

# Art in America

OCTOBER 1998

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# IMPORT/EXPORT

## Tracking the Indian Diaspora

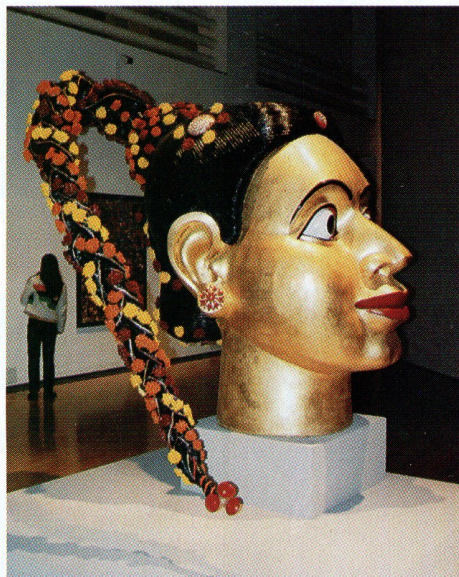
*A recent exhibition at the Queens Museum focused on contemporary South Asian art, much of it installation work created by émigré artists.*

BY THOMAS McEVILLEY

When the art market was booming in the yendrunken 1980s it seemed to have an appetite big enough for everything—even things that it couldn't quite identify. The moment for multiculturalism had apparently dawned. But in less than a decade the yen has fallen, the market has dried up, and the multicultural tendency appears to be petering out. After the Pompidou Center's pivotal 1989 exhibition "Magiciens de la terre," Cheri Samba's paintings were briefly everywhere; do you recall seeing one lately? Once the market crashed, the brief burst of "Magiciens"-inspired tokenism abated. Western markets returned to protecting their own.

Still, the fact remains that many of the most interesting developments in contemporary art are happening outside of western Europe and the United States, in what would be regarded by traditional modernist criteria as off the beaten track. In Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, complex and subtle installation art characterizes energetic and spirited art scenes. On the periphery of western Europe, in Estonia, Macedonia, Slovenia, Croatia and other nations once part of the socialist East, neoconceptual sculpture and photography, video installation and performance art are thriving. In Senegal, Zaire, the Ivory Coast and Zimbabwe, contemporary modes of painting and sculpture vigorously engage both the esthetic and the social. Cuba, Colombia and Venezuela have lately emerged at the forefront of Latin American art. In these and other artistic centers in the previously colonized world influence from the West is felt but not slavishly pursued; art works involve bidirectionality, addressing the cultural roots of the artist and his or her audience at home, while simultaneously engaging the international community through global issues.

In New York, unfortunately, evidence of this global ferment in the visual arts too rarely passes our way, and almost never in major institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim. So far, it's mostly been left to smaller museums to fill in the gaps. Last year, for instance, the Asia Society presented "Traditions/Tensions," an important exhibition of contemporary art from five Asian nations curated by Apinian Poshyananda [see *A.i.A.*, Feb. '97]. Another, more recent, such exhibition was the Queens Museum's "Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora." Curated by the museum's director of exhibitions, Jane Farver, it brought together work by 26 artists of South Asian origin. The show included artists who live in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (the nations created in the wake of Indian independence) as well as others who live and work abroad. Interestingly, even the emigrant artists make work which comes largely from India culturally—theirs is a diaspora community which still acutely feels cultural ties with the motherland.



Ravinder G. Reddy: *Krishna Veni*, 1997, polyester-resin fiberglass, gilt and paint, 76 by 75 by 74 inches. Photo © Sylvie Ball.

"Out of India" was a truly exciting and beautiful exhibition which any New York art-lover would have felt honored to see. While one must congratulate the Queens Museum for mounting the show, it's also necessary to ask why, 15 years after "Primitivism" and its discontents and 20 years after Edward Said's critique of "orientalist" attitudes, New York's bigger and better-known museums remain so hesitant to open their doors to contemporary art of non-Western nations. It's not enough to mount shows of historic, traditional art, as the Guggenheim has recently done with its China blockbuster. If we don't more fully engage the contemporary art of Asia, Africa and Latin America, we risk waking up one of these days to find that the art history of our time was happening elsewhere and we failed to notice.

