Original Article

LOOKING AFTER LIBERALISATION: ETHNOGRAPHY, CONCEPTUAL DRIFT, AND THE PROBLEM OF VISUAL MAKING IN INDIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

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ABSTRACT

Since India's economic liberalisation in 1991, contemporary art practices have increasingly adopted research-based and ethnographic methodologies to address social inequality, political violence, and historical erasure. While these approaches initially expanded the critical scope of Indian art, this article argues that their institutional consolidation has often privileged conceptual legibility over visual and sensory inquiry. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Henri Bergson, Jacques Rancière, Fredric Jameson, and Ann Cvetkovich, the paper examines how conceptual drift has reshaped artistic form, spectatorship, and pedagogy in post-1991 Indian art. Through case studies of Shilpa Gupta, Riyas Komu, Gigi Scaria, Raqs Media Collective, and CAMP, it demonstrates how images increasingly function as illustrations of argument rather than as open-ended perceptual fields. Rather than rejecting ethnographic or conceptual practices, the article calls for a recalibration that reintegrates affect, duration, and visual thinking into contemporary artistic practice and art education.

Keywords: Indian Contemporary Art, Liberalisation, Ethnography, Visuality, Pedagogy, Conceptual Art

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, research-driven and ethnographic approaches have become central to Indian contemporary art, offering artists tools to address social inequality, political violence, and historical erasure in a rapidly transforming cultural landscape. Initially welcomed for expanding the ethical and critical horizons of Indian art within rapidly transforming urban, economic, and media environments, these approaches have gradually consolidated into an institutional norm in which conceptual legibility often takes precedence over visual and sensory inquiry. While research-led practices have enabled urgent political engagement, they have also contributed to the relative marginalisation of form, duration, and perceptual openness within much contemporary work.

This article intervenes in debates on post-1991 Indian art by arguing that the institutionalisation of research-based practice has generated a form of "conceptual drift," whereby images increasingly operate as vehicles of argument rather than as autonomous sites of perceptual discovery. Rather than rejecting ethnographic or conceptual approaches, it calls for a recalibration that reintegrates affect, visual thinking, and temporal experience into contemporary artistic production.

Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Bergson, Rancière, Jameson, and Cvetkovich, the paper examines how conceptual drift has reshaped artistic form, spectatorship, and pedagogical practice since the 1990s. Through case studies of Shilpa Gupta, Riyas

Komu, Gigi Scaria, Raqs Media Collective, and CAMP—selected for their institutional visibility and distinct research-driven methodologies—it traces how artworks increasingly function as illustrations of argument rather than as open-ended perceptual fields.

Situating these practices within broader transformations in globalisation and neoliberal cultural economies, the article explores how exhibition formats, funding regimes, and pedagogical frameworks have reinforced conceptual clarity at the expense of visual uncertainty. It concludes by advocating renewed attention to slow looking, material experimentation, and embodied inquiry across both artistic production and art education. Such a shift does not weaken critique; rather, it reasserts visual and performative practice as modes of thinking—capable of generating political insight through perception rather than prescription.

GLOBALISATION, NEOLIBERALISM, AND POST-1991 VISUAL CULTURE

The visual culture of post-1991 India was shaped by rapid economic restructuring and the influx of global capital. Geeta Kapur (2001) describes Bombay (Mumbai) in the early 1990s as undergoing a radical transformation in which multinational advertising, corporate imagery, and new media technologies saturated urban space. For the first time in independent India, global consumer imagery produced what Kapur calls a "media blitz on daily desires", distancing newly assembled consumers from the city they inhabited. Simultaneously, large-scale infrastructure projects—flyovers, highways, and gated commercial zones—reconfigured urban perception, insulating the flows of global capital from everyday life.

