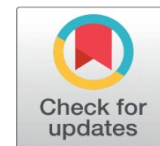


CONFLUENCE OF ART AND TECHNOLOGY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE IN INDIA



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ABSTRACT

For centuries, across the worlds, artists have struggled to invent new techniques to perfect their articulation, which in turn has changed art and its relation to the viewer. In the course of art history technology has served as a useful aid to develop innovative methods for making art. For long the utilitarian notion of technology did not clash with the metaphysical or intuitive notions of art. But in modern times the reproduction technology has raised questions concerning authenticity and originality of an artwork. In the present transitory times, the digital technology is continuously redefining art and the manner in which the art/audience response circuit has undergone a paradigm shift. The present paper attempts to delineate a capsule account of the confluence between art and technology in general and discuss how Indian contemporary artists engage the art/technology interface in their art practice.

Keywords: Art and Technology, Postmodernism, Indian Contemporary Art

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE FIRST ARTIST AS A TOOL-MAKER AS THE EARLIEST EVIDENCE OF ART/TECHNOLOGY INTERFACE

Of all the stories, hypothesizes, speculations about the first human on earth, the one that never ceased to fascinate me as convincing is the story of the caveman as artist-hunter. Both the identities, artist, and hunter, are by principle, the extension of his/her primary identity as a living species, animal or human. Necessity or the instinct to survive made him/her a hunter. In this primordial game of survival, he/she had to kill or get killed. To facilitate/prove/execute his/her potential for survival he/she had to be inventive, innovative, imaginative, the attributes which differentiate him/her from other species. In other words, he/she must possess skills in order to design his/her modes of survival. It is precisely this attribute/faculty that he/she felt, perhaps, compelled to manifest in developing a new identity as a skilled species. But there certainly are other species known for their skills, such as a spider, a mouse, a honeybee. Though the difference lies in the fact that human species kept on perfecting her skilled identity as she moved on, whereas other species lacked this unique potential to develop their skills for transformation and innovation, and hence, were left far behind. It is here one may locate the first instance of the confluence between art and technology.



For a cave man it required to be skilled both in terms of his identity as a hunter and artist. In this sense the first artist was a toolmaker. Though his/her primary aim to make tools must have been to engage with animals as a threat or as a food for consumption. But it is interesting to imagine, down the lane of pre-history, as how the identity of a hunter transformed into an artist. A lot of speculation has gone into why the cave man felt the need to scribble/draw/paint on the walls. Can we call him/her an aesthete or a magician? Did this peculiar, and apparently futile, act of scribbling/drawing/painting on the walls imply a certain sense of control. Control over what he/she was confronted with as a living experience. Control over his/her incompetence to comprehend the order of things that he/she was thrown into. Or maybe, it was a celebration of sorts for discovering/inventing new means of survival. It could be both, seeing from the amazing repertoire of prehistoric art, one may hypothesize, that the hunter-artist was as much rejoicing in engaging the walls of his/her habitat with drawings/paintings as he may have done the same in order to overcome the fear of daily combat with wild animals.



Figure 1 Bhimbetka rock shelter paintings, Wikimedia. Commons

Source https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bhimbetka_IMG-20180319-WA0015.jpg



Figure 2 Prehistoric tools, Wikimedia. Commons

Source https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Prehistoric_Tools_-_Les_Combarelles_-_Les_Eyzies_de_Tayac_-_MNP.jpg

Seeing from the prism of the confluence of art and technology the prehistoric man developed the technology of making tools to fight/kill animals bespeak the utilitarian aspect of technology. However, the same technology of making tools for drawing/paintings on the walls foregrounds the perennial equation between art and technology. For centuries, across the worlds, artists have always struggled to develop techniques, invent new mediums and materials in order to perfect their articulation, which in turn has changed art, not only in appearance, but also in terms of its relationship to the viewer. In the course of art history, technology, as a need-based drive to develop new methods or techniques for making art, at best, has served art as a useful resource. And this resource does not necessarily clash with the utilitarian notion of technology and the metaphysical, aesthetic or intuitive notion of art. But in recent times, after the advent of reproduction technology, the status of art has raised questions concerning its authenticity and originality.

2. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

The main object of the present paper is to investigate the origin of art and its relation to technology and identify and analyse various seminal junctures that invite the artist to rethink his or her mode of creative inquiry.

To locate and analyse how technology and art influence and inspire each other and to assess the impact of this convergence on the meaning of art; art as an experience; art as an object and the relationship between art and the viewer.

To identify and analyse the moments of art/technology convergence in Indian art as a parallel to western art discourse.

3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

In the present technology driven world order it becomes even more imperative to revisit and rethink about the discourse of the interface between art and technology.

The present discussion can also provide a perspective to art practitioners in general and the students of visual art practice in particular to acknowledge and experience the presence, power and impact of technology on art practice.

This paper looks at two evolutions; art and technology, simultaneously, in order to investigate the moments of intersection, interface or confluence. It explores how technology evolved out of the human need to sharpen/perfect his/her skills as a hunter-artist by inventing tools, methods and new techniques

Though art and technology confluence has seen a great academic intervention in the western art history, but it still remains to have received relatively little attention in Indian art. The paper attempts to locate and explore Indian art-historical process in the context of its encounter with technology.

4. THE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The paper incorporates the ideas formulated by some of the key authors that have played a crucial role in identifying and exploring the presence and the impact of technology on art and its relationship with the viewer. The author that retains the

central preoccupation as the core literature is Walter Benjamin vis à vis his influential essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Ramachandran (2003)). Benjamin's essay has consistently been the focus of scholarly attention for providing an insightful understanding as how modern technology of reproduction influences or alters the way we experience art. Benjamin's main concern is to assess the economy of loss of aura in the transition from the singularity of uniqueness to the abundance of plurality; from original to provisional; from authenticity to fakeness.

Gary Shapiro's book *Archaeology of Vision, Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying*, 2003, is a robust source of reference for its dense preoccupation with vision and visuality vis a vis Foucault and Nietzsche's writings on visual culture. The book brings into light the discussion around Arthur C Danto's critique of Benjamin by positioning Andy Warhol's banal multiplicity and deadpan repetitions and pitching it in contrast to Benjamin's reproduction theory. Danto's assertions anticipate a new world order where art has adopted technology to the extent that it is able to regain the aura that was lost earlier, as declared by the likes of Benjamin.

J Baldwin's book *'Self-Immolation by Technology': Jean Baudrillard and the Posthuman in Film and Television*, 2015, offers a relatively more contemporary perspective to the present state of information and communication technology. By foregrounding Baudrillard, the author of the scintillating concepts such as hyperreality, simulation and posthuman, Baldwin talks about Baudrillard's apprehensions which are concerned with the condition where the natural human attributes, in being ambiguous and enigmatic, are undergoing a slow but steady change. This change amounts to being *other* to oneself and thus becoming posthuman. Though art has not really been his core concern, Baudrillard's writings have tremendously influenced artists and art critics, specifically, in negotiating with the phenomenon of virtual reality, in theory and praxis. In the similar vein, Baldwin's insightful inquiry into Baudrillard's key concepts offers a new perspective to view or review Indian contemporary art practices in the age of digital revolution. The art practices of artists such as Nataraj Sharma, Baiju Parthan, Anju Dodiya, Jitish Kallat and Sudhershnan Shetty are known for their significant incorporation and critical engagement with Internet and digital technology.

The rigor and the comprehensiveness of Benjamin's theoretical framework make it significantly relevant to address the technological interventions in Indian art that the present paper has attempted. Although there are not many rigorous and relevant sources or academic engagements in the context of Indian art that one may draw from. However, the book, *Indian Art an Overview*, 2003, edited by Gayatri Sinha provides some idea about some of the seminal moments in modern art in India. The book consists of the articles from some of the prominent Indian writers known for their academic engagement with Indian art. The two articles that have been specifically referred are Shivaji Panikkar and Jyoti Bhatt's joint article *History of Printmaking in India* and A Ramachandran's *The Marketing Strategies of a Modern Indian Artist – Raja Ravi Verma*, which provide a lucid account of reproduction techniques and technologies in Indian art.

