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New Art from India

Monsoon Collection, Indian Embassy, Berlin, April 16 — May 5, 2008

Frontlines: Notations from the Contemporary Indian Urban. Berlin, May 2 — June 1, 2008

Shtlpa Gupta BlindStars StarsBlind. Berlin, June 14 — August 2, 2008 (both at GalleryBodhi, Berlin)

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Rajnish Chhanesh, *Different Mood in City*, 2006. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

Actualités/Expositions

Berlin

New Art from India

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"Mine is an accident of birth to have been born in India," said Gayatri Spivak at Berlin's Humboldt University speaking on *Alterglobalization and Subalternity*, puzzling her audience. "I am Indian," she was quick to explain, "but I was educated by Westerners in India and in the Western system. Can I truly speak about the people of India especially the poor whose experience is so different from mine?" She paused then mentioned her philanthropic work. "Most of you have read my article on the *Subaltern* or know my translations of Derrida [*Of Grammatology*] but you may not know what I do during the summer. I volunteer in rural Bengal where my academic authority and I do have some clout, has no meaning. What has meaning among the utterly poor – most of whom are women – is language, not English but theirs, which is hardly spoken by educated persons. I do speak their language, so I claim to speak for these people who have no voice, or possession."[1] And under her breath she said something to the effect that her birth was a lucky accident. For, she is grounded in both the East and West and informed by both worlds. Yet, she insisted on space at first. It is less about the voice for the subaltern than to open up space for them within global discourse. Clearly with linguistic difference being *the* barrier to established structures of political representation, lingual memory must be inhabited and used as a tool for activism to effect change.[2] This is an alterglobal strategy. As such, Spivak intervenes regionally and speaks globally at international conferences, as at the French-based, Alterglobal organization, ATTAC (founded in 1989) to deconstruct a "regional patriarchy" and expose exploitations on the very poor whose bodies have been ravaged by fertilizer and pharmaceuticals dumped on them.[3] "Intellectual knowledge is not enough, it has to be instrumentalized," she appealed.

Weeks later, with her talk still on my mind, I saw in succession three exhibitions on contemporary Indian art. There her arguments not only intensified, they were reinforced visually. Artists too, especially the younger generation, have opened their aesthetic space and participate in an alterglobal activity, some unknowingly. They go beyond Spivak's definition of the rural subaltern[4] and concentrate on the Indian urban, instead, reacting to the burgeoning phenomenon in South Asia, the mass exodus of the rural population into the urban areas of Mumbai (Bombay), Baroda and Greater Delhi. There the artists derive creative impulse while being taught a language from the situations in which they live. They enter into a master-discipleship, just like Spivak has, where the master is the situation and the disciple the instrumentalized intellect. The outcome, then, is more than a mere deposition of ideas as aesthetic attraction of *Indian otherness* to charm western viewers. Rather, it is an articulation, often produced under challenging circumstances, that mediates the experience of reality on the Indian Subcontinent to a global audience. Looking closely and

Sudodh Gupta, *Faith Matters*, 2007. Sushi belt, motor, aluminium, copper and brass containers. Courtesy BhodiBerlin.

staying with the art for while, a viewer will be absorbed sensually, emotionally in space and place while the mind becomes aware, making flights into various geographies, entering alterglobality.

Monsoon Collection at the Indian Embassy showed paintings Anna-B. Alves collected while traveling through Northern India last year, during monsoon rains. She carried the canvases rolled up in her backpack and with them the artists' stories. *Frontlines: Notations from the Contemporary Indian Urban* launched BodhiBerlin, a dependence of the Bodhi Art Gallery in Mumbai, where Shilpa Gupta's solo show *BlindStars StarsBlind* was also held, both curated by Shaheen Merali. Of *Monsoon* three canvases (acrylic) shall be mentioned, each understood as a window into various interiors, with those following focusing on discursive exteriors.

