



## Contemporary Indian Art; An Amalgamation of New Genres

Saba Rafi <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar (J.R.F. U.G.C.), Department of Fine Arts, Aligarh Muslim University, INDIA

### ABSTRACT:

Today's art appears to be an inclusion of various art forms. Indian contemporary art, similar to the art of the world, reflects the inclusion of diverse art forms. Nowadays, contemporary Indian art presents a hybrid picture because of its mediatic multitude of differences between various artists across the country. At the same time, we are witnessing the creation of new genres and the development of a pluralistic mediatic scenario that draws on diverse traditions and scientific developments. Art has always been affected by the patronage, contemporary events, and inventions of a particular time; likewise, constant changes in the world are impacting the nation's ongoing art. Contemporary Indian art is a perfect blend of sensibilities from Asia and the West. For almost the last three decades, Indian artists have inspired and explored the technological developments and innovation in their art practices. These artists have continuously expanded the peripheries of existing art practices, predefined paradigms, given birth to new attitudes and genres in the art which were not experienced before and contrary to popular belief contributing significantly to the value of 'wonder' and the unconventional.<sup>1</sup>

Concerning the changing nature of contemporary Indian art and artists, famous critic Keshav Malik writes in a rubric in the editorial of Art&Deal magazine:

*"At the current moment of time, artists would seem to leave no stone unturned in search of the golden fleece of novelty, that is never seen before or ever felt. They would want to give a jolt to a too-often sleepy public. No doubt, doing this some toes are bound to be trodden upon."*<sup>2</sup>

**KEY WORDS:** *Contemporary Art, New Media Art, New Genres, Installation Art, Video Art, Photo Based Art, Performance Art*

### INTRODUCTION:

Contemporary art is a broad phrase encompassing all art created in the last few decades. Contemporary art includes a vast range of styles that are almost impossible to categorize and move at a rate that is impossible to predict. It is a broad phrase that encompasses contemporary and recent art rather than a specific style or genre. In simple words, contemporary art is art created today and happens in the present period. Post-1980s art scenario evidenced the emergence and rise of new art genres and mediums. Since then, art fairs, biennales, and exhibitions have shown an amalgamation of heterogeneous art genres. Before further discussing new genres, new media/art forms in contemporary Indian art, it would be better to address the origins and dissemination of these forms from the Western historical perspective. Then the arrival of these art forms in Indian art at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be investigated.

The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the emergence of some extraordinary talents in art, such as George Braque, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Wassily Kandinsky, who did wonders in their field of interest. These artists are often attributed for giving a new definition to art by breaking down the boundaries between works of art and everyday objects. Pioneer of the Dada movement, Marcel Duchamp, questioned long-held assumptions about what art should be and how it should be made? Soon he gave up painting almost entirely, explaining, "I was interested in ideas, not merely in visual products." This approach proved to be a catalyst for artists of postmodern art movements (Conceptual Art, Minimal Art, Installation Art, Performance Art, Video Installation) such as Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Christo, Jeanne Claude, and Robert Smithson, etc. Using new art forms, postmodernist artists have stretched the definition of art to the point where almost "anything goes." Coinciding with a raft of new technological developments, postmodernism has led to nearly five decades of artistic experimentation with new media, including "Conceptual Art," various types of "Performance art," and "Installation art," as well as computer-aided movements like Deconstructivism and Projection art. From the 1960s onwards, these trends shaped a new world of experiences. The world has electronically transformed into a global village, which provided an impetus to the growth of new art forms. It happened at a more prominent platform of discourse and debate, questioning electronic media as means of expression for artists, the use of unfamiliar material, and the body itself as a tool for expression, site-specific concepts to installing objects at various private-public places.<sup>3</sup>

The impact of this systematic development of Western art came to an extent on Indian art but after some time. With its remarkable artistic heritage, India has had a dazzling flux of modern art movement since the pre-independence after the fall of Bengal school, along with a tradition of wash paintings to the progressive collective groups and from “Group 1890” till now. A retrospective assessment of the few artistic phenomena in the most erratic decades since the 1940s onwards is required to comprehend the major components of contemporary Indian art in a systematic manner.

The primary phase of self-declared modernism in India (dates from the 1940s) saw the emergence of few collective modernist groups in various cosmopolitan centers such as Delhi Silpi Chakra of Delhi, Calcutta Group of Calcutta, the Progressive Artists’ Group of Bombay, and Progressive Painters’ Association of Madras.<sup>4</sup> Artists like M.F. Husain, K.C.S. Paniker, Satish Gujral, and Paritosh Sen articulated the modern vision of the nation to the people in the modernist lexicon. Post-1947 was a phase of modernist artist’s intention to represent the country’s socio-political status.

