

Contemporary Indian Art and the 'Semiotic Eye': Issues and Perspectives

Seema Khanwalkar

Abstract

This article has a focus on the semiotic value of contemporary Indian art practice. It takes a fundamental position that in India, the conceptual response to contemporary art (painting and visual art) needs to be understood for its potential to create ongoing interpretations, and not just for what it aims its potential meaningful destination to be. The article further emphasizes the need to understand these new expressions in terms of Peirce's notion of the 'Interpretant', against the established fact that they are fundamentally distinct from the traditional art practices in their intent and purpose. The impetus for this position comes from the significant shifts, continuities and discontinuities that art in India has seen since 'modernism'. Traditional Indian theories had highly developed treatises elaborating upon the formal processes that led to an experiential 'object' of transformation and *ananda* (joy). The attempt is to call for analytical frameworks that semiotic theory can provide to the works of Indian artists who have, 'ontologically progressed beyond the initial appeal of Modernism and the attendant desire to use acknowledged Western idioms. More than anything else, they respond to politics, and work to impact social justice. This is where tradition appears-via narrative' (Seid, 2007, p. 13).

Keywords

Peirce's notion of interpretant, semiology, postmodernism

Art in the Twenty-first Century

This century has presented the arts to the scrutiny and experimentation of vastly divergent conceptual frameworks amongst artists, aestheticians, theoreticians and philosophical works.¹ All of these relate to societies, relations within it and how art as a symbol exists amidst it all in a political sense. This has been an outcome of Art theory shifting towards semiotics, cultural theory and critical theory in the humanities since the late 1970s. These developments led to some thinking about the arts. As Carrier (2002, p. 46) states:

Traditional critics were connoisseurs. Gifted with an eye, good at detecting forgeries, experts in Ming dynasty scrolls, baroque drawings or Abstract expressionist paintings guided novice collectors. So long as an artistic tradition is essentially stable, connoisseurs provide good guidance. But when new, non-traditional criteria for evaluation are demanded, philosophic art critics are required. Only a theorist can explain why a Duchamp's ready-made's, Rauschenberg's 1950's monochromes, or the American conceptual art and earth art of the 1960s are art or how these artifacts should be judged.

All artistic activity in the last century has been redefining art in the context of scientific development that has resulted in a broader definition of art and expanded into the realm of beauty that mainly technology can explain. Today, art is being redefined through technology which in turn defines us. While it is true that digital and electronic art is an increasingly important discipline, the notion that new technologies replace older techniques needs a rethinking. When artists appropriate new technologies, they contribute and comment upon the ways in which such media operate upon the individual.

In the twenty-first century, electronic media is supporting the transformation of cultural identities. Multimedia has reconfigured words, sounds and images into new forms of individuality. The postmodern condition, thus has nurtured forms of identity essentially different from the modern individual who was rational and centred. This era also marks the end of the *avant-garde* status of the artist as an agent against a dominant culture. The artist is autonomous and outside the critique or accountability to the public or marketplace, though his art continues to be

defined by his act as an artist than the art objects that he makes. Art theories too, were being challenged by the new status of the art object in a growing digital and post-Internet world. Attempts were being made to understand the social value of the 'dematerialized media' of video and digital multimedia. Towards the 1990s and early-2000s; there was a strong international agenda in the art world and questions about the power centres began to emerge. The re-emergence of the art world in New York, Berlin and London coincided with the rising artists' presence from the East, particularly China and India. These developments led to a new transition where art was now taken off the walls and portals of 'high cultures' onto 'lived spaces' and 'deconstructed gallery spaces'.²

Significantly, photography, video art and other techniques began to emerge in this decade and alongside a new quest for other materials that were in essence; 'non-art'. This period also marked the beginnings of the international art fairs, festivals and biennials. In India, video art started with the members of 'Place of People'. Artists such as Nalini Malini, Vivan Sundaram, Navjot Altaf and Rummana Hussain started to present their ideas through the medium of installations and materials ranging from video, photographs, building construction materials, ephemeral wall drawings and more. Video art developed in India at the same time as in the western art world.³ Clearly, there is a need for new theories to illuminate the multifaceted and significant roles of the media in contemporary capitalist societies.

