

Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices

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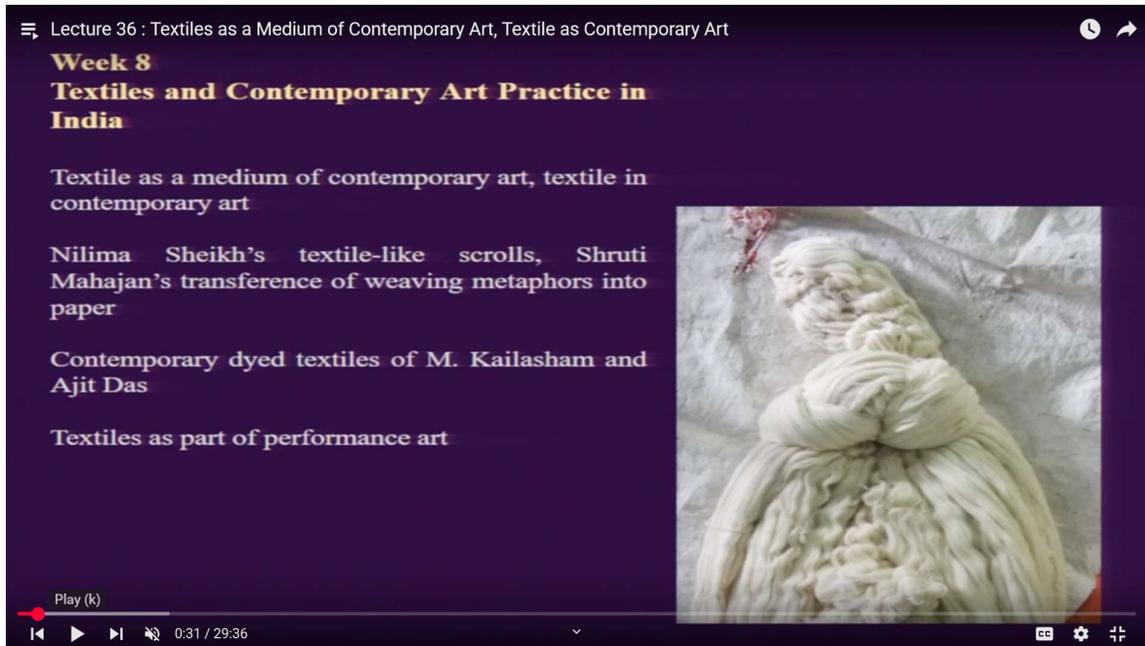
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Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur (IITK)

Week – 08

Lecture – 36

Hello everyone, this is Rajarshi Sengupta and we are here in the week 8 of our course and this is the final week of our course as you know. So, this week we will be talking about textiles and contemporary art practice in India.



The image shows a video player interface for a lecture. The title bar reads "Lecture 36 : Textiles as a Medium of Contemporary Art, Textile as Contemporary Art". The slide content includes:

- Week 8**
- Textiles and Contemporary Art Practice in India**
- Textile as a medium of contemporary art, textile in contemporary art
- Nilima Sheikh's textile-like scrolls, Shruti Mahajan's transference of weaving metaphors into paper
- Contemporary dyed textiles of M. Kailasham and Ajit Das
- Textiles as part of performance art

On the right side of the slide is an image of a white, textured textile sculpture that resembles a human figure, possibly a bust or a large-scale artwork. The video player controls at the bottom show a play button, a progress bar at 0:31 / 29:36, and other standard controls.

So, as you can see in this concluding module or in the concluding week, we will be looking into some of the practices surrounding textiles in the contemporary art field in India. That means that the kind of art practices that we see mostly in the second half of the 20th century after India's independence, of course like I mean towards the end of 20th century and until today. What kind of practices that we see in the contemporary art field? As we know that in the contemporary art field there have been a lot of transitions and those transitions we see from in terms of the medium specificity. That is, how we see a certain kind of material or certain kind of practices for example like, painting on canvas,

oil on canvas or like I mean making sculptures in the much more sort of stable and traditional media for example bronze, terracotta and things like that. How the medium specificity in the field of art making that had changed so far. Then like I mean different ways in which we see that how medium, our intellect, our sensibility all those things sort of collide with each other in the art practice that has been explored in the field of contemporary art practice lately.

