Examining the Urban Body in South Asia

By Peter Nagy

A n explosion of creativity from India is taking place in Berlin from mid-September to the end of November: ‘body.city’ is the umbrella title given to a four-part compendium of projects, hosted by the House of World Cultures. The institute itself focuses on contemporary cultural developments from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Though nationalistic theme packages of any kind can be problematic, the House of World Cultures has carefully negotiated its representation of India by inviting four esteemed scholars in the various disciplines to present substantial offerings on the subjects of contemporary visual arts, popular culture, film and cinema, and the performing arts. This inclusive programme provides the Berlin audience with ample opportunity to properly evaluate the cultural achievements that have taken place in India in the last 25 years, framed as they are within the historical, political, and critical parameters that are necessary to avoid the token exoticism or fetishism which is often the pitfall of such presentations.

Identity and its relation to politics, economics, and the production of culture can then be encapsulated with the title ‘body.city.’ For much of the twentieth century, India’s identity was still defined by the rural and agricultural norm, a paradigm that Gandhi and the independence movement successfully exploited. But since the 1960s, the economic and cultural initiatives of India have increasingly come from its cities and, with the burgeoning of a globalized service- and information-based economy, the cities of India have come to define its identity both to itself and the outside world. The demographics alone are startling: while the three megalopolis of Bombay, New Delhi, and Calcutta each encompass some 15 million people, relatively obscure (to the rest of the world) secondary and tertiary cities such as Patna, Pune, Ahmedabad, or Madurai now have populations of two to three million each. The individual body and its relationship to both a larger body politic and the living organism that is the city can be a useful set of parameters from which to explore the cultural production of India today.

Two very different exhibitions of visual arts take up centre stage at the House of World Cultures. Geeta Kapur, who has written extensively on contemporary art in India and curated the ‘Bombay/Mumbai’ section of the ‘Century City’ exhibition at the Tate Modern in 2001, presents ‘subTerrain: art works in the cityfold,’ a survey of 41 works by 16 artists. Kapur’s premise is to present works that articulate aspects of the interface between body, city, and polity. Her taste favours works that express self-consciousness about their relationship to both international vanguard art practice and the contemporary urban visual cultures of India. The majority of works on exhibit take the form of multi-media installations often encompassing video or projection devices such as those by Nalini Malani, Vinu Sundaram, Navjot Altaf, Sheela Chhachi, Anant Joshi, yet, pure painting is still represented by the works of Bhupen Khakhar, Jitish Kallat, and Vasudev Tejuhun, and unmanipulated photography by those of Raghu Rai. The works chosen by Kapur combine a strong, sometimes even aggressive, presence with a clear meaning, often taking inspiration directly from contemporary political and social situations in India.

Paired with ‘subTerrain’ is ‘The Conquest of the World as Picture,’ an encyclopaedic exhibition of popular culture and consumer ephemera from the last 150 years curated by Jutinodia Jain, former director of New Delhi’s Crafts Museum and current Dean of the School of Art and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University. A kaleidoscopic variety of material—from calendar art and religious iconography to commercial and portrait photography, functional crafts, miniature paintings, film posters and stills, theatrical backdrops, tourist postcards, packaging labels, ceramic statuary, and ‘folk art’ from the urban marketplace—is brought together to tell the story of the role played by popular Indian imagery in the construction of cultural, social, and national identities. This ‘relecticism of visuality,’ as Jain calls it, relates directly to major cultural and technological transformations that have taken place in India since the mid-1800s, whose influence has shaped both the India we know today and the debates about its future. Nine interconected sections, such as ‘Camera Indica,’ ‘Representing the Other,’ and ‘Manipulating the Image,’ allow the audience to ascertain the struggles within India’s consciousness of itself to resolve questions of colonial and nationalist politics, a politics composed of multiple linguistic, religious, and ethnic communities, and the function of religious practice and imagery within a secular context. To my mind, Jain’s exhibition gives ample opportunity to an uninitiated audience to properly evaluate many of the strategies and references being employed by the artists in Kapur’s show. ‘Actors at Work’ is the title given by Anuradha Kapur to her programme of performing arts for ‘body.city.’ Adaptation and assimilation are key attributes in the six works chosen by Kapur, professor at Delhi’s National School of Drama and theatrical director. Quotation of previously existing works ties together these dances, plays, and performances, whether they are sourced from traditional Hindu contexts (such as ‘Shakuntala’s Identification’ which is being presented by Ammanmur Chachu Chakar Smrucksursam and Natanahrail), or ‘Gaspari’ by the Adashik Laboratory for Theatre Art Research) or European (such as Kapur’s collaborative work with Ein Lall which adapts Brecht’s ‘Antigone’). In ‘A Deep
Fried Jam,’ performance artist Maya Rao teams up with musican Ashim Ghosh to present both political and autobiographical meditations in an informal, comedic, cabaret style. Most of the works in ‘Actors at Work’ display the same uninhibited experimentation with technology and formal hybridization that have featured in Rasheed Araeen’s ‘Mekong Meeting’ (2000) and ‘International Mekong Meeting’ (2002). This exhibition, entitled ‘Privacy’ and curated by Jyotindra Jain, based photographer Dayanita Singh at the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum. Having begun her career in photojournalism, Singh is an American artist and curator, frequently writing on。”