Indian art since 1947 (the year of independence from England) seems to fall into three stages. The generation of the Progressives, painters such as Syed Haider Raza and Maqbool Fida Husain, who were emerging and maturing in the 1940s, has now become classical and was not represented in "Out of India," which focused on contemporary art. From the next great generation, mostly born in the 1940s and until very recently dominating Western shows of current Indian art, only two artists were included, Nalini Malani and Vivan Sundaram. Instead, the exhibition concentrated on the third phase, a younger generation of artists who have recently become prominent, most of them born in the 1950s and '60s.

As in "Traditions/Tensions," much of the work in "Out of India" is installation art, a genre which, in the last decade, has become an intercultural visual language of historic importance. Installation art is suited to this role because it does not unambiguously proclaim any particular cultural hegemony. A generation or two ago, gestural abstraction (primarily Abstract Expressionism) and its successor, Color Field painting, were globally available styles disseminated chiefly from New York. Their claim to global relevance was based on the metaphysical universals that were held to inform and support the paintings. As numerous scholars have pointed out, these styles were actively advanced during the Cold War period through a series of overseas exhibitions that were initiated by United States government agencies.<sup>1</sup> While this policy was primarily aimed at Europe, it was secondarily directed toward Asia. In India it left an imprint on the work of the Progressives.<sup>2</sup> Somewhat later, a certain influence of Color Field painting was felt in Neo-Tantric painting, the Indian abstract style named for its relationship to Hindu Tantric art of the 18th century.<sup>3</sup>

The practice of gestural abstraction seems to have been one useful cultural instrument among others in newly independent India's drive to develop a sense of an expressive individual selfhood not based on religious tradition. However, in India and elsewhere it subsequently became clear that Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting were irrevocably associated with the formalism of Western hegemonists to whose advantage, ultimately, a claim for universalism worked. These were genres whose expressions of abstract order and depersonalized feeling fitted comfortably into the lobbies and offices of corporate headquarters. The style spread around the world in a manner that felt disconcertingly like the spread of multinational capitalism.

Installation art comes differently contextualized. Much of it is rooted in the ritual environments of cultures outside the industrialized West. Although installation art has sometimes involved Western artists adopting or appropriating cultural forms from the Third World, its cultural signature is often non-Western and nonmodern. It is natural for it to allude to the universal or the timeless not through emblems of abstract order but through invocations of a quasi-neolithic substratum of peasant village culture that is still visible in much of the Third World.

It's no surprise, then, that installation as a medium has been more congenial to counter-hegemonic outsider statements than to demonstrations of Western hegemony. In addition, the fact that installation art involves real objects from the artist's environment is of crucial importance. Each artist tends to incorporate into his or her installations

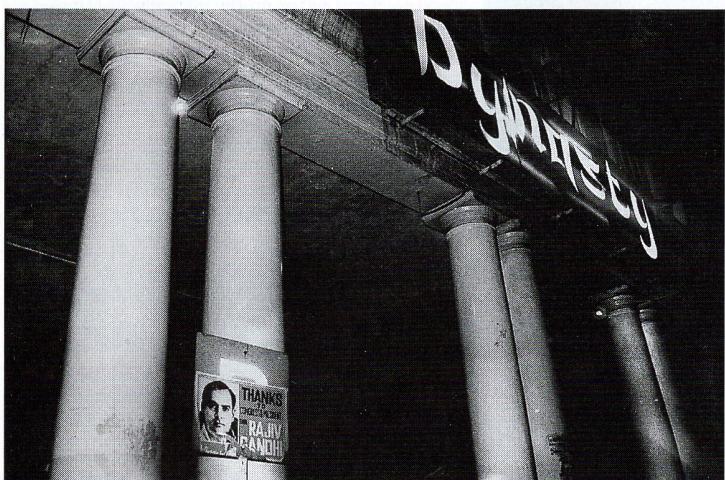




**Homai Vyarawalla:** Mrs. Indira Gandhi on vigil near the body of her father (Pandit Nehru), who died on 27th May, 1964, lying in state at the Prime Minister's residence at Teen Murti Marg, New Delhi, black-and-white photograph, 17 by 22 inches.



