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**Modernism's Relational Geographies:  
Global (Art) History With and Beyond the  
Nation**

*by*

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Talking to a gathering of historians is an opportunity for which I, an art historian, am grateful; at the same time it presents a challenge, since our respective disciplines have long had a tendency to set up walls separating one from the other. This proclivity is certainly more pronounced in the case of art history, whose practitioners have assiduously sought to secure the fences of their domain against potential intrusion, especially by historians. Art history has been slower than other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences to respond to the call of the global turn. While global history has a number of decades of research and writing to its credit, art history framed globally began to attract the attention of scholars only around the beginning of this century. Since then, publications seeking to define what it means to write a globally oriented art history have been prolific. My intervention therefore enters an already densely populated field, but perhaps it can make belatedness productive.<sup>1</sup>

For both historians and art historians, the contestations over writing in a global perspective unfold along two discursive axes: the emancipatory rhetoric of globalization that eulogizes a world with dissolving borders and its networks of cosmopolitanism; and the heavy footprint of the nation state, whose adherence to retrospectively invented and imposed tradition continues to shape the production and organization of knowledge, both conceptually as well as institutionally. We are aware of a constant tension between the nation as framing space and those processes that cannot be contained within that space. In the case of art history, such phenomena include artists, pictorial practices, and canons on the one hand, and museological displays, curators, collectors, and patrons on the other, all of whom have had mobile histories across centuries. These can no longer be plausibly accommodated

My heartfelt thanks to Christina von Hodenberg and the GHIL for inviting me to deliver this prestigious lecture, and to members of the audience for their engaged discussion. I am also grateful to Jozef van der Voort for his editorial support with the publication.

<sup>1</sup> Though numerous, these publications are mainly edited volumes, often eclectically compiled. I have discussed this historiography at length in my forthcoming monograph *Can Art History be Made Global? Meditations from the Periphery* (Berlin, 2023).

within disciplinary frameworks and institutional settings constituted according to fixed and stable units such as nation states or civilizational entities dating to the nineteenth century. This tension has brought forth a flurry of approaches and terminologies—all by-products of the global—such as entangled, connected, transnational, or transregional histories. I will not go into the issue of their explanatory power and its limits at this point, as that would take us off on a tangent. Instead, I would like to bring to the table my approach as an art historian to the place of the nation within a globally framed art history, as it deviates from those endeavours of global studies which, by virtue of their very definition and self-positioning, seek to transcend and transgress national space and scale. I wish to attend, rather, to the uneven and at times divergent regional valences that have surfaced within histories of the ‘national’ and deploy these as a wedge to break open the idea of the nation.

The nation, characterized in the social sciences as a juridical, geopolitical entity, takes on in the artistic imagination the additional quality of an imagined conceptual realm, not territorially bounded, but one that in the imagination of artists and scholars could both be local and transgress boundaries. This is particularly so in the once-colonized regions of the world, where the idea of the nation was an emancipating force: the nation was the terrain on which the struggle to cast off the colonial yoke was waged and won. In my work I explore a more complex dynamic between a critique of the national as a constricting ideological frame and the uses of its past as a ground of liberation, especially in the history of post-colonial nations. I bring this position to the study of artistic modernism, conceived of as a global process and viewed from the so-called periphery—that is, a location beyond the Western Europe–North Atlantic axis. The ‘periphery’ in my use of the term connotes both a locus and a scholarly perspective. Though identified with marginality and obscurity, a so-designated periphery has the capacity to challenge foundational ideas of exclusivity and universality, and to offer alternative positions to sedimented intellectual claims. In other words, mining the peripheries to rebound on the centre can effectively dismantle the Manichean dualism of centre and periphery. However, such a proposition cannot be carried out by simply reversing an established hierarchy while

leaving its teleology intact. Writing from the periphery is premised on viewing both centres and peripheries through a transcultural lens; in other words, unpacking both to unravel their mutual relationality (or relational geographies, as in the title of this lecture) and the transregional processes constitutive of each region. The trajectories of modernist art in the twentieth century, for instance, were constituted through the experimental energies of sites across the globe, traversing all continents. Yet scholarship produced in regions which have been parcelled into national units or isolated area studies does not feature in the contemporary canon of the global. Not only has it not found a place in a global repository of intellectual resources and narratives, its potential to exert analytical pressure on that repository, to recalibrate, even unsettle the certitudes of that canon, has yet to be fully realized. We might therefore usefully imagine the periphery less as a place and more as a critical modality.

The study of artistic modernism as a relational phenomenon nurtured by experiments at multiple locations across the globe, rather than a story of diffusion from Euro-American centres to absorptive margins, has followed innumerable studies of modernity, which are site-based, yet interconnected. These have argued for a modernity that is migrant and mutable, continuous and at best contingent; one with many possible 'habitations', to borrow from Dipesh Chakrabarty.<sup>2</sup> The recognition that the West, though a major 'clearinghouse of global modernity', no longer offers the sole template for the unfolding of its culture, is now scarcely a matter of debate.<sup>3</sup> Modernism, a cognate of modernity, was a product of a world of artistic and cultural exchange enabled by commerce, colonialism, and travel. Today, our atlas of modernist art has been enriched by countless micro-stories unearthed from innumerable sites across the globe. These include Shanghai, Mexico City, Bombay, Tehran, Ljubljana, Cairo, Dakar, Tokyo, São Paulo, Lahore, Lagos, Moscow, Beirut . . . the list goes on. In the light of such findings, it is no longer plausible to hold on to a now notoriously historicist or Greenbergian account of modernist art

<sup>2</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> The expression comes from Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, 'On Alternative Modernities', *Public Culture*, 11/1 (1999), 1-18, at 1.

that presents Euro-America as its original locus and central axis, from where its achievements are said to have spread and brought forth derivative versions of its expressive forms. Each of the stories above presents us with a vigorous modernism that is not reducible to stylistic content, informed but not determined by counterparts in Paris, Vienna, or Berlin.