5. THE ADVENT OF MODERNISM AND THE REPRODUCTION TECHNOLOGY: WALTER BENJAMIN'S CONCERN ON THE LOSS OF AUTHENTICITY

In modern times, any discussion on the confluence of art and technology recalls the seminal text of Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Ramachandran (2003)) where he addresses how a work of art loses its

aura in the crucible of mechanical reproduction. Benjamin is concerned with the uniqueness of art, which he asserts, got lost the moment art became reproducible. He traces these moments of reproduction in woodcut graphic art, when for the first-time art became mechanically reproducible; printing, which caused an enormous change in the reproduction of writing; and later lithography, which “permitted graphic art for the first time to put its products on the market.” Benjamin (1935) But the loss of uniqueness was not so profound until when photography was invented. As Benjamin states: ‘For the first time in the process of pictorial reproduction, photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens.’ Benjamin (1935) By mid twentieth century technology of reproduction had made its presence as a strong influence both in terms of reproducing works of art and hence effecting the equation between a work of art and its viewer and the same time exerting its own autonomy as art.

Benjamin’s concerns reflect on the uniqueness of art vis à vis its unique existence – ‘its presence in time and space’. His views reflect on the loss of authenticity, say, for instance, the murals of Sistine Chapel ceiling painted by Michelangelo are not the same thing as the reproduction of it in art history book. For Benjamin, ‘the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.’ According to him modern man is ready to take for granted the uniqueness of a lived experience of everyday reality for its reproduction. In the modern times the technology of reproduction is manifested in the preference of reproduction over uniqueness that is symptomatic of dehumanization in its ever-growing craving for transitory, provisional or impermanent alternatives to reality rather than the reality that is grounded in permanence and authenticity. For Benjamin uniqueness means aura and what the reproduction technology jeopardized the most is aura. The particularity of this technology lies in the fact that it can reproduce unlimited copies and by means of duplication the singularity of uniqueness is shattered by the abundance of plurality. And thus aura, which lies in singularity of uniqueness, is destroyed forever.

According to Benjamin, by jeopardizing with historical testimony the technology of reproduction tampers with authenticity. As he says, “One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.” Benjamin (1935) However, the technology of reproduction or the plurality of copies that Benjamin scoffs finds a different paradigm in Andy Warhol’s ‘repetitions. As Arther C Danto contests Benjamin by foregrounding the Warholean repetition where he insists that “regardless of the use of such techniques and the production of multiples, a certain theoretical matrix gives even the Brillo Box, which is indistinguishable from the Brillo box, the special status or aura that makes it continuous with other works in the art world.” Shapiro (2003) (Figure 3 and Figure 4) One may say that in the course of time art has as much adapted to technology as technology has adopted art. The difference, or rather the distance, between the claims made by Benjamin and Danto foregrounds a certain historical account of the confluence between art and technology. Benjamin’s position is influenced by the earliest confrontations when technology, and especially technology of reproduction, effected art. Benjamin traces the development of the technology of reproduction and its impact on art. He points out that, much more than woodcut graphic art, engraving, etching, printing or lithography, it was photography that surpassed all in its enormous impact on art.