These transformations had direct consequences for artistic practice. The Indian art world expanded rapidly through international exhibitions such as Edge of Desire (2005) and Indian Highway (2008–2009), while domestic platforms like the India Art Fair launched (2008) and the Kochi-Muziris Biennale launched (2012) emerged as key sites of validation. As MAP Academy. (2024) notes, artists working in the aftermath of liberalisation frequently responded to shifts in consumption, urbanisation, and visual overload. At the same time, the commercial art market privileged modernist painting as a stable collectible category, often marginalising experimental, process-based, or time-dependent practices.

Artists thus operated under dual pressures: to address urgent local realities and to remain legible within global curatorial and market frameworks. These conditions favoured practices that could be clearly articulated through concepts, narratives, and research methodologies. Visual form increasingly functioned as a carrier of discourse rather than as an autonomous site of sensory thought.

This recalibration of artistic priorities must also be understood in relation to the changing economies of exhibition-making and spectatorship that accompanied globalisation. Curatorial formats increasingly privileged works that could travel easily across contexts and be accompanied by explanatory narratives intelligible to international audiences unfamiliar with local histories. Wall texts, catalogue essays, and artist talks became integral to the reception of Indian art abroad, encouraging practices that foregrounded research and political positioning as forms of translation. In this climate, visual ambiguity could appear risky, while conceptual articulation promised interpretive security.

Simultaneously, the expansion of private museums, corporate collections, and philanthropic foundations introduced new forms of institutional governance that shaped artistic production. Funding applications and residency programmes frequently required artists to articulate projects in advance through research proposals and social objectives, further reinforcing a culture in which ideas preceded making. The increasing presence of biennales and large-scale surveys also favoured installations capable of summarising complex social realities within limited exhibition timeframes, privileging legibility over prolonged perceptual engagement.

Moreover, the visual saturation of post-liberalisation urban environments—billboards, digital screens, architectural spectacle—generated a competing field of attention in which art struggled to claim contemplative space. Against this background of accelerated consumption and media overload, artists often adopted investigative and conceptual strategies as a means of slowing down perception through analysis rather than through form itself. Together, these institutional, economic, and perceptual shifts contributed to a climate in which visual practice was increasingly subordinated to discourse, preparing the ground for the subsequent rise of research-based and ethnographic art in India.

THE RISE OF RESEARCH-BASED AND ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICES

In response to the structural conditions of post-liberalisation India, many artists adopted research-based and ethnographic methods to re-anchor practice in lived social realities. This "ethnographic turn" emerged from growing dissatisfaction with modernist formal autonomy, increasingly viewed as politically inadequate Kapur (2000). Artists drew on interviews, archival documents, legal records, fieldwork, and community participation to address caste violence, communal conflict, migration, and state surveillance.

This shift intersected with developments in Western art during the 1970s and 1980s, when feminist, civil-rights, anti-war, and queer movements encouraged challenges to institutional authority and the autonomy of the art object. As Foster (1996) and Bishop (2005) note, ethnographic and site-specific practices sought to situate art within social and spatial contexts, aligning production with anthropological and sociological inquiry.

In India, CAMP and Raqs Media Collective exemplify divergent research-based strategies. CAMP mobilises technical infrastructures—CCTV systems, radio transmissions, maritime archives, and open-access platforms—to reveal how governance operates through media and logistics. Projects such as The Neighbour Before the House (2009) invert surveillance logics by enabling communities to narrate their own spatial realities MAP Academy. (2023). Raqs, by contrast, treats research as speculative and philosophical, producing discursive installations that interrogate time, labour, circulation, and the politics of the commons Raqs Media Collective. (2010).

Individual artists similarly foreground sustained research. Shilpa Gupta draws on interviews, censorship records, and legal documents to address borders and language, while Riyas Komu engages constitutional archives to examine citizenship and exclusion. Yet, as Foster (1996) cautions, ethnographic art can reproduce hierarchies of representation and become a legible genre within biennale and funding economies. This paper therefore focuses less on ethical intent than on how such methodologies reshape visual form and spectatorship.

It is crucial to stress that these practices emerged as ethically necessary responses to violence, marginalisation, and historical erasure. For many artists, conceptual clarity functioned as a refusal of decorative nationalism or aestheticised suffering. The critique developed here is thus not of ethnography itself, but of the way its institutional consolidation has hardened into a normative expectation that privileges explanation over perception.

