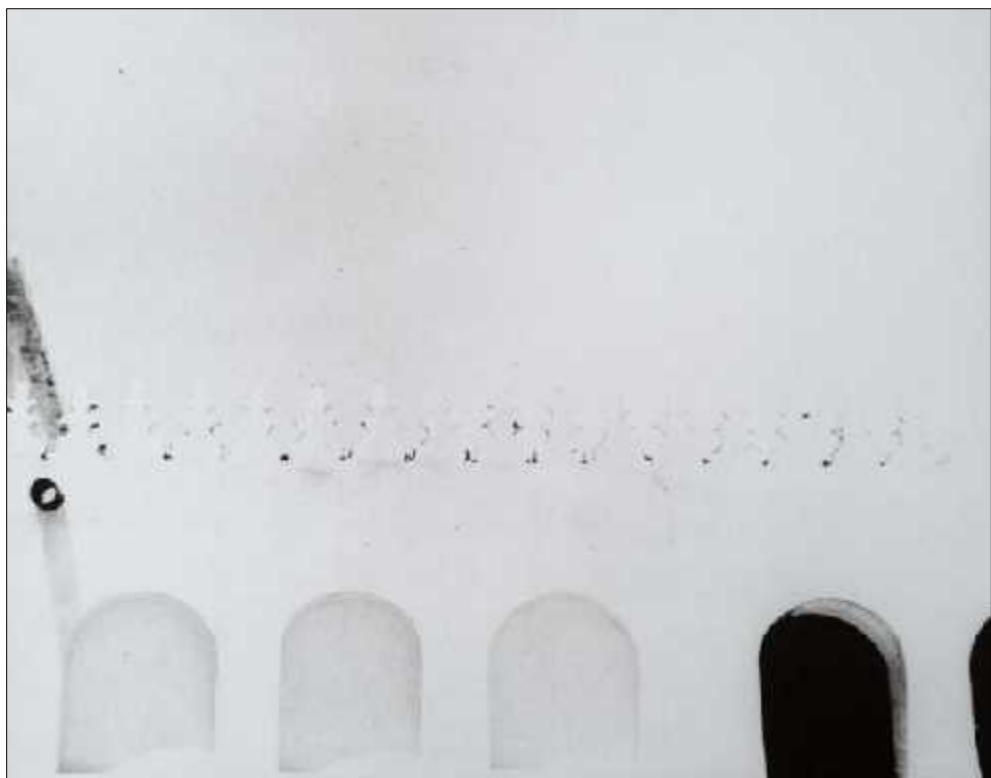


Fig. XIII: Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled I*, circa 1960-69, photograph, 30,5x20,3 cm.



**Fig. XIV:** Bhupen Khakhar, *Hamam Khana*, 1960s, oil on canvas, 122x121.5 cm.



**Fig. XV:** Gulammohamed Sheikh, *Meghdoot*, 1960s, oil on canvas, 169x118 cm.



**Fig. XVI:** V S Gaitonde, *Painting*, 1950s, oil on canvas, 101.3x178 cm.



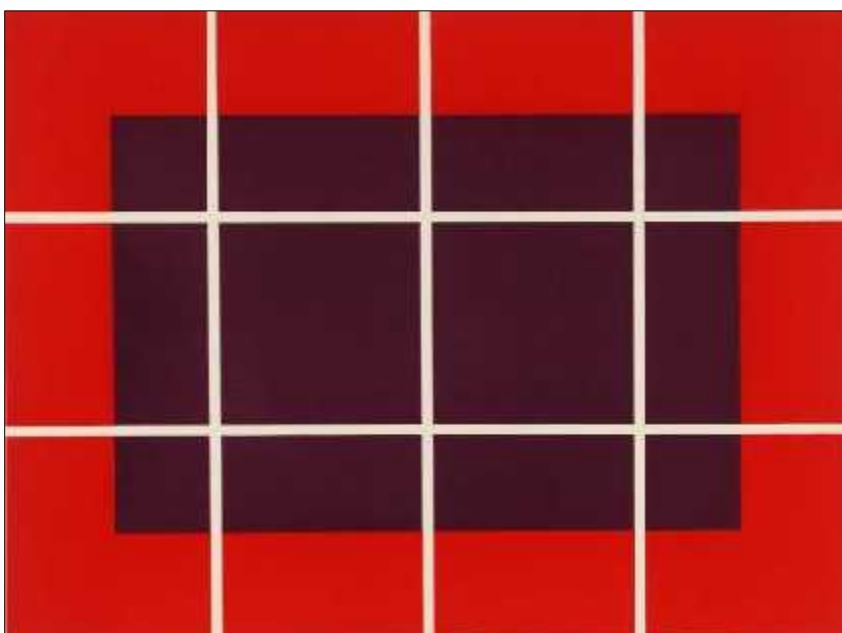
Fig. XVII: Jeram Patel, *Contours*, 1960s, blow torch on wood, 122x91 cm.



