

Geeta Kapur

**On Dialogic Exhibition-Making: In Conversation with
Natasha Ginwala//2010**

Natasha Ginwala While performing the role of critic-curator, you seem to create an epistemological bridge – with your writing often feeding your curatorial practice. Further, your texts have become a crucial component of modern Indian art history; how do you view this synergetic complementarity between writing and exhibition-making?

Geeta Kapur Some kind of self-definition may be useful as a preamble to my answer. Trained in art history and criticism, my effort is to write on modern and contemporary art theoretically, critically, politically. I continue to use the simple designation ‘art critic’ because using the category ‘art historian’ would not be strictly correct, and I hesitate to wear the badge of a cultural theorist, even though much of my writing is included in anthologies dedicated to international cultural studies or cultural theory. Over the years, I started writing much longer texts – seminar papers and what are probably best considered as essays. As for the designation of curator, although I started making exhibitions on a fairly large scale quite early on, the ‘title’ of curator came somewhat later. I hold it in partial abeyance because I have curated relatively few shows when compared with professional curators who are institutionally situated or function independently on a global scale.

Many art professionals actually prefer to name themselves as curators first, since they take criticism to be part of their curatorial studies. Sometimes this is because it is more exciting, also expedient, to be a curator today. It is my formation in discursive terms that shapes the concept and design of the exhibitions I work on, therefore I am critic first, then curator. Having said that, an exhibition’s actual display, the phenomenology of the given space and site, the dialogue and unexpected encounters between objects, the signs and meanings that surface in different viewing itineraries – all this thrills me quite separately from the conceptual paradigm of the exhibition.

Ginwala I would like to briefly re-visit your landmark exhibition ‘Place for People’ (1981). Did your personal rapport with the artists in the exhibition equip you in some special way to critically analyse their embedded intentionalities and practice?

Kapur ‘Place for People’ (Delhi, Bombay, 1981) was a self-generated project of six

artists and a critic. We did not anyway use the term curator at that stage and I functioned very simply as a member of a group or collective. It was therefore not my exhibition: though this misunderstanding continues. This is an amusing anachronism based perhaps on the fact that I was among the earliest critics in India to suggest replacing terms like ‘exhibition organizer’ or ‘commissioner’ (as we were then called) and claiming the nomenclature and rights of ‘curators’. This was as late as 1994, and yet all hell broke out in the Indian art world because this new category seemed threatening to artists.

‘Place for People’ began with the theorizing of narrativity in art. This was during the 1970s and 80s. The artworks that made up the exhibition developed in conjunction with the discourse on contemporary narration. This included a revived interest in social realism as a still-valid mode within an honourable and inclusive art-historical frame of narrative painting; and, tendentially, in magical realism, seen as a ‘subaltern’ explosion in literature and film and more nominally in painting.

The first round of discussions on narrative painting took place among Bombay and Baroda artists; the debate came to prominence in Baroda with its key artists in dialogue with the vociferous English artist and critic Timothy Hyman, who was then lecturing at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Baroda. Timothy had a friendship with Peter de Francia – a Marxist painter-pedagogue who had taught me and many Indian artists at the Royal College of Art in London – and also with the volatile artist-intellectual of the period, Ron Kitaj. Our immediate inspiration was our painter-colleague, Bhupen (Khakhar). He had set the agenda to think differently, audaciously, about what it meant to belong to a place, to respond to vernacular cultures, and narrativize the self within the everyday. At the same time, our own painter-pedagogue Gulam (Sheikh) provided the art-historical dimension to pictorial narratives, ranging from Siennese paintings to Persian miniatures. This greatly enhanced our collective learning.

When the discussion moved to the artist workshop at Kasauli Art Centre (a summer residency run by Vivan Sundaram in his mountain house) the issues became more ideological. Vivan, Nalini (Malani), Sudhir (Patwardhan), and I, explored the more Marxist dimensions of historical narrativization. The final group was composed of Khakhar, Sheikh, Sundaram, Malani, Patwardan, and Jogen Chowdhury. The shared intention was to explore locality, vernacular cultures, class, genre, and the politics of all these categories. I was the seventh member, critic and colleague, and my catalogue text for the exhibition was titled ‘Partisan Views about the Human Figure’ (*Place for People*, exhibition catalogue, Bombay and Delhi, 1981). The artists involved were committed to maintaining a *dialogic* basis for their evolving practice and believed that a critic (and her theoretical/ ideological concerns) were necessary to the formation of

a group that might change the very terms of contemporaneity in Indian art.

