



50 YEARS OF
CONTEMPORARY ART

1963 ■ 2013

Chemould Prescott Road celebrates
50 years of contemporary art

Aesthetic Bind
Five exhibitions curated by Geeta Kapur

Subject of Death
September 3 - October 3, 2013

Citizen Artist: forms of address
October 14 - November 15, 2013

Phantomata
November 29, 2013 - January 3, 2014

Cabinet Closet Wunderkammer
January 17 - February 15, 2014

Floating World
March 15 - April 12, 2014

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Chemould Prescott Road celebrates
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Second of five exhibitions curated by Geeta Kapur

Aesthetic Bind
Citizen Artist: forms of address

October 14 - November 15, 2013

CAMP
Gauri Gill
Shilpa Gupta
Arunkumar H G
Tushar Joag
Jitish Kallat
K M Madhusudhanan
Pushpamala N
Ram Rahman
Rashid Rana
Inder Salim
Gigi Scaria
Raqs Media Collective

Citizen Artist: forms of address

The regime of the nation-state commits the citizen to the ethics of a civil society determined by the Constitution and hinged to the state. The concept of the citizen *subject* implies both subjection to the state and a subject position whereby individuals inscribe their own political tendencies within the social and constitutional order. This should include anarchist dissent and organized resistance.

By substituting the subject in the compound designate of citizen subject, we may derive the category of the *citizen artist* whose ethics becomes prescient in the aesthetic bind. If the individual citizen is an enunciating and performing subject within a changing phenomenology of encounters, it is possible to hypothesize an artist supporting the abstraction entailed in citizenship yet endowing it with an existential force unravelled in the creative act.

The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form. (Theodor Adorno)

In the twentieth century, and especially during certain decades (1920s though the 1940s; 1960s through the 1970s), political artists engaged directly with revolutionary and anarchist ideas, putting their stakes in vanguard as well as party-based communism, antifascism, decolonization, feminism. Today, propositions offering *history as form* are themselves historicized. Not any more the grand narrative, discourse-and-activism focuses on transactions around citizenship in conjunction with a critique of the state and of particular modes of statist repression: nationalist, liberal and socialist.

Investigating conditions of citizenship takes us to populations excluded from the domain of human rights: subalterns, and citizens *in extremis*, who set the measure for empirical histories and ethical reflection. At the opposite end, the simultaneity and abbreviation afforded by current technologies turn human communication cool and viral; the overload of information facilitates finance capital even as it produces a mass of knowledge so condensed as to be material *and* theoretical. Criteria wobble when such disparate gains are weighed for their relative value on the scale of overdetermined globality.



This exhibition, *Citizen Artist*, starts with the nation-state, therefore borders. The Partition that marks the birth of India and Pakistan is signalled at the very start by Madhusudan's short film that 'locates' in the setting of a projectionist's workshop and damaged celluloid the face of a disappeared father. Shilpa Gupta's two works speak about anticipation and aftermath: she alludes to the aspirations for nation, state and citizenship in a Palestine cruelly denied secure borders and the status of a nation-state among others; the second work shows how, in Indian Kashmir, a stateless polity meets with relentless state repression.

Shilpa indexes a regime of annulment not only of the citizen subject, but of actual persons, buried in nameless graves and considered martyrs by their kin. Situating a graveyard in the dim hollow of the exhibition space, the artist initiates a ritual in symbolic care of the dead.

Lines of control turn into transit queues with Jitish Kallat: a midget-sized pageant of (sculpted) figures in frisker/frisked pairs gives us a performative view of cosmopolitan travel and forced migration, underscored by curtailed access to the global. This pageant is a sectional view of a populace designated variously as crowd, polity, multitude. Rashid Rana's *Crowd*, photo prints on wallpaper, is spliced versions of a mixed population and potential citizenry on global scale wherefrom we may deduce new forms of empowerment the Occupy movement, and other agential gatherings in cities across the world. But this 'congregation' leads to other conjectures: will an image retrieved/reconstructed from, say, a million flashing mobiles, pixelate when scrutinized? Both Jitish and Rashid imply that citizens are desubjectified by the global apparatus.