Semiotics and Art

In Semiotics, the first major contribution took place when meaning in art began to be viewed through the semiotic model of differences and oppositions. This stated that structure reflects the possible cultural significance of work.⁴ Greimas' semiotic square of oppositions and differentiations further enhanced the possibility of analyzing art in a social context, in a network of relations.⁵ As Carrier (2002, p. 46) states:

What attracted art world readers to Krauss's Greimas diagrams was their pseudo-technicality. Structuralism aspired to be a science. Krauss thought that the vocabulary of the art history could be translated into structuralist terms. Picasso's Modernism and Heinrich Wölfflin's art history, both convert diachrony into synchrony. Both take successions of raw historical phenomena and turn them into some formal system. Infact the same formal system, meaning does not arise from

the positivity of a simple existent, (colour for example), but rather from a system of differences (colour and not line). The meaning of any choice being equally (and simultaneously) a function of what is not chosen.

The other significant semiotic contribution was the concept of 'intertextuality' and the model of 'intermediality'.⁶ Art making and art interpretation in contexts of prior work, traditions, codes and values was assumed by interpretative community. A text was said to be intelligible only through a mosaic of references and quotations that have lost their origins (Kristeva). What is already encoded, part of a cultural encyclopedia,⁷ prior to anyone's interpretation (Umberto Eco). Art was thus a part of the network of presupposed prior and contemporary works through which anything could be interpreted. The concept of 'Semiosis'⁸ further rendered the art works in an ongoing chain or dialogue of interpretations and responses. 'Any interpretation of a text, that is translated to art was supposed to take the form of another work' (Eco, 1989).

Interpreting Ambiguity in Art

Umberto Eco in his *Open Work* (1989) invokes the ambiguity in modern art that is characterized by multiplicity and plurality. He differentiates this from traditional art and literature (in Europe), that was meant to be unambiguous and ensured, that there was a response by the receiver. Art, according to Eco, reflects the times that we live in and that there are no reasons to lament if art in present times reflects everything that is negative. Linking to the sense of alienation in modern societies, he says it is something necessary and desirable. Art today, represents a sense of disorder and discontinuity that living in the modern world generates in us all. He says to lose possession of oneself is simply part of the back and forth movement between the self and the world. That is the condition of a 'truly human existence'. He asserts that we must accept this involvement in things other than ourselves; and assert our selfhoods only by understanding and transforming it. Art according to him can contribute to this understanding and transformation of the world because its function is essentially cognitive and 'Art knows the world through its formative structures' (Eco, 1989). Art represents the world through the way it organizes its constituents rather than what the constituents themselves represent. Eco (1989) sees contemporary art as an important form that helps us to see, understand and accept the universe for what it is. It is a place, where traditional structures and relationships have been shattered and

new ones are being created. Art in this sense, he says, is political, because it produces new knowledge, though it does not possess explicit political content.

In countries like India that are vast heterocosms of multiple identities, the context of art becomes heterogeneous and open to difference, adding to the complexities to the contexts. New forms of expressions and interesting spaces of more personalized voices and personal narratives have been the result of the synergy between art and technology. It is by no means an easy task to transcend the power of technology to highlight the tensions between a personal voice and a medium of expression. A lot of contemporary Indian art attempts this transcendence.

Internationalization and globalization of the art world 'industry' has brought about self-inscribed narratives and unresolved identity politics. Art continues to be embedded in social critique, position and identities. There is also a plethora of growth in the media and spaces with more and more artists having moved towards photography and video installations over painting and traditional sculpture. Video art in India began in a period of political turmoil, when artists such as Nalini Malini and Navjot Altaf came to the conclusion that classical art mediums like painting no longer had the vitality to make socially engaged statements. The 1992/93 Mumbai riots accelerated the exigency for moving out of the 'frame'. The artists focused on the horrific world outside, while trying to make sense of the situation (Pijnappel, 2008, p. 29).

