

Art in the time of new media

Understanding was not there till the opening of Apeejay's New Media Gallery

Indian students from the 1990s probably recall little of what they were taught, particularly in the thick history text books with unmeritorious illustrations of "famous personalities". If they do, they might be able to remember a small sliver about the arts. The books ruled that several art practices died out as political systems underwent changes, leading to economic and financial crisis, and withdrawal of patronage from the arts.

After they were through with cramming these lines, such students, if they lived in larger cities, were likely to have visited the Ramliya in Delhi or painting exhibitions in Mumbai, or otherwise museums in parts of Gujarat. Many of these were almost extravaganzas, staged or built-up through the labour and finances of the new patrons of the arts in an independent India. Their efforts, in part, were a fragment of the wider process of determining the contours of a new-avstar India. So there was, for example, Sriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra in Delhi and the Sambhals in Ahmedabad, making art practices accessible to a wider public. These patrons mostly belonged to families running industrial empires, and were closely involved with their brain child, often overseeing them personally. It was a throwback, in many senses, to an offering steeped in philanthropy, an aspect of the process of nation building itself.



"It worked well in the times when art was a three dimensional sculpture, or dance form, or even painting. There was wide knowledge of these art forms and a wide audience that appreciated them. In the second half of the 1990s, in the land of the software-superheroes, art in the new media — video or web art, well established abroad — began catching the interest of some Indian artists. They hardly had an audience and almost no galleries. They were looking for

patrons, but questioning the nature of patronage itself.

Meanwhile, the discussion about the new media itself was expanding, forcing off the ornamented blinkers. Now, it was no longer confined to visual arts. New media cut across boundaries, became interdisciplinary, and artists learned to turn upside down the old, romantic notion of the artist as they furled technology and software. But there was still no dedicated space in which practitioners could turn



New age patroness Priti Paul (left), and Nalini Malani's video installation launching the Apeejay gallery in a Capital suburb (above)

Art in the new media brings with it a typical series of attributes: it is expensive to create, it requires an intimate knowledge of technology, and a sense of comfort with it, and it is interdisciplinary. And only a few would want to buy it, offering less incentives to existing spaces used to display artists' works.

Yet, it is finding its feet, thanks to a new spirit of enterprise. The last two years have seen a new breed of partners, as it were, who share felt voids in the arts and are able to actively work towards filling them. They are a new generation of young, well travelled persons, often from prosperous business houses, with a hand on the pulse of the world. They are opening up opportunities even as they themselves explore them. For the new media, this filler-of-a-gap comes in the form of Priti Paul.

Herself an architect with a sense of international art trends, Priti Paul is familiar with new media practices. This reflects in the New Media Gallery, conceived even as the building in which it is housed was being constructed. Priti ensured that an appropriate space for future work in the arts was created consciously and not as an afterthought. "The Apeejay gallery is

a professionally run, highly structural space. We are very clear about what we are doing, bringing new media art to the Indian public," Paul says.

The gallery expects to provide a forum for an exciting dialogue between film making, video, performance, installation art, digitally manipulated photography, virtual reality, acoustics, choreography and dance amongst the many other possibilities that the confluence of art and technology provide. It will not be confined to the visual arts, but explore the interaction of technology on the arts. It will undertake the oldest process — opening up the mind — to the most advanced process: the new media.

Curator Pooja Sood, commissioned to put together a series of (top secret) shows, is emphatic when she defines the focus of the gallery: "The Apeejay Group is creating a specific space with a specific focus on interdisciplinary technology, which is not easy and which no one else is doing." In fact, her plan is totally focused, without distractions, as she clearly declares, "True, there is a lot of exciting art happening, but where else has anyone made a space for this kind of intervention?" On her part, Paul

sees the media as new, but with an older attitude: "The Apeejay Group has always turned to the underground." At what could be termed its recent inaugural show — Nalini Malani's new works — most of the audience was not quite sure what to expect. Almost none of them had seen these works, Hamletmachine and Expropriate, before, partly because of the prohibitive cost of exhibiting them. While Paul brought them to Delhi, they had been shown at several other venues worldwide, because such art practice lends itself to numerical repetitions without any one being unauthentic.

Suddenly, Indian audiences were knitted into the global art world through media which lends itself to globalisation. And through an organisation which is itself global, an important factor in making this collaboration possible. In the next few years, the New Media Gallery expects that such interactions will widen, become internalised and energise the community of art practitioners. Perhaps some will follow it as a fad, others as a curiosity. Whichever the case, if new media permeates a wider consciousness, the gallery will have made an indelible mark.

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