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Diaspora Art



Rina Banerjee. *Take Me, Take Me, Take Me... To the Palace of Love*. Mixed media installation. 2003.

WAY IN THE WORLD

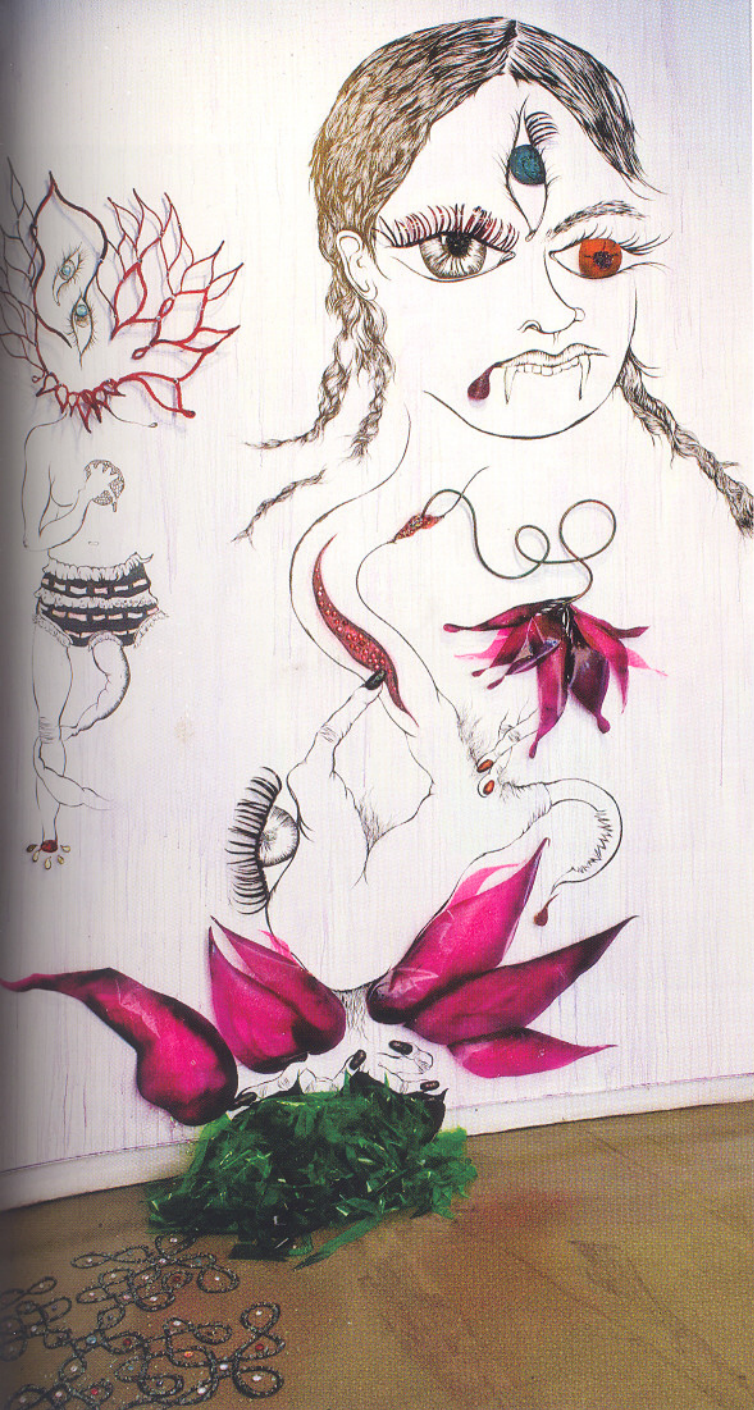
Does the term 'Diaspora Art' mean different things to different people? Should we bother using it in today's globalized times? **Sharmistha Ray** provides answers and poses questions.

SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA ART IS VARIED AND MULTIVALENT. IF there's one thing all diaspora artists agree on, it's that there isn't any singular definition of what diaspora art is. For some artists, the term itself is problematic. While their work may have social or political subtexts related to major issues surrounding the diasporic experience of cultural migration, these artists doggedly resist being labelled in this way.

Certainly, the personal and professional experiences of diaspora artists vary across the spectrum. So, their approaches to deconstructing their experiences in their art are understandably multiple too. No system of categorization has yet been devised that can effectively group so-called 'diaspora artists' together. Except, perhaps, for the fact that they all live outside of India, unifying them under a single banner is an unwieldy

proposition. However, the mere fact of being dispersed from one's homeland, be it a matter of personal choice or generational migration, has widespread implications. These are, obviously, not restricted to South Asia, but apply to immigrant communities and populations the world over.

The post-colonial discourses that dominated cultural debates in the 1990s prioritized discussions about cultural rights, belonging and identity politics. But, post-9/11, debates about globalization have taken precedence in defining the new world order and require a re-positioning of migrant communities within a larger, more complicated framework. From post-colonialism to globalization, a general trajectory of diaspora art can be traced over the past decade that is in alignment with contemporary ideas about the 'migrant experience'.



Chitra Ganesh. *Untitled.* Mixed media. Approximately 9' x 13' x 7'. Site-specific installation created for *Firewalkers*, an exhibition at Stefan Stux Gallery in New York. 2008.

Here, I have sketched four basic categories for the ideological evolution of diaspora art: The Self in a New World, The Collective Sensibility and Issues of Representation, The New Generation post 9/11, and the Hyper-Intensive Globalized World, "Globalization of the Local" and the Particularization of Experience. The categories are not strictly chronological. Instead, they are based on ideological positions that overlap, intersect or, at times, even run parallel to one another.

1. The Self in a New World

The politics of migration, identity and belonging was at the heart of artistic investigation for the first generation of artists from the South Asian diaspora - practitioners of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian and Sri Lankan



Jaishri Abichandani. *Anabata Chakra.* 4' x 4'. 2000. From the solo show *Mind's Desires* held at Gallery Chemould in Mumbai from the 27th of May to the 26th of August 2002.

descent - that emerged in the 1990s in London, New York and Toronto. First and second-generation immigrants (however displaced) found similar cultural linkages and shared histories that blurred the borders of their respective homelands. Therefore, their politics, concerns and practices converged. They had an impetus to create a common space for themselves in their new, alien context that reflected their experience of being neither here nor there.

The condition of existing in this in-between space required constant negotiations with self and place. There was a need to locate identity and trace migratory trajectories in order to map a visual language of displacement. The inward-looking nature of this investigation involved dealing with the past (of colonial and post-colonial India, for instance), while also relating this history to their altered situations in Western metropolitan centres. This self-conscious investigation was enabled by the institutionalization of Post-colonial thought in the 1990s. Since the late 1970s and throughout the 1990s, theorists like Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha have created a 'language' of post-colonialism that could be adopted by a generation of 'subaltern artists' to express their ethnopolitical concerns. Spivak further canonized 'subaltern politics' for women by identifying and exposing acts of gender subjugation, providing a precedent for non-Western women in academia, literature and the arts.

Bengali-American sculptor and installation artist Rina Banerjee maps out a hybrid terrain that investigates cultural binaries. She draws upon romantic iconographies from India and heightens the exotic nature of her objects through ornamentation and theatrical display, while also using formalist tools to construct a visual language that has its roots in the West.



Hasan Elahi. *Tracking Transience: Security & Comfort*. 324 of the toilets used while away from home. 2002 and 2006.



Hasan Elahi. *Tracking Transience: Altitude*. An excerpt of meals eaten in the air in 2005 and 2006.