Figure 3 Brillo Boxes, Andy Warhol, 1969 Silkscreen ink on wood, Courtesy: Flickr, Brillo boxes in the Supermarket. Courtesy: Wordpress
Source https://www.flickr.com/photos/ian_e_abbott/48482560827

The destruction of aura, as formulated by Benjamin, has deeper consequences as it involves its contextual integration with tradition or cult. Benjamin (1935) For, instance, if we recall the earliest art works of artist-hunter, it is unthinkable to situate the cave art in any other habitat except the caves where from it originally originated. The ritual of magic that the artist-hunter of the cave art, presumably, intended to play by means of drawing/painting on the walls is categorically integral to the pre-historic dwelling of a cave. The same goes with other art works of the past from the sacred to the profane rituals. At the same time, the de-contextualization of art in the age of mechanical reproduction raises some crucial questions as regards the methodology of pedagogy in visual arts. The question that needs to be addressed is: whether talking about the Egyptian pyramids or Ajanta Cave paintings through glossy reproductions from the art history book does help the learner in arriving at any understanding of the said subject or it only jeopardizes the learner's understanding? Can such a practice do justice to the profundity of the subject if the students are not brought in direct contact with the works in their original habitat?

6. BIRTH OF CAMERA: THE IMPACT OF PHOTOGRAPHY ON ART AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ART AND THE SOCIETY

In the technology of reproduction photography was received as a revolution. The nineteenth century brawl between the artistic merits of painting versus photography anticipated a great deal of reversion in terms of understanding the nature and the role of art. But more than photography, as Benjamin asserts, it was films that caused a great difficulty to traditional aesthetics. Where the early photography, in its prime focus on portraits, did not completely shun cult value. As Benjamin writes: "The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty." Benjamin (1935) But in films, the cult value of a stage actor went through a rigorous transformation. The stage actor presented himself to audience in person while the screen actor's performance is presented by means of a camera. Camera as a machine works by a different logic where 'the performance of the actor is subjected to a series of optical tests.' Both the stances of performance, though primarily performances of acting, achieve a startling

variance as soon as the technology intervenes. The metamorphosis of an actor caused by the technological intervention, in the present case moving camera, is famously reflected by Pirandello, who writes: "The film actor feels as if in exile – exiled not only from the stage but also from himself". Benjamin (1935) For Benjamin, the stage actor retains the aura, as "aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it", but the screen actor is facing the camera and camera plays its own game, which is removed from the visceral spontaneity of an actor as a physical entity. Hence, by the mere intervention of camera between the actor and the audience or the performance and the public which, according to Benjamin, destroys the aura – or as he describes it: "the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays." Benjamin (1935)

According to Benjamin the transition from stage actor to screen actor, vis à vis the technology of camera, amounts to oppression. The oppression lies in the very act of facing or being faced by a camera. The actor knows that the moment he gives in to a camera he has no control where or what it may lead him to. As Benjamin writes: "The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the "spell of the personality," the phony spell of a commodity." Benjamin (1935) However, Benjamin reflects on the limits of painting by staging the comparison between a painting and movie. He describes as how mechanical reproduction of art changed the response of a mass audience toward art. Unlike the architecture, or poetry of the past or the films of today, painting is not in a position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience. The nineteenth century is characteristic of this crisis that painting faced, which according to Benjamin, is not exclusively because of the invention of photography but because of the relatively independent manner in which art works appealed to the masses. In other words, it further validates Benjamin's claim that the technological intervention not only changed the nature of art but at the same time it effected or altered the relationship between art and society. While painting and movie, in principle, follow the same paradigm as visual modes of expression/communication, but the technologically advanced medium, such as, movie is in a far better position to cater the demands of masses than a painting does. Benjamin concludes his essay by invoking Fascism vis à vis Marinetti's Futurism Manifesto. The glorification of war as beautiful in Marinetti's deliberations foregrounds the disturbing interfaces between technology and life which, endorsing Fascism, reduced aesthetics to politics. The discrepancies between technology and its utilization gets manifested in the imperialistic warfare, as Benjamin beautifully describes: "Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities; and through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way." Benjamin (1935)



Figure 4 World War I, New Zealand trench, Gommecourt, France, 10 August 1918. An unidentified soldier is firing at an enemy aeroplane, Courtesy: picryl.com
Source <https://picryl.com/media/world-war-1-new-zealand-trench-gommecourt-france-21688057765-207143>