Today the challenge facing art historians and curators, therefore, is no longer that which the art historian Kobena Mercer in 2005 described as 'the limitations of our available knowledge about modernism's cross-cultural past'.<sup>4</sup> Nor can we continue to speak of this plurality in terms such as multiple, alternative, regional, or vernacular modernisms; each of these designations implies a normative centre whose status it reaffirms. The challenge is how to meaningfully write those modernist initiatives and experiments that unfolded in locations beyond the New York–Paris corridor into a shared relational matrix. In other words, what kind of an art historical framework do we require in order to go beyond simply adding unknown modernist artists to an existing canon or, alternatively, relegating regional articulations of the modern to the isolated domains of individual 'area studies'? How can regions and nations be brought into a more dynamic, non-hierarchical, and, importantly, non-homogenizing relationship with each other? Can we bring to the term modernism a less formalistic intonation and open it to accommodate experimental ventures, at times disparately so?

Two recent exhibitions, *Postwar* at the Haus der Kunst in Munich and *Museum global* at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf, have provided an initial set of impulses to meeting the above challenge.<sup>5</sup> Exhibitions enjoy the licence to plot their material

<sup>4</sup> Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 7.

<sup>5</sup> The full title of the show in Munich, curated by the late Okwui Enwezor, was *Postwar: Kunst zwischen Pazifik und Atlantik, 1945–1965* and it ran from 14 Oct. 2016 to 26 Mar. 2017, with catalogues in German and English. See Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes (eds.), *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965* (Munich, 2016). The Düsseldorf exhibition *Museum global: Mikrogeschichten einer ex-zentrischen Moderne* was initiated by Marion Ackermann and curated by a team from the museum; it ran from 10 Nov. 2018 to 10 Mar. 2019. See Kathrin Beßen et al. (eds.), *Museum global: Mikrogeschichten einer ex-zentrischen Moderne* (Cologne, 2018).

associatively and in doing so can bring a fresh impetus to scholarship. *Postwar* sought to redraw the geographical and chronological map of modernism by its inclusion, alongside the North Atlantic West, of sites in emergent nations in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, as well as those of the newly formed Eastern bloc in East and Central Europe. This inclusion also importantly meant doing away with a persistent blind spot in the telling of modernism's story. In other words, until recently that account concluded in 1945, thereby leaving out all those places where anti-colonial struggles and the formation of new nation states were imbricated with the formation of cultural modernism. The years following 1945 also witnessed, alongside the bipolar divisions of the Cold War, the formation of a Non-Aligned Movement comprising newly independent nations of Asia and Africa that refused co-optation by one or the other of the power blocs. Such far-reaching changes in the world order generated innumerable debates that sought to link issues of aesthetics and form with cultural questions of autonomy, subjectivity, humanism, international solidarity, and regionalism. The idea that art and artists had a role to play in a period of instability, recovery, and self-definition through new subjects and experiments with form and materials was crucial to the shaping of artistic modernity. Actors in different regions of the world invariably worked with, and within, the language of dominant international forms and practices, yet could and did resist their formal canonicity. The exhibition *Postwar*, in other words, made visible on a global scale a shared horizon for the study of modernism—be it in the Caribbean, South Asia, Egypt, or what was then Yugoslavia—even as each site developed its own vocabularies and practices generated by regional and local constellations and the subjectivities of the actors involved.

Within such shared horizons, individual studies take a particular site as a starting point from which to delve into deep histories as well as explore connections and resonances with regions across space. This was the approach taken by the second exhibition—*Museum global*—which, as its subtitle suggests, used microhistories as a curatorial device to make tangible a global matrix of shared concerns and local artistic initiatives. The exhibition parcours allowed visitors to follow the logic of the individual stories featured there, and in doing so uncover the tracks of barely acknowledged networks, of sites of interaction, of

journals and universities, all of which force open the binaries positing the West against the rest. Surrealism in North Africa, the CoBrA group, Mexican muralism, and the Harlem Renaissance are only a few among an increasing number of examples that show modernist art to have been from its inception a multi-centred, always and already trans-cultured phenomenon, whose actors dynamically engaged with its sites in Europe, without however presuming the universality of the models they encountered. Each of the micro-stories showcased in the exhibition took as its starting point a site beyond Europe, to then unravel specific issues and conditions of the particular locality where modernist ideas became a productive site of confrontation and negotiation. Though the individual actors were focused on dealing with the situational problematics of their own contexts, their responses to shared or similar problems and constellations allow us to speak of resonance or indirect reception rather than direct encounters. Resonant microhistories are more than a fractured plurality of stories; they are particular though already global, revealing synchronicity and coevality where previously belatedness or derivative practices were assumed.

The different approaches that the two exhibitions embody make it evident that bringing regions and nations into a relational geography asks us to simultaneously delve into localities and to navigate multiple scales – the regional, the national, and the global. It also means having to grapple with scale from the perspective of the actors for whom it becomes a mode of self-positioning. For instance, in a context of anti-colonial struggle, the nation in subjective perception is conflated with locality; for the actors engaged in that struggle it emerges as something to be retrieved from the larger, global constellation of empire. Indeed – and this brings me to what I started with – the national within this context emerges for large sections of the once-colonized regions of the world as a double-edged tool in the making of the modern. Historically a mobilizing force for reclaiming sovereignty and channelling modernist energies, the nation, by the very logic of its formation, ends up replicating those colonial temporalities and hegemonic representational modes it sought to overturn, an aspect that we will encounter in the course of this lecture.