Banerjee's use of the imaginary as an entry point into cultural dialogue has mirrored the practices of other contemporary women artists who gained recognition around the same time - notably the African-American Kara Walker, Pakistani Shahzia Sikander and Iranian-born Shirin Neshat. One of Banerjee's most significant works in this regard, *Take Me, Take Me, Take Me... To the Palace of Love* (2003) first exhibited at Mass MoCA in the show *Yankee Remix* from 2003 to 2004, alongside large installations by Ann Hamilton and Annette Messenger, was an opulent, floating pink plastic-wrapped copper and steel armature of the Taj Mahal. Inside it, were three towering objects - a chandelier, a chair and a globe. A floral chandelier hung from the central interior's large dome and an 18th century floating black wooden Victorian armchair was supported in turn by a plexiglass plate. Below the chair and resting on the floor was a black vintage globe made of semi-precious stones.

Banerjee's wry theme-park reconstruction of a popular historical monument deftly subverted its social, historical and cultural significance via this de-contextualization. The outlandish colours and embellishments abstracted the original, reconstituting it within layers of allusion and make-believe. The transformation of found, antique objects into objects of desire questioned their authenticity; in addition, their juxtaposition with fabricated sculptures blurred the boundaries between the real and the imagined. When the issue of authenticity enters an original document, the document becomes fictionalized. Banerjee's magnum opus was such a fiction on a grand scale. *The Palace of Love* displaced written histories with fables of love in an imaginary environment of decadence, splendour and wealth. It

was as if the glories of a distant past had been supplanted through the course of time and longing, by a vortex of invented memories and self-reflexive imaginings that betrayed a migrant's nostalgia for a place called home. Banerjee's deconstruction thereby engaged with a post-colonial discourse about the difficulty of positioning the self in the context of history and culture.

II. The Collective Sensibility and Issues of Representation

In the early part of this decade, few commercial or alternative spaces existed in New York that focused on Indian art - let alone South Asian diaspora art. Bose Pacia opened in Soho in New York in the 1994, but the commercial gallery tended to focus on Modern and Contemporary artists from the Indian mainland.

So, even though an artist like Banerjee was able to break into mainstream venues for contemporary art - she was included in the 2000 edition of the Whitney Biennial - other South Asian diaspora artists remained on the fringe. Their specific concerns were just too difficult for an American art world disconnected from their cultural source to understand.

New York-based South Asian diaspora artists like Jaishri Abichandani and Chitra Ganesh appropriated kitsch, clichés and other recognizable identifiers from their cultural roots in India to interrogate identity. Abichandani's *Mind's Desire* series (1998) used the formal symbol of the Mandala with elements of collage to juxtapose self-portraits with images of Hindu goddesses. *Mind's*

Desire commented on the fragmented, feminist self in a way that addressed Western stereotypes of Indian women. Abichandani writes that the series was instigated by "the pain of never being seen as a whole spirit, but instead as a projection of everyone's desires and expectations."

In 2001, Chitra Ganesh started to appropriate *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books to subvert traditional representations of sexuality and gender. She created politically subversive hybrid creatures, dislocated from any kind of categorical identification. Abichandani and Ganesh represented the typical subaltern woman, mirroring Spivak's politics. Believing that women, and more specifically, subaltern women, had been deliberately excluded from institutional discourses about culture (and dehumanized in the process), Spivak's corrective philosophy laid the groundwork for a grassroots effort implemented by and for women.

Both Abichandani and Ganesh have been involved with other South Asian activist groups in New York, like the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (S.A.L.G.A) and women's organizations that campaign against domestic violence, like Sakhi. However, while these groups incorporated art as part of their broader mission statement, their social agenda took precedence. Diaspora art in New York needed its own grassroots movement. Abichandani, who had immigrated to New York with her family in 1983, had already been involved with Desh Pardesh, the South Asian Festival of Arts and Politics in Toronto in the mid-'90s. In 1997, Abichandani used this model to integrate art and feminism with the South Asian Women's Creative Collective (S.A.W.C.C) in New York. Ganesh was one of its founding members.

