

Shifting Focus in South Asian Art: An Introspection of Social Concerns of two Contemporary Artists Navjot Altaf and Gauri Gill



Nuzhat Kazmi*

Jamia Millia Islamia A Central University, India

It is a growing knowledge that the contemporary art from South Asia is holding its own. South Asian art has increased its visibility and presence on the international art forum. Somewhere in the last decade, contemporary Asian artists and Asian art work has been appreciated, circulated, displayed, discussed and collected with an enthusiasm and confidence never seen before. Sensitivity towards art from south Asia has indeed been a global phenomenon. And when the recession hit the other parts of the world, and more especially, Europe and America, the market for South Asian art was also adversely affected, but perhaps with a diluted intensity as was seen elsewhere.

I am, here, going to discuss two artists, who have been working on a global scale, transcending the boundaries of nationalist identities without losing the charm of regional affinity and the strength of cultural empathy in defining their artistic concerns and professional commitments. I would look closely at the most recent works of Navjot Altaf and Gauri Gill, two artists who have evolved a language each that expresses their own understanding of themselves, while also situating them as thinking individuals, sensitive world citizens, keen to relate and articulate what they see as universal issues of intellectual and primarily economically disparity, political dichotomy and multi-layered social indifference. Both Navjot and Gauri have had exposure wherein they can define with clarity their prime artistic obligation and their innate needs. As an individual equipped with tools to find a language that has the ability to communicate the ideas, the critique and graph logical explorations. Aware that all of which may not necessarily arrive at complete answers, however, confident that it succeeds to bring in public domain, with the use of all possible media, helps to conceptualize their art work and to engage a large and diverse audience through their art works, knowing well that their art is not necessarily a visual, or simply a vehicle of some particular aesthetics.

* Dr. Nuzhat Kazmi, Associate Professor, Department of Art History & History Appreciation, Faculty of Fine Art, Jamia Millia Islamia A Central University, New Delhi, 110025, India Email: nkazmi@jmi.ac.in

Navjot Altaf, an artist for long in the forefront of art practices, adept in the usage a technique that can subvert tools of popular communications and therein evolve a language that may include and exclude at the same time the accepted array of sign, symbols, colours and forms. She curtly can drag the stated and the unstated, the public and the private, the obvious and the discreet into the artistic arena. She understands with empathy the power of the image and the voice of the voiceless people. Navjot has been exploring the limits of art and she has been sensitive as to what she formulated in her works, as a woman, as an artist and as a citizen of an erstwhile colonized nation and now a world that is marginalized as undeveloped. Navjot's most recent works showed at the Talwar Gallery, New Delhi, is a wholehearted attempt to record some of these concerns of identity, body and privacy of individual self. Her work entitled Touch IV brought together the social, the political, and the cultural and sensitive issues of individual privacy and the dignity of human body into visual audio projects. Navjot uses the everyday images and voices to make her point. She gives space to her subject and the audience to form opinions of their own in regard to issues under discussion in her art work. That is to capture the audience imagination while keeping them engaged through the mundane and off repeated themes. The artist makes dexterous references to that which can easily find resonance in the details of their own simple lives. The audience is encouraged to build an active identification and direct engagement with the medium that they know and understand, the language of moving and talking images. The voices of the people, straight, direct with no script, written but certainly edited to include the artist's presence and her own tools to present a content that she allows to siphon from her private individualistic perspective to an open platform where the audience has to answer their questions: all the questions of intellect, art, theme and language.

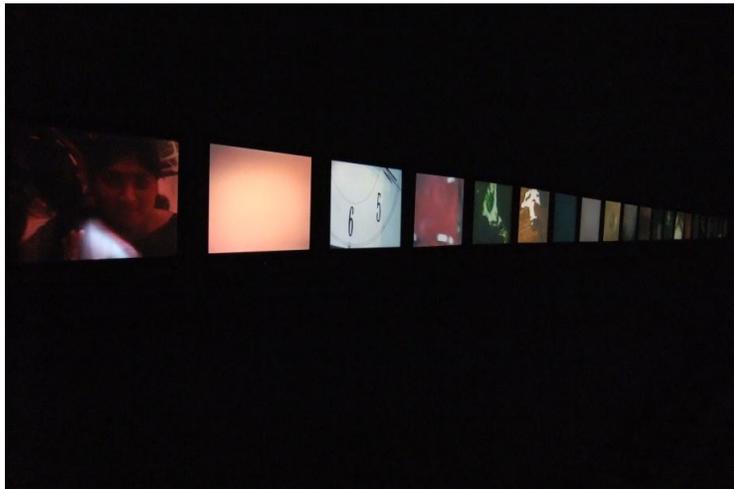


Figure 1: Touch IV by Navjot Altaf

Touch IV, a new multi channel video installation, It was also in many ways a continuation of her last show, Touch III, also presented by the same gallery. A 22 channel video installation, Touch IV continues to evolve Navjot's previous concerns with the sense of touch – and the various, perhaps infinite nuances that it can carry within its province. Invariably in social and cultural context it is read in terms of sexuality which can both be the absence or the

