

Transcript of Interview , MPCVA Bombay 2002

[Interviewed by Abhay Sardesai]

- What, according to you, is art? What is the place of art in the world? Does this role change with time or does it remain the same? How do your answers relate to Indian art? To art today? To your own work?

Ans: Art to me is that which enables a transformation of one's self, through one's knowledge. To me, this transformation is close to an aesthetic experience. Of course there is always an academic definition, but my interest in the academic way of looking at art, and of what I am doing is less immediate. What is immediately important to me is my own transformation, and I do feel that this transformative role of art remains constant through all times, and art practices everywhere.

- What made you decide to be an artist? What are its satisfactions? Its problems?

Ans: I'm not sure if mine was a very self-conscious decision to be an artist. I think that as one grows, one's 'discoveries' about oneself could potentially lead one into several, often diverse directions. As it happens, one 'stumbled upon' art. When I was growing up, the access and avenues available to us (in a small town in U.P.) were very limited. A recognition of being artistically inclined began with being good at painting. I was equally interested in theatre, but when the time came to announce to my surprised parents that I was going to do the unthinkable and go to Delhi to study either art or theatre, my father immediately ruled out the idea of my studying theatre. To be honest, I had expected more opposition , so I readily gave up the idea of theatre, and was quite glad to have gained permission easily, without having to put up much of a fight. After that, I guess it was more a matter of staying with one's choices, very often because one felt one could not really fit in with anything else...it certainly took a while to become conscious of the enormity of commitment to oneself.

I secretly hoped to simultaneously pursue theatre (I was then not introduced to either the idea or the discourse of performance), but this idea was soon put to rest, as it was hard enough to keep up with one's instinct for what one wanted to do as a visual artist, and to cultivate the discipline to not get terribly attached to and encumbered by markers of success such as a good show, an award won or a painting sold... It took years of foraging to find a language closer to oneself, a language that allows one to traverse paths between mediums. And it is almost an ongoing job to keep up the faith. The stumbling never stops. But I could not say that I see this as a problem. It is difficult to keep the spirit going when the tide is low and there is a question of basic survival. But once you've overcome the worst of such a phase, this same experience can be equally enabling. The best way I can make sense of the world I live in is through making art. One could aptly use the word 'salvation'.

- How do you arrive at a decision about what artwork to make? Its formal aspects? Its content? The process you will use? The context you will relate your artwork to?

Ans: My work includes a great deal of video installation, often the end result of

performance. Concurrent to this is the use of drawing and of hand-on objects.

My recent work explores two areas of experience: interiority, or embodied experience, and the dynamics of identity. Lying at the interstices of inner and outer experience is the body. And employing my body as a site of contest; I explore the tensions between social and inner forces of lofty and libidinal experience.

In the ever-present desire to negotiate one's 'self' and one's body, there is a humorous undercurrent, and from the comic, often a sense of the profoundly foolish is derived. While the more intimate aspect of my work gestures at the poetics of inner experience, I attempt to draw critically on references to the social domain – to geo-political locale and to cultural and gendered identity.

The world in which I travel, I am constantly The recent shifts in my own artistic, cultural and social context have thrown some of these issues into sharp relief and call for negotiating the various overlapping of representation. There is a stronger current of these in my recent work.

I tend to be indiscriminate when it comes to accepting different materials as material for art-making, though of late I have in my own work been quite partial to video, and time based works. My process of working is very intuitive. I could start from a point of enquiry and stay with it for a long time, several years perhaps, and in the process I may or may not give it material (and/ or virtual) shape.

I do not believe in the effacement of the maker. I do not situate myself in any one practice. I tend to traverse paths through various mediums (media) and as one advances, one explores different ways in which things can be done without having to lug about heavy belongings. (I am also becoming increasingly aware that while in my earlier work I sought to transcend representation in favour of a visionary presence and spontaneity, this position is slowly being replaced by one of exposing the politics of representation in my work).

Often the strategies that a work utilizes are directly generated by the material and the context that define the work. So I can not honestly say that I could trace back the evolving of my work to one single point of origin. Influences have always come to me in a very disorderly way, and from all kinds of directions.

• What role does nature play in your art? How do you think of nature?