In this case as we certainly see that textiles play a very important role in terms of pushing this perceptions about how medium, material and then of course like I mean the thinking process, concept and context all those things they sort of come together. Then also thinking about like I mean what is the politics of a particular medium or what is the politics of a particular material. We definitely had these implications before as well, but then today, we see these things ... [are] sort of brought up in a much more rigorous way in the art practice as well as in the scholarship around art practice in India.

Now so those are the kind of like the larger perimeters for our discussion this week and so we will start the discussion with understanding that textile as a medium of contemporary art and textile in contemporary art. So now what is the difference between these two phrases? So, textile as a medium of contemporary art - when we talk about it we understand that how does this medium specificity that I have already started talking about (in terms of painting, sculpture, graphics, printmaking and then the other allied practices), in this case we see ...[refers to] how textile as something that was long sort of categorized as a medium of craft expressions. then how we see that some of the artists they have challenged these notions. When I say artist I mean the artist who are trained in art institutions in India, metropolitan artist and then they have sort of ventured out to understand this understanding between craft and art. Otherwise we see a number of designers and then of course there are non-governmental organizations, NGOs and many other organizations in which we see this overlapping between the boundaries of art and craft (all those things are challenged). But in this week we will primarily focus on the trained artist. Of course I mean some of the artists who come from background of traditional textile making and then how their presence in the metropolitan spheres

have made us think about the status of textile in the contemporary society in a different way.

When we say that textile as a medium of contemporary art we try to acknowledge that how the materiality of textile some of the innate characteristics, for example the malleability of textile and then the way it is constructed (it can be folded or it can be packed in a particular way or it can also be displayed in a particular way) all those characters are acknowledged and then they are made as part of contemporary art practice. Some of the overarching themes that we see in the contemporary art field are also something that we see them to be reflected in the way that some of those exploration of the material characters of textiles. So those kind of aspects we see when we try to acknowledge the textile as a medium of contemporary art. So, we are trying to see some of the innate characteristics in textile and we are seeing some of the innate characteristics of the ongoing contemporary art activities and we try to sort of see the interrelations between them. So this is how we see that how textile can work as an effective medium of contemporary art.

Now textile in contemporary art means something slightly different. So, textile in contemporary art by that I mean that a number of artists we find them to have used textile as part of their practice and not textile-based works. So those things we can also say in terms of that I mean how textile fragments are used in many people's works and also in the other way that how textile and then like I mean the studies from textile how that generates a new kind of dialogue and maybe the resultant artwork that comes out of this research or this comes out of this exploration about the characteristics of textiles or particular kind of textile that that can be in a different medium altogether. It can be on paper, it can be in the form of animation, anything but then how textile that started this discussion about art making and that gets infused into the other kind of expressions. So that is what we will be looking at when we say that textile in contemporary art. So, with this distinction or like I mean perhaps like I mean this two set of practices we will be continuing our discussion to the other issues that we have.

So, in this week we will also looking into a lot of examples but some of the cases we will be looking much more closely. For example, Nilima Sheikh's textile-like scrolls we will be looking at and then Shruti Mahajan's transference of weaving metaphors into paper. So, these two case studies we will be looking at [to know] how some of those ideas from textile they are then brought into paper or like I mean associated media and then what happens to them. Like, if someone is using certain metaphors or certain characters of textile into paper or into a medium that is not textile, then does that do justice to textile, or like I mean, does that actually help us to understand this overarching sort of relevance of textile beyond its materiality? So those are the kind of questions we will be delving into as part of this discussion this week.

Then we will also look into the contemporary dyed textiles of Mallipuddu Kailasham and Ajit Das. These two artist will be looking at and very difficult it is for us to sort of call them as whether artist or artisan or just dye painter. That is because the kind of background they come from, As they do not come from this metropolitan educated art school pass out artist, but then we see that they have come from certain background that enabled them to practice textile making in a particular way. Then with time, with experience, with exposure and of course with their deep understanding of this medium they have managed to transform their textile making into a different level altogether. Those are the aspects we will be looking at when we consider the dyed textile making of Mallipuddu Kailasham and Ajit Das.