Let me now zoom into the context I wish to investigate here, which is that of South Asia. There are different paths I could take, for the

story of modernism in South Asia is as multifaceted as it is varied, and any attempt to characterize its several currents and divergent trails as a single and distinctive mode ends up being a vexed process. It is not my intention to recapitulate an encompassing story of modernist experiments in the subcontinent; instead I have chosen to follow the trajectories of certain individual actors across the scales they traversed and ask how these trajectories were constitutive for artistic modernism, which I wish to study from a peripheral location, as a relational phenomenon. I should also perhaps point out that relationality encompasses, together with intersections and entanglements, also refusals, failed connections, or disruptions. Global histories have just begun to pay attention to such phenomena.<sup>6</sup> I will problematize this issue in order to signal the possibility that the urge to be 'global' could also become a trap.

My account of actors begins with the art historian Stella Kramrisch (1896–1993), a name certainly known among scholars of South Asian art, though a serious scholarly engagement with her work is still awaited despite her enormous productivity.<sup>7</sup> She has been equally overlooked in art histories in the West, even though she was an Austrian who studied in Vienna and wrote and published in German, especially in the early decades of her scholarly life. The story of Kramrisch's life unfolds across three continents. She completed her doctorate on early Buddhist art from Sanchi and Bharhut under the supervision of Josef Strzygowski and Max Dvořák at the University of Vienna. In 1919, she moved to London as an interwar emigrée and continued her scholarly pursuits. It was here that she met Rabindranath Tagore, and following his invitation moved to the newly founded university Visva Bharati in Santiniketan in 1921. In the years that followed, Kramrisch became an important scholarly voice who took on the role of a cultural mediator to make what she discerned as the 'inner affinity' between Indian and European art traditions visible

<sup>6</sup> The recently instituted Käthe Hamburger Research Centre at the LMU Munich, which defines its thematic focus as 'global dis:connect', is one such research enterprise.

<sup>7</sup> A recent work exploring Kramrisch's life and scholarship through a feminist lens is Jo Ziebritzki, *Stella Kramrisch: Kunsthistorikerin zwischen Europa und Indien. Ein Beitrag zur Depatriarchalisierung der Kunstgeschichte* (Marburg, 2021).

and graspable to audiences in Europe and India through regular acts of cross-cultural translation.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, she wrote in German to introduce Indian art to a German-speaking public. On the other, she lectured to artists and students at Kala Bhavana, the newly formed art school of the Visva Bharati, on the art of Europe from the Gothic to impressionism and post-impressionism.

Modernism in Santiniketan at this time was primarily informed by East Asian art; at the same time, it drew impulses from the indigenous folk and craft aesthetic of Bengal. Into this context Kramrisch introduced modern European art together with a language of formalist art criticism with which to write the story of traditional as well as modern art. This vocabulary found its way into her prolific writings on a range of subjects, from ancient Indian sculpture to the cubist forays of the artist Gaganendranath Tagore (1867–1938), and left a lasting impact on emergent art critical writing during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>9</sup> In addition, she initiated and curated an unusual exhibition of expressionist works from Germany in Calcutta in 1922, a subject to which I will soon return.

Before that let me focus on Kramrisch's role as cultural mediator of Indian art and its history—that is, her ambition to make Indian art known to a primarily Western readership. To this ambition she brought her scholarly skills acquired primarily at the University of Vienna, followed by a stint in England, and ultimately enriched by her direct encounter with sites, practices, and objects in India. Her prolific writings furnished an art historical narrative no longer dependent on ethnological or antiquarian studies, two frames that had characterized contemporary perspectives on Indian art, both in the German-speaking regions of Europe and in colonial India. Among the significant writings of this time addressed to a German readership, two stand out: the monograph *Grundzüge der indischen Kunst*, published in 1924, three years after Kramrisch arrived in India, and the chapter of some 135 pages on the art of the Indian subcontinent that she contributed to the sixth volume of Anton Springer's *Handbuch*

<sup>8</sup> Stella Kramrisch, 'Indian Art and Europe', *Rupam*, 11 (1922), 81–6.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph M. Dye III, 'A Bibliography of the Writings of Stella Kramrisch (1919–1981)', in Barbara Stoler Miller (ed.), *Exploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch* (New Delhi, 1994), 35–48.

*der Kunstgeschichte*, published in 1929.<sup>10</sup> This volume of Springer's survey was entitled *Die aussereuropäische Kunst*; it was edited by the sinologist Curt Glaser to respond to a growing interest in non-European art, underpinned – as the preface claimed – by the desire to break free from a Mediterranean classical canon.<sup>11</sup> This trend was part of a historiographical current in German-language art history called *Weltkunstgeschichte* (world art history), about which I have written in detail elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> *Weltkunstgeschichte* had emerged in response to the influx of objects from Asia and Africa into European museums, which challenged the discipline of art history – hitherto fixated on classical antiquity – to find explanatory paradigms to make sense of this new repertoire. This strain of art history was inspired by anthropology, social psychology, and not least Darwinian theories; it sought to locate the 'origins' of art (in the earliest societies) in order to establish a relationship between art and the stages of development of humankind. Art, however expansively the exponents of *Weltkunstgeschichte* may have defined it, always served as a key to access a culture. The state of development of a group of people could be read off from the material surface of any of its objects, be it an archaeological fragment, a carpet, a bronze deity, a cave drawing, or a painted scroll. If a particular art is deemed raw or ugly, the same must be inferred about its makers.