**Dayanita Singh:** Dolly Jabbar in Her Colonial Calcutta Home, 1997, black-and-white photograph, 16 by 20 inches.



**Satish Sharma:** One of 10 black-and-white photographs from the series "Deconstructing the Politician," 1990-96, 16 by 20 inches each.



**Pablo Bartholomew:** South Asian Muslims Pray during Id at Corona Park, Flushing Meadows, Queens, New York, 1988, color photograph, 16 by 20 inches.

actual objects from the everyday level of his or her cultural heritage, so the work remains rooted in the actual life-world of the community it came from, even while it may be addressing a wider audience. Midcentury abstract painting was based on an idea of internationalism that obliterated the details of the artist's personal background. This was a part of the point of its claim to universality: a viewer was not supposed to be able to determine, merely by looking at the art work, the nationality, race or gender of the artist. This concept of universality involved the assumption that all humans are really the same underneath superficial local differences.

Postmodern globalism is based on a recognition of differences rather than on an assumption of sameness. The artist today is supposed to honestly acknowledge his or her heritage and background by incorporating them into the work; at the same time the work, while rooted in its local differences, is supposed to direct itself toward the world at large.<sup>4</sup> The process is a reversal of colonial souvenirism: instead of members of one culture taking things from another without comprehension of their meaning, members of each culture send things to others as explications of their meanings.

These observations are visually embodied in the "Out of India" installation *House* (1996) by Vivan Sundaram of New Delhi. This artist, who lives with the special karma of being a nephew of the famous artist and cultural icon of modern India, Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941), began as a painter. In canvases such as *Thinking about Themselves* (1981), *The Sher-Gil Family* (1983-84) and *Easel Painting* (1989-90), Sundaram reflects on the mysteries of his own heritage through domestic scenes to which touches of magical realism lend an aura of haunting strangeness. His work of this genre (which was not represented in "Out of India") reached a plateau of maturity combining a broad pictorial feeling with a deep sense of content; the paintings draw one into a magical space whose hidden depths, paradoxically, seem to open out in all directions.

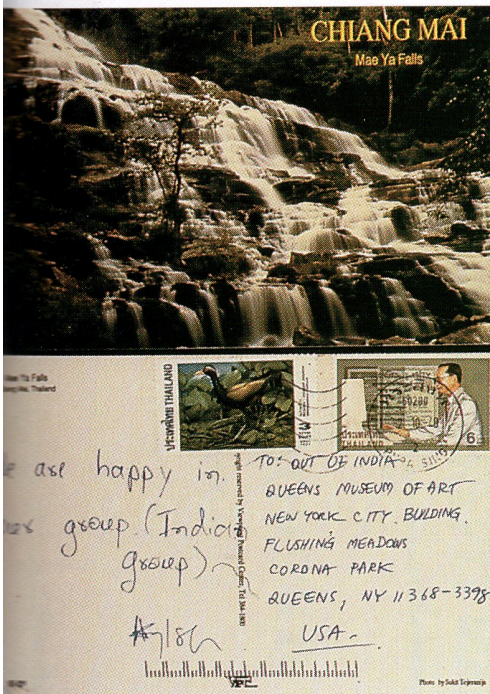
Then came the dawn of the era of multicultural installation, which seems to have been a liberating advent for Sundaram as for many artists worldwide. *House* is actually half of an installation called *House/Boat: Sculptures in Paper, Steel, Glass and Video*, in which one element, the "house," expresses the sedentary aspect of life and the other, the "boat," expresses a nomadic imperative that threat-

ens it. Simply put, *House* represents one's home or one's heritage, *Boat*, which was not included in the show, represents the forces that will draw one away from home and heritage into a broader world. *House* is an approximately 6-foot cubical structure which one can lean into and inspect but not wholly enter. Built of a rusty metal frame, handmade, embossed paper walls and a glass ceiling, the hutlike piece contains various objects including a video monitor displaying flames seemingly heating a real bowl of water placed above it. In Sundaram's inspired use of materials, an extreme delicacy cohabits with a structural awkwardness to suggest the assembled fabric of India, a composite nation which still wonders if it will continue to hold together.