To borrow Umberto Eco's phrase, '[t]he only common factor between traditional aesthetics and contemporary forms is that they are both, "epistemological metaphors"'.⁹ But it is impossible to conceptualize art in contemporary Indian society as 'meaningful'. Eco makes a distinction between 'information' in contemporary art and meaning in traditional art forms. Borrowing from Information theory, Eco states that information (as opposed to meaning), and the message is inversely proportionate to its predictability or probability. However, in a global context where we live in a pluralistic economy that guarantees access to capital, technology and human resources, there are numerous issues that plague the status, the experience and the understanding of aesthetics. 'Art and Aesthetics in contemporary world can best be defined as an aggregate of distinct mutations occasioned by encounters of humans and technology.'

Aesthetics in ancient Indian thought was essentially communicative in purpose and art was a manifestation of aesthetics. The ultimate goal of aesthetics was 'experiential', that of the *rasa* and of 'appropriateness', of the *auchitya*

siddhant. This was developed by Kshemendra in eleventh century. It was a combination of the *rasa*, the *auchitya* (the appropriate positioning of the aesthetic objects) and the *Sadrasya*. The faithful pictorial rendering of the external world as it existed ultimately led to the aesthetic balance, harmony, rhythm of any art form. This in turn led to *ananda*, transformation, joy and bliss. According to Kapila Vatsyayan,¹⁰

Classical Indian architecture sculpture, painting, literature (*kāvya*), music, and dancing evolved their own rules conditioned as they were by their respective media. However, they shared with one another not only the underlying spiritual beliefs of the Indian religio-philosophic mind, but also the procedures by which the relationships of the symbol and the spiritual states were worked out.

Cohesion in Ancient Indian Art Forms

Time in Indian art forms was of paramount importance in early Indian art. The past was coexistent with the present; hence linearity was never the perspective in representation. The interrelationship of the arts was the foundation of the aesthetic philosophy. To learn dance, one was required to have rudimentary knowledge of instrumental music, which in turn needed a foundation in vocal music. However, each of these forms conformed to its own specific canon of creation and appreciation; which in turn, was codified in specialized treatises. The codified texts also counseled the viewer in an aesthetic appreciation introducing the notion of *rasa* (aesthetic pleasure or rapture).

This was first described in the treatise on dramaturgy: the *Natyasastra* written by Bharata. He enumerated the elements; the *gunas* (virtues), *dosas* (faults) and *alankaras* (ornaments). This aided the development of *rasa* and anticipated modern theories of semiotics. These elements were the source of the fundamental features of Indian art: ornamentation, 'the' narrative and figure, which singly or in combination, continue to characterize Indian art.¹¹ Indian aesthetic theories were resolute that the prerequisite of an informed viewer did not presuppose art to be the purview of an elite minority. Art was integral to ordinary life and is deeply woven into the religious warp and secular weft of India.

Art was not constrained by formulaic interpretations. It was liberated by the concept of *dhvani*, which privileged the notion of suggestibility and layered meanings, and hence, subjective interpretations. Art was considered

successful if it leads the spectator to a state of mind freed from the perception of both reality and imitation. The fundamental assumption was that communication was the basic function of a work of art. Therefore, *Rasadhvani* allocated equal responsibility to the genius of the artist and the perceptive acumen of the spectator. In the twentieth century, this principle was echoed by Marcel Duchamp, both, by his exposition of the urinal and his recognition that the creative act was not performed by the artist alone and that engagement with a work of art presupposes a form of interpretation. Both viewed the artistic creation as the agent of a dialogue between the artist and the informed spectator. A lack of communication between the artist and the viewer may result not just from poor artistic quality but also insensitive spectatorship. The responsibility lies equally with the artist and the viewer.¹²