Kramrisch instead brought her training in formalist art history as well as her study of Sanskrit aesthetics to her writings. This approach registered a shift from the evolutionist-cum-anthropological orientation of *Weltkunstgeschichte*. Indian art, Kramrisch sought to demonstrate, was neither reducible to 'ornament', nor to be studied as a source of unspoiled forms that promised a new beginning for Western modernism. Her account approached the subject as a distinct field that merited serious study using methods identical to those deployed to investigate European art. For the context of South Asia too, Kramrisch's approach involved an important taxonomic shift. At the time

<sup>10</sup> Stella Kramrisch, *Grundzüge der indischen Kunst* (Hellerau, 1924); Anton Springer and Curt Glaser (eds.), *Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte*, vol. vi: *Die aussereuropäische Kunst* (Leipzig, 1929).

<sup>11</sup> Curt Glaser, 'Vorwort', in id. and Springer (eds.), *Die aussereuropäische Kunst*.

<sup>12</sup> See Juneja, *Can Art History be Made Global?*, ch. 1.

of her arrival in India, a large number of actors from a range of professional groups were involved with Indian objects: archaeologists, anthropologists, photographers, and makers of plaster casts on the one hand, and collectors, officials, and keepers of antiquities in museums on the other. The status accorded to these objects, however, remained a subject of controversy. Discussions took place primarily within a colonial context of collection, administration, and knowledge production. The terms used to designate the objects ranged from idols to artefacts or from antiquities to curiosities, depending on their provenance and their individual trajectories.<sup>13</sup> The category of art, or fine art, belonged to a securely guarded domain whose keepers were not yet ready to accord Indian objects an entry. In the work of colonial scholars, a discipline fixated on classical Greek civilization continued to provide the normative framework within which aesthetic quality was evaluated.

As her sojourn in India progressed, Kramrisch's scholarship turned primarily to the domain of Hindu sculpture and temple architecture, where she located the primordial principles of aesthetic production. Her magnum opus, *The Hindu Temple*, represents a crystallization of her synthetic approach that viewed the temple as a symbolic image of the cosmos realized through the integrity of architectural forms, sculptures, myths, ritual practice, and metaphysical conceptions, as they are visualized in the eye and mind of the worshipper.<sup>14</sup> As with her contemporary Ananda Coomaraswamy, the formative role of Islamic traditions and practices that came in the wake of centuries of migration from West and Central Asia finds no place in Kramrisch's oeuvre, though unlike Coomaraswamy her approach was less dependent on abstract metaphysics and more rooted in concrete objects and images – visual, material, and literary.

Strange though it may sound, the prolific output of this Viennese scholar can be seen as providing a blueprint for nationalist art history in the years following the emergence of India as an independent nation state, though this is rarely acknowledged. Her formalist methods,

<sup>13</sup> Discussed in Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton, 1997), ch. 3. See also Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford, 1977).

<sup>14</sup> Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1946).

which replaced anthropology to dignify objects as art, proved useful in taking the art of the erstwhile colony out of the zone of 'otherness'. The discourse of difference that pervades Kramrisch's understanding of Indian art proved to be equally attractive to Indian scholars seeking to rebut the colonial castigation of its inadequacies. Nationalist scholarship too searched for the primordial sources of artistic creativity in an ancient Hindu past, while subjecting a more recent, millennium-long Islamic presence to erasure. It privileged the transcendentalist dimension of art production and strove to place artworks within an indigenous knowledge system waiting to be excavated from aesthetic or philosophical texts. Nationalist art history in this sense was equally a product of transculturation to disciplinary approaches and methods formed elsewhere, which had unfolded through a history of contact among actors across scales.

Recent years have seen an emergence of interest in Stella Kramrisch, who has been valorized as a cultural broker. A high point of this celebration of her persona is the exhibition I mentioned earlier which she curated in 1922, now known as the Calcutta Bauhaus exhibition. This show has in recent years been singled out, both in art historical accounts and in global curatorial projects, as a foundational moment in the history of modernism, as a harbinger of a 'transcultural avant-garde'—a valorization that deserves a closer, critical look.<sup>15</sup> The exhibition itself, which opened in December 1922 in the rooms of the Indian Society of Oriental Art in the heart of colonial Calcutta, brought some 250 works from Weimar to Calcutta. These works comprised primarily prints, woodcuts, and watercolours by leading artists of expressionist and abstract currents, including Lyonel Feininger, Wassily Kandinsky, Sophie Körner, Gerhard Marcks, Georg Muche, Oskar Schlemmer, Paul Klee, and not least Johannes Itten, who was responsible for selecting the exhibits and organizing their transfer at the German end. The works were intended from the start not only for exhibition, but also for sale to interested buyers.<sup>16</sup> Detailed information

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Regina Bittner and Kathrin Rhomberg (eds.), *The Bauhaus in Calcutta: An Encounter of the Cosmopolitan Avant-Garde* (Ostfildern, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Contrary to the long-held view that the initiative to organize a show of works from the Bauhaus came from Rabindranath Tagore, archival documents, including Kramrisch's correspondence with Johannes Itten, have now

on the curatorial aspects of the show has long remained elusive, though some has recently come to light, including the exhibition catalogue, which had for many years been untraceable. It now reveals that a broad cross-section of Indian artists from Calcutta featured in the event.<sup>17</sup> Their work was informed by varying interpretations of what it meant to be 'modern', yet did not reveal an overt resemblance to or even affinities with the formal language and pictorial concerns of Bauhaus modernism. What joined the two was a shared rejection of academic naturalism, introduced to India via colonial art schools. The art world in Calcutta was divided among those who painted in this 'Western' idiom and those who – from a nationalist position – rejected it in favour of a more nativist return to premodern styles.<sup>18</sup> The works of the Bauhaus and Calcutta artists could thus be brought together by a curatorial hand, even though their motivating impulses differed and their understanding of modernist form remained pictorially dissimilar. At the Indian Society of Oriental Art, the two sets of exhibits were displayed in adjacent but separate rooms, so there is little evidence of any form of encounter. If anything, the event of 1922 made visible the deep fault-lines within the Calcutta art world, highlighting the retraction into 'Indianness' as one claim to modernity. In the end only one work was sold – a painting by Sophie Körner. The buyer was none other than Rabindranath Tagore.