Then we will also look into textile as part of performance art. So perhaps we will be looking at this aspect that the textile as part of performance art after Nilima Sheikh and Shruti Mahajan's transference of the textile metaphors. In one hand we can certainly see that performance art, there is this one particular way of expressing ourselves and we can also consider it as a category of contemporary art practice and that had gained its significance or its importance at least since the 1970s in USA and in the North Atlantic world. By the late 20th century (by the end of 20th century) and early 21st century performance art has picked in the Indian contemporary art scene as well. So, what do we see in terms of performance art and how does that differ from the medium specific art

practice that is something that I have already mentioned in the beginning of our discussion today? So, performance art is something in which we see some of the basic notions about art objects or art practice is denied. So, for example, when we understand art, we usually understand something that is collectible. We understand something that is tangible. By collectible and tangible, I mean that the resultant ... of an entire process can be understood in terms of an object. So for example, if I think about painting as a process, oil on canvas as a process, then the painted canvas that comes out of this entire process, this rectangular or square whatever the shape of the canvas is, is the outcome of this process that we understand that is tangible that can be displayed in a gallery space and that can eventually be collected by either a collector or a museum or an institute. So, this kind of aspects we see them to be ingrained in the making of art objects at least since the mid-19th century in Europe and in the North Atlantic world. And as we know for our long legacy of colonialism and from the mid-19th century we also have a number of art institutions being established in the Indian subcontinent and for that reason the colonial education that still plays a very important role in shaping our idea about art and also like training our minds in terms of understanding what is art, what is not. So, for those reasons this idea about the tangibility of the art object, what kind of object is considered as art, all those things we see them to be equally relevant in South Asia, the ideas which were there in Western Europe or in the North Atlantic world. So, this kind of things we see them to be sort of countered when we see the emergence of performance art in the 1970s. Because by that time after the World War II we see that there were a number of questions in terms of the role of capitalism, the role of market economy, and then also the role of artist. So, whether the artist should always feed into this capitalist market system which is all about collecting and also ... how does this transactional relationship between the buyers, the artist and the audience that sort of continues. So, there were a set of artists we find them to have opposed this way and they have come up with certain kind of art practices which do not really result into a tangible art form. So that is what we see that to be as a performance.

Now performance art is something that is again different from performing art. Now performing art is we understand in terms of singing, musical performances, dance, theatre

and so on which has been long established. Now performance art does not really claim to have that kind of a training or like this kind of a rehearsed way of performing in a particular stage. But performance art is something we see that to be somewhere in between producing an object and then of course like I mean being trained in performance. So, it is somewhere in between. It's kind of ... presents a narrative, a fragmented narrative or an experience of the artists to the audience, but then it does not really conclude in a particular fashion. So, this kind of like I mean the lack of conclusion [and] for making people explore the different ways of understanding a particular situation or a particular problem is something that is prioritized in performance art. ... The way it was established in the 1970s or it gained its importance in the 1970s, we see that it does not make any tangible outcome through this process. Only the documentation of it (through photographic documentation, video documentation) that remains. But then the entire performance that takes place is not really collected in any archive. So those kinds of aspects we see that to be part of performance art.

Now the other very important aspect of performance art we also see and that would be to do with interaction with audience. Now what we see in terms of a number of traditional art making (and when I say traditional art making I ... trace the tradition of this kind of art making back to mid-19th century in Western Europe) in which we see how art making is something that is associated with a particular kind of ... audience, that art objects are something that cannot be displayed on the roadside. Art objects are something that cannot have a ready place for display but it has to be approved by particular institutions, particular galleries or spaces which are again dominated by social elites and if those are then validated, they are considered as art objects. So this kind of like I mean aspects we see and of course like in the early 20th century this ideas got more and more consolidated in the flight of the avant-garde (that was there in the Western Europe) in which we see that the art objects are something that is considered to be there on the walls of the gallery. A lot of times we are supposed to see it from a distance and not touch it, or like be close to it. As it is considered to be something that is almost sacred, that is there on the walls and the viewers should be in a safe distance from them. The similar kind of strategy we can still see in a number of museum settings as well and that can be for security reasons