Ans: I think of nature as: the natural world. I think of nature as: the nature of things, and the nature of (one's) self. I do not think I have ever had a self-conscious fascination for representing the 'obvious' signifiers of nature, such as scenery, or the Elements. My fascination has, instead , been for the phenomenal experience. On reflecting upon a body of my initial videos I can see that I have addressed nature from the phenomenological perspective: I often work with the imaged body. I also attempt to interweave spatial, perceptual and bodily presence. For me, often the point of origin for a 'performance' is to attempt an unmediated look at the original nature of the experience of the body. Having insisted on such a deep interest in the body, I must admit that I have not paid particular attention to philosophical concepts such as body-mind dichotomy, or body as a sum total of its parts...Instead, I

suppose I try to reveal to myself, through performance, the nature of things from the starting point of my bodily encounter with the perceptual field. In my more recent works I have attempted to shift the focus from my own body to that of another.

It is important to mention that an attempt to gesture towards the experience of the body, as a natural, living object is often intertwined with an attempt to point towards the experience of the body in its cultural, guised form.

- How do you see the relation between art and reason? Art and emotion? Art and philosophy? Art and science? Art and society? Art and politics? Art and commerce? How does your own work relate to these things?

Ans: I like to think that I do move through a plurality of settings, and exchange poetically with them. I suppose most earnest attempts at art making do that. All the relationships sited above are inextricably mixed.

As far as a relation to philosophy and to emotions go, I do not care to demonstrate as to when and how a particular 'rasa' is played out in my work, I hope that the work itself will tell you that. I'd like to quote an instance: I am currently doing a residency at the Rijksakademie. We have a system of meeting other, more experienced artists who come in occasionally to 'advise'. In a recent conversation with Mani Kaul, who also comes to the Rijks sometimes, in a similar context he quoted from the guru granth sahib: "Ik Rab, te ik rab di gal" (to translate it loosely: it is one thing to talk about God, and quite something else to experience God).

Going back to the question of one's art in relation to the social sphere, I think that as someone interested in dealing with identity, one quite naturally wants and needs to ascribe to a framework of references that are more directly inclusive of the cultural, the political, and the public, alongside the personal. But I think that both in spite of, and because of, the emergence in the 20th century of the discourse on imperialism, colonialism, migration, exclusion, feminism, etc, one needs to radically problematise and rework these notions, lest these become palatable food for art that is seemingly political. This may seem paradoxical; because on the one hand, of course works of art can be made out of the very experience of cultural difference. In certain contexts, this as a gesture itself can be very important. And then you always, also have those who hop and jump onto the wagon, and are likely to turn their 'political' art into a rigidly prescriptive practice, perpetuating thereby the same power relations as those established in the systems they are questioning. (For example, feminism is thus weakened in its political undertaking as it is reduced to something as simplistic as man-hating!)

Personally, I would resist a reading of my work that focuses solely on the cultural political paradigm. I think such a reading would be reductive. I would, instead, insist on the inclusion of an understanding of the emotional/intimate core of a work.

- How does your art relate to reality?

Ans: "no reality can be captured without trans-forming"

- What is your conception of modernity? In the world? In India? How do you see the relation between art and modernity? Indian art and modernity? Your own work and modernity?

Ans: In the Indian context I find it hard to understand modernism as a period, of art as it is in the west. Modernism is not an identical narrative in reckonings across nations.. I do discern it as something with which a revolutionary form can be identified. Especially in India, its revolutionary form co-incides with the independence movement, in the country., so therefore with a nationalist agenda. But fifty six years after independence, I think that the nationalist agenda has become extremely troubled, because today's modernity (in cultural production) requires an emancipation from institutionalized structures of support for the art and production (mostly to avoid cultural policing) and this of course is paradoxical to being 'national'.

(A quote comes to mind: Kundera says in 'Immortality': to be truly modern is to be an ally of your own gravediggers").

- What do you see as the relation between "high" and "low" art? How do you see its course historically? What do you think the relation is today? In India? In the world? What do you think of the rise of visual culture/visual studies departments and journals?