In the late '90s and early part of this decade, subaltern politics formed the core focus of South Asian women artists from the diaspora. Today, this post-colonial feminism, which laid the foundation for an organization like S.A.W.C.C, has been overshadowed post-9/11 by the overarching and complex machinations of a new global order, which has thrown all prior ideologies into a state of flux.

III. The New Generation post 9/11 and the Hyper-Intensive Globalized World

9/11 changed the landscape of the world as we knew it. It brought to the fore the invisible system of dots that connects urban sites all over the world and makes them all systematically and simultaneously vulnerable. Reconstitutions of events and spaces have confused national projects within global ambitions, fuelling evermore anxiety and the oppression of minorities. Technology has become a weapon of mass destruction as much as it has been responsible for the creation of a 'flat world'; a regime of open markets, speculative capital and uncensored, cross-sectional uploading of data onto the Internet that makes information and images accessible 24/7. Cyberspace is the new model for global space: it feigns an erasure of national borders, creating *en masse* anxiety in a daily existence defined by the lack of borders, territories, security and protection. With the pervasiveness of the Internet, we are made continually transparent. With hyper-exposure, we are never safe. Uploading to YouTube, Flickr, MySpace and Facebook have

become normal everyday activities. People freely upload personal information across cultures, giving millions of persons who they have never met (and are not likely to meet) immediate access to their lives. The outcome has been a decisive flattening out of identity - whereby the only definitive entity is a one-dimensional one with an on-line presence. The number of Google hits a person possesses, and not actual achievement, affirms physical existence. We live virtual, not real, lives.

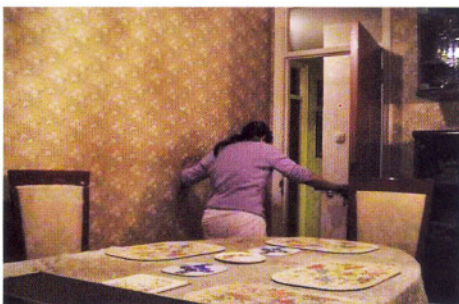
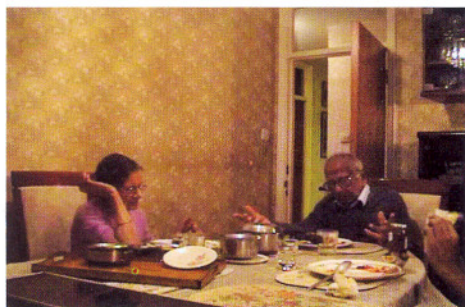
It's even more confounding, given this new global framework without specific identities, that the profiling of minorities has never been more intense. The threat to national systems and projects has upset the logic of space. New enemies, both imagined and real, are created to enforce an old-world dichotomy of 'us' and 'them.' Terrorism requires counter-terrorism that perpetuates both. But what are we fighting? The lines that divide, define and supposedly clarify are no longer doing so: they have blurred, creating a scattered geography of alliances, enemies and targets.

In 2002, Bangladeshi-American artist Hasan Elahi became such a target. An FBI investigation zeroed in on Elahi, after they had (allegedly) been tipped off that he was an Arab hoarding explosives at a Florida storage unit. After a series of regular meetings with F.B.I agents over a six-month period, an intensive examination into all aspects of his life and a number of polygraph tests, Elahi was finally cleared of terrorist charges.

The experience, however, led to an ongoing research project that Elahi started in 2002 called *Tracking Transience*. To prove his innocence, Elahi decided to make his life an open book, eradicating the borders between the private and public by exposing the minutiae of his life on-line. Elahi documents his life in real-time by photographing the places he has been to, the meals he has eaten and even records the credit card transactions he has made. The artist wears a "bracelet" that uses GPS technology to accurately record his exact movements. Consequently, he examines the inverted relationship between people and technologies. Conventional wisdom identifies the Internet as a window onto the world. Elahi's truth is stranger than fiction: the Internet actually redirects the gaze back onto the trivia of our lives, our bedrooms, offices and so on. If both the macrocosm and the microcosm exist on the same cyber-plane, which is which, really?