Rina Banerjee, who was born in Calcutta and lives now in Brooklyn, showed *Home within a Harem* (1997), a room installation related in theme to Sundaram's but presented from a woman's point of view. Situated around a bed which was suspended off the floor were a number of sculptural assemblages representing female presences. The installation combined silk sari cloths and powdered pigments, such as are used both for ritual and cosmetic purposes, with domestic detritus that



**With examples of classic photojournalism as well as more recent investigations of diaspora life, "Out of India" was surprisingly rich in photography, a medium that has not been regarded as a signature of Indian art.**



Paired postcards from Navin Rawanchaikul's installation titled from Chiang Mai on September 28, 1997, postcards, rack, telephone and audiotape.

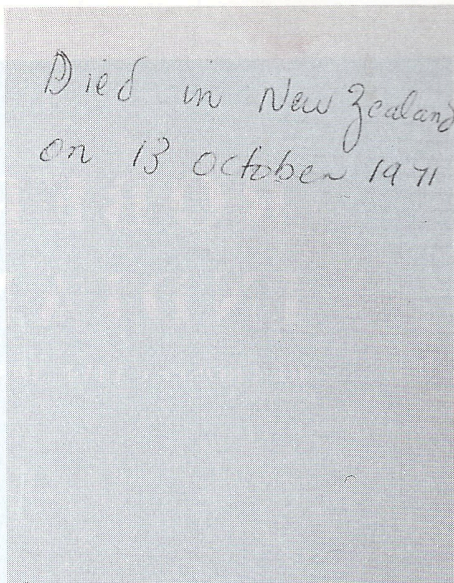
included old light bulbs and furniture stuffing. The diverse materials seemed to defy unifying categorization, yet they effectively evoked the lives of women and the duality of immigrant life.

*Far Away from One Hundred and Eight Feet* (1995) was an installation by N.N. Rimzon, who lives in Trivandrum, a city in the far south of India. The work consisted of 108 rough terra-cotta vases standing in a row, with a length of handmade rope and a straw broom protruding from each vessel. The work refers to a traditional practice in the city of Poona of forcing Untouchables to carry a pot to spit in and to sweep up after themselves so as to leave no footprints; more broadly it refers to the general ambience of old-fashioned village life, which is to be inferred atmospherically, as it were, from the sheer repeated presence of the terra-cotta vases and ancient-looking earthy materials issuing from them. The work's broader, international reference lies in the installation genre itself, with its associations of nonverbal intercultural communication. This series of expanding contexts—specific location, region, international network—allows it to remain rooted in its own location while still reaching out to the rest of the world.

In addition to installations, "Out of India" was surprisingly rich in photography, a medium that has not been regarded as a signature of Indian art. The range of examples on view, however, was enormous, from the classic photojournalism of the 1930s and '40s by Homai Vyarawalla (based in the state of Gujarat, the 85-year-old Vyarawalla was India's first professional woman photographer) to the ironic variations on it by New Delhian Satish Sharma in the last decade; from New Delhian Dayanita Singh's photographs of wealthy and largely Westernized Indian families to the elegant conceptual project *Album Pacifica* (1997) by Mohini Chandra, who lives in London. While Vyarawalla's photographs of national leaders and political events such as Gandhi's funeral were involved with the formation of national identity, Sharma's tend to question that identity through somewhat ironic contextualizations of political posters and effigies of politicians. Singh's wealthy Indians viewed *en famille* at self-conscious leisure open a new lens on the culture, depicting an Indianness that is both despiritualized and without pathos, displaying neither mystical exaltation nor social tragedy. Chandra traveled the path of the diaspora, seeking out family members from Fiji to the United States and collecting old family photographs from them; these are exhibited with their backs outward, showing not the pictures but the notations, such as names and dates and occasional remarks, which someone who cared added to them once. They simultaneously trace the dispersion of family members in the diaspora and the persistence of family feelings, with the nostalgic poignancy of the pressed flower from long ago.