In 2013, the event of 1922 was resurrected by a collaborative curatorial and scholarly project to reconstruct the Calcutta exhibition at the Bauhaus Foundation in Dessau, with a view to reframing the history of this avant-garde German institution as a global and cosmopolitan undertaking.<sup>19</sup> The show was an ambitious curatorial experiment that

established beyond doubt that she was the one who initiated and conceptualized the show; see Kris K. Manjapra, 'Stella Kramrisch and the Bauhaus in Calcutta', in R. Siva Kumar (ed.), *The Last Harvest: The Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore* (Ahmedabad, 2011), 34–40, at 34.

<sup>17</sup> A detailed review of the exhibition – in all likelihood authored by Kramrisch – names several of the participating Indian artists and contains six reproductions of exhibited works. See Anon., 'The Fourteenth Annual Exhibition of the Indian Society of Oriental Art', *Rupam*, 13 (1923), 14–18.

<sup>18</sup> Discussed extensively in Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850–1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge, 1994), ch. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Bittner and Rhomberg (eds.), *The Bauhaus in Calcutta*.

sought to ‘restage’<sup>20</sup> the 1922 event, though without any of its works, which have been lost. It was therefore more of a simulation than a precise reconstruction, though it was cast as an example of ‘transcultural modernism’, a label that raises many questions. A word of caution is therefore in order in the face of an eager, unequivocal valorization of what was no doubt an unusual event as a harbinger of a ‘cosmopolitan avant-garde’.

The Calcutta Bauhaus exhibition of 1922 is instead an example of how certain global processes, while propelled by the humanist-cum-vanguard spirit of individual actors, falter in the face of contingencies of local practice and fault-lines within sites where they unfold, so that the intended aims of individual initiatives prove to be at best only partially achievable. This in turn raises questions about the criteria scholarship deploys to judge the long-term effects of such processes. Our evaluation often tends to rest, at least in part, on specific intellectual predilections and philosophical convictions of our times. Instead, examples such as this one urge us to further nuance our vocabulary as we unpack the morphology of transculturation, and to make place for failed connections, so we can speak more precisely and plausibly across disparate contexts.

The second actor whose trajectory—again across scales—I wish to trace here is an artist, Francis Newton Souza (1924–2002). Souza, a Christian from Goa, was one of the founding members of the Progressive Artists’ Group,<sup>21</sup> which was constituted as a collective

<sup>20</sup> The term is taken from Saloni Mathur, ‘The Exhibition as “Re-Job”: Reconstructing the Bauhaus in Bengal’, in Bittner and Rhomberg (eds.), *The Bauhaus in Calcutta*, 191–9, at 191.

<sup>21</sup> A photograph taken in 1950 that documents the formation of the group can be found online in Ranjit Hoskote, ‘Requiem for a Pioneer’, *Art in America*, 20 Dec. 2012, at [<https://www.artnews.com/gallery/art-in-america/aia-photos/requiem-for-a-pioneer/>], accessed 19 Jan. 2023. It shows a mixed group of Indians and Europeans—artists, critics, connoisseurs, and gallery owners—exuding optimism and solidarity, assembled in the somewhat cramped space of an exhibition gallery. The paintings hanging on the walls in the background are recognizable as the work of the artist and member of the group, M. F. Husain (1915–2011), seated in the front row (fifth from left). The owner of the gallery, Kekoo Gandhi (1920–2012) (standing, second from right, wearing a striped tie) was one of independent India’s earliest gallerists

enterprise in 1947, the year of India's independence. Six young men,<sup>22</sup> all migrants to Bombay, came together with another small group of Jewish emigrés from Central Europe who had sought refuge in Bombay in the 1930s, having escaped the Nazi regime. What joined the members of the group was an opposition to colonialism and fascism, which also resonated with critiques of Western humanism in a world recovering from the trauma of war and genocide. Decolonial analyses of liberal humanism's complicity in upholding colonial violence found expression in the domain of art, be it in Nigeria, Egypt, Vietnam, or Indonesia. Everywhere, cultural sovereignty and individual autonomy conjoined in a productive tension to seek out artistic and literary forms adequate to articulate the aspirations of a modern, culturally confident, decolonized subjectivity.<sup>23</sup>