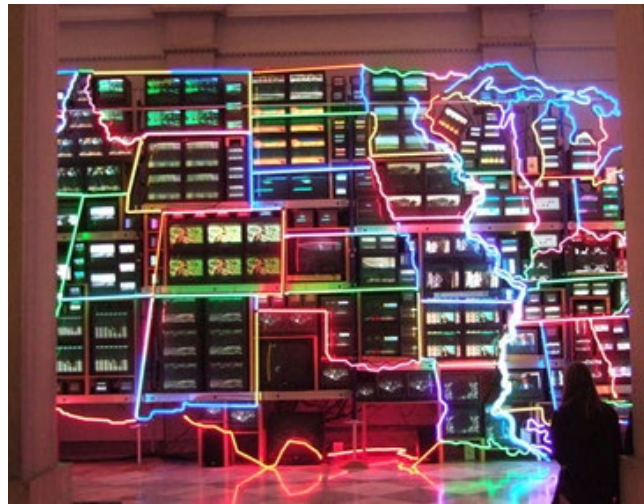


Figure 5 Nam June Paik, Electronic Superhighway 1995-96, Fifty-one channel video installation, (including one closed-circuit television feed), custom electronics, neon lighting, steel and wood, colour, and sound. Courtesy: Commons. Wikimedia
Source <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/global-contemporary-apah/20th-century-apah/a/paik-electronic-superhighway>

7. TECHNOLOGY IN THE AGE OF POST-HUMAN: JEAN BAUDRILLARD'S APPREHENSIONS

Marxian thought held that, since technology has assumed enormous autonomy in influencing the social order, its power should be acknowledged and accepted at par with ideology as key to understand consciousness. In recent years a lot has been written on the influence of technology on culture. Today we live in a world where technology is virtually in everything and everywhere. We, virtually, don't have a choice to accept or reject technology. In other words, today we don't choose technology, but technology has already chosen us. The crisis and oppression that Benjamin talked about in 1930s, vis à vis the technological intervention in the process of art making and its reception by the mass audience, reaches an enormous

degree of anxiety or complexity in the recent critique and celebration of the posthuman condition. [Baldwin \(2015\)](#)

In the present times of technological revolutions in communication, medical and economic networks the thin line between the human and technological has become increasingly blurred. The posthuman is a condition, which in the present context, 'refers to the experience of the subject in the age of digital media.' Jean Baudrillard's apprehensions are directed toward the celebrative stance of technological advancements in the sphere of 'digital, cloning, virtual reality, virtual bodies and so on.' As described by Jon Baldwin:

Baudrillard is critical of the ever-improving operational efficiency of technological systems such that the human becomes irrelevant to the process. In digital reduction we witness the supersession, in Baudrillard's terms, of the symbolic, alterity and singularity of the human by the semiotic, simulation and technological. The posthuman here becomes the inhuman... For Baudrillard, the universe of simulation aims at a virtual universe from which everything dangerous and negative has been expelled. [Baldwin \(2015\)](#)

It is interesting to state that both Benjamin and Baudrillard are less celebrative and more apprehensive of the technological excitements. Baudrillard reflects his anxiety about virtual reality and the posthuman as manifested in the science fiction films. In the midst of recent innovations in 'robotics, prosthetic technologies, neuroscience, nanotechnology, biogenetic capital' and issues concerning 'cloning, artificial intelligence, mediated reality, virtuality and increased networks', Baudrillard formulated his concept of simulation. His apprehensions are concerned with the condition where the natural human attributes, in being ambiguous and enigmatic, are undergoing a slow but steady change – change that amounts to being *other* to oneself. This other of the human, which exists in the copy or the clone, is the posthuman. And the process that leads to this becoming or metamorphosis is what Baudrillard calls simulation. As he describes: "The ambiguous and enigmatic real is eradicated and superseded by the copy and the clone." [Baldwin \(2015\)](#) The confluence of technology with life, at this crucial juncture of digital revolution, poses serious, or often nightmarishly threatening, questions concerning who controls the vicious network where we humans are but a piece of information that can be used/abused/misused. The technology today is as efficient as never before to help mankind but at the same time it has the incredible potential to disrupt social, political, economic and even electoral processes.

