

CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES OF CURATING CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SCULPTURE SHOW: A FIRST-HAND ENQUIRY CITING TWO SELF-CURATORIAL PROJECTS

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Abstract: Curatorial challenges in the field of visual arts have lent itself to a wider scope of issues in recent times as the contemporary art practice has evolved rapidly in last two decades. The effective shifts were evident from 1980s when display and showcasing of art in general and sculpture in particular began to feel the need of curatorial intervention as an essential requirement. The present paper is an attempt to investigate the new scopes and challenges in curating art exhibitions with specific references to two self-curated shows taken up by the author. Considering them as field studies, the author critically analyses the scopes and challenges encountered in real space and creates room for future development and expansions in the curatorial ideas.

Key words – Curatorial intervention, contemporary sculpture, modern Indian art, curated exhibition

Introduction:

Modern Indian sculpture has come a long way since its time of inception. The history of modern Indian sculpture can be traced back to the British Colonial period. However, after the colonial impact, the major breakthrough came from a stalwart like Ramkinkar Baij – the founding father of the modern Indian sculpture – who changed the face of modern Indian art, once and for all. He was followed by his students and his art inspired sculptors from successive generations who were mostly experimental sculptors in temperament with different aesthetic aims and objectives along with a penchant for exploring non-conventional mediums. From mere thematic explorations, the history of modern Indian sculpture moved on more towards material explorations and technological innovations beside addressing novel ideas and new subjective connotations. Along with figurative and representational sculptures, abstract non-figurative idioms too found a great acceptance in the modern Indian practice. It is said that the inspiration came largely from the various phases of modern Western art and particularly sculptural movements. But modern Indian sculptors, while imbibing certain aspects of international modernism, have always looked at the roots of their own cultural space and gradually assimilated the indigenous, local and individual characteristic features thereby aspiring for an authentic Indian modernism. In the above process, the rich legacy of traditional Indian sculpture also played an important role in shaping the Indian modern sculpture. Therefore, the trajectory of the modern/contemporary Indian sculpture is not necessarily linear and certainly not unidirectional – either in time or in space. Historically speaking, the journey of modern Indian sculpture has often referred back to past to reconceptualize certain elements and motifs of the past and it has often taken the position of avant-garde projecting itself to an unknown future.

From representation to expression, from narrative to non-narrative evocative images, from poetic moments to cultural statements, from intimate sculptures to public art – from studio to outdoor – from object to construction – modern Indian sculpture since then have been exploring all the possible venues of idioms, languages, mediums, ideas, concepts and locations. Not only that, it has also broken many a taboo and

barriers regarding the conventional use of mediums and display. Further, the shift from individualistic work to collaborative projects has also added new dimensions to contemporary Indian sculptures. Today, at this juncture, an all-encompassing curatorial approach to the study of Indian sculpture thus seems to be essential and urgent. Along with the above changes and remarkable transitions in the field of modern Indian sculpture, the role of the curator and a deeper understanding of the curatorial possibilities need to be explored as thoroughly as possible.

Since 1980s (1980 also happens to be the year of Ramkinkar Baij's demise), Indian sculpture witnessed new turns and twists which are remarkable in terms of the new promises. In the wake of new developments of Indian art in general and a rapid exposure to global phenomenon in the international art scenario, Indian sculptors from the 1980s opened up for themselves a vast possibility of sculpture-making with the aid of new technological interventions and new-age tools. Contemporary Indian sculpture thus not only changed the way we look at it but also required a severe scrutiny of its display and showcasing and conceptualizing. In other words, it requires a thorough curatorial research.

The etymology of the term 'Curator'.