“Nehru’s Coat”, Anand Bhavan, Allahabad 2000

Finally, film historian and theorist Ravi Vasudevan takes the multi-headed monster that is film in India, with his programme entitled ‘Selves made Strange: violent and performative bodies in the cities of Indian cinema, 1974-2003’. Vasudevan’s tastes are all-embracing, giving equal attention to the commercial Hindi-language cinema generated out of Bombay (Bollywood), regional cinemas in Bengali and Tamil, documentary film-making for social and political purpose, as well as diasporic storytelling. Directors included in the programme are Satyajit Ray, Yash Chopra, Kumar Shahani, Mani Routhan, Madhesh Bhatt, Anand Patwardhan, and Ram Gopal Varma, amongst others. ‘Selves made Strange’ celebrates a certain dissipation of coherence that has taken place in Indian cinema since the 1970s, asserting the ‘mutability of personality’ as a possible emergent critical vocabulary. With Vasudevan’s programme, ‘body-city’ achieves its cathartic melting point, identifying Indian culture as inherently and necessarily complex and contradictory.

Contemporaneous with ‘body-city’ but not officially allied to it is a comprehensive survey of work by the New Delhi based photographer Dayanita Singh at the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum. Having begun her career in photojournalism, Singh has pursued a variety of subjects of her own volition over the past ten years. This exhibition, entitled ‘Privacy’ and comprised of 150 photographs, is drawn primarily from two bodies of her work, ‘Family Portraits’ and ‘Empty Spaces,’ each of which focuses on the domestic scenario within contemporary India, both with its inhabitants and without. Singh’s portrait of India is intimate, patient, privileged, and refined, light years away from the garishly coloured visage of touristic India and the disaster-driven images that feed the international media. Her realistic portraiture provides the Berlin audience with an in-depth look at a single artist’s accomplishment, which unfortunately, is not possible with the collective format of Kapur’s show (and isn’t this perhaps the strategic fail to nationalistic exhibition paradigms?). Parallel to ‘Privacy’ is ‘Myself Mona Ahmed’, Singh’s body of work documenting the life of and her friendship with a trans-gendered inhabitant of Delhi’s old city. Exhibited separately at the Museum of Indian Art, ‘Myself…’ provides a poignant rendering of the life of an individual who is both marginalized by mainstream society and her own milieu, a portrait of the tremendous tolls taken in the creation of an independent identity. As the vast majority of Singh’s images in both shows in Berlin have been shot in New Delhi, Calcutta, and Bombay, her corpus should make an appropriate addition to ‘body-city’ and its multiple arguments.

Peter Nagy is an American artist and curator, frequently working on the subject of contemporary art. Since 1992 he has been based in New Delhi where he runs Nature Morte, a gallery promoting a wide variety of art forms by both Indian artists and those coming to India to work. naturemorte@hotmail.com

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