The Baudrillardian anxiety is manifest in the ever-increasing power that the gods of Silicon Valley possess and the ever-increasing blur in the real and virtual. There are no real, actual, or authentic, or as Benjamin would add, beings with aura, but we live in a world of simulacra. These renderings or reductions caused by technology has made today's life more abstract than perhaps what all the attributes of abstraction put together can amount to. As described by Peter Halley: "In this century, technology has itself become more abstract, and it has transformed the world we live in into an abstract environment." [Halley \(2014\)](#) The seminal attributes of abstraction, non-referential, non-representational, non-objective, autonomous, in-it-self, are today more manifested in technology than in abstract art. Abstraction has been generally understood as the alternative to the nature, natural, visible, physical world out there. The startlingly similar attributes are today found in technology where it is not just an alternative to nature but an imposing *other*. More than just being abstract, technology has achieved the power to render life abstract. And this abstraction doesn't seem as meditative as contemplating a Rothko

or Gaitonde painting. It is, on the contrary, more Kafkaesque in forcing us into a no-exit alternative world with no promise of redemption or salvation.

8. INTERSECTION BETWEEN ART AND TECHNOLOGY: THE INDIAN CONTEXT

In India, to locate the intersection between art and technology, can be traced back to 1556 when print came here by way of Portuguese Christian missionaries in Goa. They printed books using the technique of wood and copper plate relief, which were illuminated with naturalistic pictures. It is during this time that printed book was introduced to the court painters of Akbar, by means of which they were able to synthesize European pictorial conventions in their art. By early nineteenth century books were illustrated with images produced with relief printing of woodcut, wood engraving and metal engraving. Reformers like Rammohan Roy utilized the printing technology in the propagation of education, documentation and social reformation. [Panikkar and Bhatt \(2003\)](#) The nineteenth century, however, is at the same time pregnant with colonial onslaught on the existing art traditions in India. One of the most significant onslaughts came by way of the displacement of illustrated manuscripts as the new patrons preferred the inexpensive printed books produced by lithography over manuscripts. This, eventually, lead to the demise of more than three hundred years old tradition of miniature painting. [Dadi \(2010\)](#)

In nineteenth century, the momentous venture of Raja Ravi Verma in establishing a printing press to reproduce his works is a good case in point. Ravi Verma is perhaps the only Indian artist who not only painted but, at the same time, worked hard to make sure his work reaches the wider audience. From classical literary themes, the Puranas to the iconography of Hindu epics, such as, Ramayana and Mahabharata, Ravi Verma's selection of themes was diverse catering a wide range of interests. The urge to reach out to the masses prompted him to utilize a "technological device to propagate his art". [Ramachandran \(2003\)](#) From Benjamin's perspective Verma's oleographs may suffer from the lack of aura, however, keeping in view the Indian context where the gap between art and society was unthinkable wide; where, unlike Europe, art academies, art salons or exhibitions of art for general public was almost a non-existent tradition, Verma's initiative to utilize technology to bridge this gap was crucially significant.



Figure 6 Development of printing press in India, Courtesy: knocksense.com
Source <https://www.knocksense.com/goa/goa-and-printing-press>