Prafulli Agit Shevede's *Nest* (2006) represents a large, red propane gas container, which is the essence for a woman living on the outskirts of Delhi. With it she cooks the meals and sustains her fam-

ily. Positioned like a revered icon against a dark shadow, the flask may represent the hearth, which is woman but contained, and the shadow patriarchy that continuously reduces women to body and household duties. In some social circles in India, women can only pursue their art in a clandestine manner, said Alves. In Rajnish Chhanesh's *Different Mood in City* (2006) a figure sits on a bench while turning back and looking through vertical bars onto a dense architectural built-up. Bottles are overhead. The scene reflects the predicaments of the artist's family who lives in a single room-apartment, like thousands of others, in state housing, trapped in schizophrenic spaces, which they must call home. Re-settlers cannot afford the soaring rents asked by private building owners as a result of the economic boom and housing shortage and this, despite a family's higher education. Alcohol has become an escape route for some, a despair spread over the canvas. Spatial tension, a subdued palette, bottles and prison bars emphasize shame, hope-

lessness – an existential crisis. In his *Dream Series* (2007) Tanul Hirachand Vikamshi seeks refuge in the feminine. He places voluptuous Indian goddesses known from Hindu temples into swirls of colour. "I have turned to the fairy, the traditional Indian woman ... an unceasing shelter," Vikamshi said. The memory of woman-goddess-mother "is that feeling of presence, that language of taste before the code of ideas, that envelope of aromas, in a word Love," writes Julia Kristeva.[5] As a result, Vikamshi's paintings have become brighter recently and his earlier melancholy has faded. Auto-rikshaws, entrances and stones appear less frequently in his work now. He has adjusted to those obstacles as a wheelchair user and to the limited mobility. In filial affection, his brother carries the painter up the flights of stairs to his studio. Only in that dependency can Vikamshi pursue his painting practice.

The built-up environments filled with feelings of alienation, poverty and dreams have become the new frontlines.[6] *Frontlines* drew crowds in the newly built hall near the canal where the sprawling gallery of BodhiBerlin showed, ironically, an inner city core of skyscrapers, Subodh Gupta's *Faith Matters* (2007). On a large table sushi belts slowly rotate circular metal containers, tiffins, stacked high the sheen bouncing off aluminum, copper and brass. The tins form an impressive skyline *en miniature*. They are familiar to us from Indian restaurants only stacked higher like those of the food deliverers in cities in India, those urban subalterns who skillfully balance their goods to hungry consumers, often in low-paid servitude. *Faith Matters* also raises questions about building practices in other Asian boomtowns and the acquisition of land preceded by the forced dislocation of small homeowners. The "motors of power" behind such enterprises are hardly audible but visible under the table of which the technique is emblematic.

Powerful art often follows a traumatic experience invested with affect and considerations of time, a negative sublimity – death? There lies in the centre of BodhiBerlin an implied life-sized corpse on a stretcher with pronounced handles that facilitate transport. It's an eerie thought of 'removal' blanketed with deep woodcarvings. Only the bronze head is exposed. Riyas Komu's *The Cult of the Dead and Loss of Memory* (2007) is a funerary pyre protected by high gridlock walls. We are either barred to enter a sacred realm, or protected from the mortal sphere. The memory of social status or the adherence to a religion seems already lost for the departed. Islamic references in the woodcarvings are for initiated eyes. I recognized the acanthus motif, which in western iconography is a symbol of paradise. Hailing from Kerala, the highest populated state in South West India, Komu notes: "mine is not a fatalistic view, but just an observation of how things have changed in front of my eyes." Notably viewers walked quickly around *The Cult of the Dead* and veered sideways either to the mobile city, or to Atul Dodiya's recycled shutters, *Sayno Bolona* (2008) fastened to the wall. Nine shutters of variant sizes are covered with such motifs as a red anchor, a figure, or a British subway sign reading *Atul*, the artist's name, not *underground*. He started his shutter series in 2000 by painting historical figures like Mahatma Gandhi. The recent motifs fluctuate between painting and graffiti, or paintings tagged over by a 'soft' graffiti to emphasize their altered state, objects, which are already historically processed. Some shutters may have once protected the windows of British owned businesses, but in their new use invite a reading of a century-suppressed colonized 'Indian subaltern' to a free nation. "India, the amazing powerhouse of our future with its rapidly spiraling economic might has advanced its potent cultural heritage into an innovative [...] aesthetic development," pronounced BodhiBerlin. Although, Zarina Hashmi's minimal but poignant metal sculpture on the wall near the Entrance/Exit points to a global mapping that is not balanced in terms of destination. *Mapping the Dislocation* (2003/07) consists of fine metal strips that extend over a flattened world map (implied through perception), similar to an airline's flight routes to emphasize connecting points, here with thumbnail-sized dots. Surely, travel routes are established for business, education and tourism but flight lines for the sheer human embrace to a regional geography where no commercial profit can be gained are missing. "The notion of revolution leading to change a state formation as if looking forward to an altered globe does no longer work," said Spivak. "One must start regionally to effect change nationally."