Contextualizing Contemporary Indian Art

Commentators on Indian art and aesthetics have often lamented the ‘lack’ of ‘civilizational continuity’ in conceptual art. They seem to bemoan the fact that contemporary Indian art is focused on the intellect and excludes the senses, emotions and probably communication too. There has often been a call for a return to the basic; to the fundamental basis of *ananda*, meaning transformation and joy, if we have to rebuild our lives (Maira, 2006). Others have claimed that there is a need to understand how much of the new technology in contemporary art forms has been independent of ancient Indian aesthetic formulations or, how much have they merely reflected these in a culture of continuity. These and many other commentaries on the arts reflect a deep sense of anxiety about art, the aesthetic and communication in our society today. While these views also address the role of aesthetics in creating living spaces and the unaesthetic growth of urban and cultural environments, the question remains if it is possible to rebuild aesthetic sensibilities on theories that addressed a different society and a different need?

A well-documented aspect to contemporary art forms is that they are in fact quite aligned with the traditions in their form and style. It is well established, that,

Indian art forms are communicated with an awareness of enduring consciousness of the past as relative to the present. Through consecutive incursions, the assimilation of techniques, materials, ideas and forms have been selective, meaningful, creative and highly original. The awareness

that tradition offered formal and stylistic direction enabled progressive artists to evolve a modernism unique to India.¹³

Despite historical discontinuities, commentators have insisted on the definite continuities in style and form in the Indian art forms. Contemporary art forms are a fascinating array of assimilated mix of folklore, myths, legend, the multi-dimensional cave paintings, temple sculptures and the new visual cultures that have distinct technological influences. Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, India’s leading contemporary artist, has been instrumental in initiating and theorizing the Narrative–Figurative tendency in contemporary art. His interest in several traditions of world art and the search for a linguistic–theoretical bedrock that could support an indigenous practice that did not become insular, have since led to the formulation of a practice that resists monolithic constructs of identity or tradition; an identity and tradition that moves back and forth in time and space.¹⁴

Contemporary Art as ‘Semiosis’

What are the conceptual frameworks that will help us to understand the plurality of possible relations between artists and their audience in contemporary Indian art today? Kant was the first philosopher who said that works of art seem to place us under an obligation to interpret them and yet we are convinced that our works of art will never be exhaustive. As Shapiro (1994) states,

[I]n practice we find an indefinite plurality of responses to works of art which do not seem to cluster around a single paradigmatic meaning. This indeterminate meaning of a work of art may become more accessible if we begin to understand it as a sign. And in order to ascertain its meaning, it will have to be established as a semiotic entity, a sign that participates in a process, or ‘semiosis’ as Charles Peirce would call it.

For a sign, as defined by Peirce, is something that stands for someone or something (or another sign). The relation of the ‘art sign’ to its ‘object’ is symbolic and not natural because what he understands is not the intentionality of the artist. Those who talk of intentionality understand art in terms of extra-artistic intentions of some kind; such as the sublimated expression of repressed desires or participative in class struggles. It is difficult to expect a painting, for example, to resolve ambiguities. The painting can be seen as a sign of an intention to represent in a particular way. But this could result in our seeing no significant difference between two paintings with similar morphology because it is not possible to give a catalogue of the basic types of

intention of the fundamental form of intention. There is a need to take an empirical and pluralistic approach to the nature of intention. Freud says that artistic intention exhibits overdetermination. There may be a complex network of purposes involved in the production of a work (Shapiro, 1974).