On the Indian subcontinent, the liberation from colonialism went hand in hand with the trauma of partition. This was preceded by a devastating famine in Bengal and a communist-led peasant uprising in Telangana. All these developments violently destabilized the idea of the 'modern', built on nostalgia for the past. Instead, culture was seen to play a crucial role in the movement for national sovereignty and to free an enslaved economy. The artists who came together to

who helped give shape to the infrastructure of an emerging art world. The photograph has been reproduced in several works: Yashodhara Dalmia, *The Making of Modern Indian Art: The Progressives* (New Delhi, 2001), fig. 20; Karin Zitzewitz, *The Art of Secularism: The Cultural Politics of Modernist Art in Contemporary India* (London, 2014), fig. 3.5; Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930–1990* (Oakland, Calif., 2015), fig. 48; Zehra Jumabhoy and Boon Hui Tan (eds.), *The Progressive Revolution: Modern Art for a New India* (New York, 2018), fig. 41. Kekoo Gandhi is discussed by Zitzewitz, *The Art of Secularism*, ch. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Zehra Jumabhoy intriguingly mentions the presence of a female artist, Bhanu Rajopadhye Athaiya, within the group, whose name appeared once in a catalogue of 1953, and who apparently soon gave up painting to become a costume designer. Though two of her works are reproduced in the Asia Society exhibition catalogue of 2018 mentioned above, her relationship to the group remains inconclusive; see Zehra Jumabhoy, 'A Progressive Revolution? The Modern and the Secular in Indian Art', in ead. and Tan (eds.), *The Progressive Revolution*, 18–19 and figs. 1 and 2.

<sup>23</sup> See Okwui Enwezor, 'The Judgment of Art: Postwar and Artistic Worldliness', in id., Siegel, and Wilmes (eds.), *Postwar*, 20–41.

form a 'progressive group' engaged with several currents: they looked out to Mexican muralism, to Négritude, and to the powerful languages of expressionist art brought by the exiles from Austria, all of which catalysed their enthusiasm into productivity. Bombay modernism survived on a meagre budget, minimal infrastructure, and through the support of individual sympathizers. Its members at the same time had recourse to a specific self-fashioning that drew heavily on the romantic habitus of European modernism. In other words, they styled themselves as a collective of bohemian artists living on the edge of poverty, bonded by their valorization of rebellion per se and a deeply masculinist ethos.

Within the Progressive Artists' Group, the 'progressive' was singled out in the group's manifestos as standing for untrammelled freedom to experiment with form; yet their pictorial choices worked against the dominance or isolation of formalism. Instead, they set out to rethink the political, the personal, the popular, and the everyday as dynamically expressed in paint, colour, and facture. The preoccupation with the human subject triggered experiments with the human form in various states, ranging from the heroic-statuesque and the voluptuous to the deprived pushed to the edge of precarity. However, the qualities and the subjects that artists of the group selected from European modernist idioms were those already institutionalized in the West rather than the younger, more radical avant-garde positions that came with surrealism or Dada. Their subjects—the modern city, monumentalized peasants, workers, and prostitutes, the marginal figure of the rag-picker, and above all the celebration of the feminine as a nurturing force for a male artist's creativity—were all a direct legacy of a European canon, ready to be infused with local personae, sensibilities, and stories. For instance, the intense modernist preoccupation with the female nude lent itself to easy assimilation within an 'Indian' tradition of erotic religious art; for artists such as Akbar Padamsee (1928–2020), K. H. Ara (1914–85), Souza, and especially Husain, sensuous femininity was a paean to the fecundity of Indian visual culture. Work by Souza grafted the language of bronze statues and temple sculptures on to the modernist genre of the nude. Ara's nude figures drew attention to the role of the Indian bohemian artist living in a squalid Bombay garret. He made no bones of the fact

that his models were prostitutes from the red-light district of central Bombay close to where he lived.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, a celebration of the rural and the marginal as a counter-image of the industrialized urban—a representational trope characteristic of much of nineteenth-century European art<sup>25</sup>—resonated with the Gandhian valorization of the village. A condensation of this translational praxis is *Zameen*, an early work by M. F. Husain, whose title stands for both Earth and land.<sup>26</sup> The painting on canvas extends horizontally over a width of some five and a half metres, taking on the quality of a frieze. It is a non-narrative ensemble of compartments, two-dimensional forms, emblems, and pictographs, brought together in a self-consciously experimental idiom. Its vivid details—a peasant tilling the land with a pair of bulls, a woman winnowing grain, a dancer, a woman churning milk, another giving birth, religious symbols such as the wheel, the footprint associated with the Buddha, Vishnu, and the prophet Muhammad, the hand evoking Fatima—are both an inventory and components of a mythology of the young nation. This emphasis on the nation was an open one, turned inwards as well as looking outwards. No contradiction was felt in creating an art for the nation that was embedded in a global context.

Yet the collective life of the group did not endure for long following independence. Three of its artists, including Souza, migrated to metropolitan centres—London, Paris, New York. They decided to turn their backs on the ‘developmental nationalism’<sup>27</sup> of the Nehruvian years

<sup>24</sup> Souza, Padamsee, and Husain were all tried for obscenity; Husain was subsequently accused of ‘hurting religious sentiments’. In each case, the artists’ defence rested on the art historical evidence of Indian ‘tradition’. See e.g. the full text of the judgement in the Padamsee case, published by Mulk Raj Anand, the editor of *Marg*: ‘Judgment in the Trial of Akbar Padamsee for Alleged “Obscene Paintings”’, *Marg*, 7 (1954), 90–1; also Zitzewitz, *The Art of Secularism*, 86.

<sup>25</sup> Monica Juneja, *Peindre le paysan: L’image rurale dans la peinture française de Millet à Van Gogh* (Paris, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> *Zameen* can be viewed online at [<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/zamin-maqbool-fida-husain/iwHUdYLtb88WQg?hl=en>], accessed 24 Jan. 2023.

