

'A CHAOS OF AWAKENED WONDERS': HETEROGLOSSIA AND MULTIMODAL SIGNS IN INDIAN SCULPTURAL PRACTICE

In the contemporary era, sculpture undergoes radical shifts. Experiments in materiality, as well as explorations of language, ecology, sound, sensorium, technology and the ephemeral, give life to the medium. Borders between genres dissolve, generating new discussion about the representation and definition of the object.

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Fig. 29.1
K. S. Radhakrishnan,
Freehold Musui, 2006. Bronze

This chapter considers artworks that make use of minimalist and/or formalist principles, explore geometric characteristics, and evoke the absent and ephemeral to do their work. In so doing, it aims to map contemporary sculptural practice in India.¹ As a point of entry into a changeable field, we look at a body of works through the use of material assemblages: those which employ light and shadow play as modes of expression, and which explore the poetry of motion through kinetic means. Beyond the scope of this chapter, however, are works that employ tools of social sculpture, interventions into the natural world, architectural overtures, text-based sculptural works, post-human cyborgian works, sonic works, and many others.

Some artists under discussion are actively engaged in social, political or cultural commentary and critique in their work. Others draw more obliquely on the times in which they are living, and we can observe this dynamic without ascribing a simple cause-and-effect relationship between social transformation and artistic practice. Some of the discussed works draw meaning from the contextual ground of the post-1990s erosion of Nehruvian secularism, and the rise of identity politics centring around inequality of caste, class, gender and religion following economic liberalization in India. But, of course, not all artists engage with these transformations directly or even at all. Some artists engage allegorically, while others experiment with poetics of materiality, and so forth.

The various possible readings of these works exist in a heterogloss multiverse, waiting to unfold. This refers to an infinite number of parallel universes, filled with heteroglossia: an infinite number of simultaneous and divergent voices. This heterogloss multiverse is as large as the number of viewers who bring their preoccupations and lives to the reading, sometimes in ways that conflict with the intent of the artist.

Figurative/Metaphorical

Many contemporary Indian artists have created bodies of sculpture around iconic figurative images, such as G. Ravinder Reddy's stylized golden heads, with their exoticized appearance of essentialized 'Indianness', or Chintan Upadhyay's designer babies; in so doing, they offer a comment on consumer aesthetics by using a figurative language that is easily associable with an artist's

aesthetic brand. But this mode is but one of many, even among the most figurative of sculpture work.

Early groundwork for what would become a vibrant and astonishingly varied field of sculptural practice was laid by such noteworthy artists as Amarnath Seghal, Prithpal Ladi, N. N. Rimzon, Krishnakumar, K. S. Radhakrishnan and others [Fig. 29.1]. These artists' work either remains firmly in the territory of the modernist enterprise, or productively straddles that divide into the contemporary (while nevertheless lying outside the scope of this chapter). Here, we will discuss a few examples of the prominent use of figurative language in contemporary Indian sculpture, to show this diversity.

Navjot Altaf – known mononymously as Navjot (b. 1949) – has created a body of sculpture that is among the earliest figurative works to shift us decisively into a conceptual and genuinely contemporary domain, focused on gender, language and possibilities for speaking truth. Engaging questions of gender, power and various knowledge systems, she renders primarily female, nude bodies, carved in wood and painted bright primary colours, which contemplate their own physicality and sexuality, as well as their relationships to class, gender, production and power, and to one other.

Navjot often explores the equalizing power of knowledge in relation to patriarchy, class and caste. In *Response to Kunti* (1999–2000) features three figurative sculptures configured into a dynamic relationship [Fig. 29.2]. The primary figure is Kunti, who was an Adivasi woman accused of witchcraft in 1998 in Kondagaon, Bastar, where Navjot has been conducting ongoing field work since the same year. Kunti is seated on Duchamp's bottle rack, and she appears to be in solidarity with two other female figures. She has one hand open to receive new knowledge, the other closed, holding the knowledge she has accumulated through her life. Next to her, a standing woman holds a hosepipe covered with text cut from the *Economic and Political Weekly*, where a paper identifying patriarchy as 'the first class' was published after the Kunti incident.²

This sort of inquiry persists through Navjot's practice, including her *Horn in the Head* series (2013), in which a similar visual language takes figurative sculpture and interpolates additional material into it: objects and, in this case, a projection from the



Mahim creek in Mumbai where the polluted Mithi River meets the Arabian Sea, in order to investigate knowledge systems in the context of environmental degradation. Navjot combines sculptures of the mythical three-legged donkey, which is said to have the power to purify, with ordinary four-legged donkeys, female interlocutors seeking knowledge, and layering in sound. She features a donkey listening to the Babol River in Iran flowing into the Caspian Sea, and sites of what the Greeks called 'agkuklios paidea', a learning cycle activated through the articulation of diverse perspectives, listening and dialogue.

Another important strand of figurative work has been unfurled in the service of speaking historical and political truth to power. An unforgettable example of this is *Memorial (Mausoleum)* (1993) [Figs 26.5a–b, p. 380] by Vivan Sundaram (b. 1943), in which he deploys a plaster cast of a live body that lies under a triangular structure lit up with neon tubes. The body is contorted into the position documented in a *Times of India* newspaper photograph taken by Hoshi Jal in January 1993, which shows one of the many victims of the 1992–93 communal violence that was at its most extreme in Bombay and which began with the illegal demolition of Babri Masjid, a mosque in Ayodhya. The image is echoed in other photography and sculptural pieces in the artist's body of work, and it remains an icon of that horrific turning point in Indian politics, emblazoned into the collective memory of India's progressive intelligentsia.

The ghosts of communal and political violence reappear across the corpus of Indian contemporary sculpture, many through figurative devices that serve as metaphors for the problem under investigation. Tejal Shah's (b. 1979) sculptural gun, *Bharatgas* (2003), is made out of toy gas cylinders that reference the way in which ordinary cooking cylinders from Indian kitchens were transformed into explosives used to murder Muslims in the 2002 Gujarat massacre [see Box 21.4, p. 294]. *Anger at the Speed of Fright* (2011) and *Circadian Rhyme* (2013) by Jitish Kallat (b. 1974) nod visually towards the form of the ethnographic sculptures of the ethnic groups of Maharashtra that are part of the permanent collection at the Bhau Daji Lad museum, while their action-figure-like displays of street-fighting scenes can be imaginatively mapped onto the communal conflicts in Bombay of 1992–93, or conflicts anywhere between communities or individuals and authority figures [Fig. 29.3].

