Vivan Sundaram: Disjunctures

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‘Vivan Sundaram: Disjunctures’, curated by Deepak Ananth with Anna Schneider, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 29 June 2018 – 1 January 2019

In a published exchange, titled ‘Proposition Avant-Garde: A View from the South’ for the online Art Journal (2018 Spring edition issue), New Delhi art critic and curator Geeta Kapur submits a series of epigrams in the form of a manifesto about the role and meaning of the avant-garde today. Since the publication of her book When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India (2000), Kapur has been preoccupied with reclaiming a validity for the concept of the avant-garde. Committed to rescuing the notion from the stranglehold of Euro-American discourse, Kapur has long striven to relate it to the ‘hitherto unlogged initiative’ of the Third World. Laying out her vision for an aesthetic of decolonisation, Kapur selects the historical case study of the Soviet Union as paradigmatic in eliciting the first political vanguard, the one that created a loophole for a future global initiative across the arts. Her recent manifesto is wilfully anachronistic and offers a recursive constellation of observations, intentions and motives about the recovery of conceptual and dissident aesthetic strategies for artists operating
from the Global South. Foregrounding the local, so often overlooked by global comparative studies that tend to search only for similarities with the West as the main reference point, Kapur elucidates vital connections and resonances, multiplying perspectives that retroactively shape global art histories tethered to local criteria. Artist exchanges derive from alternative ways of understanding art terminologies. Moreover, art histories from the South, Kapur reminds us, are important points of reference to trace how artists think about and make art on their own terms, using calibrated terminologies located in their writings on art, such as the manifesto. The elliptical, perhaps intervalllic form of the manifesto allows Kapur to revisit the possibility for art and ‘anachronism’ as strategy in what she terms ‘slow time’ and ‘recursive regard’. It is this unlikely, paradoxical pairing that through her eyes can still elicit novel hermeneutic understandings of timeliness, offering urgent ways to rescue the ‘contemporary’ from subsumption in the global imaginary. Questioning the meaning of the notional Global South, and its solidarities, Kapur highlights the current scholarly revisitation of this conflicted historical notion to ponder the ghostly echoes of what Vijay Prashad calls the darker nations. In the long shadow of the Bandung movement, the Tri-Continental Conference and the formation of a powerful Third World aesthetic, Kapur asks, ‘Do memories of underdevelopment acquire anachronistic significance in judging the model of the developmental State? [...] Does postcolonial theory in its vastly influential role continue to exercise its “deconstructive leverage”? These questions gesture toward the figure of an artist whose focus on location and ability to shift aesthetic paradigms can still effect the disturbance of settled parameters. It is easy enough to identify multi-media artist Vivan Sundaram (b. 1943) as an artist who in many ways
incarnates the avant-garde figure articulated by Kapur. Life-long comrades and seminal figures operating from the Global South, both Kapur and Sundaram’s political and aesthetic commitments have intersected in ‘uncertain, difficult, conflicted and contradictory ways’ for over five decades.6

Sundaram’s embrace of installation art and the mis-en-scène parallels Kapur’s own championing of the postmodern condition as the decolonial art endeavour. Sundaram’s aesthetic investment in the political is usually made with reference to his formative years in Europe in the late 1960s, in India in the 1970s during Indira Gandhi’s Emergency – the aberrational twenty-one-month period of martial law – and for almost two decades, his association with the SAHMAT Collective. SAHMAT (which also means ‘compact’ or ‘agreement’ in Hindi) took shape in the wake of the horrific murder of Safdar Hashmi, a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and a theatre artist and activist, in 1989. Attacked by a group of thugs whilst performing a street play in a working-class district of Delhi, Hashmi became the avant-garde martyr for many artists and activists on the Left. The collective ‘emerged from a violent interruption of committed artistic work, and it answered this violence by an eruption of outrage leading to a formation that combined what might be seen as the avant-garde of artistic protest with the avant-garde of politics’.7 Beyond Sundaram’s ongoing involvement with this avant-garde collective, his career has seen him operate within a tradition of artists on the Left, including writers, activists, poets and filmmakers, who have intervened politically through the medium of art. In the essay accompanying the catalogue to Sundaram’s exhibition at Munich’s Haus der Kunst, filmmaker and theorist Ashish Rajadhyaksha inscribes the multi-media artist’s career in a tradition that goes back to ‘the antifascist fronts of the 1930s, the progressive movements across the arts that have been aligned to various degrees with the Communist Party since World War II’.8 The history of art practice has rarely been scrutinised for its political claims and vexed relationship to the Communist Party. Moreover, the question of what political art itself is, and what art can do at a time when political gestures in the name of art abound and have become a requirement for showcasing in the global art scene, is today crucially relevant. Drawing attention to the conflicting trajectories of the term ‘politics’ in India, Rajadhyaksha explains, borrowing from political theorist Sudipta Kaviraj, that ‘institutional logic of democratic forms’ and the ‘logic of popular mobilization’ are pitted against one another in contemporary India.9 Such violent friction has pushed the country to a crisis in which the Indian state is no longer threatened from outside, but rather from the inside. It is to this growing sense of implosion, one that has also crucially affected, and afflicted, the Left in India, that
Sundaram’s multimedia installations refer – in the forms of recursive memorial, critique of readymade legacies, and open-ended archive.