Much of the work in the show, especially the photography, deals directly with the theme of diaspora. London resident Shaheen Merali's *Going Native* (1992) consists in part of slide projections of Indians adopting the ways of a new environment in England; the transition is seen as a perilous one, an act of daring self-abandonment that is metaphorically represented in a photograph of a young Indian boy standing, apparently frightened and hesitant, on the edge of a high-diving platform. Pablo Bartholemew, who lives in New Delhi, shows diaspora Indians not abandoning but clinging to their inherited ways in the haunting photograph *South Asian Muslims Pray during Id at Corona Park, Flushing Meadows, Queens, New York* (1988). Here, the global icon of the unisphere from the 1939 World's Fair presides over the non-Western practice of prostration, implying at once the global scale of the Indian diaspora, the persistence of cultural conditioning among far-separated diasporic groups, and the traditional hollowness of Western pretensions toward globalism, as in the concept of a "world's" fair.

Navin Rawanchaikul, who



One of 100 photograph backs in Mohini Chandra's *Album Pacifica*, 1997, each approx. 10 by 8 inches.

divides his time between Thailand and Japan, organized a mail-art project involving postcards sent to the Queens Museum by Indian migrants in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Carrying brief messages about the quality of the immigrants' lives, the postcards, each identified by a number, were displayed on a Plexiglas shelf running around one of the galleries. By punching in the posted numbers on a telephone included in the installation visitors could listen to English translations of the messages on the postcards. Rawanchaikul's installation is related visually to classic mail-art predecessors of the 1970s such as On Kawara's *I Woke Up*, but, unlike the universalization of Kawara's work, which involves the repetition of an experience that has no ethnic or cultural boundaries, the messages from Chiang Mai are bound to the homeland by the persistence of feelings of community in diasporic situations. One card which says, in English, "We are happy in our group (India group)," embodies these polarities. The card is framed with another

One of 18 photo-etchings from Vijay Kumar's *India Portfolio*, 1993, 12 by 16 inches each.





card showing water cascading down the Thai mountain Chiang Mai. The waterfall looms above the written message, which seems overshadowed and menaced by it. In contrast, the writer claims that the group feels sufficiently at home, so long as it remains an "India group."

New York resident Zarina documents her own diaspora experience through nine etchings—collectively titled *Homes I Made/A Life in Nine Lines* (1997)—portraying the floor plans of the nine apartments she has lived in as she has moved from India to Thailand, Japan, Germany, France and the U.S. While straightforward in their autobiographical factuality and their avoidance of sentimental idealization of home, the floor plans radiate a melancholy that crystallizes the idea of diaspora—the idea of leaving a bit of yourself in each place, and taking away a bit of a new self.

**A**nother of the broad themes that run through much of the work is concern over the Hindu nationalism that has been rising steadily in the wake of the riots that followed the destruction of the



Nalini Malani: *Control*, 1993, watercolor on paper, 22½ by 30 inches. Collection Chester and Davida Herwitz.

Barbari Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in 1992. In Hindu tradition Ayodhya is the birthplace of the god Rama, and Hindu nationalists had protested since 1972 that the mosque had, supposedly, been built on the site of an ancient temple to Rama. In 1992 a Hindu nationalist mob razed the mosque in preparation for rebuilding the Rama temple, setting off Hindu-Muslim riots throughout India, but above all in Bombay, where the Hindu nationalist group Shiv Sena is centered. In the enlightened Indian art community there is understandable concern lest the nation's secular ideal be endangered—concern which can only have been intensified by the recent electoral victory of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and its alarming forays into nuclear adventurism.

In one of the etchings in his *India Portfolio* (1993) Brooklyn resident Vijay Kumar transforms the *New York Times* coverage of the destruction of the mosque by superimposing etched images of death and interment. Atul Dodiya, who lives in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), depicts Gandhi's birthday celebration in Mumbai in his painting

*2nd October* (1993); the strangely ominous image refers to the fact that not only did much of Gandhi's activity take place there, but also the worst of the Ayodhya-related riots. Mumbai resident Nalini Malani's disturbing watercolor depiction of unidentified scenes of struggle and violence in *Control* (1993) may also involve such a reference.

