

PABLO LAFUENTE

**How Things Come Together, Before They Continue on Their Way, or Stay Together for a While. Writing about Sheela Gowda's Work**

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*SHEELA GOWDA. REMAINS  
SKIRA AND  
PIRELLI HANGARBICOCCA  
2019*

It is like driving a car, in the middle of dense traffic, with other cars, vans, dogs, motorcycles, traffic lights, people, cows... appearing on your way, some coming toward you, others drifting away, giving sound signals to tell you they're close by, behind, that they intend to get in the place where you are headed. And through that negotiation, trying to get somewhere, appreciating what you can witness through the window, feeling bumps on the road, enjoying conversation with the person sitting next to you. There is a goal, an intended outcome – getting somewhere, doing something – but that doesn't feel like the most important thing at all times. There is planning involved (Is the car park full? Can we avoid rush hour or the coming storm?), but not everything needs to be thought through. Some things are better done without reflection. And the car... it is an old-time companion, the hands and feet know it so well that it seems the exchange between them and the wheel and pedals is independent from what goes on in the head, in the mouth, in the circuits connecting all those parts together.

It is also like practising yoga every morning, right after you wake up, when the sun is rising. A glass of warm water and a short walk before you encounter the same instructor you see almost every day, who chants through exercises that you know, but which never become easier. Because the body settles, it won't work as it did in the past, and something needs to be done, every day, to put it into motion, to teach it once more moves that are in part forgotten. And so every morning they need to be repeated, without reflecting on whether they mean something or not, with determination. And with respect: they're not just any other thing, they come from a very specific tradition, otherwise they wouldn't work. Even though, or precisely because, in recent times they've become part of other networks, globally, devoid at least in part of what they meant, of implications they possessed not long ago.

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These are both conventional, common, ordinary situations. It's not difficult to imagine them, but it's impossible to imagine them in all their modulations. The car, the cleanness and humidity of the air in that moment of the day in the city's traffic; the instructor, what he's wearing, the room, the depth and volume of his voice. They're details and sensations that my words won't be able to account for – not just because of my limitations, which exist, but

also because every account suffers from the same limits affecting every representation: it cannot capture the totality of relations, the configuration, conjuncture. It must choose. And the choice will partly be a result of what I am interested in, what I would like or have been asked to say, and what I can (and cannot) bring forward.

I'm invoking them here to talk about Sheela Gowda's artistic practice, to accompany an exhibition that includes works she has made during the last 20 years, and which I have been familiar with (partially, that is) for over a decade. A practice that began much earlier, and which may have occupied more of her time than other things. A practice that is definitely the issue here, but that is not actually separate from, or more relevant than those other things she has done with her time. Let's imagine Gowda driving through the city of Bangalore, organising the things that need to be organised to prepare her work, or taking care of things that are not her work. Let's imagine her getting her body ready, because without it the body of the work might not come to exist. It's all the same process. Or rather it wouldn't be fair to think about each of the processes separately, in its singularity. It would just be an abstraction, imposed by rules that the issue at hand – art – demands from its discourses. (Although it might be pertinent to talk about abstraction, and I shall later on.)

Flows of the body and flows of the city encounter flows of the world, and each work is a materialisation of a path that results from this and other paths; that gathers, sometimes by default and sometimes by intent, elements from here and there, presenting them in configurations that have their own mode of existence. Over-determined; that is, interdependent and at the same time specific. This would be a banal statement (isn't that the case for everything that happens, including every artwork?), if it weren't for the fact that in Gowda's work you can really feel it, intensely, in front of every single one of her paintings, sculptures and installations. And because of that it's not easy to write about them, as, beyond what might apparently be the 'issue' in each, 'everything' is in all of them. Traditional ways of doing, political present, private gestures, habits and exercises, art history, manias, global economy, family stories, work relations, personality traits, shared textures and colours, hermeneutic expectations... all more or less orchestrated by a subjectivity that is resistant to exposure. And this is not because of shyness – it's an attempt, I believe, to put subjectivity in its place.

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There is a banging noise in the basement of a house under construction. Hammer hitting metal, steadily. The sound that fills the large, mostly empty, concrete space somehow communicates that the hammering has a purpose and the hand that bangs is familiar with the hammer. Steady. The hand belongs to a man; thin, not tall, as gentle in his movements as he will later prove to be in manners. The metal has the form of a large

rectangular sheet, painted on one side. Given the state of the paint, the piece has been dragged, piled up, used. Not once, but many times. That ‘immediate’ information is mediated by other data: each sheet used to be a drum for carrying tree resin. I could have guessed, based on observation and with a bit of imagination, on some familiarity I may have with the original drums (I don’t), or as a deduction from the fact that Gowda has used metal drums on several occasions in her work – for example, in *Chimera* or *A Blanket and the Sky*, both from 2004. I didn’t guess, I was told. But I could still see the used metal, a use that carries with it (how could it not?) stories I’m not party to. I can also see that, despite the skilled hand with its steady drumming, there are slight dents here and there, which means the metal sheets were not always flat. I didn’t need to see the man flattening them in order to perceive this.

So I can imagine that if I had visited Ikon Gallery in Birmingham in the summer of 2017, I would have ventured that similar sheets, used in the installation *What Yet Remains* of that same year, had a different shape in the past, and had been used before being flattened. For what, I would probably know only if I had read the publication or press release. But would I need to? I could instead look at the way some of the sheets, measuring 90 x 178 centimetres each, had been punctured with round holes with a 43-centimetre diameter, distributed on the surface so that eight of them would fit into the sheet, maximising space, leaving the minimum surface unused. Although ‘unused’ is not the right word, because I already (might have) guessed everything (the metal) was used, and continues to be used (in the installation). Like the cutout circles, most of them turned into bowls, recipients, carriers; carriers because they’re all sitting on the floor with the concave side up, otherwise they could be presenting themselves ‘just’ as curves, bumps laying on the floor. Like the leftover surface from the sheets, leaning against the gallery’s white walls, or hanging high above on those same walls. As if they were monochrome paintings, but not quite, because paintings don’t (unless forced into an uneasy conceptual stance) touch the floor, or sit so close to each other, or overlap. Like sculptures, bent into themselves to form thin, long and short strips leaning on the walls. Or sometimes bent into three-dimensional shapes occupying the centre of the room, surrounded by the cutout shapes turned into bowls.

The ensemble comes across as a catalogue of possibility: all the things, or very many things you can do with a basic modular form (a metal drum sheet, flattened), and through one fundamental operation (cutting circles within them, maximising surface). Not more, and also no less. From this crossroads, a myriad of paths – monochromatic compositions, explorations of height, chromatic scales, exercises of proximity and distance (with the body of whoever is there to see), comparison and difference, stillness but also movement, different organisation principles – are formed. All of that, if you’d like, but not necessarily, in dialogue with the visual arts tradition. Not necessarily because it could be understood ‘merely’ in relation to the room’s white spaces, its walls,

wooden ceiling and windows. Or to the circulation of goods, brought over in crates from Bangalore to Birmingham – containers inserted in other containers, bringing with them the history of their uses and their making. Or else, and I'll stop here, the circulation of money, which remunerates the craftsman for his skilled hammering hand; which allows for a change of ownership of the original metal drums, now shapes and figures presented miles away, in a different, but not entirely different, part of the world; but which rarely pays Gowda for her contribution to the institution's programme, or for her ability to arrange the elements conceptually and physically – artists hardly ever get paid for their labour.

All of this is there, even if we don't perceive it immediately. Perhaps like an energy that is impossible to sense directly, but can be detected through its effects on other things. Energy that you are familiar with, but which can only be observed through reflection – reflection of the arrangements, of the peeled-off paint, of the bent forms, of the text in the information sheet.