Munich’s Haus der Kunst and its then director Okwui Enwezor invited Deepak Ananth to curate Sundaram’s large retrospective ‘Disjunctures’. Ananth’s selection presented a sweep of Sundaram’s prolific career, one that has seen the artist move across media, from painting to more collaborative forms of installation and theatre production. Greeting the viewer was Sundaram’s playful sculpture *Mill Re-Call* (2015). The anthropomorphic assemblage consists of car parts, exhaust pipes and protruding antenna-like LED lights carefully welded together by the artist. The sculpture functions as a kinetic tribute to modernist artist Ramkimkar Baij and his iconic *Mill-Call* (*Koler Banshi*, literally ‘machine call’), made in 1956 at Visva Bharati in rural Santiniketan. Enthused by speed, motion and the imagined promises anticipated by the machine age, Baij opted for ferroconcrete rather than clay and cow dung to create *Mill-Call*. Celebrating women workers on the move, the durable and rough materiality of the sculpture resonates with Jacob Epstein’s experimental treatments and his brief flirtation with Vorticism prior to the techno-horrors of World War I.10 Strongly rooted in social realism, Baij’s celebration of resilience and tribal labour was deliberately at odds with the Gandhian call for localism prevalent at Santiniketan. Sundaram rescues Baij’s techno-utopian aspirations to think through the emancipatory possibilities of modernity and the revolutionary hopes of the working classes.
Begging to be animated, his robotic *Mill Re-Call* is a playful work that gestures toward the failed past-futures inspired by Baij and his monumental sculptural legacies. Recasting the peasant worker into a metal tin-man, Sundaram offers a conditional scenario to the rural utopia of self-sufficiency proposed by Gandhi. In this recouping of the future, India could be under the influence of the Russian Revolution and the development of Communism (a very real possibility in India from the 1940s up until the 1980s).

In another installation also inspired by Baij, Sundaram populates a room with a riotous mass of fired-clay figurines. Produced collaboratively, *One and the Many* (2015) presents another retake on Baij’s sculptural works, including his *Santhal Family* (1938), a ferroconcrete homage to tribal motherly resilience. Originally conceived for *409 Ramkinkars*, a theatre performance and installation, *One and the Many* plays with notions of craft, artisanal labour and scale. The simplicity and spontaneity of these gestural choreographies resonates with the radical and itinerant endeavours of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), a group historically affiliated with the Communist Party of India. Theatrical in grandeur, but dystopian, was Sundaram’s ruminative installation *Memorial* (1993/2001/2014) accreted over the years in the aftermath of the communal carnage that erupted in the city of Mumbai between December 1992 and January 1993. The carnage was triggered by the destruction of the Babri Masjid (the sixteenth-century mosque situated in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh) by a rioting mob of Hindutva fanatics. Sprawled across the gallery space, *Memorial* evokes the space of an underground catacomb or open construction site and involves a mournful and difficult itinerary across an implied excavation ground. Sundaram desecrates the photograph of a dead man and, with cruel irony, covers his body with a blanket or a garland of rusty nails to perform his burial on behalf of an absented state. Messing up readymade minimalist vocabularies, Sundaram also

![Vivan Sundaram, ‘Gateway’, from *Memorial*, 1993, mixed media installation, courtesy of the artist, photo by Gireesh GV](image)
questions the fate of secularism in India by toppling over and overturning industrial structures, including a miniaturised version of Tatlin’s unrealised Monument to the Third International. The techno-utopianism of Sundaram’s Mill Re-Call opens up into radical disillusionment through mimetic exacerbation of works by the Russian Kazimir Malevich and the minimalist Carl Andre. Yet, as pointed out by Kapur, Memorial can be seen to address the possibilities of collective mourning and memorialisation in terms of ‘the secular right to life of its own dead citizens’.11 Closing off (and opening into) a neon passage, Memorial is more reminiscent of a bleak gateway with no exit in sight.