Figurative sculptural objects serve a performative function in the context of conflicts in Kashmir, much like those in Gujarat and Mumbai; they take form as the utterances of truths suppressed in the dominant discourse. In Shilpa Gupta's (b. 1976) *1278 Unmarked, 28 Hours By Foot Via National Highway No 1, East of*

the Line of Control (2013), on the disputed border between India and Pakistan in Kashmir, she offers 1,278 marble gravestones for the vast and yet uncounted numbers of casualties produced in that multi-decade conflict. Here the gravestones are more literally performative than merely figurative; they are markers for people buried in unmarked, sometimes mass graves, the deaths of whom are rarely officially acknowledged. The gravestones are for viewers to take home, but in order to take one, they must sign a letter agreeing to be its caretaker and accountable for its whereabouts henceforth. This agreement signifies an acknowledgement of our collective responsibility for the crisis, belying the pretence of our distance and disconnection to it.

There are many other works that respond to political strife as well, such as the blindfolded worshippers and Guantanamo-esque hooded prisoners in the sculptural installations *The Birth of Blindness* (2007) and *The Dead Smile* (2007) by G. R. Iranna (b. 1970), in which the artist uses a figurative language to hint at the connection between religion and political violence of a global nature [Fig. 29.4].

L. N. Tallur (b. 1971) often uses a seemingly traditional Indian figurative iconography, but in a contemporary sense, using such



FAR LEFT
Fig. 29.2 Navjot Altaf, *In Response to Kunti*, 1999–2000. Indigo and acrylic on wood, PVC pipe, oil on iron

BELOW
Fig. 29.3 Jitish Kallat, *Anger at the Speed of Fright*, 2011. Detail. Painted resin, 62 figurines and a variety of implements and weapons

FAR BELOW
Fig. 29.4 G. R. Iranna, *The Dead Smile*, 2007. Fibreglass and cloth



ABOVE
Fig. 29.5 L. N. Tallur,
Colonial Sisters, 2008.
 Rosewood



RIGHT
Fig. 29.6 Raqs Media
Collective, *Coronation*
Park, 2015. Detail. Fibreglass
 sculpture on bitumen-
 coated wooden pedestal
 with acrylic polymer plaque.
 Giardini, Venice Biennale

materials as termite-infested or burnt wood and concrete, as seen in *Alzheimer's* (2006) and *Lamp (deepsa laxmi)* (2011), for example. His sculptures are often placed into an interactive relationship with the viewer, as in *Colonial Sisters* (2008), in which a rosewood carving aligns two similar but not-quite matching halves of women with children on their hips, opposite a pile of corresponding pieces that should but cannot form a whole of the same [Fig. 29.5]. The result is an unsolvable puzzle for the viewer to contemplate, suggesting that the partition of wholes, once fractured into parts, makes for an uneasy family relationship that is as impossible to deny as it is to unify seamlessly.

While not often thought of as a group of figurative artists, per se, Raqs Media Collective (f. 1992) often trades on figurative components that go far beyond the older notions of figuration as representational, instead unbinding figurative language from its traditional moorings to make it speak in the tongues of many predicaments of the human condition. Their sculptural evocations of the mythological Yaksha and Yakshi draw deliberately on the two figures created on commission by Ramkinkar Baij for the National Reserve Bank of India [Fig. 20.3, p. 268]. If the originals were modernist commentaries on an India at the crossroads of an economic transformation, Raqs's renditions of the mythological figures – which appear in such video works as *Carbon Twilight* (2008) and *Sleepwalkers Caravan (Prologue)* (2008), or as multitudes in *The Reserve Army* (2008), their necks bedecked with garlands of cash – invoke the seepage of capital and its practices of life and labour across national and temporal boundaries. As gatekeepers of national wealth, Yaksha and Yakshi watch over 'the accumulated traces of time hidden in the earth as carbon', which 'disappear and reappear under different guises, sometimes as wealth, other times as poison. Only the gatekeepers know which is which'.³

Subsequently, Raqs's *Coronation Park* (2015) – an imposing suite of tongue-in-cheek monuments of dismembered kings atop high plinths, unveiled at 'All the World's Futures', Okwui Enwezor's 2015 Venice Biennale – deconstructs the familiar iconography of monarchy and autocratic power with plaques engraved with fragments from George Orwell's treatise on the



LEFT
Fig. 29.7a Bharti Kher,
The Skin Speaks a Language
Not Its Own, 2006. Bindis on
 fibreglass

ABOVE
Fig. 29.7b Bharti Kher,
The Skin Speaks a Language
Not Its Own, 2006. Detail
 on fibreglass

fall of colonial rule, 'Shooting an Elephant' (1936) [Fig. 29.6].⁴ Heads lopped off, bisected bodies sliced in half; these rulers' conspicuous missing parts pair with prescient lines adapted from Orwell, such as 'One could have imagined him thousands of years old. He fired again into the same spot.' In another, a regal robe stands empty, as if gutted of its wearer, and the text beneath reads: 'He became a sort of hollow, posing dummy. He wore a mask and his face grew to fit it'.

The murdered elephant in Orwell's text symbolized the brutalized subjects of British colonial rule, the violence of empire, nation and colonization. In a similar vein, perhaps the most well-known example of the figurative spectre of the elephant in contemporary sculpture is Bharti Kher's (b. 1969) seminal work *The Skin Speaks a Language Not Its Own* (2006) [Fig. 29.7a]. This life-size fibreglass elephant, depicted in the throes of death, exemplifies the poignant use of the figurative to embody the violence of our modern, human way of life, showing how our violence as a species extends to the non-human world. The hide of this majestic behemoth, whose sentient intelligences rivals our own, is suffocated with densely placed grey bindis [Fig. 29.7b]. Against the indexical ground of the prostrate elephant's dying body, these markers of human culture, religion and gender are transfigured for this elephant into a skin not its own.