Ans: The question of high or low does not interest me very much. I tend to pay less attention to the rather self-conscious discourse that has build around the subject. I do think this is a pertinent matter when it a question of the dying arts, or the question of the survival of craftspeople in a remote part of a country. In my world all can happily coexist.

About the role of visual culture studies: thanks to the rise of this new area of study in the twentieth century, a lot of very pertinent grey areas were given more dignity and there right place in the world of academics.

Having said that, I'd like to also register some bit of misgivings: I think that the academic circles have embraced Cultural studies way too tightly, so that it often gets totally co-opted into the discourse: there is a comfortable niche for everything... this, I feel does not benefit the reactionary aspect, or the radical impulse that prompted the need for making space for this area of studies in the first place.

- What art of the twentieth century do you think will remain in the public consciousness at the end of the twenty-first century? Why? What do you see as the emerging trends in contemporary art in India? In the world?

Ans: I have to see and experience a lot more, to be able to truly suggest my choices.

- What, according to you, are the three most pressing problems facing India today?

Ans: Scarcity of means that can provide people with basic amenities and education.Continual increase in the economic divide, and therefore poverty.Over population.Bad governance and corruption.

- What, according to you, are the three most pressing problems in the world today?

Ans: Continual production of weapons of mass destruction. Unbalanced power structures.

- What, according to you, are the three most pressing problems in the art world today? In India? In the world?

Ans: In some parts of the world, there is the problem of overkill, excess and the ensuing boredom. How to keep alive the space for radical transformation.

Problems specific to India: The distance (in communication) between disciplines within the arts that should ideally be working in tandem. Poor outreach of the art produced. Fewer means of production. All this is owing not only to a poorer economy, but also a culture of indifference. (the irony of there being an inversely proportionate relation between larger public/ fewer spectators...) The threat that global capitalism may take over the discourse on culture.

• What type of art criticism do you like? Why?

Ans: I prefer criticism that is not prescriptive, but descriptive, if you must. Better still, instead of reading, listening to someone speak 'about', I prefer to have them 'speak nearby'. • Who are some of your favorite artists? Why? How do they affect your art?

Ans: In areas that are overtly visual (but of course, also sensual, intellectual etc) : Trinh T. Minh-ha. Arpita Singh. Abbas Kiarostami, Bill Viola, Pina Bausch. Seeing the works of these people have filled me with a sense of amazement, with joy, with a sense of having gone through an intense experience, in other words – very inspiring. Of course, I also love Indian classic music, and derive a great deal of nourishment from it.

• Who are some of your favorite writers of fiction and nonfiction? How do they affect your art?

Ans: Nowadays I read in fits and starts. I consummate my need for fiction through watching films. And recently even documentaries. There is never any time, despite best intentions. I prefer to read non-fiction, though some years ago I could only hold my attention with fiction. I have gone through the usual phases of reading the existentialists, the analysis of transgressive thought, bits of feminist theory, intermingled with solid-entertainment novels, and modern fiction often combined with bits of modern philosophy. I have often looked for subject matter for my work through what I read. And not necessarily in the sense of finding a narrative, this could be a subject of philosophical enquiry, something 'enriching and meaningful'. I don't care so much about that sort of a thing anymore. If I 'look for' anything now, it is for something that would help me articulate better, and bring to surface my own thoughts and ideas and understanding of my art practice. And it is uncanny how you can pick up almost anything the expression you need is there, smiling back at you in your face. But I would say it is more like borrowing words to find one's own expression, before you know the borrowed words become a point of departure, and your thoughts have wings of their own. I do believe in books and in reading, and I keep promising myself to get back to it more seriously.

• Are there activities other than art that you pursue? How does this affect your art?

Ans: Food and cinema. I don't think there is a separation in what one does and the art one makes. I love cooking for friends.

• Can you identify a single unified way you adopt to view the world?

Ans: I cannot speak of adopting a single unified way to view the world, without

spouting self conscious wisdom, and extreme political correctness that I do not necessarily follow myself. I do have my own personal list of dos and don'ts that I keep revising when I'm not being lazy.

I think self awareness is very important. I think the ability to be amazed by things and by yourself leads to being happy. I think it is not a good idea to be self-serious, nor too skeptical. I think that it goes without saying that following the basic humanitarian ethics is essential.