presence of 'touch', sensed, desired and interfaced through the medium of the body. The artist raises questions of intimacy, sensation, feeling, emotion and absence of emotion in what is termed sexuality, which in many cases can become the singular and a lone defining element that establishes the identity and the nature of their particular existence. Sexuality and the instrument of touch becomes in this film a multi layered discourse, narrating the artist's interaction with workers, a method to open with the a sensitivity that it demands, the grim reality of the trade of touch and the sale of sex to make a livelihood for a bare existence. Navjot has spent time with the sex workers, involving herself more especially with NGO like Sangram Center and the Vamp Organization, Sangli, Maharashtra. Navjot as a person interacted with a group of sex workers, who continued, out of their own choice, the profession, at Prithivi Theater, Mumbai. Here this select group was enacting their own lives. Navjot, in her current art project, has in a sense invited the sex workers as collaborative, in her artistic as well as social explorations of issues that concerned them and herself, both as an artist and socially aware individual. The artist in the film explores the equilibrium between the body and touch, mapping elements of undesired as opposed to desired touch, the sexual violence, justice and the injustice around the issue of sex, the right to individual privacy, violation of this privacy through the violation the other body and the access to human rights. The film uses subtle devices; the continuous repeats of the select frames, create an unending, infinite narrative which may start at any point and may then end at another. While the film is viewed, the engagement becomes multi-dimensional. Besides the artistic commitment between the artist and the sex workers, images are drawn from the experiences of references to preconceived notions and signs, which in reality become the cynical acceptance of formulations of half truths or no truths at all. The artist applies repetitive forms and images, movements and spoken words of the protagonists to create an endless framework in which the audience becomes an active insider, equipped and inspired to make new formulations of old norms of engagements with the reality of sex trade. These signs draw attention to the relationship between desired and undesired touch, touch as a mode of self knowledge that emphasizes the temporal experience, the unfolding narratives of sexual identities.

Navjot's attempt is not to blur the reality but to open the layers of authenticity bringing in all possible perspectives and drawing on everyday life; the mundane, the all visible, the urban culture and its mechanics, kinetic energy, moving objects, images of fire, passion, heat and vulnerability, the street lights and the shadows of the narrow by lanes. The clicking of a typewriter is a sound that hints of human presence, of living energy and thinking body. When the eyes and ears of the participant audience is saturated and visually intoxicated, new, free born metaphors emerge and gain their existence to challenge inebriated, mutilated icons of yesterday. A dynamic revelation may be sensed by the senses, without, what may be an interesting metaphor for us, actual use of 'touch'. Here the sense of touch and the hearing is applied and rest is generated at an individual level, where specific experiences and tutoring take a major role in defining the reality and its understanding. What is unique and continuously new about the work is how each installation is a step towards breaking down

the boundaries of identity, touch, narrative and form towards a sub-verbal experience, the existence of which we can only 'sense'.

Navjot Altaf currently lives and works in Bastar, Central India and in Mumbai, born in 1949 in Meerut, India. She has been included in several important exhibitions including Lacuna in Testimony at Frost Art Museum, Florida, US (2009-10), Public Places, Private Spaces, The Newark Museum, New Jersey, US (2007-8) and The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota, US (2008-9), Tiger by the Tail! At The Rose Art Museum, Waltham, Massachusetts, US (2007); Zones of Contact, XV Sydney Biennale, Sydney, Australia (2006), VIII Havana Biennial, Havana, Cuba (2003) Century City at Tate Modern, London, UK (2001) and the first Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial, Japan (1999). She has also been in several interactive, cooperative, and collaborative projects including Groundwork at Carnegie Mellon Galleries, Pittsburgh, PA (2005) Three Halves at Bolton Museum, Lancashire, UK (2001-3).