<sup>27</sup> The term is taken from Atreyee Gupta, ‘After Bandung: Transacting the Nation in a Postcolonial World’, in Enwezor, Siegel, and Wilmes (eds.),

that, though it valorized culture in the service of the nation, privileged genres such as murals and public sculpture at the expense of an infrastructure congenial to more individualistic, experimental forms of creativity. Aspirations to modernity during the Nehruvian years indeed soon showed that many of the modernization programmes of the young, now autonomous nation continued the colonial policy of appropriating forests and rivers as key sites of resources for industry. In doing so, they extended the expropriation and marginalization of large groups of inhabitants—classed as tribes (again in continuity with colonial censuses)—who at the same time became objects of a politics of both everyday violence and cultural nostalgia.

In 1949 Souza moved to London, becoming thereby a participant in a reverse movement: the post-colonial journey of migrant artists from the former colonies of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean into the Western metropolitan world.<sup>28</sup> This was a transformative conjuncture in the story of twentieth-century modernism, when individual histories came to be mapped across (post-)empire and former colony in a fresh connective relationship. Souza's early years in Britain were marked by isolation and poverty, as his work encountered little interest in the art world. Reviews of his work were couched in orientalist tropes of the exotic or belatedness, characteristic of art critical responses to the productions of artists belonging to Asian, African, or Caribbean diasporas in Britain. From the start of his artistic career as a member of the Progressive Artists' Group, Souza's work was a kaleidoscope of multiple iconographic references—the sculptural language of the nude body appropriated from Hindu iconography, the jagged planes of expressionist idioms, and, above all, the tortuous as well as sublime aspects of religion proffered by Christian art. His continued and deep exploration of these became a way of identifying with his new location; yet they ran counter to the expectations of metropolitan viewers and critics anxious to 'read' diasporic identities through references to a single locus of origin.

For Souza, Christianity was a bridge that connected him to other diasporic communities, in particular artists from the Caribbean. Yet *Postwar*, 632–7, at 635.

<sup>28</sup> See Sarat Maharaj, 'The Congo is Flooding the Acropolis: Art in Britain of the Immigrations', *Third Text*, 5/15 (1991), 77–90.

it was also more than that: the image of Christ as an incarnation of the tragic was a tool that enabled the artist to intervene in the post-war crisis of humanist values. The enquiry into the failure of human civilization unfolded in two directions: to rethink the memories of mass annihilation, as in the work of Nietzsche and Sartre; and in the discourses of Négritude, as well as Frantz Fanon's impassioned work *Black Skin, White Masks*, which reclaimed for the once-colonized the ethical right to bring forth their vision of humanity. For Souza, having grown up in the midst of Goa's pageant-like church imagery, a locally transcultured Christianity – with its primordial paradoxes of suffering, guilt, and the promise of grace – came to be an enduring force shaping his life and art. Even as his innumerable paintings and drawings of a suffering Christ were injected with unrelieved affliction, even rancour, Christianity remained for the artist a vital source of humanism. His rendering of Christ imbibed some of the emotions surrounding the anguished debates of his time – rage coupled with a castigation of colonialism's degradation of humanity.<sup>29</sup> The crucified Christ has been turned in the artist's work into a black, spindly figure, as if cobbled together from thorny pieces of wood, with grotesquely jutting white teeth, a signature trope in the artist's religious imagery. Flanked by two men – one of who is surmised to be St John – clad in patched shirts of red and green, this deformed triad borders on the edge of caricature rather than inviting compassion. Souza's handling resonates with the similarly brutal treatment of religious themes by his contemporaries, such as Francis Bacon (1909–92), articulating the deeply disturbed psychic representation of the human subject that haunted the imaginations of post-war generations.

London also afforded Souza the opportunity to study Goya's works in the National Gallery, and from these came the compulsion to engage with another face of Christianity: the theme of hypocrisy tied to clerical authority. The artist's rendering of Christian saints bristles with ambivalence. St Sebastian, ironically titled *Mr Sebastian*, dons a dark suit and tie very much in the style of the numerous caricatural portraits of 'gentlemen of our times' painted by the artist:

<sup>29</sup> See F. N. Souza, *Crucifixion* (1959), at [<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/souza-crucifixion-t06776>], accessed 24 Jan. 2023.

face without a forehead, bearded, bulging eyes, and the signature protruding razor-teeth.<sup>30</sup> Arrows that had once pierced the saint's innocent body and provide the clue to his martyrdom, are now stuck with a vengeance into the 'gentleman's' black face and neck. These and other works brought Souza favourable critical attention during the 1950s—he participated in group exhibitions, while the newly opened Gallery One hosted a one-man show of his work, generating sales and reviews by eminent critics such as John Berger and Edwin Mullins.

The mid 1960s brought forth a series of 'black paintings', anchored within a complex network of artistic practices that characterized a global modernism of the post-war years. Several readings of these enigmatic works have been proffered. While Okwui Enwezor locates them in the discursive frame of a 'blackness constituting a resistance to an idealizing and blinding whiteness',<sup>31</sup> Aziz Kurtha conjectures that these works were a homage to Goya's *Pinturas negras* of the last years of his life, from around 1819.<sup>32</sup> A connection between Blackness, civil rights movements, and the resistance to racial segregation and violence has been frequently sought in works by artists investigating the tensions between humanism and colonialism,<sup>33</sup> yet the subject of racism was only rarely addressed in Souza's oeuvre. In the context of one particular painting, *Negro in Mourning*, that stands apart from so much of his other work in that it exudes a deep empathy and melancholy for its subject, the artist refers to the period of heightened racism in which it was painted, suggesting a gesture of mourning

<sup>30</sup> A reproduction of *Mr Sebastian* (1955) can be seen in Neysela da Silva-Reed, *Postwar Modern: New Art in Britain 1945–1965. Learning Resource* (London, 2022), at [<https://www.barbican.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/2022-04/Postwar%20Modern%20A4%20Teacher%20Resource%20large%20text%20v1.pdf>], accessed 15 Sept. 2022. For examples from the 'gentlemen of our times' series, see Rob Dean and Giles Tillotson (eds.), *Modern Indian Painting: Jane and Kito de Boer Collection* (Ahmedabad, 2019), Figs. 78, 79, 80, 81, 85.