Although Elahi travels constantly, his whereabouts and activities are available for anyone to see at anytime on his website www.trackingtransience.com. His server logs show hits from the Pentagon, the Secretary of Defense and the Executive Office of the President, among others. Ironically, the site has the reverse effect of what's expected; by placing his life under a microscope, Elahi takes the individual out of the picture. Instead of bringing himself up-close for scrutiny, he abstracts himself out of the picture altogether. Elahi no longer exists as a person of substance but as an endless series of generic photographs and documents that obliterate the original. In the aggressive act of locating himself in every moment, Elahi becomes a passive subject, a non-enemy of the state. A Nobody. For if Elahi's investigation started with the scrutinized self, the hunted fugitive, his intense self-examination renders the end product a non-person.

[Lead Essay]



Gautam Kansara. *I'm Leaving*. Single-channel video. Dimensions variable. 5:49 minutes. 2005.

Where cultural identities are concerned, Elahi's project has even deeper and more disturbing implications. Post-colonial theorizing attempted to make the subaltern human. Here, the opposite happens. Personalities, nationalities, identities and individual characteristics are as interchangeable as foreign currency. Tactics of surveillance and sousveillance can dehumanize irretrievably. As the old equation between the 'self' and 'other' gets re-jigged, the post-colonial project is dismantled in the process.

IV. "Globalization of the Local" and the Particularization of Experience

Thomas L. Friedman, the author of *The World Is Flat* (2005), is a proponent of globalization. He sees the global world as a utopia in which individual cultures actually have a much greater chance of thriving through what he calls the "forces of particularization". According to Friedman, greater exposure to information empowers cultural minorities, allowing them to maintain their local traditions by giving them continuous access to their specific cultures. He writes, "Even those individuals who have had to uproot themselves from developing countries to go West - to Europe or America in particular - have been able to take advantage of the flattening of the world to hold on to many aspects of their local culture, even if they are living in the midst of a different one thousands of miles away."

London-born and New York-based Gautam Kansara is one artist whose work benefits from mediated access to specific cultural information. Working primarily with video and installation, Kansara's work draws on Indian subject matter - even though his experience of India has been largely limited to what his London-based grandparents have told him. (They both passed away last year.) Kansara's closeness to them has, to a large extent, provided the source material for his investigation into the particulars of the Indian family; its generational experiences and the impact of migration.

In the single-channel video work *I'm Leaving* (2005), Kansara recorded numerous conversations around the family's dining table in his grandparent's home in London. The video featured Kansara's grandparents and himself. Kansara was seated on the viewer's right, while the camera focused on his grandfather at the centre of the scene. The video started with Kansara saying "I'm leaving tomorrow", which plunged his grandfather into despair. His sentiments transformed quickly from displeasure to disbelief and then slid into utter confusion. By focusing on his grandfather's accented speech and gestures, Kansara emphasized the distinctive eccentricities that characterize the individual. Kansara instigated the scene, but became a passive participant thereafter in order to allow his grandfather's subjectivity to play itself out over the course of the video. Like a storyteller, Kansara remained keenly attuned to the cultural particularities of person, place and situation thereby weaving a powerful narrative about migration, charged with the subtext of separation. Unlike Elahi's total submission to technology which erases individuality, Kansara achieved the opposite by directing the technological lens towards personal experience.

Globalization has ensured that fixed points no longer exist. In this essay, I have identified a few broad categories that analyze some of the major themes that dominate South Asian diaspora art but there are, undoubtedly, many others. The term 'diaspora art' is constantly expanding and changing shape in a world order defined not merely by cross-cultural exchange but also by the continual (re) shuffling of personal and ideological boundaries. Conversations about 'locating the self' have been replaced by those that attempt to define identity amidst rapidly shifting geographies. Diaspora artists, like everyone else, are not pinned down by place and time anymore. They are free agents, negotiators of a multiplex of ideological positions that are constantly being revised.