Importantly, on the same spot of *Mapping*, Shilpa Gupta in *BlindStars* placed a photographic scroll six meters long but only about 10 cm high, of people waiting in line, *100 Queues* (2008). "In third world countries people are always waiting in line," I was told while looking at the predominantly gendered groups – clusters of men and clusters of women with children – and wondering out loud "what are they waiting for? " (I became aware of my own blind star). Fascinated by the beautiful sari-clad-women I started to count them but soon gave up because there were so many. What is the *punctum* that which lingers when the photo is no longer in front of one's eyes, as Roland Barthes asked? The *punctum* here is the multitude not the individual. *100 Queues* is a jointure of photographic space and geographic region – that space that needs urgent opening as Spivak said. "Often artists like myself who are working in a so called 'activist' role, become branded as activist artists," Shilpa Gupta said. If the word activism has a bad rap, alterglobal is an alternate to be used because that is what she is engaged in. Her *Tryst with Destiny* (2008) consists of an old microphone attached to a stand but low and placed isolated in the large gallery. A girl's voice could be heard when bending down to listen. It is Gupta's voice recorded in school years ago, as she reads what Jawaharlal Nehru read on August 14, 1947, the speech on the granting of India's independence from Great Britain. That giant moment of freedom from colonial rule followed the *peaceful activism* led by Gandhi (supported by Nehru) whose presence was not only implied by the spindly stand of the microphone but felt through historical awareness.

Yes, Indian art made a big splash in Berlin having taken a front seat recently at international commercial art fairs as a dealer remarked, replacing contemporary Chinese art, the bestseller over the last three years. This interest is no doubt, connected to the country's rise as a global player, which has made the West curious and alert. But the tenure of our time is, as Spivak said, alterglobal, which is: "to turn that capital around for social, *not* capital globalization so that the many poor on the Indian Subcontinent can benefit."

MARIA ZIMMERMANN BRENDEL

Maria Zimmermann Brendel who holds a Ph. D. from McGill University, Montreal, is working as an art critic in Berlin.

NOTES

[1] In 1997 Spivak founded the Pares Chandra and Sivani Chakravorti Memorial Literary Project, a non-profit organization, to provide a primary education of quality for children in some of the poorest region of the globe, including rural areas of West Bengal, India. Sincere thanks go to Anna-B. Alves, Katarina Valdivia Bruch and Anja Hellmold for their help with the visuals and other needed information, and to Dr. Nina Roy who gives me critical feedback each time I ask and this without hesitation.

[2] Spivak defines alterglobal action as: exposure, problem solving, fundraising and state interference. She dedicated her talk to a male professor in India who went to prison for burning down a Franchise of a Kentucky Fried Chicken.

[3] See Marie-Monique Robin's documentary *Monsanto* (2008).

[4] Spivak uses the definition subaltern in a specific sense meaning the utterly poor in the areas of the global South. Homi Bhabha applies the term subaltern more extended including social groups, oppressed minorities but who can subvert hegemonic power, which the utterly poor cannot.

[5] Julia Kristeva, *Murder in Byzantium*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, 240.

[6] Press Release, *Frontlines*, BodhiBerlin, 2008.