1 The words of an unnamed Huni Kuin individual in Kenneth M. Kensinger, "The Body Knows: Cashinahua Perspectives on Knowledge", in *How Real People Ought to Live: 48th International Congress of Americanists, 1994*. Quoted from Joana Cabral de Oliveira and Lucas Keese dos Santos, "Perguntas demais' – Multiplicidades de modos de conhecer em uma experiência de formação de pesquisadores Guarani Mbya", in Manuela Carneiro da Cunha and Pedro de Niemeyer Cesarino (ed.), *Políticas Culturais e Povos Indígenas* Editora Unesp, São Paulo, 2014, p.14

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Imagine building your own house for the second time. Coordinating a team, accompanying the work. Meeting contractors, revising the architects' plan. Buying the materials, speeding up the work to avoid the rainy season. Planning, or just imagining, future use and experience. Undoing and redoing until there's no more time for revision. Waiting, impatiently, for others to complete their tasks so you can start your own. And stopping to have a chai and a conversation whenever the woman who visits the construction site daily turns up.

Or being invited to someone's home, for dinner or tea, and, presented with a problem affecting the household, being asked to contribute something meaningful. You'd like to, but feel uncertain, aware of your shortcomings, but also your obligations. So you stay and push yourself to say something, because you know you're expected to. And somehow, it works.

2 "How to... things that don't exist", 31st Bienal de São Paulo, 2014, for which I was the co-curator together with Galit Eilat, Nuria Enguita, Charles Esche and Oren Sagiv, in a team that also included Luiza Proença and Benjamin Seroussi as associate curators.

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"Nukun yuda yamakidi nun xinanmiski."<sup>1</sup> These words in Huni Kuin do not, but could, refer to Sheela Gowda working in the construction of *Those of Whom*, the installation she made for the 31<sup>st</sup> Bienal de São Paulo in 2014.<sup>2</sup> "We always think with all the parts of our body." I remember her on the ground floor of the pavilion, thinking (without quote marks) with and through sheets of non-vulcanised rubber and rusty window grills and metal furniture parts she had gathered in Acre and São Paulo. Setting them up together, one leaning against another, others tied, stretched, connecting one to the other to construct a barrier in the middle of the large concrete space, just beyond the access ramp, also creating a space that could be entered. A space conformed by materials that didn't seem

fully at ease together, perhaps because the process of coming together was not easy either. The rubber sheets in particular seemed to resist many of her approaches. Most of them partially melted into large, heavy bricks on their way from Acre (the region where the Huni Kuin are from, along Brazil's border with Peru and Bolivia). And the sheets that were not stuck to each other would sometimes be too rigid or too elastic to do what her hands and arms attempted to do with them. If the whole body thinks (as the Huni Kuin say it does), thinking through them was a terribly difficult process, as if the sheets were words that came in sentences her body couldn't read; in bundles of information it could not assimilate. As a body of knowledge she hadn't been born with or acquired yet, and only recently encountered.

Rubber has a history in Brazil, just as the metal sheets from *What Yet Remains*, the hair ropes in *Behold* (2009), and the cow dung in *Gallant Hearts* (1996) do in India. Rubber's history, as we might know or read, is at the heart of the country's colonial past and present, the core of the spoliation mechanism formerly active in Belém, Manaus and Porto Velho during the first and second rubber booms, of the enslaving of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples to become *seringueiros* (rubber tappers) in the Amazon forest, of one of the engines of development – with all the implications that word contains – of the northern part of the country. Unlike the southeast Asian plantations that would substitute them in the second decade of the 20th century as the world's primary rubber producers, in the Brazilian territories rubber trees grow in the middle of the forest, along with other trees, plants, animals and life. They're not separate, so they resist extraction (just as the rubber sheets, stuck together, resisted Gowda's thinking hands). Such difficulty ultimately led to the collapse of Brazil's rubber industry, with only a brief return during World War Two, and to the eventual liberation of some of the people who had been enslaved to secure its extraction (including the Ashaninka, the Puyanawá, the Yawanawá and Huni Kuin), who could now stop being *seringueiros* and become, once again, indigenous, recovering a knowledge they had never lost.

And so the history of rubber continues: in 2014, in the rubber bullets (rubber balls with a heart or skeleton of metal) used by the military police to repress demonstrations in São Paulo – a remainder of a dictatorship that ended in 1989 but stubbornly refuses to go away. And also with new, fair trade approaches to rubber extraction and transformation by companies like the one that supported Gowda's research trip to Acre, and therefore sponsored (made possible) her work and the Bienal.

Too many stories...  
...and not enough access...  
...to a material she had to engage with.

And so she was obliged to live with and through it, to submerge and take others with her, to turn it into something that, as requested,

would find a solution to a curator's problem, and function as an introduction to the exhibition: as the first work within the actual show, in measured contrast to the order of the Bienal pavilion's modernist architecture, through a vocabulary of tension and looseness, the aesthetics of a temporary arrangement, the impression of being a barrier forcing a pause on those coming in, and a window that, in its semi-transparency, gave a hint of what would come later. Perhaps because of this contrast, of the difficulties it found in its attempt to understand the materials and histories as they came, and its stubbornness in making sense of them, today I would say that *Those of Whom* was an embodiment of the exhibition as a whole.

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It is, finally, though I could go on, a bit like having a cat living in your backyard. Not your cat, but you still take care of her, and through that care end up caring about her. One day she comes back pregnant, has kittens (four of them), all with different personalities and shared demands. With their own dynamics, too, which you are part of, but cannot prescribe or organise. You enjoy them, but not all the time. In fact, you sometimes wonder why you let her get so close. Until one day they're all gone, without warning. At least the dog who frequents the front yard is still around.

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Lines swirling through the space: two, three of them. Deep, deep red in the white, bright northern spring light coming through the windows and reflecting on the white walls. Snaking along the floor, climbing up the white wooden beam and, after giving two or three turns around it, coming back down only to go up again, across the space.

When *And...* (2007) came to Oslo,<sup>3</sup> it came with baggage (a discourse, almost like a set of instructions) it had acquired in documenta 12 in Kassel, where it had been shown in 2007<sup>4</sup> (or perhaps earlier). It arrived as a red line in a white gallery space, as a form that was connected in the German exhibition to other lines women (Hito Steyerl, Trisha Brown, Atsuko Tanaka, Iole de Freitas...) made in the same exhibition building. Using a relatively abstract form to subtly (or deftly, depending on your perspective) invoke and connect other issues that seemed more concrete, more directly related to 'content' or to specific conditions and situations (bondage and binds, movement and dance, permanent and lost connections...).

Such a relationship between form and content brought with it a way of understanding the specificity of art, of what sets it apart from other practices or actions. A way of making that involves precision and follows a set of rules; a resulting practice that claims either metaphorical or symbolic power; self-referential and also conscious of its appropriate

3 As part of the 2010 exhibition "Sheela Gowda: Postulates of Contiguity", curated by Marta Kuzma at Office for Contemporary Art Norway in Oslo, where she was the director and where I also worked at the time.

4 By curator Ruth Noack and artistic director Roger M. Buergel.

place; proud of its special nature; enjoying its own space and system of reception; and made possible by a market that guarantees its circulation. Art's abstraction as a move of detachment from a concrete condition, a fundamental piece in the puzzle that constitutes it as the specific practice modernity saw in it. Like when Anni Albers took Andean or Mesoamerican geometric forms and 'translated' them into her modernist tapestries, judging the material production chain that lay at their origin as less relevant – if relevant at all – than the ability of those forms to enchant and communicate, even if (or especially if) dislocated from their original place and history.