We have other variations on the profile of the citizen. CAMP offers a theatric and absurdly predictable nexus between corporates and bureaucrats, negotiated through sound and text. *The players*: guardians of the state exchequer, a renegade bourgeoisie, an intermediary with a female voice, her monosyllabic words inviting an (always objectionable) voyeurism, and the telephone that transacts, despite surveillance, astronomical sums. As if to complement this high-voltage exchange conducted via phone tapping, we have a fortuitous inversion in Tushar Joag's telephonic relay. Here the conversation provides modest profit – a detour into the 'collective' unconscious via conditions of sleep, sleeplessness and waking and, with that, neighbourly goodwill. Except that Tushar overlays a surrealist text where the ruse of sleep affords a promiscuous take on democracy; a liaison between the listless citizen and a developmentalist state damming up rivers, drowning protesters.

To return to the force of the populace, civil-society politics shifts focus on India's deprived and deserted citizens, representing not so much an identifiable working class, but minorities and, by extension, tribal, nomadic and dalit communities. Arunkumar's frieze photograph of daily-wage labour presents a class-defined polity. We can assimilate labour into migrant multitudes but only by taking into account rural dispossession in what was a peasant country along with the circumstance of contingent lives in metropolitan India. Gauri Gill takes us back along the same route to those who migrate from country to city; her photographs allow us to glimpse the lives of palpably individual, seemingly eccentric characters in the deserts of northern Rajasthan. Unrecorded even by BPL ('below the poverty line') logistics, the photographed characters offer prankster poses to a friend-photographer. What is transmitted is the *punctum* of the photo image; it unsettles middle-class protocols with unsolicited gestures of equality by young players in the wilderness.

In a seeming jump cut, I go to the other aspect of the exhibition which is about iconic identities. To begin with, Pushpamala's studio photograph: her spectacular retake of Delacroix's heraldic history painting *Liberty Leading the People*.¹ The French Revolution presaged a class war culminating in the proletarian revolutions of the twentieth century and this image pushes into high rhetoric through and beyond the present argument on modernity, secular democracy and equal citizenship. Iconicity is brought nearer home by Gigi Scaria who compresses (with found footage from the internet) chronicles of recent history with Gandhi and Mao as unforgettable, if alternative, icons. Both leaders laid their stakes on the peasantry (and not on the bourgeois proletarian axis); both envisioned what inevitably took the form of a nation – in one case by non-violent means, in the other through armed struggle. If anything unites them it is their unwillingness to succumb to the established order of the nation-state.

There is an iconicity attributable to ordinary men and women; it is condensed in the body of the protesting citizen. Ram Rahman's top-angle photograph of Safdar Hashmi's cortege is iconic. The photograph enters a twentieth-century image archive: the slain body draped in a communist flag (of the CPI-M); the hammer and sickle characterizing, signifying, the dead revolutionary. Safdar's death marks the foundation of Sahmat (Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust), a collective that galvanizes Indian artists to resist rightwing and antiseccular forces in Indian politics. Many of Inder Salim's performances have been at Sahmat; more recently on discursive platforms such as Sarai. He is everywhere in the national capital region; his choice of persona and issues mocks the state's assumed omnipotence. A polyvalent figure (like the change in his name from Inder Tikku to Inder Salim), he is dedicated to his native Kashmir. Through his identification with its travails he has found a politics of dissent and the poetics necessary for the performing subject.

Raqs Media Collective's animated facsimile of the handprint of a Bengal peasant, taken in 1858 by colonial state officials, prefigures identification technologies that have, since, multiplied the possibility, as Raqs says, of 'the state touching its subjects'. In this exhibition, Raj Konai's phantom limb, dipped in indigo blue and counting to infinity, becomes archetypal. It indexes the daily disappeared, the scrutinized, the desubjectified, the sleuths, their victims and our neighbours; it indexes the performers, the marginalized, the martyrs, peoples' leaders and formal icons. That is to say, it deconstructs the political on behalf of the citizen who is at the fulcrum of this exhibition.

Geeta Kapur
14 October 2013
New Delhi

¹Painted in 1830 (the July Revolution), its republican iconography reaffirms the first French Revolution of 1879–94: a towering female figure, the flag, a mixed class of people (bourgeois and worker), barricades, the forward march.