but also at the same time there is this gap that needs to be maintained between the object and the viewer is something that also adds to the aura of the artwork. So, this kind of aspects we see that to be there when the art objects are created, they are displayed and they are appreciated. Now what happens in terms of an interactive process and what we see in the performance art in the 1970s and later on? We see that the artist frequently goes reaches out to the viewers or the audience; they either talk to them or sort of allow the viewers to touch them or exchange notes and then ... they act upon it. So ... it is kind of like breaking down this gap that we have between object and viewers and the artist, ... this invisible gap that cannot be sort of fulfilled. So those kind of things ...are countered in the performance art. If we try to bring some of these key points together and understand ... what are some of the salient features of performance art (at least what we see from 1970s), we see this stress on not producing something as a tangible outcome of a process there that was prioritized, and then we see this high aspect of interaction between art object, artist, viewers those aspects are ... sort of prioritized. By doing that, they have managed to sort of counter or oppose some of those institutional hierarchy that were established in the field of modern art making in the mid-20th century and so on. But then of course ... those kind of practices that started, they did not really remain the same way as we see in the 1970s. We have definitely sort of moved away from that. I mean what kind of tangible outcome we are thinking about, what kind of aspects of documentation and archiving about performance is now sort of there as part of this kind of art processes. But then in all this, (I mean in certain in case studies in works of certain artist) that textile plays a very important role. The artist [or] the performance artist will be looking at in the Indian context they do not claim themselves to be performance artist as such. But then what we see that I mean textile plays a very important role and perhaps because of its innate quality of border crossing. What we see in terms of ... border crossing is something that is very much involved in textiles. That it is foldable, and then it is malleable but also at the same time it can be sturdy. For all those opposing characters (those are already there in textiles) sort of makes it ... receptive to different kinds of changes and different kinds of transformations that can take place in the field of contemporary art making. And for those reasons we find that a number of performance

artists have also incorporated textiles as part of their practices and continued this discussion about what is the role of textiles in contemporary art practice in India today.

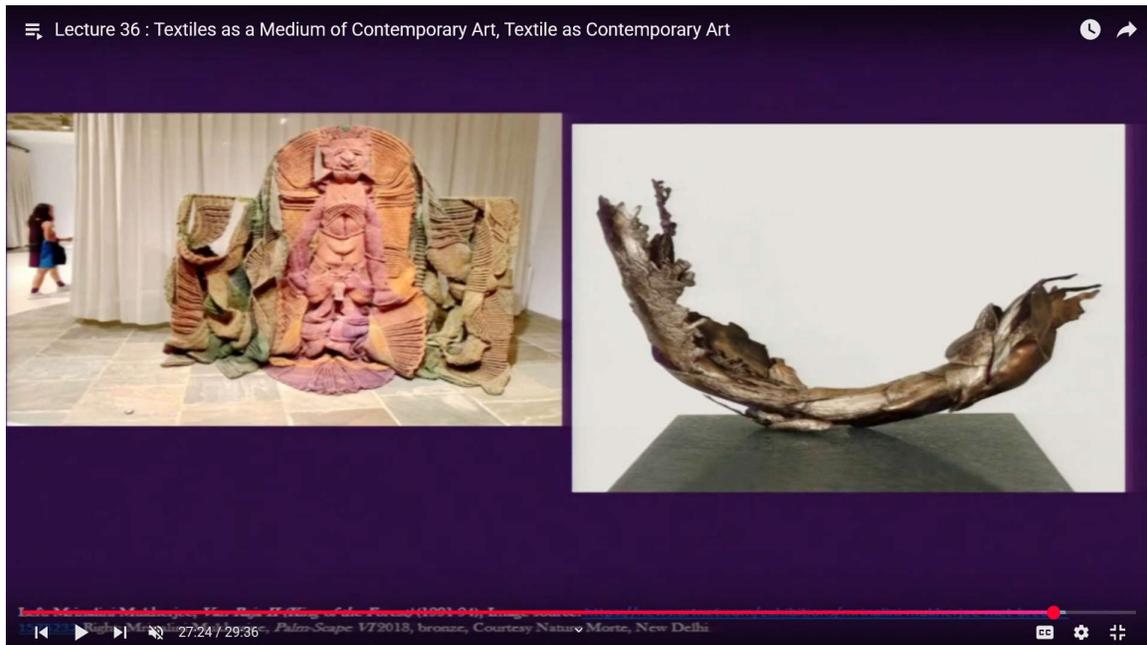


So with that we will be sort of looking into some of the examples as I have already mentioned and perhaps when we talk about that I mean textile as a medium of contemporary art, textile in contemporary art then we see that I mean there are a number of approaches those were taken by artists. Then those approaches are something we see that to be there, [and] how that sort of made a difference in terms of how textiles are looked at. One thing we definitely see is in post-independence India, the kind of institutions [that] were established [for example] in 1949, 1950 around this time, the Maharaja Sayajirao University (MSU) that is well known for fine arts education in Gujarat was established. That sort of ... took the discussion about how contemporary art would move in or ... proceed in the Indian context. It kind of took the lead to continue this discussion (this particular institution), and we see that some of the [imparted] medium-specific education those are there in terms of understanding painting, sculpture, graphics, ceramics and so on. But then we see that it is not just one institute but then, like in many other institutes, for example, Government Schools of Art which were established in the colonial period and so on textile is something that is usually not understood as part of contemporary art practice. Now then there are also institutes like this alternative school that Tagore established in Shantiniketan, Visva-Bharati, and there we also have