The Oxford English Dictionary traces the etymology of *curator*, *curating* from Latin *cuare*, meaning to care for, referring to the "cure of souls" (earliest known use 1362) or guardianship of those legally unfit to look after themselves (1413), and subsequently manager or overseer (1632) or one with the power to elect university professors (1691).¹ In these early citations the role of the curator was that of a supervisor, in a controlling relationship with those cared for. The earliest known use related to the art-world was in 1667, as the officer in charge of a museum, gallery of art, library, or the like: a keeper or custodian. The verb *to curate* is traced to US usage, as in, to act as a curator of a museum, exhibits, and the like, or to look after and preserve (earliest use 1934). In extended use today *to curate* means to select the performers or performances to be included in a festival, album, or programme; also, to select, organize and present (content) on a web site (earliest use 1982). *Curating* (noun), formed by the verb *curate* with suffix *-ing*, was first noted in 1906 and referred to the supervision of a museum, gallery or the like by a curator; the work of storing and preserving exhibits.²

Meanings associated with the history of curating practice have been diverse; during the twentieth century the role centered on the presentation of objects in museum exhibitions, then expanded during the twenty-first to include more than art objects and presentations in venues other than museums. Some lament as inappropriate its current everyday use in referring to organizing a pop festival or culling items from a department store for a fashion display while others see such uses of the word as following the trend of less pedigreed professions to adopt the vernacular of more prestigious ones, or a metaphorical use to allude to creative insight.³ We do not pursue such usage, instead we consider curatorial practice related to artistic endeavors. We are encouraged by the aim of the new *Journal of Curatorial Studies* to engage "questions of the curatorial – whether stemming from the art world or other domains of contemporary culture"⁴

Role of the curator:

Indian contemporary art in general and contemporary sculpture in particular witnessed, as mentioned above, significant changes and positive signs of experimentations and explorations with respect to medium and theme since 1980's. 1980's is also the decade which saw massive changes in the cultural practices due to globalization. In spite of the cultural and social identity issues contemporary sculpture aspired to be International. The role of the curator since 1980's also became extremely important across the world and the need to have a curator's role became increasingly vital.

The primary concern and the driving motivation behind this need is the fact that without an appropriate and effective role on part of the curator, proper showcasing of modern Indian sculpture is not possible. In the present times, showcasing or display of modern Indian sculpture is not merely a physical arrangement but a conceptual process too. Each exhibition or show of modern sculptures is also equivalent to writing the script of modern Indian art history afresh. Therefore, the primary objective of the proposed research is to study and analyse the history of modern Indian sculpture from the point of view of the curator and to create further curatorial ideas from this study.

In contemporary art practice the role played by a curator in conceptualizing a show has gained a significant importance over the years for many reasons. As the contemporary art practice itself has grown wide and deep over last few decades by transgressing the limits of conventional modernism and by incorporating

interdisciplinary ideas and mediums of expressions, showcasing these art works has increasingly become a task that demanded the active role of a designated curator. Further, most of the contemporary shows now require an appropriate conceptual framework for the viewers to have a more meaningful communication and dialogue. A curator by his/her capacity to understand and contextualize the art works serve the purpose of outlining the conceptual contours of an exhibition which may comprise one or two artists or even a group of artists who practice in diverse mediums or similar methods. However, a curator is not only there to conceptualize the show but also to conceive and execute the physical display of the art works in a given space of a gallery or museum space. A curated show in the present-day context does not only mean to be *seen* but a contemporary art show is also meant to be *experienced* intellectually, visually and historically. This is also the reason why informed and educated viewers look for the meaning of contemporary art not only in the *objects* of art but also in the curatorial interventions. In other words, curatorial interventions more often than not provide additional meaning by contextualizing and planning the show and by questioning the status-quo of a common non-curated show.

A curator of contemporary art, in other words, play the role of an art historian by pre-scripting the history of contemporary art while shaping the individual moments through exhibitions and shows. As a student of History of Art, the present author has always found the role of curator very engaging mainly because there is always a significant scope to not only deal with established artists but also with the upcoming artists and artists who are yet to be discovered. Therefore, curating a show is not about just conceptualizing and displaying; often it is also about discovering and rediscovering artists. Curator thus often plays the role of contributing to the history of contemporary art practice by their findings and enriching the practice by adding value to them. A large part of this experience and knowledge to the present author has come from her own practice as a curator and the challenges faced on various occasions.