Neither Here nor There: Minimalist/Formalist/ Geometric/Ephemeral

The distinctions between figurative and formalist are not always mutually exclusive, with some artists incorporating figurative elements towards ends that are more formalist and abstract than metaphorical and symbolic.

This is clearly exemplified in many works by Alwar Balasubramaniam (b. 1971), which traverse the boundary between the figurative and the serene language of formalism, with elements of minimalism as well. In well-known pieces such as his *Shell as a Body* (2007), the *Nothing From My Hands* series of works (2010–12) and *Unfold* (2012), pristine white sculptures are performances of bodily traces frozen in time. His works enfold enquiries about shape and shadow, perspective and time, into elegant objects that move fluidly from figurative elements

towards abstraction. Although figurative imagery abounds, the uses of that imagery are not primarily to represent, even metaphorically, but rather as figurative elements that are employed as forms proper. The uniform white colour further performs this formalist, minimalist functionality.

For Manisha Parekh (b. 1964), forms are about neither figuration nor functionality; nor can they rightly be characterized as minimalist. Rather, her carefully studied explorations of the possibilities of forms unfold into space within the bounded constraints of the material itself. Across the breadth of her distinctive practice, in her wall-based sculptural hemp-rope works, she uses forms to gesture beyond the figurative into the realm of abstraction, guided by a feeling for the tactile properties of her chosen materials.

Meditations on the intersection of form and material, the possibilities of shape and the language of shadow exude from Parekh's series of works, such as *A Secret Within* (2008, 2009), *Spinning Time* (2009) and *Murmur* (2009–15). In these series, the space that 'homes' the work is integral to the work itself. Out of a menagerie of individual objects, which Parekh describes as akin to 3D drawings made of jute, she creates an additional meta-form from the assembled swarm of smaller forms. Instead of representing anything concrete, for her, the forms are steeped in associations and memories, and the tying and twining is a meditative process that is part of the work itself. Noteworthy examples include the site-specific installations of these formal assemblages for the 'Living Off the Grid' (2009) exhibition at the Anant Art Centre in Noida, curated by Meera Menezes, 'Fragility' (2011) at Art Alive Gurgaon, curated by Rakhee Balaram [Fig. 29.8], and the 'Constructs/Constructions' exhibition (2015) at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in New Delhi, curated by Roobina Karode.

Using jute, but in a visual language quite different from that of Parekh, Manish Nai (b. 1980) creates abstract sculptural objects, patterned and moulded into shapes ranging from the cube to the circular disk. He is part of a younger generation of artists in India who are exploring the haptic materiality of natural fibres to play with geometry, form and abstraction, exemplified in his 2014 dyed-burlap work, *Untitled* [Fig. 29.9]. Another noteworthy younger artist working with abstraction and materiality is Hemali

Fig. 29.8 Manisha Parekh, *Murmur*, 2011. Jute rope on terre-verte-coloured wall, work in 30 units. Exhibition: 'Fragility', Art Alive Gurgaon



RIGHT
Fig. 29.9 Manish Nai,
Untitled, 2014. Burlap



BELOW
Fig. 29.10 Pooja Iranna,
Pervasive Expansion, 2016-19. Staple pins and mirror. Installation



Bhuta (b. 1978), who has constructed massive columns and pillars made of alum, and other mono-material abstract, formal or geometric works in substances including soap and graphite.

The robust, elegant science of geometry in formalist work is instantiated in Bharti Kher's offering at the 2014 Kochi Biennale: *three decimal points. of a minute. of a second. of a degree*, 2014. The work – made of wood, metal, granite and rope, and using the shape of the triangle, the physics of the pendulum, and a granite counterweight – is described by the artist as 'a mobile that naturally finds balance or a point that marks the place and time and coordinates of where the world can stand still for a minute or a second of a degree. By both defying and accepting gravitational forces all objects can find perfect equilibrium, poise and meaning.'⁵

Kher's iconic minimalist assemblage *The Hot Winds that Blow from the West* (2011) transforms the most mundane objects into an elegy of geometric form. In this work, Kher stacked 131 old radiators into a perfect cube, comprising a frugal synthesis of formal, geometric and material assemblage, and offering the viewer a strong example of the 'multimodal shifter', in that it employs different modalities of signification simultaneously, activated by the viewer's own selection of an indexical ground against which the work becomes meaningful to them. This work is an excellent example of semantic heteroglossia, as it is a strong exemplar of material-assemblage-based sculptural practice as geometric, formalist minimalism.

Everything is Not Straight (2011) by Pooja Iranna (b. 1969), like many other such works in this vein of her practice, is meticulously built primarily out of a single material: ordinary office staple pins. With these mundane materials, Iranna has created an evocation of an urban skyline, populated by gleaming, metallic high-rise buildings [Fig. 29.10]. Her metal structure is both as strong and as fragile as the underlying industrialized order that has produced the spectacle of cityscapes with their jutting skyscrapers, posing as iconic edifices of the seemingly unshakeable permanence of our way of life – which is in fact as fragile as a house of cards.

The distinctive practice of Prajakta Potnis (b. 1980) offers yet another vector of intersecting planes of minimalist play with form, particularly in terms of spatiality and surface. Many of her subtle site-specific interventions into built spaces quietly, almost imperceptibly, transform environments by altering either spatial perceptions or the skin of the surface itself. Her spatial intervention *The Outside* (2015), installed at Kunsthau Langenthal in Switzerland, uses glue on the wall and two slide projectors to create the disorienting appearance of walls pocked and bubbling with peeling paint [Fig. 29.11].

In her environmental intervention *Tracing the Disappearance* (2011), Potnis enacts a similar intervention that inverts the porous, fraught boundary of inside and out [Fig. 29.12]. Using white lime powder to trace the spatial shapeshifting of the natural environment, she marks the old boundaries of Kachrali Lake in Panch Pakhdi, Thane, which has shrunk noticeably due to urbanization, drought and human encroachment. Unlike the glowing glue in *The Outside* that gave one the impression of locatedness – in this case, being inside of a cube – here, the outlines demarcate shifting externalities of the Anthropocene (the new geological 'Age of Man', in which a particular mode of toxic human activity – based on an invidious distinction between the human and the more-than-human world – has radically destabilized the life-support systems of the planet). The result leaves us with a sense of dislocation.