Still other works deal more directly with Indian tradition in itself. Ravinder G. Reddy, who lives on India's east coast in the state of Andhra Pradesh, has penetrated a rich lode of visuality in *Family* (1997), his 3½-foot-high, polyester-resin fiberglass sculpture of a naked man, woman and child. The three smooth, curvaceous figures are deep blue. Associated with the deities Krishna and Kali, the blue skin color bears implications of traditional rural Hinduism, as does the domestic scene based on low-caste or Untouchable village life. Simultaneously grandiose and cartoonish, Reddy's works elevate those at the bottom of the social hierarchy to "high art" status atop the cultural pyramid.

The watercolor miniatures of Pakistani-born Shahzia Sikander, a Houston resident who was in last year's Whitney Biennial, refer directly to the Moghul tradition and indirectly, perhaps, to recent uses of that tradition by Western artists such as Francesco Clemente. *Uprooted Order Series 3, no. 1* (1997) demonstrates Sikander's virtuosity with a symbolic metalanguage that discombobulates Indian tradition at the same time that it pays homage to it. Female figures reminiscent of traditional Hindu temple sculptures of goddesses float enigmatically amid mandala-like shapes and floral foliage. While the internal elements of the work are, or could be, all Indian, the structural recombination of them suggests various Western tendencies from Surrealism to postmodern pastiche. Compact and delicate, the works have their way with Indian visual tradition without a sense of transgressive intervention.

Despite the persisting Western view of India as a backward society plagued by such practices as bride murder and widow burning (suttee), this exhibition revealed a contemporary art world that is socially progressive and enlightened, perhaps more so than ours. The fact, for example, that 14 of the 26 artists in the exhibition are women no doubt results from curatorial choice, but it also reflects the unusual openness of the Indian art world toward women artists, critics and curators. While this proportion would be unusual in a Western show, it apparently does not seem strange in context of contemporary Indian art. In an essay in the catalogue, curator Jane Farver cites the assertion by Indian critic Geeta Kapoor that today on the subcontinent the icon of the male Modernist has been "stripped bare by the brides, even."<sup>5</sup>

## If we don't more fully engage the contemporary art of Asia, Africa and Latin America, we may wake up one day to find that the art history of our time was happening elsewhere and we failed to notice it.

All the work in the exhibition, including work of the artists not mentioned in this brief recapitulation, was outstanding in quality, intelligence and thoughtfulness. Never pedantic, it nevertheless teaches; never reductive, it nevertheless analyzes. The strength and diversity of the Indian tradition seem to hold good, unbroken yet not rigid in confrontation with the rest of the world. □

1. See Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," *Artforum*, May 1973, and Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum*, June 1974, both reprinted in Francis Frascina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, New York, Harper and Row, 1985. Also see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983.

2. For more on this movement see Thomas McEvilley, "The Common Air: Contemporary Art in India," *Artforum*, summer 1986.

3. In 1972 Neo-Tantric painter K.V. Haridasan told me, in conversation in Rishikesh, that he acknowledged some degree of this influence in his own work.

4. "At the center of the work, personal sensibility interacts with group location or ethnicity—the place the artist and his or her ancestors entered and were shaped by the causal web. Obliquely intersecting this is the impetus of the place where the artwork is (physically or mentally) made; to honestly acknowledge its embeddedness in causality the artwork must somehow reflect the conditions of the place where it takes form. Another vector which sometimes will affect the being of the work, and sometimes not, is the conditionality of the place where it is to be exhibited, where it is to exert its effect, to become a cause in its turn. Surrounding these boxes within boxes—or contexts within contexts—is the grander matrix of the global frame. At their greatest potential, the meaning and presence of the artwork simultaneously contract to an intense focus on the particular and expand to a global scale through the incorporated awareness of the work's place within a reconceived history." Thomas McEvilley, *Art and Discontent: Theory at the Millennium*, Kingston, N.Y., McPherson and Company, 1991, p. 179.

5. Jane Farver, "Inside and Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Indian Diaspora," in *Out of India*, Queens Museum of Art, 1997, p. 13.

"*Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora*" was seen at the Queens Museum [Dec. 10, 1997-Mar. 22, 1998]. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue with essays by its curator Jane Farver and Radha Kumar. The show did not travel.

Author: Thomas McEvilley's latest book, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt* (Allworth Press), will be published in January 1999. He is organizing a conference at the Mohile Parikh Centre for the Visual Arts, Mumbai, India, to be held in January 2000.