A sign is constrained or limited in meaning by its own nature and object, but open to interpretation because it must address some interpreter. More importantly, it must have an 'interpretant', but to which no single interpretant is adequate. This is because the interpretant of a sign is itself a sign. This may also make it possible to distinguish artistic semiotics from other kinds of signification. Art objects, require social conventions for their interpretations, but are much more complex. Art is enduring, and while it arises out a particular historical, social personal context, it endures so that it acquires a life beyond that context. It is still difficult to discern the meaning of the art even if one understood the conventions of the new context. We return to the same work of art again and again because we continue to find new meanings or new interpretations.¹⁵

Peirce's semiotics may be used as a speculative instrument of cognition for exploring the complex nature of representation and its role in knowledge and meaning-production. Applying that triad of categories, signs or representations are divided into icon, index and symbol. Icon is a sign based on resemblance to its object, possessing some character contained in or expressed by an instance of the icon. Index is a sign that is based on correspondence to fact, to some existential relation into which the instance enters. Symbol as a sign function assumes both quality (in reference to a ground) and the existential relations of a particular object or situation. Symbol is also specific in referring to an interpretant, a cognitive moment, determined by Firstness and Secondness but not limited to either. Meaning derives from representations that involve the triadic categories, not any binary relation between signifier and signified.

From the perspective of Peirce's semiotics, every art-object is an icon (Firstness) whose aesthetic value resides in the articulation of its intrinsic qualities. The interpretant of the art/icon is a feeling or complex of emotions, the subjective correlative of the objective properties embodied in the artwork. While the interpretants of an art-object are signs of ontological Firstness (Rheme), detached phenomenal elements are merely potential. This aesthetic experience becomes an object of reflection and the logic of inference (hypothesis, deduction, induction). The interpretant (Rheme) becomes a new representamen that

determines a new interpretant (another Rheme, Proposition or Argument). So, the reader undergoes an experience of immediate consciousness in the first moment and then transforms this sign-process into a new sign, and so on.¹⁶

The interpretant is itself a sign. Second, it does not rise arbitrarily, rather it is determined both by the sign that it translates and by the laws that govern the association of signs. Finally, no interpretant is ever complete. The interpretant's function is to make its predecessor more determinate to place it in a context of other signs so as to yield more information about its represented object, to develop or enhance any meaning it might have (Parker, 1998). Art is then not just a set of formal properties divorced from everyday life; and artistic experience is broader than what we find in conventional thought. It is an experience whose mediated apprehension (through icon, index and symbol) is facilitated by logic of critical inquiry and the normative disciplines of aesthetics and ethics. Paintings in the Peircian sense are 'sinsign', or 'autographic'. It is a unique entity, unlike a poem, photograph or music, which are reproducible and hence are allographic, and hence 'legisigns' (Parker, 1998).

In its broadest sense, interpretant is the effect produced by the sign and there are many possible effects that a sign might produce, logic is just one of them. In semiotic terms, symbols grow through their interpretations. Peirce calls a work of art a 'living symbol', like a constitution or a living practice, which retains its identities through change (Shapiro, 1974).

Conclusion

Contemporary Indian art needs to be reviewed in the context of multiplicity and plurality and against continuities and discontinuities with traditions. The works of art need to go beyond conceptualizations that establish their narrativity, ornamentation and figure. It should build frameworks of analysis that will provide important clues to art as 'semiosis' and establish an epistemology of contemporary Indian art practices. Art in the twenty-first century requires artistic intelligence rather than scientific intelligence because the former fixes meaning, while the latter multiplies meaning (Shapiro, 1974). It is not adequate to draw parallels and continuities with traditional art practices, but there is a need to understand the 'interpretants' in the absence of an 'object' to these semiotic symbols. As Langer (1957) says, art and artistic expressions are symbolic in character. Art is said to express human feelings for

the sake of contemplation. In this sense, Langer establishes art as not 'signific' or 'symptomatic', but symbolic presentationally, not discursively like the human language that follows the laws of syntax (Ghosh, 1979). Contemporary Indian art has for sometime experimented with the parallel use of the linguistic, the discursive and the visual, the non-discursive, which is undoubtedly a legacy from the ancient Indian art practices. This has afforded the artists to reinterpret the written into the visual. It also helps coexist with each other in a continuous interpretation of historical narratives like the partition or communal riots, in a kind of fluidity that only an 'interpretant' can allow.¹⁷ And that is where contemporary Indian art has significantly moved away from the *ananda* representing the 'transformation' of the well-defined 'object' of traditional Indian aesthetic.