Fig. XVIII: Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled* (set of 3 works), 1965, ink on paper, 63,4x38,8 cm.



**Fig. XIX:** Nasreen Mohamedi, *Drawing IV*, 1970s, ink on paper, 51x51,5 cm.



**Fig. XX:** Donald Judd, *[no title]*, 1992-93, ink on paper, 51x51,5 cm.

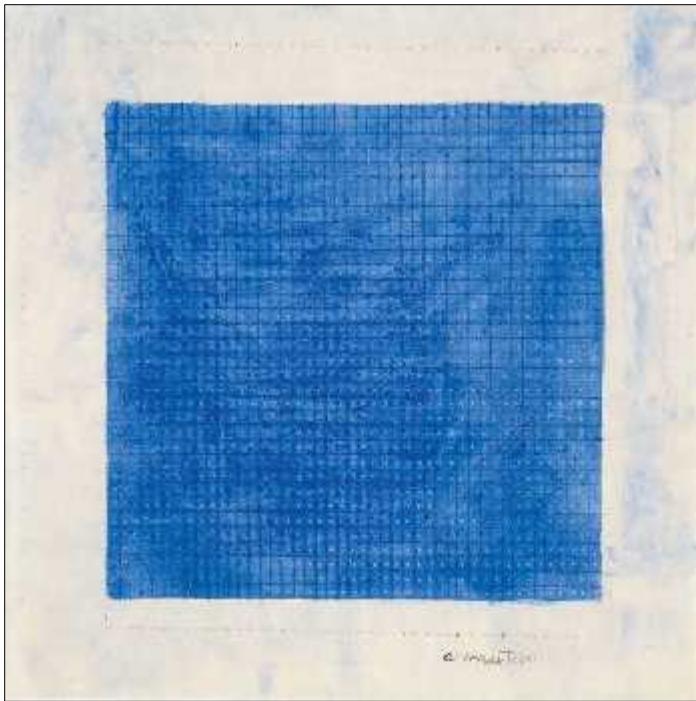
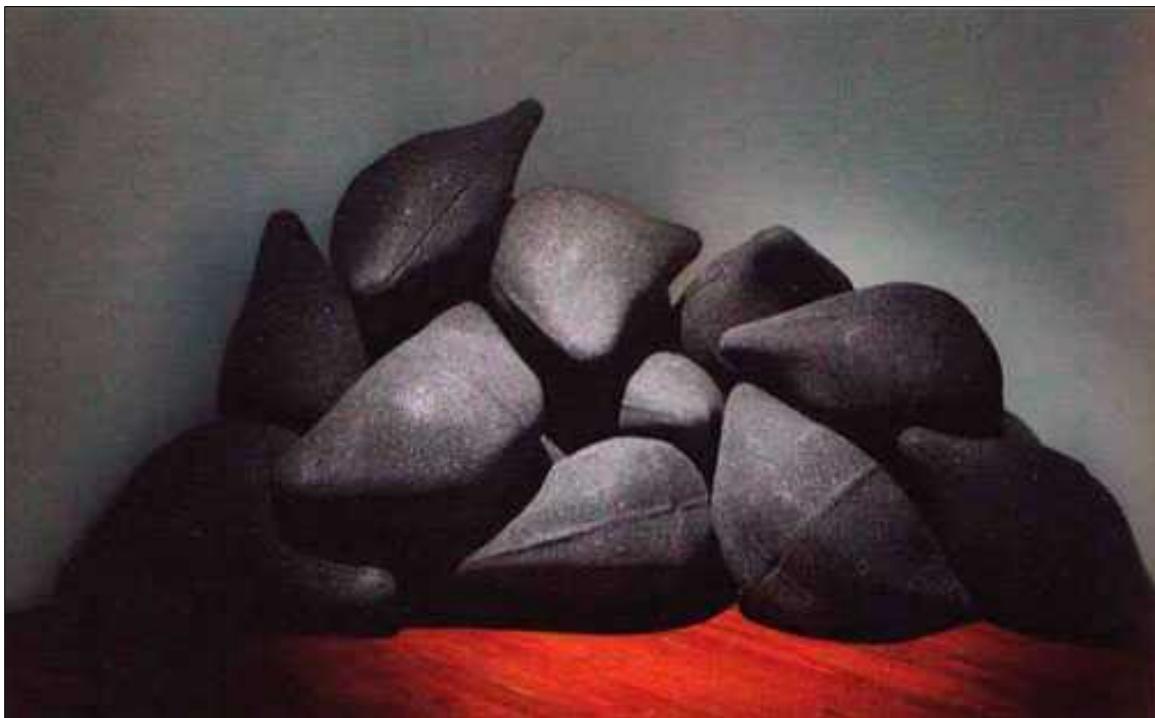