Interestingly, the other formation that emerged within the same decade – the Kerala Radicals (Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association, active 1987–1989) – had Anita Dube as their resident critic and comrade. She wrote a short ‘manifesto’, *Questions and Dialogue*, for their exhibition in Baroda in 1987. What is remarkable is that these artist-provocateurs entered the Indian art scene by critiquing the aesthetics and politics of ‘Place for People’. This confrontation provided a ‘dialectic’ within contemporary art in India, the intensity of which has scarcely been matched in later decades, even though the production and exhibition of Indian art has so proliferated and gained global presence.

Geeta Kapur and Natasha Ginwala, extract from conversation first published in *Art & Deal*, vol. 7, no. 32 (2010) 12–28; revised for this publication, 2013.

Margarita Tupitsyn The Decade BC (Before Chernenko) in Contemporary Russian Art//1984

It isn't new ideas but new places to put ideas.

– Richard Foreman, *Book of Splendours: Part Two (Book of Leaves) Action at a Distance*, 1976

[...] In 1982 the members of the Collective Action group, together with younger artists, formed ‘krug MANI’, the Moscow Archive of New Art circle. They began to show in a studio apartment on the outskirts of Moscow, home to artist Nikita Alekseev, who described it as ‘the first avant-garde gallery in “a sixth part of the world”’. From this the whole movement came to be called ‘Apt Art’. The title celebrated the twenty-year-old tradition of showing alternative culture in apartments or artists’ studios, with this difference, however: in the early 1980s to exhibit in the Apt Art gallery was a statement, style-wise as well as politically, not a grudging necessity. The first Apt Art exposition ran from 20 to 31 October 1982 and presented a crowded installation of more than one hundred works executed specifically for this event by individual artists and several collectives. Sven Gundlakh, who became a key figure of the Moscow vanguard at that time, reports that ‘a tendency to emphasize the *faktura* of the artwork was reflected in the mode of display. The latter, in its complete saturation of available space,

created an artificial environment in which a viewer could touch, pull or “butt” into everything.’ To this the artist Anatoly Zhigalov adds: ‘An avalanche of unreadable texts, inscriptions, slogans and posters descended on the viewer.’ Stylistically, the show was eclectic except for a common inclination towards the use of texts that, by being simple and ironic, stood in opposition to the prevailing metaphysical moods of the Moscow vanguard and to cerebral interpretations of the Collective Actions group.

Most of the works tended to focus on political and cultural issues, unlike the individualistic and existentialist content of the art of previous generations. Physical neatness for the art objects became unimportant. For the first time Russian artists accepted and used to their advantage the absence of good materials. The size of works was generally small, as in the 1960s. Then and now it signified the non-public nature of Soviet alternative culture, contrasting its different ‘look’ from the public art of Socialist Realism.

Among those whose work was exhibited in the first Apt Art show were Victor Skersis and Vadim Zakharov (jointly known as S/Z), who have collaborated since 1980. Their grotesque double-self-portrait, repeated in various media, has become their trademark, used for a self-advertising campaign. All their works draw on mundane imagery decorated with blunt and infantile language. These emotionally and visually electric ‘products of S/Z were suspended in the middle of the room, involving bits and pieces of a sparkling colour film and frying pans with the inscription “objects to head-butt”’. S/Z’s artistic ‘rubbish’ must have been insulting for the many Moscow guardians of art’s creative temple. But that is precisely S/Z’s intention. Separately and in collaboration, S/Z are building a reputation as crusaders against the formal and theoretical canons of Moscow underground culture.

Another collective, the Mukhomor group – involving Gundlakh, Aleksis Kamensky, Sergei and Vladimir Mironenko and Konstantin Zvezdochetov – is like ‘a big cauldron in which ideas are boiled and extracted and then put into practice’. According to the Mukhomor, in their ‘microcosm’ there is no such thing as plagiarism, since after Marx ‘the elimination of private property signifies a complete emancipation of all human feelings and characteristics’. The group dates its foundation to February 1978, when they staged ‘an exhibition-action’, and on 24 March they collectively executed a work called *An Indian Hunting the Eagle* on a piece of canvas stretched on a frame from an old sofa. Shortly thereafter, they staged a guerrilla action by seizing a spot at the sanctioned exhibition of work by the nonconformist artists of the 1960s called ‘Experiment’. Their final penetration into Moscow’s artistic circles happened when they made noisy visits to Moscow studios touting a suitcase stuffed with leporellos of drawings and miscellaneous objects of no apparent function. Stylistically, this