The tension between human will and natural order manifests itself in a site-specific ephemeral work by Hema Upadhyay, curated by Maya Kóvskaya in 2012. Approaching the front of the Delhi-based gallery Exhibit 320, the viewer is confronted by a planter box filled with green grass that curls and twists into what appear to be letters of the English alphabet, but one cannot quite discern what it spells out. Her environmental intervention *The Space Between You and Me* (2002) – depicted on four postcard-sized photographs printed on handmade paper and hung in the gallery – was the basis for the planter box outside. In that piece, the artist examines how words can unify and connect people across disparate spaces and places. The letters in the site-specific installation were carved into the soil with human hands intent on conveying meaning, and the seeds were sewn into the shapes meant to make nature conform to human desires. And yet the unruly power of nature, and its refusal to be so easily contained and constrained, expresses itself profoundly here. Upadhyay's intervention demonstrates both the powerful possibilities, but also the ephemerality, contingency and fragility, of communication. While the text started to grow with promising clarity, the life-cycle of the grass contains its own contingencies that first facilitate, then obscure, the conveyance of meaning. Once the grass grows to a certain length, the words disappear into the riot of sprawling green blades splayed in all directions, transgressing the boundaries of letters and overwhelming meaning with a robust chaos of greenery. The inevitable outcome in the life-cycle of this ephemeral artwork, then, speaks about paradoxes: sense and nonsense, location and dislocation, and the frailty of our attempts to inscribe our will upon the natural world. Words appeared briefly and just as quickly they disappeared into a riot of monsoon growth.



ABOVE
Fig. 29.11 Prajakta Potnis,
The Outside, 2015. Installation at Kunsthau Langenthal, Switzerland. Mixed media

BELOW
Fig. 29.12 Prajakta Potnis,
Tracing the Disappearance, 2011. White lime powder, site-specific, Kachrali Lake, in Panch Pakhdi, Thane, Mumbai



Disappearances can be made visible, palpable and tangible in many ways, and Neha Choksi's (b. 1973) many works explore appearance and disappearance, presence and absence, the ephemeral and the permanent. In her *Shrinking and Disappearing Series* (2005–ongoing), she uses a range of sculptural works to explore form and loss of form. Using various kinds of casts of objects, such as boxes and inflatable toys, from the whimsical to the mundane, she casts and recasts, creating a lineage of infinitely degrading form in such works as *Shrinking Patchwork Tiger* (2005), *Echo of the Inside (Column Cube I)* (2011), *The Inside is Perpetual* (2010–11). Throughout her work with sculptural ephemera, erasures and reconstructions, the immateriality of being and dematerialized nature of presence are ironically rendered visible and sensible. This is achieved through successive processes of purposeful absenting, and knowingly futile attempts at rematerializing what has been lost.

Choksi's practice forms a coherent body of work that spans an astonishing array of mediations but remains tightly focused on her distinctive philosophical preoccupations. Three noteworthy interventions of hers that also evoke the disappearing and the ephemeral are captured in the following video-transmediated performances. In *Petting Zoo/Minds to Lose* (2008–11), Choksi anaesthetises herself in a petting zoo, making the artist and her conscious mind recede quite literally, if temporarily, from the work. In *Leaf Fall* (2008), Choksi orchestrates the denuding of a tree, leaf by leaf, and videotapes the process of that disappearance. In her performance *Iceboat* (2012), she rows a boat made of ice into deep water, wearing clothing which, like the boat itself, begins to melt [Fig. 29.13]. She rows until the boat can no longer support her and disappears into the water that the boat has joined through its phase change. Although radically different in form from earlier works, there is great philosophical continuity among Choksi's various meditations on absence and absenting, disappearance and ephemerality.

Material Assemblages

A focus on the elements that can be used to make up an artwork is at the core of another strain of sculptural practice that is prevalent in Indian art. Material assemblage is a link between works fixated on form and works that emerge from meditations on material. Material-assemblage sculpture practices, like other practices, are distinctly multimodal, and combine a range of languages, from the figurative to the formal and minimalist, to extravagant installations that compile related objects which share one material or formal quality into yet another form or set of relations.

An early pioneer of sculpture work involving material assemblages was Rummana Hussain (1952–1999), who bridged sculpture, installation and performance in her seminal body of work. In 1992–93, her practice was transformed by the political ruptures caused by communal violence against Muslims in Bombay. Various images of the shattered secular polity emerged in her assemblages of cracked terracotta vessels, spilled *gheru* (red-brick powder) and mirrors in early works such as *Conflux* (1992) and *Fragments from Splitting* (1993). Her identity as a Muslim and a woman became important within her creative practice.

Anita Dube (b. 1958) has used her sculptural practice to take her materials to the boundaries of their signifying possibilities using innovative ways to engage the various substantive questions that interest her: gender, power, sexuality, the body, intimacy, the nature of self and relation of that self to broader communities, including the nation. After a period working in wood carving and with body-part fragments, Dube has since the late 1990s created a rich body of diverse works crafted from various found objects that she then covered in sensual velvet skins. These include her earliest of these works, *Desert Queen* (1996), which was made in Namibia out of deep-midnight-blue sequined velvet that mirrored the night sky, in a shape that

evoked the limbed, body-shaped animal skins of African tapestry, spread open on display.

Her use of sensual velvet skins continued in such works as *Silence (Blood Wedding)* (1997) [Fig. 21.25, p. 292], in which she took a medical skeleton, used for anatomical studies, and painstakingly encased it in blood-red velvet, bone by bone, following the death of her father. From this icon of death, Dube worked through her pain, transforming pieces of the body into new forms, imbued with Eros and life: bones became a fan, a flower, a garland, a bird and more. In *The Theatre of Sade* (1998–99) [Fig. 27.7, p. 392], skins of black encase figurative objects, including a mask, a book and a hand.

Another pivotal artist who bridged sculpture and installation through material assemblages early on was Vivan Sundaram (b. 1943), who expanded from his painting practice with *Collaboration/Combines*, executed first in New Delhi, and again at Gallery Chemould in Bombay in 1992. His body of *Riverscape* works (1992–93) combined charcoal on paper with steel and engine oil to create three-dimensional commentaries on ecological degradation. In his series of works meditating on the detritus of our consumptive excess, *Trash* (2008), Sundaram used elaborate material assemblages of such objects as soda cans, discarded objects and other rubbish to create industrialized urban landscapes, with which he populated photographic images including *Metal Box* (2008) and *Prospect* (2005–8), and video installations such as *Turning* (2008).