Beyond Sundaram’s ongoing and prolific engagement with the readymade in his installations, several works on paper titled Engine Oil and Charcoal, produced in 1991, were especially striking. These sensitive drawings draw the viewer closer into their dirty, turbulent surfaces filled with wiry lines, dirty fumes, bones and maimed bodies. Conjuring the fluidity and toxicity of oil, Sundaram’s biomorphic shapes mimic deadly spillages and leaks, as with the enigmatic From the First World/From the Third World (1991). Ancient hieroglyphs buried in the sands allude to the landscapes of Iraq in the wake of the First Gulf War of that same year. Titles such as Land of Euphrates, Death of an Akkadian King and Mesopotamian Drawing anchor these ruinous sites to the lived histories of invasion and extractive destruction perpetrated on this once rich country. ‘Traces of annihilation are virtually the structural elements of the drawings’, writes Sundaram.12 The series Long Night: Drawings in Charcoal (1988–90) involves hallucinatory visions of destruction, hunger and death. Cosmopolitan affiliations could be further traced in the
enigmatic *Heights of Macchu Picchu* (1972), a series of drawings the artist produced during the time of Salvador Allende’s presidency of Chile and which were inspired by the poetry of Pablo Neruda. Following an official invitation to Poland in the late 1980s, Sundaram also produced works such as *Carcass* and *Barbed Wire*, which figure the ruins of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps.

Vivan Sundaram, ‘Desert Trail II’, from the *Engine Oil and Charcoal* series, 1991, engine oil and charcoal on paper, courtesy of the artist, photo by Parabjit Singh

Sundaram, much aligned with socially engaged figurative and narrative painting up until the early 1990s, would put away his brush and paint after the communal carnage of 1993, increasingly taking up installation and collaborative forms of theatre production. Looking back at the drawings he produced in the 1970s and ’80s, the different registers and temporal worlds of avant-garde making in his long career are evident. ‘Disjunctures’ offered a landmark retrospective that celebrated Sundaram’s life-long investment in the categories of the political and the aesthetic across multiple media. Proposing a poetics of the fragment, the suturing back together, one memorably described by the Hindo-Pakistani writer Saadat Hasan Manto (‘I feel like I am always the one tearing everything up and forever sewing it back together’), Sundaram figures the volatility of the political, its chronic dangers and permanent insecurities, both present and future. To articulate a vanguard for the future from a place that continues to mutilate the present, putting the idea of political hope on hold and under prolonged duress, is the challenge Sundaram continues to step up to. The loopholes are there, Kapur and Sundaram have shown where to look out for them.

See, for example, the conference ‘Axis of Solidarity: Landmarks, Platforms, Futures’ organised by and hosted at Tate Modern, London, on 23 and 24 February 2019; and the itinerant exhibition ‘Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s–1990s’ jointly organised over a period of five years by three national museums in Japan, Korea and Singapore, and the Japan Foundation Asia Center. The exhibition is currently on view at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA), Gwacheon, Korea until May 2019 before travelling to Singapore.

Kapur, ‘Proposition Avant-Garde: A View from the South’. The Bandung Conference took place in 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia, and was the first and largest Conference gathering involving Asian and African states, most of which were newly independent. The aims of the Conference were to promote Asian-African economic and cultural cooperation and to fight novel and widespread forms of global colonialism. It is regarded as the foundational step toward the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement. Eleven years later, the Tricontinental built on the Bandung Conference to radicalise the idea of a non-aligned movement and promote the construction of a Third World anti-imperialist and often anti-capitalism project. Moroccan socialist leader and organiser of the Conference, Mehdi Ben Barka, promoted the merging of ‘the two great currents of world revolution: that which was born in 1917 with the Russian Revolution, and that which represents the anti-imperialist and national liberation movements of today’.


Vivan Sundaram, quoted by Deepak Ananth in his catalogue essay ‘Precarious Poetics’, in Vivan Sundaram: Disjunctures, p 24