Objective:

The objective of the present paper is to explore the challenges and possibilities of curatorial engagement with the contemporary Indian sculptures with reference to two case studies. The present author cites two of her self-curated projects conceived and executed by her in real space and time. By curatorial engagements what is meant is an extensive research into the very conceptual and physical modes of establishing and contextualizing modern Indian sculpture in the most appropriate, meaningful and relevant way. Further, it is believed that a proper curatorial study of the modern/contemporary sculpture will help the researcher to re-write the narrative of modern/contemporary Indian sculpture in a more contextual way. It is also believed that an exploration of curatorial possibilities would create a foundation for the innovative display strategies of contemporary sculptures. In the West and South-Asian countries, curatorial aspects have always been given due importance along with the creative aspects of works of art. In India however this approach is a recent phenomenon. A lot remains to be explored with the belief that without a proper curatorial involvement it is almost impossible to establish contemporary Indian sculpture in the appropriate context.

Contemporary art has evolved significantly in many ways over last three decades. It is noteworthy that the changes have occurred not only in the art forms, mediums and concepts but also in the ways in which art need to be shared, showcased and brought within the circuit of art market as well. In this context, emergence of curator has gained huge prominence because of the increasing importance it achieved over the years. The role played by curator has significantly shaped and redefined contemporary art practices providing appropriate conceptual frameworks. The task of curator is challenging as it ranges from conceptualizing a show to right up to the display strategy. Moreover, the learning experience of a curator is achieved only by curating shows and reflecting upon every detail and aspect of the project.

The account of the two self-curated projects are given below.

Project One.

In 2016 the author curated a show titled '*Melange- a spectacular show of contemporary sculptor from Bengal*' in the same gallery and organised by the Janus Art Gallery. It was held on Shridharini Gallery in New Delhi. But it was conceived as a sculpture show and it was meant to be a commercial show too. There was no single theme, no theoretical concept and as a curator only focus was on the display and the biggest challenge was of course to make the show commercially viable. So, as a curator the author had to select artists from Kolkata and Delhi keeping in mind the market dynamics of the art world and the preferences expressed by the sponsor. The curator's job here was to ensure the aesthetic richness as well as marketability

of the chosen works; in other words, to make the show attractive and worth collecting for the professional collectors and buyers. The gallery space was huge and we had approximately thirty works. Yet to break the monotony of the display the sculptures were exhibited on the pedestal and a few on the floor. So, the challenge was to arrange the pedestals in a manner that the one work should not overlap with the other. The most important objective here for the curator was to make the display visibly a spectacle where each art object demanded an exclusive presence.

Name of the curatorial project: *'Melange- a spectacular show of contemporary sculptor from Bengal'*

Venue: Shridharini Gallery, New Delhi

Date: 12th- April to 21st April 2016

Artists: Kaushik Halder, Saurav Roy Chowdhuy, Srikanta Banerjee Surajit Sarkar, Tapan Barui, Animesh Mahata, Arindam Sarker, Suvajit Samanta, Pankaj Panwar, Tarun Maity, Debabrata Sarkar and Vijay Kowshik

Curatorial concept: **Mélange – the contemporary sculptures from Bengal - The shining horizon**

Bengal in the post-Independent era witnessed a renewed energy in the field of visual arts carrying a modern mark of identity beyond the nationalistic concerns. Though painting played a major role in this scenario, innovations and experiments in sculpture too began to appear from the 40s especially from Santiniketan, by the path-breaking modern Indian sculptor Ramkinkar Baij. He stepped out from the Eurocentric academic language and paved way for a liberated, creative and indigenous way for modern sculpture – through different kind of themes and absolutely new methods of sculpture making. As acknowledged by the art historians as the first successful modern sculptor of India, Ramkinkar's highly experimental nature and expressionist character of his sculptures inspired the following generations of artists to conceive and execute sculptures in new modernist terms. Renowned sculptors like Deviprasad Roy Chowdhury before Ramkinkar and the likes of Prodosh Dasgupta and Chintamani Kar, Sankho Chowdhury, Meera Mukherjee after him contributed significantly to the development of modern sculpture. From the modern Western vocabulary as the inspiring source to the local indigenous traditions of India, modern Bengal sculpture derived its energy from a vast range of repertoire.