Other striking instances of Sundaram's material assemblage can be found in works ranging from *House/Boat* (1994) [Fig. 26.4, p. 379], to *Carrier* (1996), to his *Structures of Memory: Modern Bengal* (1998), in which he arrayed a wall of file holders annotated with names of public political and cultural figures who were well-known during the struggle of Indian independence. His contribution to Delhi-based arts organization Khoj's 2008 festival '48 Degrees Celsius Public.Art.Ecology', *Flotage* (2008), expanded his interest in the waste from our industrialized societies; in this work, he lashed together innumerable plastic bottles into a raft that was floated down the Yamuna river. The same theme was expanded once more in his series *GAGA-WAKA: Making Strange* (2011) [Fig. 30.29, p. 441], in the form of an ironic, playful repurposing of common consumer goods into haute-couture objects of mobile, wearable sculpture. He created garments from assemblages of items ranging from sanitary face masks to tyre rubber, bras, dish scrubbers, orthopaedic support garments, inflatable medical bags used for IV drips, worn-leather shoe soles, and many other objects, and these assemblages were modelled in catwalk fashion by art-world insiders in a tongue-in-cheek, intentionally self-critical spectacle.

From early on, Sheela Gowda (b. 1957) has also used several material elements to build up whole bodies of work. By using red-pigmented kalava threads (sacred protective threads) and sewing needles in such works as *And Tell Him of My Pain* (1998/2001/2007) and several *Untitled* works from the 1990s, she makes a set of metaphorical connections between devotion and connection, damage and reparation [Fig. 28.12, p. 407]. Kalava threads are traditionally tied on the wrist before making *puja* (acts of worship), or tied for *rakhi* (a Hindu festival celebrating siblings and love) by a woman to the wrist of a man as a sign of a sisterly bond. By presenting this thread alongside the needle, which can prick and pierce, as well as bind and mend, Gowda inserts an ambiguity into the use of these materials that resonates with the title. In her later works, threads become ropes spun from hair, which dangle and stretch across space, forming

crisscrossing webs in *Behold* (2009), her contribution to the Venice Biennale, and *Like a Bird* (2011). Cow dung is molded into shapes in a variety of her works: transformed into hanging ornaments, stacked patties, lines of bricks and boxes of misshapen balls. Tar-drum sheets and barrels form interior spaces into which metaphorical starscapes are punctured, as in *A Blanket and the Sky* (2004) and *Darkroom* (2006). Architectural beams zigzag across space, connecting empty door and window frames, defying the containment of walls, in a poetic suggestion of pure structure.

The soft sculpture and embroidery-based works of Rakhi Peswani (b. 1977) offer another kind of material-assemblage sculptural practice. In her tributary triptych that takes the needle as a common point of departure, Peswani brings together many evocative languages. The first of these works, *Negotiating Differences (for Louise)* (2004), draws on the forms of French-American artist Louise Bourgeois's early *Personages* works: both her innovative use of worn clothing to make intimate soft sculptures from fabric, and her fixation on the vulnerability and power of female sexuality. This trilogy invokes the belief held by Bourgeois, whose mother repaired antique tapestries for a living, that the needle possesses a reparative power. Peswani's soft sculpture works incorporate steel armature with cast-off fabric, embellished with hand embroidery and beadwork. The second of these works, *Slowly, Solely, Solo (for Nanki)* (2006), uses fabric taken from her mother's wardrobe to explore the role

Fig. 29.14 Rakhi Peswani, *Slowly, Solely, Solo (for Nanki)*, 2006. Detail. Soft sculpture with pliable steel armature, waste cotton, satin fabric, worn velvet blouse stuffed, darned and mounted with gauze fabric

Fig. 29.13 Neha Choksi, video still from *Iceboat*, 2013. HD video, colour, stereo sound; 13 minutes 17 seconds



of needlework and textiles in her mother's life [Fig. 29.14]. The third work in this triptych uses blue jean cut-offs, with the pink folds of a sari spilling from the crotch, resembling an exaggerated clitoris emerging from the fly of a man's trousers. It salutes the triumphant androgynous gender-role transcendence of Anita Dube, while referencing her iconic *Desert Queen* (1996).

Many works by Shine Shivan (b. 1981) draw on assemblages of natural objects that he collects: goat dung, thorns, quail eggs, mango seed hulls, and many more. *Empty Spaces Between Desire and Fantasy* (2009) is a materially motivated sculpture work

made in his characteristically sensuous visual language. In this work, an assemblage of natural objects, meticulously gathered by the artist – palm thorns, dried bottle gourd, dried pumpkin – is used to create ambiguous forms that are simultaneously erotic and charged with hints of danger; organic but also suggestive of the traces of human intervention. Shivan combines these with organismic-looking objects sewn together with cotton and thread to resemble a seedpod, or the membranous sac of an ovary or a softly exposed testicle. Tentacular tendrils gracefully probe the spaces in between the plant and the animal, the passive and aggressive, the submissive and the dominating. The dried bottle gourd and pumpkin have a distinctively phallic quality, while the palm thorns evoke the erotic aura of BDSM tools of boundary-transgressing pleasure. The work offers an intricate interplay of light and dark, desire and discipline, which plays along the knife-edge of violence. Shivan's deft use of shadow and light gives the work a bristling, tremulous feeling of intense anticipation, like a plant on the verge of a sneeze, on the verge of orgasm: a latent power that is being anxiously restrained but is impossible to contain indefinitely [Fig. 29.15].