like the department of design in which textile design and all those things are taught. But then, that is also something we do not really see that is directly associated with the way we understand contemporary art-making today. So, with all those differences and similarities, we definitely see that there is a boundary between those created by institutes, those created by the colonial education system, and then those that were conveniently continued by the Indian institutions in the post-independence era as well. Then we also see some of the design institutes that came into being; for example, in the 1960s, we see NID (National Institute of Design) and then later on in the 1980s, we see NIFT (the National Institute of Textile Fashion Technology). So, in terms of, like, I mean NIFT and NID, we definitely see that these institutions have produced several successful designers that are working today in India. But then they are considered as designers and are hardly considered as artists. even though in terms of like experimentation, we might find that the designers' works were certainly be considered as art objects (if we sort of go by certain ideas about what constitutes the idea of an art object), then for the kind of classification that we have, and that is continuing since the colonial period we do not consider them as an artist's unless we are challenged. So those kinds of binary we definitely see. So today when we look into a number of those case studies we will be looking at a number of people from different background and try to see that how their art practices or so called art practices that made this kind of questions much more evident for the viewers and for us to reflect on these issues in a much more productive way.

So, we will start our discussion with artist Mrinalini Mukherjee, who was trained in Shantiniketan and of course after that she was trained in the school in Baroda (MSU). So, like this two elite art institutions that we see that there and she was part of both of those places. She was trained in painting, mural making and eventually got interested in making sculptures. Then we see that she was getting interested in making sculptures so instead of thinking that like how sculpture is associated with this hard and like stable material we see that she was more and more interested in exploring fiber. By fibre, I mean some of the indigenous fibre materials so, for example, hemp, which is called *shon* in Bangla. This is something that we see, I mean how she got more and more interested in knotting. It's a particular way of making textile (this Macramé) and something that had

existed in history for a longest period of time, and she definitely did not really make textile in terms of like I mean sitting in a loom and weaving it but she was more interested in hand knotting this fiber (the bunches of fibre) and then making them into sculptures that we see it here. A lot of those sculptures we see them to be gigantic in size, but then they are also foldable; because they are made of textile. They are also malleable and that's because like I mean it is made of this flexible material. Hemp is slightly ... rougher in comparison to cotton or silk but then ... this particular kind of character of the fiber (hemp) that had given both the sturdiness and also ... the flexibility of handling the ... material. So with those we see that Mrinalini Mukherjee in the 1970s started working on this kind of knotted sculptures. On one hand we see that she called these works as sculptures (she named them very specifically), but at the same time we see that some of the basic characters of sculpture [to be absent], for example, it's tangibility [or permanence], I mean of course these are also tangible but then they are not permanent as a bronze sculpture or a metal sculpture. So the permanence of this kind of forms or, like, I mean, the sturdiness [are not the same]. Then, ... this also relates to the gender roles; I mean ... the stable material is something that is more associated with masculinity than femininity, and she sort of managed to delve into these details and use certain materials which can surface this kind of flawed boundaries.



When she made this sculpture (for example on the left side of the screen), we have this one sculpture, that is hemp-made sculpture and this is called *Vanaraja- the king of the forest*. We see that this hemp-made sculpture ... can be installed in a particular way, and through that, the figure can be revealed. But then if it is folded, then we cannot really appreciate the way it was made. So, there is a particular way in which it needs to be displayed, there is a particular way it needs to be unfolded and then kept in a [specific] way. Even though this is made of malleable material, we see the kind of grandeur it has because of its monumental scale, and it sort of also makes us think about the iconic deity figures in the Indian context. So she is clearly drawing from the totemic figures, the sculptural objects from Indian history, but then transforming them with a material that we see to be not traditionally associated with sculpture making. With this knowledge, when she went back to making bronze sculptures, we see that I mean there's this fragmentary idea of making small strips of wax and then putting them together in a way in which it can be moulded into a piece is also there informed by her way of textile making. So, this is how we find that Mrinalini Mukherjee was successful in terms of suppressing the boundary between something that is much more sturdy and tangible and something that is much more malleable and flexible. We'll continue this discussion more in the coming lecture. Thank you.