In India, the post-independence era shows a complex artistic landscape. The most exciting part of the post-independence art movement was the freedom; each artist enjoyed and expressed it in their personal idiom of form and color. The diverse Indian conditions provided and evoked a highly individual response from each artist, and a unique way in which the artist reacted to it was often emotional.<sup>5</sup> Abstraction made a forceful intervention by the modern Indian artist with European experience to mold the post-independence scenario. However, Abstraction as a genre gained popularity, which by the 60s had won general acceptance and appreciation. Artists introduced the aesthetic of color and texture, which was dominated by narrative and meaning until then.<sup>6</sup> The 1960s saw an artistic campaign in the form of “Group 1890” led by Gulammohammad Sheikh and eleven other artists was instituted as a response to the Progressive Artists’ Group’s modernist interventions in the 1950s.

Between the 1980s & 1990s, a younger generation of Indian painters moved towards ‘the international’ and ‘Avant-Garde’ and was mapped on the Indian art scene with such vital events like the Festivals of India in London, Paris, and the United States, and the Place for People exhibition held in Bombay and New Delhi. The Place for People (1981) exhibition was an initiative undertaken by artists like Gulammohammad Sheikh, Bhupen Khakhar, Vivan Sundaram, Nalini Malani, Jogen Chowdhury, and Sudhir Patwardhan.<sup>7</sup> Due to post-modernist concerns, Many Indian artists turned towards three-dimensional expressions in paintings while questioning the visual understanding of painter, sculptor, and designer as it seems there is no difference in their individual disciplines, and contemporary art becomes interdisciplinary in its nature.

### Paradigm Shift in Indian Art:

Many art connoisseurs have declared the decade of the 1990s as most instrumental, pathbreaking, which saw newer innovations and experimentations regarding new materials, new structures, conceptually coded signs, thereby bringing out questions of art and its object-hood.<sup>8</sup> Due to the advancement of conceptual art in the Indian art scenario, more and more artists dare to switch over to new genres/mediums and experiment with novel techniques.

The following reasons were the catalyst for major changes which occurred during the 1990s in the paradigm of Indian art:

- I. The decade of the 1990s, noted as the moment of the paradigm shift in contemporary Indian art, saw the rise of new dimensions as the country progressed towards greater liberalization and a free market economy. Artists of Indian origin feel greater flexibility, exposure, and access to view the global art scene to do many experiments based on themes, modes, and forms.<sup>9</sup>
- II. The advent of globalization in the 1990s and the technological approach simultaneously made significant changes across the world. Many artists moved to engage themselves with the world around them; artists actively participated in new digital media or postmodern media such as photography, installation, film, video technologies, and digitally manipulating works that record the actual physical world. In this way, people around became the subject for artists and also an active partner in the creation of artwork.<sup>10</sup>
- III. Artists began to travel extensively to international institutions, workshops and exhibition sites, art historians and critics began participating in international conferences where, besides expanded theory, questions of creative and critical curating were gaining prominence. Opportunities started emerging in the 1990s for Indian critics—curators to show Indian art internationally; the entry of foreign curators interested in exhibiting contemporary Indian art in their own contexts changed the scene further. They brought in transcultural criteria, which had an indirect impact on the concepts and language of younger artists, which in turn made private galleries in India start up a process of self-learning. Slowly, Indian galleries are entering the international circuit—first through auctions, now in art fairs, and potentially through exhibitory collaborations.<sup>11</sup>
- IV. Unlike the traditional mode of paintings, contemporary Indian art reincarnated as a hybrid genre of art such as photography, digital representation, video, installation, performative arts, and new media creations. It is an absolute medley, an amalgam of various trends and practices informed by the free flow of global exchanges such as freewheeling experiments with tenor, content, medium, and form. The subjects that appear to be predominant are the environment, regional identity, sexuality, corruption, violence displacement, and denial of various sorts of the subaltern.<sup>12</sup>

Indian artists nowadays are enjoying the possibilities of merging genres and challenging disciplinary boundaries. Rather than relying on the traditional, their works frequently explore newer options within the environment around them, frequently exhibiting a sharp political awareness with the goal of creating context-sensitive connections to politics, personal problems, and historical disputes.<sup>13</sup>

Undermentioned are the most prominent new art forms, genres, techniques along with their evolving history, which developed with this paradigm shift in Contemporary Indian Art through which art is characterized nowadays.