The development of printmaking in modern India shares more or less the same historical pattern as the other more privileged mediums such as painting and sculpture. The technological efficiency that this recent fine arts medium demonstrates for offering new possibilities was relatively as popular among the Indian artists as it has been in the west. Many modern Indian artists, from as early as 1920s, not only used the new techniques of printmaking but even left for Europe for advanced training. By this time prime institutions like Santinekatan had even started inviting printmaking artists from Europe to share their techniques with Indian artists. The contribution of Nandalal Bose's students at Santinekatan in the early development of printmaking in India has been often mentioned. By 1950s printmaking received more support in Delhi with the formation of Lalit Kala Akademi, the first truly national academy for the promotion of art in India, and the establishment of the department of graphic art in Delhi Polytechnic and later Delhi College of Art. From 60s onwards there has been a considerable boom in in the field of printmaking. Some of the seminal modern Indian artists who have significantly adopted printmaking technology for their artistic pursuits are Gagandranath Tagore, who is known for using print media in his socio-political satirical cartoons; Benodebehari Mukherjee, whose etchings and woodcuts demonstrate his expressionistic response to nature and ordinary life and controlled articulation of black and white. Chittaprasad's utilized the characteristic possibilities inherent in the woodcut printing technique to achieve the strong and startling contrast of light and shade in order to articulate his response to the haunting realities of Bengal Famine. Like Chittaprasad, Somnath Hore too is known for his significant utilization of printmaking techniques to respond boldly to the social realism of the times. Hore is more dynamic in his experimentations as he kept advancing and exploring various techniques of printmaking, which often went beyond the conventional techniques. Krishna Reddy is credited with inventing the viscosity method for multi-coloured printing from a single plate. Jyoti Bhatt is known for his work in the medium of intaglio or the combination of photography, serigraphy and intaglio. [Panikkar and Bhatt \(2003\)](#) The convergence between print technology and art, generally speaking, is not as much a matter of celebrating the technology of reproduction, as Benjamin would confer, rather it is more about exploring the tactile possibilities that it offers. For Indian artists the primary concern to adapt or adopt printmaking technology comes by way of maximizing the visual impact, the visceral ambience or the evocative effect of their pictorial language.

9. TECHNOLOGY/ART INTERFACE IN THE CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICES OF INDIA

In the recent years, especially since the advent of digital technology, printmaking had only few takers as the new generation artists are more driven by the new mediums and new technologies. The changed trajectory and the new impulses of post 1980s saw a shift in paradigm as how artists approached their work and how the work was received by the audience. One of the visible shifts is evident in a certain decline in the inward-looking thrust dominant in the post-independence/post-colonial indulgence into the indigenist drives, graduating largely into abstractionist tendencies. The inward-looking drive of previous years was replaced with turning outward to engage with the social or political realities of the times. The older pundits of Euro-western modernism preaching Greenbergian formalism ceased to impress the new artists, and, on the contrary, they were more inspired by the Pop Art and Neo-Dada. The Baudrillardian paradigm of art in the age of digital technology finds an echo in the art practices of Indian artists such as

Nataraj Sharma, Baiju Parthan, Anju Dodiya, Jitish Kallat and Sudhershnan Shetty. As Ranjit Hoskote talks about these artists: "These artists camouflage their radical formal and conceptual experiments by deploying formats, devices and icons drawn from the realms of mass and popular culture, sign-systems more widely understood in society than formally defined in art. These measures also make a response to the challenges posed by the mediatic structures that now constitute a pervasive counter-reality: art must now compete with and steal devices from cinema, 24-hour satellite television, computer-morphed advertisements, the music videos, the Internet and the virtual-reality game." Hoskote (2003)

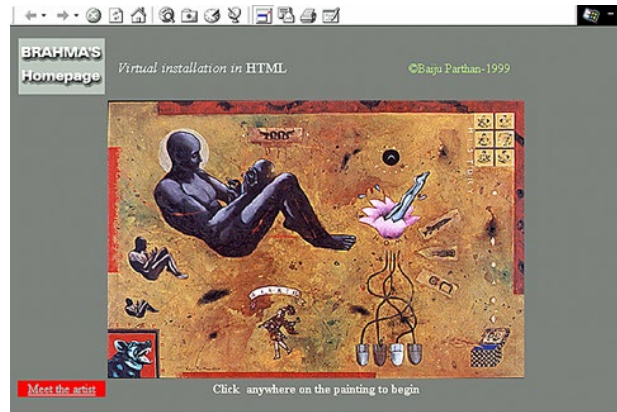


Figure 7 Baiju Parthan, Brahma's Homepage, Courtesy: sarai.net Acrylic on canvas, HTML interface on computer