If instead of images of *And...* installed in Oslo or Kassel we look at a different image, the process of abstraction grows harder. For example a photograph of Gowda standing, one foot forward, defiantly staring at the camera, her clothes covered in red pigment – the same red pigment that has stained the walls and floor, and that was used in the rolls of rope that surround her all over the floor. (*Kumkum*, if we must know.) Or another image – same floor, same walls – showing a young boy in saffron briefs joining his hands in front of his chest in sign of prayer while a Caucasian man lies on the floor, shirtless, eyes closed. What we see is messier, visceral, still symbolic, but grounded on a physical and emotional investment, on something that seems more personal. As if the work (the ropes) would communicate something that could only be uttered once it settled in Gowda's chest – a recovery (gathering what is left, what others have left) rather than an extraction.

What is settled in her chest, in her hands while she anoints the strings and bundles them into cords... Can we call it her own? Her property, her history, her subjectivity? I guess we could, but what would we get from that? What would she get? She would probably get irritated, or she might decide not to bother. Her concerns, her history, her interests and her skills constitute a particular way of being that is only possible within a context that allows for them to develop; a movement, a path that can only exist within wider, longer movements and paths, most of which continue beyond her. Some of them may pass through her hands, without getting to her head, as they help the piece become what it may become or what it aspires to become, what its materials, its history, its resources actually allow it to generate, independent of her intentions... Some may go through the *kumkum* straight into the cords, only touching the surface of her body, staining it temporarily, leaving a mark. Later on it might disappear from her skin, as the work eventually does... perhaps to appear again once more, at other time. Like the rubber, the *kumkum*, or the metal drums. The hair bundles, the car, the traffic, the cow dung, the construction plans or the yoga moves. The cat. Or every other thing, each in its own trajectory, meeting for an instant, making the most of it, then going its separate way.

JESSICA MORGAN

**Material Concern:  
The Art of  
Sheela Gowda**

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1 Ayisha Abraham,  
“A Certain  
Language: Artist and  
Filmmaker Ayisha  
Abraham Talking to  
Sheela Gowda”, in  
Trevor Smith (ed.),  
*Sheela Gowda*, Steidl  
and Bose Pacia,  
Göttingen and New  
York, 2007, p.148.  
And in this volume,  
pp.162-67.

Sheela Gowda is always weighing her options: literally – insofar as her sculptural works are often suspended, their hanging substance demonstrating their heft – but also figuratively, as the found images she uses are assessed for potential content, both obvious and latent. “I find it impossible to look at any thing around me without thinking about the processes behind it”, the artist has said.<sup>1</sup>

The material consciousness of a sustained sculptural practice does not commonly accompany the two-dimensional scrutiny of our image-obsessed culture, a scrutiny increasingly filtered through technological distance. Yet the Bangalore-based Gowda makes a case for the necessity of all dimensions to work in coexistence. Exploring the tactility and mutations of many media, Gowda’s art physically demonstrates how meaning circulates, breaks down and re-forms: her abstract sculptures and installations come close to divulging too much information, verging on a narrative reading, while her works on paper with appropriated, generally representational images remain obfuscatory. Vernacular materials are treated by the artist with great respect, while found images are never allowed to speak for themselves but require a disruptive revision – one that does not excavate so much as accentuate elusive signification.

Gowda’s transition from figurative oil painting to sculpture in the early 1990s began with the introduction of unexpected materials into her two-dimensional work. (The artist continues to experiment with representational painting today, using watercolour, in gnomonic images suspended somewhere between referent and refusal of form.) An untitled piece from 1992–93 is a small-scale work on canvas, the ‘painted’ surface – rough, textured, but delicately modulated abstract markings – achieved through the application of cow dung. A few strokes of charcoal on this mottled brown field effect a long central gash, and small collage elements of thorns and a torn scrap of flowered fabric collectively suggest a slowly coalescing scene of violence. The work has a quiet, even reclusive initial presence requiring close perusal; once identified, the unusual combination of materials leaves the impression of a trail of evidence placed in a formal composition.

Cow dung, in Gowda’s hands, comes to signify many things, at the same time that the artist demonstrates how many cultural meanings it already carries. There is

nothing exotic for Gowda in her choice of material – dung is a common element of life in India, still widely used for fuel and to line the floors of rudimentary village homes (both traditions now gradually fading due to the impact of global economic development on this region). In part a rejection of the accepted materials of art-making and an embrace of materials available on the street, Gowda's use of dung was also a response to the coincident social and political changes sweeping through India. In 1992, the rise of Hindu nationalism led to sectarian violence, with riots in Mumbai resulting in many deaths, and tensions that continue to characterise local politics. Gowda responded to the co-optation of Hindu imagery and beliefs for political purposes by reappropriating dung for works that touched on the underlying violence of contemporary dogma. (The cow is of course a sacred animal in the Hindu religion; even its waste enjoys elevated status.) Gowda's use of dung reconnects a potentially hallowed substance with its profane use-value rather than its symbolic potential, deliberately retaining an ambiguity of reference. In a 2006 interview with artist and filmmaker Ayisha Abraham, Gowda dwelled on the levels of meaning in her materials: "In a way the visual appearance is mere skin. But it is not something I want to throw at someone, in the face. It has to unravel slowly."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.145.

For the artist to begin using excrement first as a support for drawing and painting – including a large-scale triptych produced almost exclusively from dung (also untitled from 1992–93) – and then as sculpture was a logical step. Such works adopted a language of form that did not stray far from the context or shape in which Gowda observed dung's local use: modelled into simple rectangular bricks suggesting a construction material, into piles of dried disks, or into potato-shaped balls. A series of round, flat forms with irregular surfaces showing the imprint of the artist's hand are incorporated into a wall piece (also untitled from 1993), recalling the placement of cakes of dung on the sides of buildings to dry before being used as fuel. Here the dung is a support for Gowda's delicate, sketchily rendered imagery in white paint: sometimes recognisable – a laundry line, for instance – and in other instances barely discernible tracings that seem to mimic a primitive type of mark-making (an impression enhanced by the rough support).

These transitional works are given prominence at the artist's first major survey exhibition, titled "Open Eye Policy", organised by curators Annie Fletcher and Grant Watson, and up through the end of this month at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. They clearly released her from the confines of traditional art materials and opened up her process to more specific observation and experimentation. Engaging the elegant, skylighted series of galleries in the museum's original building, the meticulously installed works make evident the clarity of Gowda's thinking between two and three dimensions: the objective nature of materials opposed to the manipulative potential of pictures. Each space revisits the complications of this dichotomy, as every room is forced to resolve the tensions between flatness and

bulk, between image and object, which ultimately forces the visitor to contend with multiple registers of seeing.

For instance, a small space is devoted to two early works: the aforementioned untitled painting in dung with charcoal and collage elements and the floor-based sculpture *Mortar Line* (1996), which consists of a curved double line of dung bricks with the red pigment *kumkum* (the substance used for *bindi* and to dye the central hair parting) acting as a form of cement to hold the spinal progression together. The form and floor placement recall Carl Andre's *Equivalent* series using bricks, and bring to mind the subsequent feminist subversions of Minimalism by Gowda's contemporaries such as Janine Antoni and Mona Hatoum. Both works in this space require intimacy to be fully apprehended, and yet it is only from a distance that one notices each work features a violent gash, hinting at some interior. Seen together, they hold a spirited exchange about organic curvature and the corporeal liminality of a slit, which makes it difficult to imagine encountering them outside this intense dialogue.

The movement between different scales, the near and the distant view, is a trope repeated throughout Gowda's art, particularly in her use of found media images. Despite her emphasis on close observation, in her work an enlarged image does not always offer more information. In fact, the artist has deliberately used the blow-up to obfuscate the original context or to make evident the impossibility of deciphering meaning from found images.

Take *Sanjaya Narrates* (2004), a dissection of a photograph, culled from a newspaper, of a Palestinian family immediately following an attack; a man and a woman hold a mortally wounded child, and two other women are seen crying out. The work's title alludes to a passage of the ancient Indian epic the *Mahābhārata*: Sanjaya, charioteer and adviser to King Dhritarashtra, reports to the blind ruler on events from the battlefield where his children are killing one another.