One of the most well-known perpetrators of a sustained engagement with material assemblage is Subodh Gupta (b. 1964). Gupta uses stainless steel and brass household wares to make sculptures that have come to stand among the most iconic examples of material assemblages in Indian contemporary sculpture [Fig. 41.9, p. 594]. In these works, Gupta uses the aggregation of similar objects to form the shapes of new ones, in an echo of the language of his earlier work with cow-dung patties, which he used to build humble dwellings. *What does the vessel contain, that the river does not* (2013) extends this use of ordinary objects, now arrayed not to form new shapes or represent other objects, but lovingly assembled into the hull of a wooden boat, like fragile stowaways clinging to a life they have not yet reached. Here the



ABOVE

Fig. 29.15 Shine Shivan, *Empty Spaces Between Desire and Fantasy*, 2009. Palm thorns, dried bottle gourd, dried pumpkin, fabric, cotton thread, aluminium wire



RIGHT

Fig. 29.16 Sudarshan Shetty, *No Title (from The Pieces Earth Took Away)*, 2012. Hand-carved teak wood, acrylic, water pump

boat carries them in a way that is not a figurative representation of something else, but rather as a performative instantiation of the precarious nature of life in a time of uncertainty and transformation. Against the backdrop of today's refugee crises, this work takes on an especially poignant prescience.

Other examples of material assemblage include Reena Saini Kallat's rubber-stamp works, Sharmila Samant's flowing saris constructed out of a 'chain mail' of recycled bottlecaps [Fig. 27.10, p. 394], Vibha Golhotra's many sculptures made from hundreds of thousands of *ghungaroo* ankle bells (typically used in Indian classical dance), and Valay Shende's objects formed from metal buttons. In *My Hands Smell of You* (2011), Krishnaraj Chonat (b. 1973) assembled myriad computer cables, keyboards and electronic components into a snaking wall. Hema Upadhyay's *Derelect* (2007) presents a whirlwindesque, spinning-top-shaped form made of thousands of individual matchsticks. Bharti Kher has demonstrated the potency of material assemblages in her *Bloodline* (2002), a stack of 4,200 red-glass bangles, lit up from within by a rope light, and her numerous bindi-covered works. Sudarshan Shetty's (b. 1961) assemblage of doors from *The Pieces the Earth Took Away* (2012) is but one example of his multimodal material-assemblage practice that is at once formalist and architectural [Fig. 29.16]. In this vast genre of sculptural practice, there are countless other worthy examples – far too many to be catalogued exhaustively here.

Light and Shadow Play

Another important area of investigation in Indian sculptural practice is the sensorial. Indeed, it is a realm of enquiry so rich that an entire essay could be written about it alone. Works that use light and shadow, or mobilize kinetic properties, are often

combined with other modalities of sculptural language and function, and offer more than merely a heightened sensual effect: they become sites of exploration themselves.

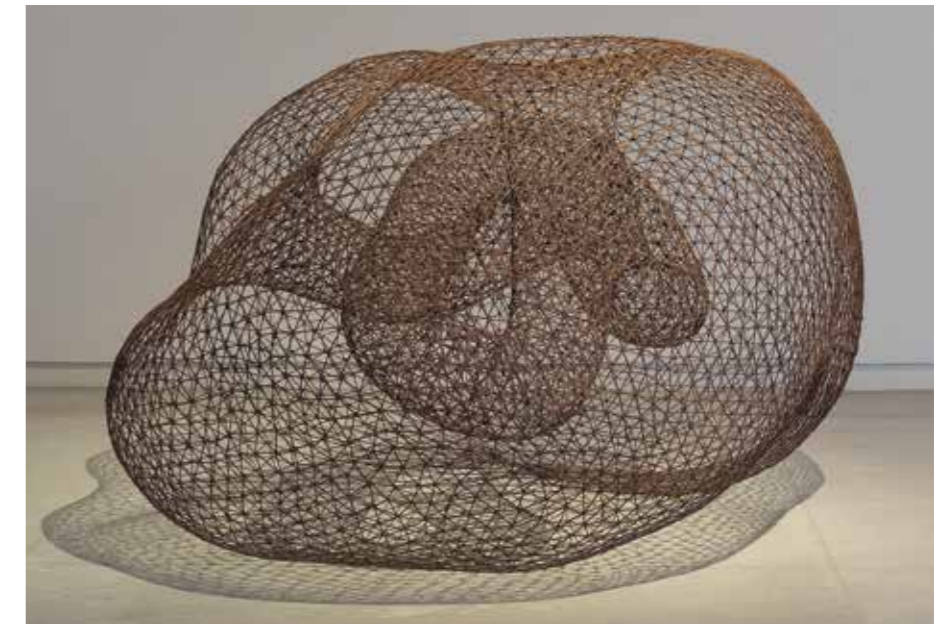
Play with light and shadow as a substantive part of the artwork itself is evident in the work of Ranjani Shettar (b. 1977), as exemplified in *Scent of a Sound* (2010–11), in which stainless steel, abstract cutaway forms cast shadows on the gallery walls and floor [Fig. 29.17]. Similarly, in her *Heliotropes* (2011), made of orange vulcanized latex, cotton thread and steel, waving lines protrude from the gallery wall; they are like stamen or insect antennae, and seem to strain into space, giving the projected

BELOW

Fig. 29.18 A. Balasubramaniam, *Between Here and There*, 2011. Iron

FAR BELOW

Fig. 29.17 Ranjani Shettar, *Scent of a Sound*, 2010–11. Installation. Stainless steel, muslin, tamarind kernel powder, paste and lacquer. Talwar Gallery, New Delhi, 2011



shadows a sense of immanent movement. Likewise, A. Balasubramaniam's (b. 1971) mesh-like iron sculpture *Between Here and There* (2011) seems to undulate into twisting curls, like a thick python coiled around itself, casting shadows that comprise a key element of the work [Fig. 29.18].

The works of Susanta Mandal (b. 1965) provide further evocative examples of the multimodal shifter in art language. While he is one of India's more prominent kinetic artists, he also works to a large degree with light and shadow; one can just as easily talk about many of his works in cyborgian, post-human terms; and the work is quite literally performative – and, in fact, constantly performing itself in multiple ongoing iterations. With quotidian materials, he seeks to construct 'events' that draw viewers into his quirky, nerdy spectacles, placing them on the footing of the 'witness' to what he casts as 'raw reality' transmitted through 'interactive environments', the 'kinetic mechanisms' of which he describes as seemingly 'playful, but... actually uncanny and ultimately disconcerting constructions.'⁶ Inspired by India's traditions of vernacular storytelling, which employ 'painted scrolls... brought to life with lamps at dusk', his lighting becomes 'theatrical' and the narrativity and performativity of the work is conveyed through tactically deployed chiaroscuro.⁷ He also often integrates videos and digital imagery in his works, and uses programming to create space for a polyphony of dialogues to emerge from them. Of the role played by light and shadow in his work, Mandal remarks: 'they are symbols of abstract fear – fear of life, fear of social change.'⁸ This deployment of luminary techniques presages (or foreshadows, so to speak) his kinetic work, in which moving shadows are cast on surfaces to evoke various forms.