**Installation Art in India:**

Installation art, as described by Deeksha Nath, is *“a vehicle for transmitting meaning and imaginative power.”*<sup>14</sup> The early traces of Installation Art in India can be seen in the work of MF Hussain's *“Swetambari”* an installation based performance, in Bombay, in 1986, although this is the early interdisciplinary art in India, but Hussain didn't follow up his pioneering act.<sup>15</sup> In the same decade, Vivan Sundaram and Ved Nayar emerged as the most consistent practitioners of installation art in India. Other artists who have been contributing towards creative installations and conceptual art include Amaranth Sehgal, Satish Gujral, Gogi Saroj Pal, and Ratnabali Kant.<sup>16</sup> Most contemporary artists do not work in a single medium of expression defined as painting, drawing, sculpture, or installation but have carved a niche for themselves somewhere in between all these mediums. Most of them are using installation art in their work in one way or another. Their work is an ephemeral confluence of violence, nationalism, religion, and femininity and questions each of their positions in contemporary India.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, the increasing involvement of Indian artists (mostly below fifty) in various kinds of installation making and installation performance, including those in publicly accessible sites and on issues of public interest, since two and a half decades is inspired by and derived from preceding Western examples and models.<sup>18</sup>

From 1990 onwards, the sculpture has become a hugely expanded horde of concerns, mainly regarding the use of varied materials about expressive needs, and it developed gradually in harmony with new shifts in ideology and paradigm, which is evident in the works of contemporary artists. Sculptors have broadened the criteria for selecting the materials and techniques up to the limits of their imaginations. The context and location of sculpture in India have considerably changed. The shift away from the traditional media to installation, often incorporating other media, has brought fresh attention to bear on the use of material and form. The growing use of ephemeral material, light, and sound with sculpture has redefined the way in which a work is perceived. Fresh locations like international biennales, art fairs, global institutional buying as well as international collectors have encouraged incrementally ambitious indoor projects, which has blurred the line between sculpture and sculptural installation.<sup>19</sup> Traditional media like stone and metal changed into new treatments and unusual combinations, and inventive techniques like site-specific installations and kinetic sculpture gained popularity. These artists have dissolved boundaries between painting, sculpture, and installation like Anita Dube, Navjot Altaf, Sudarshan Shetty, Anandajit Ray, Jagannath Panda, and G.R. Iranna, hybridizing the three through their practices.

**Video Art:**

Video as a new art form started in India in the early nineties, approximately three decades after its appearance in the West by artists such as Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell. These precursors had taken a firm stand against the new all-encompassing culture of the T.V world.<sup>20</sup> With its inception, the development and change took place in the context of visual arts. Artists like Vivan Sundaram and Nalini Malani, who studied in the west at the end of the sixties/ early seventies, were exposed to new forms like installation, performance, and video art. At the beginning of the nineties, Nalini Malani started to use video for making video documents of her installations. She used it as an integral part of her theater play, *‘Medeamaterial’*, which was a reaction to the rape of the colonies by the west, with the persona of Jason only appearing on a screen or a monitor, in an interactive mode with the protagonist, Medea. It was also the same period of the early nineties when Vivan Sundaram abandoned his painting career and created his first video sculpture, *‘House/Boat’*, in 1994 as a result of his residency at Oboro in Canada. This work became part of a series of an installation titled *Shelter*, in which the work *‘Carrier’* 1996 included video. The third person who contributed to developing video art in India is Navjot Altaf. Her video Installation *‘Linked Destroyed and Re-discovered’* in 1994 was about the Bombay riots, in which she worked together with three Indian women documentary makers.<sup>21</sup>

The most notable names of artists are Sonia Khurana, Atul Bhalla, Shilpa Gupta, Ranbir Kaleka, Gigi Scaria, Nalini Malani, Tushar Joag, Valay Shende, Anita Dube, Ayisha Abraham, Veer Munshi, Vibha Galhotra, and Tejal Shah who started using videos. Most of these artists have been using this newly emerged art form since they were in their twenties or early thirties and had often learned the medium on a foreign residency. There is a strong determination amongst them to continue to use it against all the odds; they feel it is a medium that suits them best and is appropriate for the current times.<sup>22</sup>

**Performance Art:**

Performances involve four basic elements- time, space, the performer's body, and the relationship between the performer and the audience. Out of their interactions emerge experiences that are magical! Performers often establish an intense relationship with the audience.<sup>23</sup> It is a type of a performance piece presented to an audience within a fine art context. Performance Art may or may not be scripted, and it could be unplanned or precisely choreographed. It may or may not include audience participation. It could be live or through the support of other media; in this way, the artist may or may not be present. There are no specific rules that have to be followed. It can occur at any time and any place, for any duration. A performance could be a work independently or a part of a larger narrative.

*‘Live Art’* has a deep history in the West. Although the term Performance Art emerged in western art historical discourse in the later 1960s and early 1970s,<sup>24</sup> this new mode of representing felt experiences into live/actual performances has taken a long time to gain a foothold in India.<sup>25</sup> The name of Bhupen Khakhar often comes in first to introduce performance art to Indian contemporary art circle, but this art form got momentum much after that.<sup>26</sup> As stated earlier on in this paper the decade of the 1990s was also instrumental in the context of performance art. During the 1990s, Ratnabali Kant, Rummana Hussain, Pushpamala N., and Sonia Khurana made powerful use of performance art to spread their message, focusing equally on issues of ecological warfare as of communal violence.