Gowda does not show the complete photographic image but instead divides it, zooming in on certain sections that become distorted via magnification. These fragments she in turn translates into fourteen watercolour drawings, a process that suggests both abstraction (insofar as the technique reduces the detail enabled by the lens) and a transfer from the mechanistic to the handmade. The drawings metonymically include the original figures: blurred faces, bare feet, hands and a duplicated image of the male mourner. His anguished face is shown in full and in two repeated, cropped shots, as if the quick shutter of the camera had caught this same partial image twice in movement – a sly 'fake' reference to the speed and distortion of the photographic process and the death itself. Other drawn images capture abstracted, partial details – cloth, a truck's headlight – such that the sequence never allows the eye to settle comfortably. Every drawing except one is in colour; the single sheet where the dead child appears is drained of all but sepia tone.

Without text or commentary, Gowda makes baldly apparent the complexities of our exposure to representations of violence and atrocity: on the one hand, the need to retain and expose the reproduction's distance through a personal approach; on the other, our lack of any real capacity to truly understand its information or surrounding context. Giving mythical magnitude to the tragically common disasters of contemporary conflict, Gowda also makes madness of any narrative sense by displaying the fourteen sections in sequence, like frames in a strip of film, though the images in fact represent a single moment rather than a chronological progression.

Such part-for-whole relations are taken to the extreme in Gowda's oeuvre. The proliferation of images means that any viewer – even the one who will 'get' most of the cultural referents – is overwhelmed by an excess of signification. This is the case in a large diptych from 2006, *2/7* and *Agneepath*, that pairs two watercolour paintings with very different subjects. *2/7* is derived from a photograph of students demonstrating in Kerala, India, transferred into watercolour on ink-jet print. Gowda begins by enlarging this digital image and then erasing information, replacing it with her own painted forms. As in *Sanjaya Narrates*, this process foregrounds the artist's decisions about what to manipulate, and thus highlight, in the image. For example, her removal of the ground between the demonstrators and the police exaggerates the divide between the two groups – the police appear to float in empty space, while the demonstrators are sucked back onto the earth. In turn, her use of watercolour creates a blurred suggestion of ghostly movement, as if the police batons were perpetually moving forward and the protesters were perpetually falling back in response. This image's pendant, *Agneepath*, is a watercolour version of a still from the cult 1990 Bollywood film of the same name, also enlarged, that captures the last moments of a renegade son (played by the famous Indian actor Amitabh Bachchan), collapsing, bloodied on his mother, as she remains impassive, turning away (a motif that belies her embrace of him in the final scenes of the film).

Seen as a whole, the diptych is part cliché – public violence and personal tragedy – but Gowda's conflation of documentary non-fiction (with no clear identification of subject) and fictional film (here represented to misleading effect) alerts us to the process of artificial staging behind both scenes. The work's large scale suggests a type of history painting, as Gowda has mentioned.<sup>3</sup> And yet its precise meaning – in direct contradiction to that genre – is not transparent, but seems to dwell in the transpositions of surface and source.

Elsewhere, Gowda transforms a group of leaping soccer players from a newspaper clipping into what look like protesting demonstrators. Similar cloudy watercolour images of family photographs, wherein the figures appear to be dematerialising or engulfed in smoke, are incorporated into the larger installation *Still* (2006), shown that same year at Bose Pacia Gallery, New York. Further distancing the images from

3 Trevor Smith, "A Conversation with Sheela Gowda, Bangalore, July 2006", in *Sheela Gowda, op. cit.*, p.136.

their original state, Gowda made printed scans of the watercolours, exhibiting these reproductions of drawings of reproductions on tables alongside incense formed into shapes suggestive of leaves and organic debris. These shapes were burned prior to the exhibition opening and remained as ashen ghosts of the forms they once occupied – vulnerable to touch or wind – such that both picture and material appeared to exist in some kind of ‘monochrome’ half-state.

Gowda’s open-eye policy here seems less about a gaze revealing meaning through careful attention than about an awareness of the unfixed nature of images, despite their profuse application in the documentation of daily events and their proliferation as evidence: like incense, or almost any material in the artist’s hands, they are one thing and then they are another.

Gowda revisited this transubstantial use of incense in the work *Collateral* (2007), shown by London’s Iniva at Rivington Place in 2011. There, she made incense paste with charcoal, water and tree-bark powder, molding it into abstracted forms presented elegantly on mesh-screen tables. Once burned, the forms assumed the impression of a model-scale city – blocks of charred incense with fissures that appeared like roads, the fuse linking the irregular elements acting as interconnecting routes on a map that seemed at once a view from space and a close-up of the cracked, dry earth.

Recently, Gowda has turned to large-scale installation, assemblages of materials that forcefully engage the viewer inside an entire space through freestanding sculptural forms as well as suspended elements perilously hanging from ceilings and walls. Exhibited in different iterations depending on the architectural context, these works refuse to give a full picture and, much like Gowda’s reused news images, resist easy consumption.

To experience the installation *Margins*, shown at the artist’s GALLERYSKY, in Bangalore, and the related *Of All People*, shown at Rivington Place, both from 2011, is akin to walking through a collage that has leaped into an expansive surround – a sensation that implicates the viewer as an alien presence. *Of All People*’s brightly painted found doors and doorjambs, barred pink window frames, standing columns and salvaged wood spread throughout the main gallery space of Rivington Place, which is characterised by a massive floor-to-ceiling glass frontage that divides the space from a busy London street.

At the Van Abbemuseum, the installation occupies a smaller room, which echoed the original domestic scale of the dismantled architectural elements. While the suspended limbs of the wooden jambs evoke their original architectural proportions, Gowda has included thousands of finger-size basic wooden figures (produced by hand in India for commercial sale) to replicate the scalar oscillations that characterise so many of her other works. These miniature ‘figures’ – articulated by simple notches in the red sandalwood – suggest singular posturing (perched atop a tall pillar) as well as mass gatherings, as in

the jumble, hard to differentiate, piled on top of an upturned table. Placed along the upper ledge of the room's recessed lintel and appearing to look down on visitors from above, these figures also suggest a reversal of the viewing subject. Here Gowda's work seems to be turning an open eye toward us.

Every installation by Gowda wraps material surprise in historical reference. This is nowhere more evident than in the visceral *Behold* (2009), in which Gowda uses ropes of human hair – bought in strands and laboriously woven together into thicker cords – to suspend metal car bumpers from the wall. The bumpers dangle irregularly, a little like collapsing musical bars. The hair ropes are dark and uneven and – in contrast to the shiny metallic surface of the bumpers – are scatological or intestinal in their appearance, while the clumps or knots of hair that rest on the floor suggest oversized heads, referring back to the origin of the material.

Gowda's decision to combine these materials derived from her observation of daily life in southern India, where it is common for people to tie human hair around their bumpers to ward off danger and accidents. As always, technology remains untrustworthy. In conversation, Gowda has said she finds amusing empathy in this need to return to a human material for protection, despite the metal hulk expressly designed for this purpose.<sup>4</sup> In a further twist, the material itself represents a large industry in India: hair is donated by pilgrims to temples, where it is given as an offering in a process of ritual cleansing; the temples then sell long pieces to Western companies for wigs and hair extensions, while shorter pieces are sold for the superstitious purpose evoked by *Behold*.