Poetry in Motion

In addition to the uncanny use of light and shadow to make their works speak, many artists employ kinetic elements to enable their artwork to do this work for them. This mode typically

involves an artist utilizing a motor mechanism to animate an element in the tableau of a sculptural installation. Such works include Bharti Kher's elegant *in the presence of nothing* (2009–10), configured from a minimalist bowl and a mechanism for movement, set atop a wooden plinth, and Sudarshan Shetty's *No Title* (2011) (from *Between the teacup and a sinking constellation*), which features a sword, granite construction stone, rope, wood and a motor mechanism for creating movement.

Rummana Hussain was a forerunner of heterogloss practice, who has long produced works rich with shifters and multimodal vectors of meaning. She blurred the 'lines between aesthetics and activism'; her 'works sought to go beyond the visible, to index dissident meanings', and 'form and language [were] areas of struggle'.⁹ Her *Sequence and Change* (1994), which employed an assemblage of mirror, mud and a bicycle, animated by a motor, is an early example of the deployment of the kinetic in the context of a sculptural language.

Zoetrope (For Oum Kolthum) (2001) by Sonia Khurana (b. 1968) is a wonderful example of a non-electronic, multimodal kinetic sculptural work. Deriving from the Greek for 'life' (*zoe*) and 'turn' (*tropos*), the zoetrope is a device that produces the optical illusion of movement from a set of static images. The prototype for the zoetrope originated in China circa 180 CE (then called 'The Tube that Makes Illusions into Reality'¹⁰), and the modern version, invented in the early 19th century, was given the popular moniker of 'Wheel of the Devil'.¹¹ The first cinematic projection of moving images was produced with a version of the zoetrope in the late 19th century. Khurana's zoetrope brings multiple modalities of signification beyond the sculptural physicality of the work and its optical and kinetic elements. The piece dynamically inhabits a poetry of presence and absence, with its cyclical loop of animated embodiment, perpetually renewed by the viewer's own vision, without which the optical illusion of movement could not exist. The still, sequenced photographs of the zoetrope evoke shades of silent film in an interactive



Fig. 29.19 Susanta Mandal, *It Doesn't Bite!*, 2007. Glass tube, blower, motorized links, integrated lights, soap solution, air pump and timer



Fig. 29.20 Nandita Kumar, *eMotiVe sOuNDs of the eLEctRic wRiTEr*, 2013–15. Installation

sculptural form; as viewers animate the still photographs in the moving zoetrope with their minds, they bring their own imaginaries to the reading of the simulated action within. Thus, in a performative mode, Khurana offers an interactive spectacle that engages the viewer corporeally, visually and conceptually.

A kinetic sculpture by Tejal Shah (b. 1979), *When I am bored, all I do is make a red knot and look at it* (2009), plays with tropes of gender. It takes its title from the diary entry of Augustine, a patient confined in the Salpêtrière mental institution in France, describing her frustration and boredom. In the work, an array of white ropes protrude from a white wall, twisting and turning.

Red, resembling menstrual blood, seeps into the white cotton, smearing with the motion of the ropes onto the pristine surface. When the tension of the knotting becomes excessive, the ropes recoil with a slap against the floor; this is an embodiment of the spasmodic cycles of 'hysteria' (a widespread diagnosis of the 19th century used as a form of biopower to control female bodies and psyches). This tension builds and then releases, leaving the ropes increasingly frayed and bloodied in the process, as they strain against their confinement. Here the kinetic speaks of both the psychological and the physiological in relation to constructions of gender.

MRINALINI MUKHERJEE (1949–2015)

Who could have imagined that the long-awaited consecration of Mrinalini Mukherjee's achievement as a sculptor would coincide with a closure of the most final kind – that the perspective opened up by the major exhibition at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Delhi of her work in natural fibre, ceramic and bronze, elaborated over the last four and a half decades, would also be a posthumous one? Mukherjee was hospitalized two days before the opening of her retrospective in late January 2015 and died a week later. The critical acclaim on her home ground came too late and she was no longer there to savour it. Internationally, however, Mukherjee's work was critically esteemed much earlier, as evinced by her one-person exhibition in 1994 at the Museum of Modern art in Oxford, curated by David Elliott, and her participation in the Paris Biennale (1980), the Sydney and Havana Biennales (1986), the Asia Pacific Triennial (1996) and, most recently, the Gwangju Biennale (2014).

She made a remarkable debut in the mid-1970s with her work in jute or hemp fibre, estranging the material's traditional artisanal connotations by the cunning ways in which she harnessed it as a medium for three-dimensional form. She had a sophisticated understanding of the art/craft dialectic, nourished as it was by the pedagogy professed by her teacher, the artist K. G. Subramanyan, himself a student of Mukherjee's father, the painter Benodebehari, a luminary at Visva Bharati University founded by Rabindranath Tagore. Given the vitality of the vernacular art traditions in India, the recourse to craft as the basis of a plastic language came naturally to Mukherjee. She certainly didn't have to take any cues in this respect from her contemporaries in the West (some of the artists associated with Supports/Surfaces in France and Arte Povera in Italy, Simon Hantäi, Richard Tuttle, Jackie Winsor, Eva Hesse) when they variously turned to rope, gauze, wicker, printed textiles, unstretched canvas, knotted or pleated cords, latex, papier mâché or artisanal techniques such as tie-dye in their attempts to explore other formal alternatives to an atrophied modernism.

Mukherjee's sculptural imagination was profoundly anthropomorphic and unabashedly organic, nurtured by what she had learned from Indian art's partiality to a voluptuous, iconographic excess (from high temple sculpture to wayside shrines) and by a certain modernist predilection for a more stringent economy of means. It is astonishing how the manually made knot that is the basic micro-unit of the sculptural syntax of her works in rope fibre could yield such baroque and imposing floral and arboreal totems. (The human form is invariably an avatar of the vegetal.) Their suggestive folds



Mrinalini Mukherjee,
Adi Pushp II, 1998–99.
Hemp fibre

and rents, protrusions and openings, are poised at the wondrous moment that precedes the bursting open of a pod.