The present show **Mélange – the contemporary sculptures from Bengal** is showcasing a selection of works by contemporary sculptors from Bengal who are mostly born in the 60s or later with Vijay Kowshik, the senior-most sculptor in this show as one exception. These sculptors, who are either residing in Bengal or outside are all trained in Bengal and have deep rooted connection with the legacy of Bengal either pedagogically, or culturally or both. One of the most striking features in the works of these artists is an experimental and exploratory approach to their work. The thematic range is wide and open to various ideas and concepts; and so is the material use. The idioms evident in their works range from narrative, iconic, formalist, tactile and even conceptual to some degree. The younger generation of sculptors do not shy away from being experimental, inviting the nonconventional and exploring the possibilities of the medium. Sculptors like Kaushik Halder, Saurav Roy Chowdhuy, Srikanta Banerjee Surajit Sarkar and Tapan Barui make strong visual statements primarily by the way they use their selected mediums and make the material speak out as much as the subject matter itself. The idea that the medium is not merely a vehicle of a theme but a theme by itself is highly celebrated in many of these artists' works showcased here; and this is certainly a noticeable modernist mark which enables them to seek and explore a deeper integrity or contrast in the age-old riddle of form-content relation. Amongst others the element of humour seems to be a major strategy to make a satirical or a more thoughtful comment on an issue. In the works of Animesh Mahata, Arindam Sarker and Suvajit Samanta their idiom allows a narrative streak along with a tongue-in-cheek comment which is entirely visual and thought provoking. Tarun Maity and Debabrata Sarkar are perhaps more direct and confessional in their approach to theme and their concern with humanity in relation to the immediate social and natural environment inform their work in various registers.

Pankaj Panwar – belonging to the immediately preceding generation than many of the above-mentioned artists and a mentor-teacher to many of them – is one of the most successful sculptors from his generation to have been able to keep himself rooted in the Indian legacy yet become global in terms of the universality of his vocabulary by keeping himself flexible and adaptive throughout. Pankaj has the amazing capacity to pick up or start off from a simple idea or theme and turn it into an engaging sculptural entity which surpasses beyond that theme and touches upon the fundamental values of life. The precise medium handling and a continuous dialogue with the medium is his forte which underscores the character of many of the sculptors' works from following generations. The senior-most artist in this show, Vijay Kowshik is an expert in glass

sculpture and have been experimenting and working on the possibilities of this medium for decades. His rich experience in this particular medium and an aesthetically rich variety of artworks made him a significantly innovative sculptor who has a deep-rooted connection with Bengal and more precisely with Santiniketan. (Fig.1, Fig.2, Fig.3, Fig.4)

Curatorial Challenges and limitations:

It was a sculpture show. The organizer wants to promote Bengali Contemporary sculptors. But the show was organized in Delhi and me and my organizer is from Kolkata. So logistic and transport was a big challenge for this show. As a curator I have to search and identify the sculptors who are based on Delhi or near to Delhi but Bengali young practicing artists. I also select few artists from Kolkata as well. In this show the display was very challenging from different reason. Because as we know in three-dimensional form, we need huge space to look at the work from different angle and in this show most of the works are pedestal based and very few I was displayed on floor. So, arranging the pedestal plays a very vital role in this show. My main concern was not to overlap the works from one to other. Every viewer should engage their self very comfortably. There are few limitations in terms of selecting the artists, the transport and display of so many three-dimensional works in a particular cubical space.