Whether through the obvious labour involved in fabrication or through references to productivity and work, Gowda's oeuvre frequently returns to the methods by which people cope with – and struggle against – their environment, and the inevitable anthropomorphisation of the materials and process as a result. This narrative of the social and economic underlies even apparently abstract works such as *Kagebangara* (2008), a large installation constructed out of yellow and blue tarps and tar barrels, some flattened, configured in abstract compositions. The bold, painterly impression of the piece, which expands to industrial-scale dimensions that loom over the viewer, is placed in contrast to its details. Evidence of habitation is suggested by the lids of tar drums hammered into bowls partially hidden inside a cubic space constructed out of the flattened barrels: Gowda here alludes to the origin of the tar containers recycled by itinerant road workers in India to create shelters to live in, as they travel along the road they are building. An admiration for the efficiency and adaptability of the labourers is evident in *Kagebangara's* formal elegance. But so, too, are the otherwise invisible living conditions that are one local by-product of industrial development.

Gowda does not regard her work as activism and is clear about her position vis-à-vis the people with whom she works: one of observation and experience but not collaboration.<sup>5</sup> In a wall-based piece

4 Sheela Gowda, interview with the author, 26 February 2013.

5 *Ibid.*

using found images, *Protest, My Son* (2011), Gowda uses a light touch to explore the relation between the artist and her subjects. The work consists of a startling, life-size image of a group of gesticulating, semi-clad figures adorned with face paint, beads and feathers, one of them clutching a massive bow and arrow. At the Van Abbemuseum, the piece is framed by the larger white expanse of the space, and bordered underneath by painted gray and white stripes that bring to mind cautionary curb markings, or a truncated Daniel Buren. The proximity and the scale of the figures in the image give the impression that they explode through the wall. Closer inspection reveals a smaller duplicate version of the image installed on top of the larger version. This image within an image has been painted on; a process of 'spot the difference' shows that Gowda has further embellished the figures in the smaller scene by adding tattoos, headdresses, body paint and other details that further exoticise those represented, with a clichéd hybrid of Maori, American Indian and African dress.

Shown protesting for their land rights, the depicted figures are in fact members of the Hakki Pikki of southern India, a group that has developed a successful trade in fake animals. (A string of faux tiger claws hangs from the image.) The tribe holds an unusual international trade position: many have passports and travel frequently to major markets to sell their goods. Gowda was drawn to the scene for the way in which the Hakki Pikki perform their tribal status by donning clothing and decoration atypical of the group – a form of self-tribalisation that echoes the fake animal products they sell.

Gowda's work alerts us to observe the same open-eye policy that she maintains in its making. But *Protest, My Son* can also be read as a wry lesson in the way we evaluate images in every cultural dimension. Narration gets arrested or redrawn somewhere between a form's original context and its reception. Perhaps what is most highlighted in Gowda's economic manipulation of materials is the resulting tension between registers of visibility: if today we are confronted with a surfeit of images, Gowda presents the physical weight of this overload, on the one hand, and its suspension of meaning, on the other.

AYISHA ABRAHAM

**A Certain Language:  
Artist and Filmmaker  
Ayisha Abraham Talking  
to Sheela Gowda**

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SHEELA GOWDA  
STEIDL AND BOSE PACIA  
2007

**Ayisha Abraham:** Let us start from the beginning. You were originally a figurative painter, and then in the 1990s your practice became sculptural and more conceptual. In many ways your work has always defied categories. It never quite fit into any particular trend. And you have resisted any one way of making art. How do you think of your work and the changes it has gone through over the years?

**Sheela Gowda:** At one point I felt that I could express myself entirely through painting. Those were times when we did discipline-based work. When I look back at those early works from the standpoint of my present concerns, even though I can see the same stubbornness and conviction in what I want, my needs have changed, and so have the materials.

**AA:** What is your relationship to the materials you use? Materials and media have significantly different meanings now from when you started, they're no longer seen as neutral. The choices are many, and for artists what they select is symbolic, as it engages with the world in a specific way.

**SG:** When I started working with cow dung I didn't do it to give closure to painting, but to open out into other ways of seeing materials. Painting has its own art historical references. The mere act of using cow dung invokes a history of cultural references specific to India.

**AA:** What about the paintings in this exhibition? Could you say something about how the two images, blown up in scale from different sources (a newspaper and a Bollywood film), contribute another reading to the abstract sculptural work in this exhibition?

**SG:** Not having painted for several years, I often looked for a re-entry into it. I no longer have the innocence for doing a 'painting' painting, but I still argue within myself as to why 'the real' cannot enter my work through the front door, as it did earlier.

When I went back to painting, I retrieved my art student past, when we made still-lives, landscapes and portrait studies. I 'quoted' these genres in the work *Private Gallery* (1999), conceptually framing them within a larger installation. I have used painting since, more as a way to process the act of seeing and receiving images that are 'pre-chewed', culturally mediated.

The particular film still I used here (*Agneepath*, 2006), though representative of others in this genre, is poignant and relevant to the present. I would have never been able to paint dramatic excess if it hadn't been an enacted scene. The other part of this 'diptych', titled *2/7* (2006), is the newspaper image, showing a political protest that looks almost comical.

AA: Your teachers have been a strong influence in your work. Could you say something about these relationships?

SG: My art schooling began at Ken School of Art in Bangalore, a small school which was established by R.M. Hadapad, a very inspiring artist and a guru who is an icon for many people even today. However, the curriculum, as was prevalent then, demanded to study in conventional ways, separating it from expression.

When I went to Baroda to study under Professor K.G. Subramanyan I had skills but not the rudiments of a language. His method of teaching was to get you to understand the fundamentals of perception, the ways of seeing, and how to read the formal elements in art and in traditional art craft through the ages. He never asked me what the meaning of the figures I painted was, he didn't want to do that kind of storytelling with me. Against this background, I think much of what I do is exploring languages.

AA: You have always been an independent thinker, and also a doer! You have been through many schools and genres of art practice, and always emerged as an original artist.

SG: I have always had my own agenda, which did not come about by putting any definitive theoretical framework before me. I never wanted to be part of any group, I found it very uncomfortable.

AA: What is it that you found uncomfortable? There were groups. And people came together because through talk and friendship, the nuts and bolts of a movement came about.

SG: Though I may have been making work that came out of a certain language because it was the climate at the time, I always felt that the nuances of difference were equally important. This made me feel that I was not part of a collective.

AA: Where did this self-confidence come from?

SG: I don't know if I would call it self-confidence. It either feels good or not, it's a matter of intuition. When I work, I visualise a lot. I do not think through a theoretical model, although I persistently throw questions at my work, and at myself.

AA: When you first started off as an artist, you could have gone in any direction. What did being 'contemporary' mean to you?

SG: When I think back on those early years, I remember we had many books on art, but not much access to art you could call contemporary. R.M. Hadapad taught us that a single image has a lot to teach. For us, as students, a reproduction in an art magazine was important enough. The intensity with which we looked gave us a lot. We were encouraged to question and respond to people and to issues around us. For me being contemporary happens in this interaction, so it is a habit I have imbibed. I am not constantly looking for what is happening elsewhere or for the latest trend. If I come upon it I study it, but I do not go very far looking for it.

AA: After studying in Baroda and then Santiniketan, you went to London and Paris, and that's when you met your husband Christoph, an artist from Switzerland with a conceptual background. What kind of influence did he and that phase of your life have on you?

**SG:** I would say that he was my fourth teacher, the third being Peter de Francia, a professor at the Royal College of Art in London. Christoph enabled me to read what was happening in Europe in the 1980s and earlier in terms of both the material and conceptual ways of thinking, in the same way K.G. Subramanyan had opened up my world to painting and to modernist language earlier. The shift in my work happened later.

**AA:** That shift is also about questioning the 'aesthetic' element of your work?

**SG:** I would say the major shift was in terms of figuration and form. Abstraction was what I strived towards, as the figure became less central. Specificity within abstraction is very important for me. It is the most challenging aspect of creating a work. I work towards layers of meaning while trimming the form to the extent that is possible, so that the reference or the source is suggested but not stated. If my work were read as just beautiful it would be inadequate. It would be a reading of the surface markers alone, because the underlying layers are dark.