Gauri Gill, the second artist, who is an essential for our study, and to bring focus on the changing dynamics of both the thematic content as well as the technique in the art of South Asia. Gauri has been educated in College of Art, Delhi, the Parsons School of Design, New York and Stanford University in California and has a language that is eloquent and uninhibited. Gauri has been exhibiting her photographic art projects since 2008 starting with the solo "The Americans" in Kolkata, showed by BosePacia Gallery, moving on to show in London, Switzerland, Barcelona, New Delhi and Mumbai. She is now based in Delhi. Her recent show at Nature Morte inspired many responses. The recent series is entirely in black & white, except the ones done by the local children. She provided them with material to indulge themselves, which they did, and to participate in the image making experience with her. Gauri has worked both in large format and small, drawing her themes from the life of people living in remote areas of Rajasthan and balancing informed objectivity with spontaneous subjectivity. The artist/ photographer captures images of stark contrasts and simplicity, recording the complexities of life and of people living in a landscape of austere limitations and infinite imaginative possibilities. Gauri with a defined focus develops her creative impulses, never forgetting herself as an Indian, a world citizen. By constructing a conceptual framework that is sustained by native inputs Gauri has diligently nurtured her art around the routine rituals of rustic preoccupations.

The visual structure that Gauri constructs are primarily silver gelatin prints, and some archival digital prints and C-type colour prints, produced in an edition of 7. Using the technique and material of photography, she creates her visual art around the real happenings in the life of people who live with very few resources and almost nothing in the name of modern facilities. A child birth in a household becomes an occasion and not just a theme to the artist. It is the moment and the focus of the birth that brings into the arena many issues that usually may escape our attention otherwise. While we are thrilled by the visual innovations, we are shocked by the utter lack of desired hygiene. The health care is

conspicuous by its very absence in this modest hamlet where a woman gives birth like a cattle, and the midwife wears a surgery glove on one hand by way of medical care.

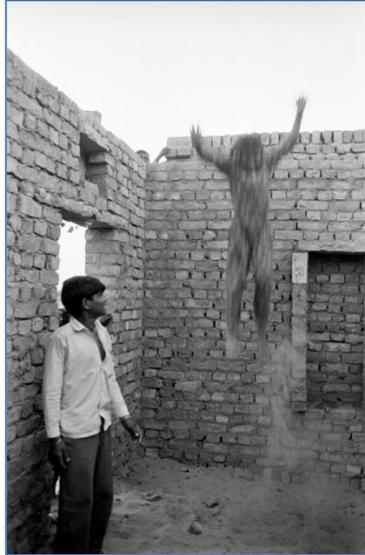


Figure 2: New Homes after the flood, Lunkaransary by Gauri Gill

With a remarkable control and command over her medium, the artist works to store a wealth of visual images. She brings with her images many concerns. Her visual language, her engagement with the medium of photography, her aesthetics of positive and negatives spaces and her sensitivity to social concerns extending into specific concerns like gender bias, economic injustice, material depravity and medical ignorance. The artist also takes care to retain in her art the exhilarating spirit of a people who understand elements of nature and have learnt to nurture it as it nurtures them. They acknowledge the nature and its elements, both the benevolent and the brutal, perhaps more than anyone else living in more privileged spaces elsewhere.

The exhibition has been designed so as to allow the viewer to see and connect with the artworks in demarcated spaces that weave themes of portraiture of a society that has an intense sense of self sufficiency, as if not bothered as to what is and should be their lot. Some spaces to individual studies, constructed to include perhaps have private references of the artist herself, anxious not to let go her own attachments that were inevitable in working on this series of photographs, product of a decade of her intellectual and creative association with people in Jaipur, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Barmer, Phalodi, Baran, people who were also students, teachers, officials and social workers.

Perhaps the greatest view of all was to see the flood in the desert of Rajasthan that unexpectedly saw the river flow like never before, the children thrilled and rebellious enough to throw themselves, soaking wet in the rainfall. To find men and animals sleep as if they were different pieces in a puzzle that with pieces put together built an image inconceivable to the world outside. The artist talks about one such vision when in the cold of a wintery night under the thick quilt and on the cold sand, camel, dog and goat can rest with

the entire family, sleeping after a hard day, breathing into each other, no care in the world, while the creatures of the desert finds rhythm with the pulse of nature that does not, after a point, really discriminates!

Navjot Altaf and Gauri Gill, as artists, and artists from South Asia, are really not bothered with routine art historical concerns, not overly preoccupied with issues of modernity or post modernity. However, they push through their art and the conceptual framework, an eclectic acceptance of technique, material and cultural. Social nuances embedded in an image itself, in the sound of a voice letter of a language becomes for the two artists the most immediate, the most crucial and vital in human situation as they perceive it from their understanding of the local, and at the same time the global.