Challenges negotiated:

I had negotiated the selection of artists because of the transport issues. Because of different form, size and materials I have to negotiated with the display strategy.

Project Two.

One of the most challenging and exciting curatorial projects was in 2018 was at A.M gallery, Kolkata. It was a solo show of Soma Chakraborty's sculptures titled '*Unveiling*'. Soma Chakraborty was a sculptor from 1980's who completed her study from Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan. She used to do her sculptures in soft materials which was very unique from her time. Those days the general concept of sculpture was mostly about hard and solid materials but Soma Chakraborty went beyond that and created a new language in her own way with soft materials. She used soft materials like cloths and other fibers using stitching and sometimes by applying paint and color on them. Her works are mostly huge in scale and mostly evoked the inner pain and violence referring to the life of a woman. The name of the show *Unveiling* is justified as I had to search and bring an unknown and important artist to the forefront and make her seen by the viewers. The word unveiling also suggests the revelation of the artist's inner pain and it also signifies the moment of this show when her works were revealed to the public after many years.

The challenging part of this show was that the gallery space was very small while most of her works were quite large. Hence selection of the art works was quite critical for this show. I have to select those works which can justify her way of working and the content and it had to be taken care of that it should not be dominate or suffocate the small space. The selection of the work and the available gallery space played a very important role in this show to keep the viewers engaged intimately.

Name of the curatorial project: ***UNVEILING: A glimpse into Soma Chakraborty's sculptures***

Venue: A.M Studio

Date: 3rd February 2018- 24th February 2018

Artist: Soma Chakraborty

Curatorial concept: ***UNVEILING: A glimpse into Soma Chakraborty's sculptures***

'Your vision is the promise of what you shall one day be; your ideal is the prophecy of

what you shall at last unveil.' James Lane Allen

It was almost more than thirty years back that Soma Chakraborty introduced soft sculpture for the first time, quite unusual and exceptional indeed in the context of the modernist conception of sculpture in India those days. While modern sculptural practice thrived essentially on conventionally accepted mediums such as bronze, plaster, stone, wood, terracotta and the likes which are hard and strong in nature at the outset, Soma chose to explore the possibilities of working in rather atypical materials like cloth, fabric and thread using needle as the tool. She made use of stitching as her sculptural method as opposed to modelling or carving. In other words, right from the beginning of her career as a sculptor after graduating from Kala Bhavana in 1983 Soma opted for an unconventional creative path and continued to search for her expression in this uncharted journey till her untimely demise in 2017.

As a matter of fact, modern Indian sculpture since late 1980s witnessed a remarkable change in the concepts and executions of sculptures with strong expressionistic energy and a visible preference of psychological

and socio-political concerns over straight-forward realistic or formal aspects. For example, the likes of K. P. Krishnakumar, Alex Mathew, N. N. Rimzon, Ravinder Reddy, Pushpamala N., and others not only challenged the conventional modes of sculpture-making but successfully explored the new materials and unconventional representations inspired by senior artists like Somnath Hore and Meera Mukherjee. This new generation of young sculptors brought in a much-needed fresh air in the contemporary art scenario. Soma Chakraborty belonged to this temperament of experimentation and innovation. She certainly played an active part in that avant-garde movement but she remained unnoticed and unrecognized except a few in the Kolkata art fraternity. In fact, her first solo show 'The Perfidy' in 1989 at Academy of Fine Arts was much ahead of her times in every aspect beginning with the sculptures up to the display. Like her sculptures the display too was conceptually rooted evoking a sense of anguish and dark drama with carefully placed ambient lights and thus creating a special kind of viewing. 'Even the use of kerosene lanterns in the dark areas', writes the sculptor Rishi Barua, 'created the perfidious ambience, shrouded by an unknown fear and mystery. It was interesting the way Soma manipulated darkness as a metaphor for her expression.' Thus, pain and anguish become synonymous with an artistic sensibility – part of her deep psyche. This solo show was certainly a landmark event in her otherwise silent career. Soma Chakraborty's works – particularly her soft sculptures – remind us of Claes Oldenberg. Both share a feminist position but with different concerns. While Oldenberg represents the mundane daily objects by magnifying them and elevating them to the status of visually stunning forms, Soma follows an introspective itinerary. Soma's sculptures do not look out or valorise the objects; they swallow in our mind, to the deepest recess of their existence, radiant with a sense of agony and hidden pain. The closely stitched forms throb with their untold stories as much as their desire to unveil them. She posits her sculptures in this eternal dilemma.