The celebration of eros remains an enduring leit-motif and organizing metaphor of her work when she made the transition from natural fibre to ceramic and then bronze. All three substances are notable for their tactile qualities, and indeed, touch, the physical contact with the raw material, was always a shaping factor in her conception of sculptural form. In her later body of work in bronze, Mukherjee renewed contact with the carnal knowledge that she had always intuited in the organic. The floral and vegetal forms are tremulous and tumescent, stirring free of bark and membrane in an alteration that is at the same time the becoming-sculpture of formlessness. The generative principle is brought to a head in the works which deploy a form like a lingam (an abstract representation of Shiva, often phallic in

shape), but as a very curious matrix indeed, inasmuch as the conventional symbolic association with the masculine has been feminized by the wanton floral caress. More perversely, the male attribute reveals itself to have been enwombed in a reversal of roles as sly as that undertaken by Louise Bourgeois when she perversely titled her conspicuously phallic sculpture *Fillette* ('Little Girl'; 1968). The presiding matriarch of contemporary sculpture would surely have recognized Mrinalini Mukherjee as a fellow 'bachelor' of art.

Deepak Ananth

© Artforum (29 July 2015), 'Mrinalini Mukherjee (1949–2015)', by Deepak Ananth.

L. N. Tallur (b. 1971) is also well known for a rich array of kinetic elements in his sculptural works. In *Panic Room* (2006), the viewer can enter a makeshift space formed inside piled jute bags. These bags are equipped with blowers, which inflate them, trapping the viewer. The viewer's ensuing panic is recorded with CCTV cameras. His *Digesting System* (2008) features lumpy black globs of substance that resemble tar, which lurch between three bowls, their motion propelled by the vibration at a high frequency. At times the material clumps up, necessitating an intervention by the viewer. *Enlightenment Machine (Beta Version 1.2)* (2011) features a metal grinder suspended between the two hubs of a huge wooden spool/wheel that is sunken into the concrete floor. In this interactive work, the viewers are supplied with bronze religious sculptures that they can grind down.

Susanta Mandal has built his practice around a body of kinetic works; he creates sculptures that exploit movement, in connection with light and shadow. Mandal explores a variety of political, aesthetic, physical, temporal and scientific issues through works that are multimodal in many ways. In *A Routine Scrutiny* (2006), Mandal integrated photography and moving magnifying glasses to explore the way migrants to the city – especially migrants with strong regional accents, dark skin and different appearance – are frequently subject to prejudice in the capital. This concern with the politics of surveillance, categorization and exclusion segue logically into Mandal's well-known series of *Caged Sacks* (2007–8), jute sacks filled with mysterious, somewhat disturbing, unidentifiable moving objects. The jute sacks, which were once used for transporting sugar, are in Mandal's hands filled with motorized contraptions.

Mandal's work then becomes preoccupied with questions of the ephemeral, leading to a body of works that are just as much about impermanence as they are about movement. Featuring delicate bubbles of varying sizes, these works create structures that disappear almost as quickly as they arise. Unlike the mystery objects writhing in *Caged Sacks*, bubbles cannot be caged. In *It Doesn't Bite!* (2007), he uses the shadow of a moving pair of scissors to do the impossible: 'bite' the bubbles [Fig. 29.19].

Nandita Kumar (b. 1981) considers how to transmediate one kind of energy into another in real time in her delightful kinetic

love letters such as *eMotiVe sOuNDs of the eLEctRic wRiTeR* (2013–15) [Fig. 29.20]. This work has two distinct components: it takes the idea of the disappearing art of letter writing, and asks what in particular is evoked by the specificities of individual handwriting – specificities that we lose in the digital rendering of our personal communications.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of Kumar's practice is the creative integration of technology into her art. She uses a home-hacked drawing machine that she has transformed from an old-fashioned vinyl cutter plotter, configured with an attached felt-tip pen that responds to the scanned and vectorized love letters she uses as inputs. These love letters were sent to Kumar by many people across the world in response to a call she put out on social media. Thus the machine 'reads' scanned letters and 'prints' them out by longhand, using the felt-tip pen to mimic the handwriting of the original, resulting in a cyborgian humanization of the machine that rewrites simulacra of the original letters continuously on a thirty-foot paper scroll. Yet even as the machine faithfully renders the letters in the participants' own handwriting, it is also 'humanized' by its own fallibility in the processing of complex information related to the contours of the various kinds of handwritten scripts, the spacing and also marginalia on some of the letters. This unexpected result led Kumar to think of John Cage's idea of the 'chance score', and to use these spontaneously emergent patterns of ink blotting to form a musical score, which she then entrusted to musicians to interpret and perform as a sound piece.¹²

These pages aim to reveal to the reader the profoundly heterogloss character of the art languages and performative vehicles in the various kinds of artworks that may be labelled as sculpture [Box 29.1]. The way in which a given artwork performs its affective and conceptual work on us is far more important than any categorical nomenclature. As Nietzsche famously wrote, 'one must still have chaos in oneself to give birth to a star.'¹³ It is delightfully clear that whatever Indian contemporary sculpture may be, it has no dearth of this celebratory, productive, generative chaos.

NOTES

- This chapter draws from my curatorial practice. My curated projects in India include: 'Earthbound', Critic/Curatorial Consultant, Project 88, Mumbai, 15 January–14 March, 2015; 'The Secret Life of Plants', Curator, Exhibit 320, Delhi, 10 August–9 September, 2012; 'In You is the Illusion of Each Day', Curator, Latitude 28, Delhi, 13 October–12 November, 2011; 'Excrescence', Curator/Critic, The Guild, Mumbai, 29 April–28 May, 2011; 'A Cry from the Narrow Between: Eros and Thanatos in the Works of Tejal Shah & Han Bing', Critic/Curatorial Consultant, exhibition initiated by Tejal Shah, Gallery Espace, New Delhi, 12 March–3 April 2010.
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- Like textual sculpture, sonic sculpture is another profoundly rich genre that I have not been able to cover in this chapter due to the space requirements.
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