<sup>31</sup> Enwezor, 'The Judgment of Art', 32.

<sup>32</sup> Aziz Kurtha, *Francis Newton Souza: Bridging Western and Indian Modern Art* (Ahmedabad, 2006), 39.

<sup>33</sup> Enwezor, 'The Judgment of Art', 32–3; Homi K. Bhabha, 'Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Condition', in Enwezor, Siegel, and Wilmes (eds.), *Postwar*, 350–5.

for a victim of racist violence.<sup>34</sup> Souza's works in the *Black on Black* series emerge above all as a formalist experiment in their refusal to choose between the unproductive binary of abstraction and figuration, instead deliberately combining figuration with facture.<sup>35</sup> The 1960s saw similar experiments in black among expressionist artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Ad Reinhardt as an act of exploring the limits of the visible.<sup>36</sup> By allowing the figure and the ground to merge and interpenetrate, the black paintings demand of the viewer an intense act of looking, almost an act of excavation of the resistant forms deeply ensconced in the thick impasto of black-on-black paint. Though immediately suggestive of a classic melancholy, the works are a demonstration of tremendous skill both as painter and as draughtsman. They are also designed as a challenge to techniques of mechanical reproduction, demanding light at particular angles in

<sup>34</sup> The work, part of the collection of the Birmingham Museums Trust, is reproduced in Shelly Souza, 'Shelly Souza's Elegy to A Negro in Mourning', *Sotheby's.com*, 7 July 2020, at [<https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/shelley-souzas-elegy-to-a-negro-in-mourning>], accessed 10 Jan. 2021. Souza cites her father's message of 16 Oct. 1997 to the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery: 'Although I wasn't involved in any unpleasantness over skin colour and have never been, prejudice is a fact of life. Being born in India I know better. But the black man, the negro, had the worst of it. In fact, it was in London that I became aware of this black-white discrimination. Much of it had to do with sex. It was dangerous for a black man, a negro, to be seen with a white woman!' The artist's statement draws attention to the nuances within practices of racial segregation that distinguish between Brown and Black. Though he experienced racism in post-war Britain, he also saw himself as an empathetic observer of 'black-white discrimination'.

<sup>35</sup> In 1966, London's Grosvenor Gallery hosted a solo exhibition of Souza's works entitled *Black Art and Other Paintings*; in 2013, it featured many of these monochromatic works in a fresh show, *FN Souza, Black on Black*. See [<https://www.grosvenorgallery.com/exhibitions/126-fn-souza-black-on-black-frieze-masters/overview/>], accessed 20 January 2021.

<sup>36</sup> See the catalogue of the exhibition at Haus der Kunst, Munich: Stephanie Rosenthal (ed.), *Black Paintings: Robert Rauschenberg, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Frank Stella* (Ostfildern, 2006). A recent essay on Souza's black paintings, which appeared soon after this lecture was delivered, examines the intersections of 'the politics and poetics of color' within the larger context of post-war conditions; see Atreyee Gupta, 'Francis Newton Souza's Black Paintings: Postwar Transactions in Color', *Art Bulletin*, 103/4 (2021), 111-37.

order for the viewer to be able to penetrate the layers of paint and get a glimpse of the images concealed in the dark depths. At once a palpable material surface and a metaphysical proposition, a painting acts as a space that refers to another space, challenging, exhorting the viewer to grasp figure and ground in their complex organic unity. These works, no doubt an important conceptual development within expressionism, already gestured in the direction of art across the Atlantic. Indeed, soon after this exhibition, which was strangely overlooked by art criticism in the mid 1960s, Souza left England for the USA where he spent the remainder of his life, returning to India shortly before his death in 2002.

This account has meandered across scales to underline the exhaustion of diffusionist models of artistic modernism, and instead to see modernism as a deeply relational phenomenon, whatever site we choose as a starting point for an investigation. From this perspective, the explanatory potential of a critical globality that draws on principles of transculturation as an analytical tool exceeds that of the 'transnational', frequently used in global studies to transcend the boundaries of individual nation states, without however disrupting the nexus between the entities 'nation' and 'culture'. Transculturation disconnects culture from the nation state by unpacking its workings and delineating its internal fault-lines. At the same time, arguing from the perspective of an art historian, I have proposed that the national is not entirely incommensurable with the global, this being another underlying premise of much of global history. The relationship between the two that I have sought to explore in this lecture (and which I discuss more extensively in my forthcoming book) is more complex and contradictory in view of the nation's role in resisting the violence of conquest and colonization on the one hand, and its need to stabilize its self-representation through a play of power, dispossession, and everyday violence on the other.

And yet: relational geographies urge us to refuse the choice of the nation as a unit of investigation and characterizing principle of the enterprise of art-making, even while acknowledging its potential as an imagined realm for artistic positions, a life-giving force in the face of colonialism and neo-colonialism. When adopted as an automatic gesture to frame surveys and units of art historical investigations,

the analytical category of the nation is bound to lapse into the ethnographic reflexes that underpin such a choice. Working with and beyond the nation involves using that category to function as a point of critical interrogation, built around questions rather than answers. It can also serve as an opportunity to redraw the matrix of references within which concepts of culture might be recast.

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