Beyond individual practices, the ethnographic turn was reinforced through research platforms and alternative pedagogical spaces such as Sarai and Khoj International Artists' Association, which fostered long-term residencies, interdisciplinary collaboration, and field-based inquiry. The circulation of critical theory within art education—postcolonial studies, Marxist cultural analysis, feminism, and media studies—further shaped how artists framed projects for curators and funders. Proposal writing, public presentations, and documentation became central competencies.

While these developments expanded the ethical and intellectual ambitions of Indian art, they also recalibrated evaluative criteria. Works increasingly came to be judged by the sophistication of their research questions or political positions, sometimes at the expense of sustained engagement with material form. Over time, such criteria consolidated research-driven practice as a dominant paradigm, setting the stage for the conceptual drift examined in the following section.

FROM VISUAL INQUIRY TO CONCEPTUAL DRIFT

While research-based practices initially expanded the critical scope of Indian contemporary art, they have increasingly done so at the expense of visual and sensory engagement. In many recent works, conceptual frameworks dominate, reducing form to an illustrative function. Interpretation is frequently steered by wall labels, curatorial essays, and catalogues, positioning explanation as primary and perception as secondary.

Fredric Jameson (1991) critique of postmodern "depthlessness" is instructive here. In many contemporary works, social contradictions are named but not allowed to unfold visually. Images function as signs rather than experiential fields, requiring textual mediation to acquire meaning. Visuality thus becomes symbolic rather than affective, flattening perceptual complexity.

Jacques Rancière (2004) concept of the distribution of the sensible further clarifies this shift. When meaning is pre-scripted through explanatory discourse, the spectator's interpretive agency is constrained; instead of redistributing perception, art confirms authorised readings. Henri Bergson's philosophy of duration offers a counterpoint: creativity unfolds through lived, qualitative time rather than instant cognition Bergson (1911), De Groot (2022). Concept-driven art often arrests this duration, privileging immediate comprehension over sustained engagement.

Ann Cvetkovich (2003) notion of an "archive of feelings" similarly foregrounds art's capacity to hold affective residues that resist abstraction. When sensation is subordinated to concept, grief, memory, and vulnerability risk being reduced to signs. Together, these critiques suggest that conceptual drift has narrowed the experiential possibilities of Indian contemporary art.

Conceptual dominance is also sustained by the rhetoric of professionalism surrounding contemporary practice. Artists increasingly adopt the language of research, investigation, and archiving to secure institutional support and intellectual legitimacy. While this has strengthened art's critical authority, it has also produced an environment in which visual uncertainty appears as methodological weakness rather than aesthetic strategy. Ambiguity, silence, and formal excess risk being discounted unless anchored by explicit interpretive frameworks.

Exhibition design further reinforces this tendency. Installations frequently incorporate diagrams, timelines, transcripts, and documentary footage that guide viewers through predetermined interpretive routes, transforming galleries into quasi-archives or research laboratories. The bodily and affective encounter with objects and images is deferred until after cognitive decoding.

This shift does not imply a loss of formal sophistication. Rather, it signals a redistribution of labour between form and discourse: materials are increasingly mobilised to demonstrate arguments rather than to generate meaning through perceptual indeterminacy. Visuality persists, but in domesticated form—rendered legible within global circuits while constrained in its capacity to surprise, disturb, or exceed its stated concepts.

CASE STUDIES: ARTISTS AND COLLECTIVES

Shilpa Gupta's practice exemplifies the integration—and tension—between research and form. Works such as For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit (2017) translate testimonies of censored writers into sound-based installations that fragment speech and silence. The experience is immersive and affective, yet its political significance depends on contextual framing Bastardo (2019). Similarly, I Live Under Your Sky Too (2004–present) visualises fractured communication through drifting neon letters, producing a fragile optical rhythm that invites lingering while remaining conceptually anchored in border politics Kapur (2000).