Notes

1. The scope of this paper allows for a limited focus on painting and technological interventions in contemporary Indian art. Nor does the paper attempt to evaluate any particular art movement or artist. It has a modest aim to highlight the importance of an analytical paradigm in semiotic terms towards an understanding of contemporary Indian art.
2. Extracted from www9.georgetown.edu.
3. *New Narratives: Contemporary Art from India*.
4. Extracted from 'Art Theory Contexts', www9.georgetown.edu.
5. A. J. Greimas, Structuralist Semantics (1966). See Krauss, R. *October*, 8(Spring 1979, p. 30–44), 'Sculpture in the Expanding Field' for an excellent reading of 'sculpture' as it grew in post-war America.
6. Intertextuality is a term coined by Julia Kristeva, a post-structuralist scholar from the Tel Qel School.
7. Encyclopedia was introduced by Eco, in place of 'Codes' as he felt it had a better way of explaining how communities capture shared knowledge.
8. Semiosis is a Peircian concept that talks about totality of the natural and artificial processes whose occurrence requires the mediating role of signs and is an ontological process, while semiotics is the knowledge about semiosis, and is hence epistemological.
9. Paul Thagard and Craig Beam (University of Waterloo, Canada), the uses of metaphor and analogy in epistemology and philosophy in general are much the same as their uses in science. Rhetoricians since Aristotle have noticed the major contribution that metaphor makes to efforts to convince other people. And part of the reason why epistemologists use metaphors is that they make views more appealing to readers and listeners.
10. Vatsayan, K. Source Unknown.
11. Apte, S. *Indian Highway: Contextualizing the Contemporary*.
12. Extracted from, Apte, S., *Indian Highway: Contextualizing the Contemporary*.
13. Apte, S. *Indian Highway: Contextualizing the Contemporary Art*.
14. Source unknown.
15. Extracted from Shapiro (1974).
16. Extracted from The Philippines matrix project: Peirce's Semiotics as theory of inquiry and its uses in literary and cultural studies.
17. Neelima Sheikh's work on the Partition, her interpretation of Urvasi Butalia's book, *The other side of silence*, Rushdie's novels and many Kashmiri poet's works to narrate Kashmir through her paintings is another exemplary example of this.

References

- Apte, S. (2008). *Indian highway: Contextualizing the contemporary*. Retrieved from www.heartmus.com
- Art theory contexts. (2004–09). Retrieved from www9.georgetown.edu
- Carrier, D. (2002). *Rosalind Krauss and American philisophical art criticism: From formalism to postmodernism*. Westport, Connecticut, London: Praeger Publishers.
- Eco, Umberto. (1989). *The open work*. Harvard University Press.
- Ghosh, R. K. (1979). *Aesthetic theory and art*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications.
- Krauss, Rosalind. (1979). Sculpture in the expanding field. *October*, 8(Spring 1979), 30–44.
- Langer, S. K. (1957). *Problems of art*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Maira, S. (2006). *Towards ananda: Rethinking Indian art and aesthetics*. India: Penguin Books.
- Parker, Kelly A. (1998). *The continuity of Peirce's thought*. Tennessee, USA: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Pijnappel, Johan. (2008). *New narratives*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing.
- Seid, Betty (2007). *New narratives: Contemporary art from India*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt Ltd.
- Shapiro, G. (1974). Intention and interpretation in art: A semiotic analysis. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 33(1), 33–42.
- Shapiro, M. (1994). *The Peirce seminar papers: An annual of semiotic analysis*. Providence: Berghahn Books.
- The Philippines Matrix Project: Peirce's semiotics as theory of inquiry and its uses in literary and cultural studies. Retrieved from <https://philcsc.wordpress.com/2008/10/13/charles-sanders-peirce-maxine-hong-kingston/>