KHOJ, a Delhi-based not-for-profit organization and an ‘incubator of experimental art practices,’ has consistently provided performance art a much-needed platform. Its international workshops and artist residencies (1997- the present) have created a vibrant and conducive atmosphere for performance art.<sup>27</sup> Today India has some artists who have taken performance art to new heights of creativity, like Nikhil Chopra, Inder Salim, and Tejal Shah.

### **Photo-Based Art:**

A visual representation technology invented during the nineteenth century, photography is translated as “writing with light.”<sup>28</sup> The history of photography is a story of technological advances. It took a century and a half for photography to be recognized as a fine art form. It grew popular among the people in the West during the twentieth century, and the digital revolution has introduced it to the Indian people. In India, photography is mostly employed for photojournalism, as well as industrial and advertising reasons. It is only recently that it has been a part of the developing contemporary art scene. Cameras have become smaller and more portable, allowing people to capture fleeting moments of intimacy. Through the experimentation of the last century, photography has now found its proper place in India’s contemporary new media art practices.<sup>29</sup>

Two decades after its development in Europe, photography came to India in the 1840s. Initially, photography was restricted to daguerreotypes in royal residences, but it rapidly expanded into documentary and journalism, advertising, and, eventually, the art world in metropolitan commercial studios. Photography took a long time to be recognized as an art form. Probably because photographic equipment was for a long time more expensive in India than in the West, preventing modern artists from adopting it, but in Europe, the camera was an intrinsic part of modernist movements such as Surrealism and Constructivism. Even after photography had become popular and pervasive, it was still seen as a Western method during the heyday of cultural nationalism in the 1920s.<sup>30</sup>

The new media first appeared in India in the 1990s, and photography has since captivated the aesthetic attention of Indian contemporary artists. Initially, installation art was the first to incorporate images and writing. When Vivan Sundaram used newspaper images of the victims of the Hindu-Muslim riots in Mumbai in 1992 to construct a poetics of grieving, he was one of the first practitioners of installation art to employ photography as documentary material. The proliferation of affordable digital camera technology made it unexpectedly simple for artists to employ these devices to capture performances, and the camera thus became an intrinsic part of a second modern art genre. It is no exaggeration to say that photography’s presence in “high” art in India was first felt through performance. Artists who used the camera to bring their own bodies to the foreground ushered in an exciting new type of self-reflexivity and identity investigation.<sup>31</sup>

### **New Techniques:**

In addition to the new genres/mediums mentioned above, contemporary art is a conglomeration of various new techniques. In contemporary art, each artist has a different method to express himself. Describing all the existing techniques through words seems extremely difficult because some are so complicated to categorize and are beyond words. Today the work of some artists has not limited to merely a single medium; rather is the result of the incorporation of various modes and techniques. The work of these artists is the process of experimentation and innovations. A few instances of these innovations are; the reinvention of the uses of jute and ceramics by Mrinalini Mukherjee, bamboo and clay to construct a Sati shrine by Lattika Katt, Relics in burnt wood and pulp paper by Pushpamala, cow dung cakes by Shiela Gowda, Fibre glass, metal and sand by P.S.Ladi, bone, paper pulp and rope by Valsan Kollari. More recently, the use of fog screen projection, LED bulbs and resin by Jitish Kallat, kitchen utensils by Subodh Gupta, bindi by Bharti Kher. In some cases, it is not the theme so much as the medium and technique that has become the message.<sup>32</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

This study confirms the hypothesis of amalgamation in the context of new genres/mediums in Indian contemporary art. So for sure, one can see the amalgamation of genres, pluralistic art practices range from miniature and canvas painting to ultra-modern new mediums that simultaneously go on side by side. Variety with novelty seems to be an intrinsic motto of today’s artists. Today’s contemporary art clearly shows that there is no restriction of medium or style in art; instead, today’s artists can use any object or material available in this world for their expression. This freedom open to contemporary artists has given rise to various amalgamation.

The study on this topic indicates that new art forms along with new techniques and artistic initiatives have entirely redefined the way Indian art has been made and seen since the last few decades. Indian artist today lives in a country that is constantly growing its economy, where the old gives way to the new, where paradigms are changing in the confluence of both tradition and modernity. New art forms and techniques have emerged in India as a result of inspiration from the west and have flourished in the country’s diverse environment, making contemporary art much more interesting than ever. Today new art forms such as those detailed in this paper, i.e., Installation Art, Video Art, and Performance Art, have become an integral part and defining characteristic of Contemporary Indian Art.

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