**AA:** Does this formal beauty become a necessary façade or a camouflage, a trope one needs to encounter and pierce through to experience the inner layers? What you introduce into your work when you bring an ordinary, everyday object or material into your studio from the street is a transformative process, a process of refinement. The tar drums, the thread and needle, the cow dung, etc. The resulting objects are beautiful and melancholic, stripped down to the point they are bare and economical.

**SG:** I want the material to speak. But at the same time it has to serve my purpose, I need to control it, to subvert it. Most of my works are labour intensive, but I do not like to make the process immediately apparent, like in *And Tell Him of My Pain* (1998), for which the process of making was a private performance. I feel this labour adds to the intensity of the work, while the appearance remains simple and minimal.

I see my work as dark, it is not about the lighter things in life. And so in a way the visual appearance is a mere skin. But this darkness is not something I want to throw at someone in the face. It has to unravel slowly.

**AA:** Is this darkness about having to live with a constant knowledge of the violence that happens both in an overt sense and at a subliminal level? In India violence exists at many levels, and the disparity we have to live with is so violent too. The gap in standards of living and lifestyles seems to be increasing with globalisation.

**SG:** My work has addressed this obsessively, the insidious nature of violence, overt and inside us, in our psychic makeup.

**AA:** This form of development propels society into a kind of amnesia. You see this in the city, which is so rapidly reconstructing itself. The layers and memories of the city of the past risk getting erased. Where do we artists fit into this accelerated pace of change? How do we bring back those that are forgotten, the lost memories, the people who are made invisible? This makes me think of your work *Someplace* (2005), for which you created a subterranean world made of plumbing pipes and transmitted within it, the voice of A.S. Murthy, a popular radio talk show commentator and household name in Kannada.

SG: I think art is about resistance, or at least some aspects. And this resistance can strengthen us, forcing us to think aloud, to evaluate change and get our ideas together, each time anew. For my generation the past has been important, and it is still in relation to our identity. The present is readable mainly as relative to that past.

In this work, the voice the spectator 'lends an ear to' talks about the everyday world in Kannada, my mother tongue, which will be understood if the listener speaks the language or, if not, be abstracted into sound. The plumbing pipes are one of the most basic networks of any city or town, so most people will be familiar with it, while the language makes the piece locally specific. My main aim was to present the monologue of A.S. Murthy in a gallery, to bring it into a contemporary discourse of the local and the global. And I wanted to make the act of listening visible.

In this same exhibition I presented another work, titled *Portraits* (2005), which consists of backlit advertisement showcases. No advertisement appears in them, because local political groups, most often lumpen elements, break them down and disfigure them with tar when they see an advertisement in English or when they are on a rampage, as happened recently on the occasion of the funeral of Raj Kumar, the Kannada film idol, or the massive event organised by the American Tele-evangelist Benny Hins. As you know, there has been an ongoing movement for Kannada, the regional language, to be more visible and audible, which is about identity politics rather than about language. So these showcases remain often empty, illuminating their shabby interiors.

Like in the sound work, where I resisted the use of earphones, here I resisted the convention of using Translite boxes. This is perhaps due to the stubbornness that I mentioned earlier. Instead, I inserted the photographs of the lit advertisement boxes, printed on backlit flex, into the gallery windowpanes. The fluorescent tubes in the image are lit up by daylight, which I found quite ironic.

AA: As well as urban life, your work has also reflected life outside of the big cities in India.

SG: I lived most of my childhood in small towns, in huge colonial bungalows which came with my father's government job. But I was also familiar with rural life. My parents were born in a village, and their lives spanned both contexts, the rural and the urban. My father, also a writer and a folklorist, documented folk music and collected folk objects. Folk culture, the special dialects, folk musicians dropping in and out of the house, their performances... it was all part of my upbringing. But it didn't become a reference in my own work until I made the shift in the early 1990s. From then on grassroots traditions appeared as one of the possible sources to work with, familiar elements that were until then unexplored in terms of contemporary artistic practice.

This realisation was a moment of freedom for me. Combined with certain skills I had acquired along the way in my art education, it made me feel like I could now explore the rich sources out there. My work seems to be disparate at times, but the links are all there.

AA: The city of Bangalore has grown enormously over the last few years, and the rural villages at the periphery have been absorbed into the city. How do you access this rural in the city, and how is this present in your work?

SG: There is fresh cow dung outside my door even today! When I moved into the area where I live it was still on the edge, between city and countryside. This is where the work *Private Gallery* is located: the city being the façade in the formica sheets on the outside, and in the inside of the room-like installation a rural world with its smells of the cow dung pats, etc.

There is however a distancing mechanism for the urban viewer. As an urban person with memories of the rural – a shared but ‘other’ space –, I posed to myself the question of how I deal with these memories. And this situation was not mine alone.

I made the cow dung pats the size of a fingertip, considerably smaller than the palm-sized ones one normally encounters in the countryside. From the distance, cow dung pats on walls are perceived as mere dots, for instance when one travels through country roads. Inside the installation, even as you are forced into close proximity of the material, they are distant in terms of memory.

AA: It seems that the city of Bangalore has transformed from a paradise for retired people into a global hub of information technology, among other economies. How does globalisation influence your work and your life? How do you react to this change, as an artist, as a citizen?

SG: We seem to be at the receiving end of the good and the bad, of the money and the opportunities that come our way. The dogma of the global market as a self-regulatory and borderless system no longer guarantees the power to those who are more influential within the social fabric, as happened in the early post-independence days. It is something else, bodiless big capital, that seems to be in control.

But it is important for us, artists, to do what we want to do and resist what we think is not right. In my view being an artist means that we are not part of the system in a mindless way.

AA: Do you think that history and a search for identity weighed down the generation of artists who came before us?

SG: Yes, but there were reasons for it. Recently I read an article in which Kannada writer Chandrasekhar Kambar quotes Gandhi, “I will leave the doors and windows of my house open, but I will not allow myself to be swept off my feet.” Kambar adds a consideration from a contemporary perspective: “we can leave our windows and doors open, but what if there were no walls anymore?” On the one hand we can say “yes, we can now be citizens of the world, we can be cultural nomads and we don’t need to be confined by the walls of our house.” Not having walls is a frightening and disorienting prospect for many. For others, walls are restrictive. Then we have the fundamentalists, who want only hard concrete structures around them and for others as well, through coercion. Ironically, the ‘new global market ideology without walls’ seems to be coercive as well.

AA: One thing that has enabled your work is your interaction with people who live in the interstices of our society and our economies. The economy

of manual labour that you have engaged with, the road workers, the *agarbatti* or incense makers, people who work within what we call the ‘informal economy’. Could you say something about these interactions, especially in relation to *Darkroom* (2006), your recent work with tar drums?

**SG:** A colony of road workers came to Cholanayakanahalli, where I live. What struck me was the way they were constructing their homes with the materials they worked with – tar sheets that came from flattened tar drums. They were not the most comfortable spaces to live, but it was a logical way to create temporary shelter. All their baggage and cooking utensils were placed on top of this construction. The inside-outside nature of the shelter was an image, an impression which kept coming back to me. I was interested in the way the material defined the space, and I wanted that to happen in my work as well. Beyond this, the material did not mean much to me. I could have made other structures with the sheets, but what is important is the link to their dwellings. I would, however, be reluctant to explicitly state “this is a road makers home and this is how they live”. I am very conscious of my privileged life situation. So when I am addressing issues which seem to be related to people such as those road workers, I take my position of privilege, and the privileged position of the viewer, as the point of departure.

**AA:** The work also speaks about the ways in which human beings can improvise their living environments.

**SG:** Yes, it is about ingenuity, about the way they work around what they have. It seems logical to do that, in their circumstances.

**AA:** As artists, I often think we are located in between, looking with horror at a rampant development on the one hand, and on the other with fascination at invisible labour. It is both despair and elation in the face of these colliding worlds and world views.