Fig. XXI: Agnes Martin, *Stars*, 1963, ink and watercolor on paper, 30,5x30,5 cm.



Fig. XXII: Metalwork window trellis 15<sup>th</sup> century Sarkhej Roza Complex, Ahmedabad.



**Fig. XXIII:** Alwar Balasubramaniam, *Secrets*, 2007, cast fiberglass, silicon, and hidden objects, circa 267 x 163 x 185 cm.



**Fig. XXIV:** Alwar Balasubramaniam, *Energy Field* (detail), 2006, 22-karat cast gold, acrylic, wires, and electric current.



**Fig. XXV:** Alwar Balasubramaniam, *Energy Field*, 2006, 22-karat cast gold, acrylic, wires, and electric current.



**Fig. XXVI:** Alwar Balasubramaniam, *Self in Progress*, 2002, fiberglass and plaster.



**Fig. XXVII:** Alwar Balasubramaniam, *Emerging Angels* (detail), 2004, evaporating compound, acrylic, and fiberglass, circa 30,5 x 38 x 46 cm each.

## Sources of appendices

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- **Fig. XV:** <http://ngmaindia.gov.in/sh-movements.asp#> - Courtesy National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- **Fig. XVI:** <http://ngmaindia.gov.in/sh-movements.asp#> - Courtesy National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- **Fig. XVII:** <http://ngmaindia.gov.in/sh-movements.asp#> - Courtesy National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
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- **Fig. XXI:** [http://www.artnet.com/pdb/publiclotdetails.aspx?lot\\_id=424215727&page=3](http://www.artnet.com/pdb/publiclotdetails.aspx?lot_id=424215727&page=3) - Courtesy Phillips de Pury & Company New York.
- **Fig. XXII:** Private property.
- **Fig. XXIII:** [www.talwargallery.com/images/bala/sm/secrets.jpg](http://www.talwargallery.com/images/bala/sm/secrets.jpg) - Courtesy Talwar Gallery, New York.
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- **Fig. XXV:** [www.talwargallery.com/images/bala/sm/energyfields.jpg](http://www.talwargallery.com/images/bala/sm/energyfields.jpg) - Courtesy Talwar Gallery, New York.
- **Fig. XXVI:** Bhagat, Ashrafi, 'The Play of Image and Idea' in: *Art India* Vol. 7 No. 3 (2002), pp. 46: <http://www.talwargallery.com/html/inpress/q302artindia.pdf> - Courtesy Apparao Galleries.
- **Fig. XXVII:** Majumdar, Minhazz, 'Alwar Balasubramaniam: Uncharted Territories' in: *Sculpture* Vol. 27 No. 10 (2008), p. 1: [www.sculpture.org/.../dec\\_08/balasub/bal-02.gif](http://www.sculpture.org/.../dec_08/balasub/bal-02.gif).