Source <http://www.baijuparthan.info/brahma1.htm>



Figure 8 Baiju Pathan, Morph - Z, 2004, Pigment ink on backlit polyester film: Courtesy: storyltd.com

Hoskote formulates four distinctive experiential approaches that characterize the Indian art practice today. The first experiential approach aims at revitalizing painting; the second attempts to redefine sculpture; the third addresses the virtual space introduced by the Internet; the fourth engages with the post-studio-gallery-museum system called public space. The common force, however, between all the four directions is the availability and easy accessibility to new media, materials and technologies, which have played a crucial role in not only redefining or revitalizing the conventional modes of art practice but, at the same time, have been responsible for a great shift in the equation between art and audience. The approach that is of

relevance to the present article is the third one that negotiates with the virtual vis à vis the technology of Internet. Hoskote refers to the works of Baiju Parthan and Jitish Kallat for drawing inspiration from the “coded symbolism” of Internet and science. Their works engage and address the questions raised by technology or the “political uses of technology” – neurology, genetics, cybernetics, quantum mechanics. The questions that negotiate the interface between life and technology – “self in relation to the noosphere, the technosphere and society.” Parthan is considered as among the earliest artists in India known for venturing into the virtual world of World Wide Web. His response to the new technology came at the time when computers and the Internet were becoming common in India. In 1999 he made his first digital interactive work titled as *Brahma’s Homepage*. The work meditates on the attributes of the revolutionary technology that has created an alternative virtual world where the communication with the physical world is managed by computer program coding system.

As a departure from the conventional painterly surfaces, and in order to redefine it, Parthan and Kallat have been consistently incorporating non-conventional materials such as film screens, videos, sound, internet and so on. They utilize the bewitchingly subversive technology of morphing and bombard the screen with images that never seem to be static. Enamoured by the play of “depth and emergence”, appearance and disappearance, text and hypertext, sound and silence, movement and stillness, fact and hyperbole, it appears that the artists have outlived the yester-years’ iconic stillness of a painterly surface. Yet, as Hoskote, describes: “these artists do not renounce their painterliness. I should also point out that the Internet is more a guiding metaphor than the only venue of practice for these artists; indeed, Pathan is the only Indian artist to have fully Web-based art works so far.”

Hoskote (2003)



Figure 9 Jitish Kallat, Installation view of *Covering Letter*, 2012, Fog Screen Projection, courses: Artsy.net

An immersive installation and video projection incorporating the text from a piece of historical correspondence projected onto a curtain of traversable dry fog. The text is a historical letter by Mahatma Gandhi to Adolf Hitler, written just before the start of World War II

Source <https://www.theartblog.org/2017/01/public-notice-jitish-kallats-covering-letter-at-the-pma/>

10. CONCLUSION

In the present context of contemporary Indian art practice, the intersection of art and technology has been relatively favourable than it was in the previous years. The global phenomena of communication and information technology has redefined the debates surrounding modern, national, and international, the crisis-ridden debates that consumed the pre-80s Indian art practice. In other words, the national contours are blurred with global networks. Today the Indian artist is willing and confident, as Hoskote writes: "... (Indian artists) tap into the global information system and subvert the cultural imperialism of the global market order, they acquire the dexterity to negotiate a consumerist pattern of patronage while savouring the possibilities of cultural renewal." Hoskote (2003) Earlier, like most of the non-western worlds, the gap between the western and the non-western contemporariness of art was a matter of crisis. But, today, the instantaneous accessibility of technology across the world has rendered such gaps irrelevant. One may say, as a concluding remark, today the intersection of art and technology has reached the stage where Benjamin's *aura* has undergone rigorous redefinitions. The interface between technology and art has become the mirror image of the interface between technology and life. Recalling, once again, the Baudrillardian paradigm, vis à vis what Oscar Wilde said a century ago, life imitates art far more than art imitates life, one may wonder, if life has become as virtual as a machine, then what Wild said may be rephrased today as 'life imitates technology far more than technology imitates life'. Or, in other words, technology imitates art far more than art imitates technology.

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