**SG:** I find it impossible to look at anything around me without thinking about the processes behind it. I am aware I am not ‘a worker’, in the way that I am empowered economically, socially, etc. There is an unspoken class apartheid around us. But I have a curious empathy with the people I work with, for example with Rehmat, a welder whose skills, after 40 years of experience repairing objects of daily use, have been invaluable to me. Handling a material makes me understand its limitations and its potential. So at the level of ideas I know what is feasible and what is not. Proximity to the material defines the formal aspects of the work and its tangibility. I therefore do not outsource the physical aspect of art making. I feel I need to labour as much as my assistant. But working side by side is not easy. Promises are broken, time stretches and shrinks easily, and tomorrow can be a week away. But there are also moments of so much generosity.

GEETA KAPUR

## Framing/Unframing

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I See *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of Artwork*, edited by Paul Duro (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996). My argument owes much to this excellent anthology. See in particular the introduction by Paul Duro and essays by Louis Marin, Deepak Ananth, Jonathan Bordo and John C. Welchman.

It seems that the act of framing/unframing the artwork still produces some anxiety, even though the deliberately deframed artwork has a history already as long as the twentieth century. The anxiety seems to centre around giving up the security of a contained form of visibility; a sense of the loss of integrity in the two senses of virtue and cohesion. And, conversely, there is the fear that a contemporary unframed object rejects in some way the aura and the form of reification that makes it into a desirable commodity.

I offer some preliminaries that involve opening out the formalist aspect of the act of framing/unframing in twentieth century modern art.<sup>1</sup> I then want to test the proposition against actual forms of art practice today, especially installations, and possibly even beyond art practice into the much referenced public sphere that gives art-historical inquiry a critical function.

Already as far back as the turn of the twentieth century, the classical modernism of artists such as Edgar Degas and Paul Cézanne, positioned in conjunction with Realism, introduce an antiperspectival view – not by expunging the real world but by a refusal to dematerialise paint. Thus, subsequently, modernist art comes to stand for the thing itself, paint as paint, establishing the objecthood of art. To telescope the argument via the two masters: Pablo Picasso's Cubism questions the window/mirror paradigm and the frame provides what we may call today a deconstructive device for rethinking illusionism; Henri Matisse's orientalist paintings with multiple borders become markers of cultural difference. By the time we come to Jackson Pollock's all-over paintings and more generally to the late modernist art favoured by Clement Greenberg, the frame/plane/colour/surface are structured as perfect coordinates in such a way as to exhaust, in my understanding, the myriad possibilities of painting by making it a predictable icon for retinal attention.

In contrast to such doctrinaire formulations on abstraction, we should engage with the dialectic proposed by Robert Rauschenberg, by his 'flat-bed' pictures, and by Jasper Johns's profound parody of the object nature of the artwork. From the 1960s, a whole series of Pop artists, most notably Andy Warhol, insist on forcing into the frame the *real* in everyday material terms, and more specifically in terms of the fully commercial commodity-form. They thus undermine the formal assumptions of high modernism.

Equally, but almost in exact opposition to Pop art, the 1960s movement of Minimalism – think of Richard Serra and Robert Morris – works largely with abstract form

2 Julie Ewington, 'In the Wild: Nature, Culture, Gender in Installation Art', in Catriona Moore (ed.), *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970-90*, Allen & Unwin/Artspace, Woolloomooloo, NSW Australia, 1994, p.242.

and foregrounds, simultaneously the manufacture of concrete objects and the act of physical deframing. This is a strategy to create a contiguity between the spectator's body, the artwork and real space. Thereby a phenomenological continuum is established and, with it, a relational ideology abutting on the *real* that accomplishes a "subconscious social structuring of perceptions".<sup>2</sup> Around the same time, Arte Povera in Italy produces a more eccentric interactive field: between the real world and the contingent presence of 'poor' materials and between these and everyday things that are alternately an obstruction/attraction for the spectator walking into the desacralised precincts of art. I am referring to work such as that of Michelangelo Pistoletto and Jannis Kounellis among others. Both movements attempt a deconstruction of the discrete object-fetish, even as they magnetise the field; both movements theatricalise and also in the process desubliminate objecthood in art. They thus make art forms part of the larger object-world, and by giving it this ubiquitous status they confront the exclusivity of aesthetics and critique the reified institution of art.

In this kind of art-historical reading, art is ideology not only because it gives a substantive message but because of the transformative sign systems at work. Joseph Beuys stands at the intersection of several propositions that relate object and sign within a contemporary (subjectively mediated) mythology.

In a next step, Conceptual artists of the 1970s work out ways of a formal economy on the basis of an *idea*, and their claim of being democratic, anarchic, entropic, radical is based on the process of semiotic *re-coding* rather than on actual fabrication. Thus formal propositions are advanced as political acts. Conceptual art, as practised for example by Hans Haacke, should be understood as a polemical debate on contexts, a debate that tests the orders of signification of the very paradigm/frame. It becomes, metaphorically speaking, a debate on horizons: a critique of the limits of tolerance in the politics of class, of gender and of race. It is no wonder that some of its foremost protagonists are women artists: Mary Kelly, for example, is positioned at the cutting edge of Conceptual art.

Thus the argument here about art with a conceptual intent goes like this: breaking out of the first frame, of painting and sculpture, was a liberating gesture performed by European Dada and the Soviet Constructivists in the 1920s. This impetus was reactivated in the 1960s and 70s when it also renewed the critique of the second or institutional frame surrounding cultural activity. Such an art practice proposes itself as a knowledge construct and it invites us to look for its praxiological potential.

### Installations

Here I want to test the framing/unframing problematic by dealing directly with the installation form that derives from the briefly sketched history of contemporary Western art movements on the one hand, and ritual, performance, 'happenings', popular manifestations of the sacred at street level from many different living cultures, on the other. Precisely because installations set into play different elements like images, texts, objects,

constructions, natural elements, performative persons, it is an open form always seeking but never preconditioning the synthesis of intentions, deferring the processes of sublimation, indeed often leaving the ground of the 'real' fallow for volatile irruptions of signs and meanings.

What I present here is part of a longer argument I am developing about installations in two contexts: the Asian/Indian context and the context of feminist art practice. There is work done on both counts, especially of course on feminist practice, that is a minefield of new aesthetics since the 1970s. Considering the rich proliferation of a post-Minimalist installation form outside the citadel of Anglo-American (male) art; considering its remarkable flowering, its bold and sometimes subversive hypotheses in Asia in the last two decades, I should like to see my work in India contributing to parallel art-historical agenda. By that I mean that we appreciate continuities *and* discontinuities in the trajectories we trace for pertinent aspects of Indian art today.

We can, I suppose, make a parallel exposition on the living traditions of Indian art and superimpose this onto the debate on installation, as many contemporaries tend to want to do. This would be part of a compulsive continuity thesis about Indian art. If I do not privilege this aspect of installation art, could it mean perchance that I am more interested in marking discontinuities? In any case, I believe that situational, that is, cultural *into* political readings are at least as valuable as readings from tradition and need to be put in the balance of what, at any given point of time, constitutes a contextualised art practice. It remains to be debated whether we call it national, regional, local; and whether we still hold on to the category of the authentic/Indian or pitch that notion into the global net. What trajectory we follow in order to make our own art-history agenda brings with it both choice and responsibility of naming the place we speak from and the place can be as much a political as a civilisational configuration. Each one of these choices has its ideological import, including the quick-slip into subjectivism that today, in the postmodern scenario, so easily substitutes the historical, despoiled and denigrated but still the only utopias!