Stitching obviously is an essential part of her work that relates to gender and personal misery. Sensitive detailing, feminine elements, suggestions of domestic life and a physical expression enrich her works with a strength that is obvious yet subtle. On the face value the autobiographical and feminine elements seem to be simplistic but the process in which the works have been conceived and executed is complex, reflecting her inner life and veiled trauma. Bright red with a strong thrust on the intensity of the hue evoke directness – a kind of violence that makes her works stand apart. Even stitching evokes a pain or an experience of wound. But none of these can be trapped in any banal prosaic narrative. Deep into her psychology there resided a wounded soul with a strong sense of rejection as well. Perhaps this can be connected to an introvert mind that leads to a meticulous concentration – like the journey of a lonely soul. Unveiling – the first posthumous solo show of Soma Chakraborty is a quiet glimpse into her world – brilliant yet lonesome. (Fig.5, Fig.6, Fig.7, Fig.8)

Curatorial Challenges and limitations: The most important challenge of this show is selection of the works because the size of the gallery was small and the size of the works were big and bold in expression. Soma Chakraborty was the artist from 80's when the use of soft materials was still very unusual. Therefore, to establish her works in a contextual way was another challenging part of this show. Though her works mostly dealt with her inner pain they have tremendous possibility to extend that experience to the viewers. She was not a very well-known artist except in the close circle. So, the curator's challenge was to bring in a forgotten artist and reinstitute her identity in the history of modern Indian sculpture. Normally in the solo show viewers expect huge number of works which can justify the language and the entire oeuvre of the particular artist. But for this particular space it was impossible since that attempt would have made the space look very suffocating.

Challenges negotiated: The curator had to select the works very carefully. Keeping in mind the size and available space of the gallery the curator had to select those works which directly represented her world of visual language and her core concerns with the medium and content. There were different sizes but the medium created a homogeneity in the show.

Conclusion:

Both these curatorial projects, cited and analyzed above, were important hands-on experiences to investigate the scopes and challenges of curating shows first hand. These experiences also indicated the possible challenges emerging in the future projects as the infrastructural and financial scopes may often seem to shrink thereby posing extremely challenging situations for the curator. However, open-ended curatorial projects also leave ample rooms to discover new or hitherto forgotten artists and provides an opportunity to recontextualize their art and the art of a specific time and period.

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Image Details:

Fig:1. ‘Melange- a spectacular show of contemporary sculptor from Bengal’, Shridharini Gallery, New Delhi, 2016



Fig:2. *'Melange- a spectacular show of contemporary sculptor from Bengal', Shridharini Gallery, New Delhi, 2016*



Fig:3. *'Melange- a spectacular show of contemporary sculptor from Bengal', Shridharini Gallery, New Delhi, 2016*



Fig:4. *'Melange- a spectacular show of contemporary sculptor from Bengal'*, Shridharini Gallery, New Delhi, 2016



Fig.5. *UNVEILING: A glimpse into Soma Chakraborty's sculptures*, A.M Studio, Kolkata, 2018



Fig:6. *UNVEILING:* A glimpse into Soma Chakraborty's sculptures, A.M Studio, Kolkata, 2018



Fig:7. *UNVEILING:* A glimpse into Soma Chakraborty's sculptures, A.M Studio, Kolkata, 2018



Fig:8. *UNVEILING*: A glimpse into Soma Chakraborty's sculptures, A.M Studio, Kolkata, 2018