What is not included in this argument, though it appears in my extended work, is the way both protocol and anarchy of the (classical and popular) theatrical mode of visual presentation of bodies and objects is inducted into contemporary installation art. What I do want to comment on is the too-often claimed relation between installation art and the traditional artifice – the sacred sign/object in a ritual space. Asian/Indian artists may (at last) turn their back on what is by now an exhausted discourse of ritual art. We now look towards street, the platform, the public theatre, the metropolis. Here, even if there is some restaging of the ritual in its more popular incarnation, it is in terms quite radically different to the supposed source; the source is not any longer the (dubious notion of the) collective unconscious. It is irreversibly historicised by the self-generating city that is the engine of the modern. And it is, I believe, the ambition of many artists to relate to the inner-city combustion in the aftermath of globalisation.

Most artists in our part of the world live in the metropolis. They are well prepared to recognise that an installation today is by definition inscribed in a public space: a museum or gallery or an alternative city site. It is, by conceptual extension, situated in the presumed public sphere with a citizen-subject on the track, so to speak. Conceptually at least this allows one to dovetail the more passive designation of the spectator with that of a citizen-subject so as to arrive, if not always, at a more political or at least at a more alert and participatory viewer.

There is evidence of artwork based on this kind of hypothesis in Mumbai, in Delhi and in Bangalore, where some of the artists are engaged, among other things, in working out the country-city interface. Here I will take the example of Sheela Gowda to make the point about how an intelligent counterposing of continuities and discontinuities opens up the current discourse on art practice, and how critical reflection in turn helps to uproot set notions about source, language and authenticity.

### Sheela Gowda

Sheela Gowda's work during much of the 1990s makes the point of cultural deconstruction through ingenious relays of material signifiers. The social, indeed inalienably local commitment of Gowda's is as, or perhaps more important, than the art history she subliminally commands. Her commitment to the material existence and everyday labour of women in rural India leads her to a choice of materials like cow dung treated/combined with neem oil (as a preservative) and *kumkum* as pigment. Besides being part of the everyday economy of the Indian woman who must recycle animal excreta as house plaster and fuel, this choice gives Gowda as an artist a malleable sculptural material that is replete with meaning and, indeed, properly signified in the realm of environmental/cultural *ethics*. Even as the woman's material existence is signified by Gowda literally mucking with nature in a mimetic act, an anti-aesthetic is also benignly put in place accepting ridicule and recoil as part of the regenerative process of making art.

In rural India the stuff is turned into cow dung cakes, and used for fuel, and we know that this kind of domestic activity remains in a country like India almost unchanged since the time of early rural societies. She also turns the cow dung into gold streaked plaques, bricks and walls. On one occasion the material has been plumped out, smeared with red *kumkum* and strung from a wall like blood pouches or as she calls them *Gallant Hearts* (1996). This transposition of basic raw material becomes a way of anointing female labour, and the fact that she does this through a seemingly ritualistic means could take the argument outside my preferred framework, but for the fact that she decathects any hint of magical compulsion from the objects she makes. So that we can return full cycle to her subtle art-historical allusions and, with that, to her ideological clarity.

Her work is honed to a kind of Minimalist aesthetic that makes the message chaste yet radical; and she achieves it precisely by cross-transposing the meaning of sign and substance, by finding a semantic economy and a spare form resembling a life-sustaining parable. We can identify

distinguished predecessors among feminist artists. Eva Hesse, who had, though she died young in 1970, already broken the flank of the predominantly male Minimalist contingent. She had loosened out the space of the white cube, installing fragile, rope-and-limb-like forms that were formally 'gridded' yet corporeal, sexual, insinuating. Gowda's antecedents may be tracked along a detour with Ana Mendieta, who, in a compressed oeuvre spanning a decade (1975-85; she also died young) introduced the female body into the problematic binary of nature and culture in a way that the body itself functions as an indexical (a physical/imprintable) rather than as a symbolic presence within nature.

Julie Ewington, a feminist art historian, asks in a generative essay titled "In the Wild: Nature, Culture, Gender in Installation Art", why artists work with messy intractable things drawn out of the larger chaos of nature itself, and she argues:

But it must be recognised that materials in installations often do double work – as the subject of a sign *and* as its content. This is a highly unstable oscillation between codes. And its instability is exciting.

Installation is an art of hybrid vigour. The key to these works is the artists' mobilisation of the irreducible character of material objects and natural elements, set into relationships with contrasting objects from social life.<sup>3</sup>

Not wanting to be subsumed under a discourse on nature-culture that typecasts women art practitioners almost by default; not wanting to bear the cross of such mystical/mystificatory readings of a woman's creativity; recognising the dangers of a too easy eco-friendly essentialism attributed to women artists, Sheela Gowda introduces in her work during 1997 and 1998 a more clearly marked site of social intersection. She deliberately introduces the woman and her tasks, her skills, as the 'other' in the nature-culture nexus.

In a 1998 labour-intensive artwork titled *And Tell Him of My Pain*, she passes an unbroken 700 foot long thread through a sewing needle and doubles it in the middle. She then repeats this with 89 needles and clutches the bunch (of 89 double threads) together with red pigment and glue to make a 350 feet long cord that is 'a semi-flexible body', coiled, knotted, looped in the space of the white cube, the gallery. Each cord has, on one end, a head of 89 steel needles that have performed their meticulous task and now droop and glisten like prickly ornaments, like miniaturised objects of torture. At the other end there is a playful tassel 'tail' of unglued individual threads.

The looped cords, trailing along the floor, climbing the walls of the gallery, dissolve the strict right angle format of the gallery space. (Or so it appeared in the installation at the Japan Foundation Galleries of the Asia Centre, Tokyo, in 1998, where she participated in an exhibition of eight Indian artists titled "Private Mythologies". She had a fabricated space of 7 metres by 7 metres with the height of the walls rising to 6 metres). These single-surface, high-tension 'drips', the strung up drawing that is deep red on white seems to flatten out the wall and floor in a recall

3 *ibid.*, p.230. The author is known to several Indian artists, and the fact that she is referring among others to Australian artists like Joan Grounds, Robyn Backen and Judy Watson, who have chosen to work in India as it so happens, makes for a common cause for feminist art on a global scale.

of modernist abstraction now made theatrical by a physical body that is not strictly sculpture and yet occupies physical space with an almost monumental ambition. Here is a re-inscription of the artist into a heavily coded spatiality of the enclosed gallery, here is an allusion to art history through a sinuous manoeuvre in space.

There is thus a double (triple) take here: modernist aesthetics of ultimate abstraction through a dematerialised space; reference to the dominantly male aesthetic of Minimalism; and mimicking/challenging the monumentality with a corporeal factor: the set of two 350-foot-long cords appear like great coils of disembowelled innards.

Above all this is a work done by a woman: "Tell Him of My Pain", the title says. Umbilical cords, a noose of intestines, blood trails become the body's extension-abstraction in longing. This is a visceral work, but very far from being gory; it makes of her pain a strange ritual of self-perpetuation. The woman's body is erotically signified through its absence, and the work involves you in the combined enticement: of her labour and of her narcissism, which together turn into the act of doing, nurturing, being.

But when you return to the formal proposition, the cords, laid out as loosely knotted arabesques in the large white cube, are meant to confound body scale. Even as you walk through the festooned space, the body disentangles itself and the linear pattern recedes into a spatial dimension set for a virtuoso performance that you prefer to behold rather than re-enter. This particular route, which finally takes Gowda to her concern with the ethics of female labour, passes through a form of symbolic theatre, tantalising you by pulling out yards of her wound/womb, and the very arterial system that pumps blood to her heart.

This kind of metonymy that never recoups the body to which it refers, what sort of a subject does it figure, what sort of an encounter is this? I would like to present Sheela Gowda's work in the first place as a radical unframing of the exhibition space. For, even as she feels at home in the white cube, she transposes onto the logic of the frame a compulsion to recede, to efface itself. Within this spatial schema, she unravels her own body and clutches the streaming ropes at certain points on a metaphor of pain.

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