Riyas Komu adopts an explicitly archival and political methodology. Salabhanjika and the Wall – I (2023) juxtaposes Harappan motifs with Nandalal Bose's Gandhi portrait marked by bullet holes. The installation functions as a visual essay on exclusion and constitutional memory. While materially striking, its significance relies heavily on historical narration and the artist's stated intent Komu (2023).

Gigi Scaria employs irony and montage to critique neoliberal urbanisation and majoritarian nationalism. Works such as Who Deviated First (2008) deploy satire to destabilise national myths, using exaggerated imagery and performative absurdity. Although visually engaging, the works remain tightly aligned with conceptual intent, leaving limited space for ambiguity Ramaswamy (2015).

Raqs Media Collective foregrounds research as speculative inquiry, producing installations that prioritise discursive complexity over immediate perception. CAMP similarly assembles dense installations from data and documentation, demanding sustained cognitive engagement. Across these practices, research increasingly determines visual form, positioning images as illustrations of argument rather than as autonomous perceptual events.

A closer attention to formal strategies across these practices reveals how conceptual imperatives subtly structure visual decision-making. Gupta's installations frequently deploy fragile, reduced materials—thin wire, dim neon tubing, hushed audio loops—that cultivate an atmosphere of vulnerability. These sensory effects slow perception and invite affective attunement, yet their sparseness also leaves the work dependent on supplementary explanation to anchor its political referents. The perceptual field thus oscillates between immersion and instruction.

Komu's surfaces, by contrast, are dense and accumulative. Layered pigments, scorched textures, and punctured images produce a material rhetoric of violence and erasure that initially confronts the viewer bodily. However, the symbolic system organising these marks—Harappan motifs, constitutional calligraphy, Gandhi's visage—ultimately resolves into a historically specific argument that privileges narrative coherence over ambiguity.

Scaria mobilises photographic montage and animated sequences to achieve rapid visual legibility. His compositions often hinge on graphic juxtaposition and theatrical gesture, encouraging immediate recognition of irony or critique. While this clarity sharpens political address, it simultaneously restricts the interpretive latitude afforded to viewers, who are guided towards predetermined readings.

Raqs and CAMP deploy more dispersed visual grammars. Raqs favours poetic fragments, speculative diagrams, and textual overlays that create associative constellations rather than linear narratives, yet these constellations are typically framed by dense conceptual scaffolding. CAMP's multi-screen environments and data-rich displays generate kinetic visual fields, but the proliferation of transcripts and technical schematics steers attention towards investigative logic. In both cases, perceptual excess is absorbed into explanatory systems.

Taken together, these formal tendencies suggest not a disappearance of visual invention, but its recalibration within research paradigms. Visuality persists, yet it increasingly operates under the governance of concept, reinforcing the paper's central claim that contemporary Indian art after liberalisation frequently transforms images into vehicles of argument rather than autonomous sites of perceptual discovery.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ART AND PEDAGOGY

This pedagogical configuration has produced a subtle recalibration of what counts as artistic competence. Students are frequently evaluated on the clarity of their proposals, the coherence of their research questions, and the sophistication of their theoretical framing before material exploration has fully unfolded. Studio critiques often prioritise verbal articulation over perceptual description, encouraging students to translate visual decisions into conceptual language rather than to dwell on what works sensorially. In such settings, the act of looking risks being displaced by the act of explaining.

Moreover, the institutionalisation of research-led practice has encouraged the adoption of academic modes of address within the studio: bibliographies, methodological statements, and ethical justifications increasingly accompany even preliminary experiments. While these practices cultivate intellectual rigour, they can also prematurely close speculative or intuitive avenues of making. Students may avoid ambiguous or formally excessive gestures for fear that such moves cannot be defended discursively, resulting in works that are cautious, schematic, or over-determined.

Rancière's insistence on the equality of intelligences offers a pointed challenge to this climate. To trust the learner is not to abandon critique, but to suspend interpretive authority long enough for perception to operate on its own terms Rancière (2004).

Bergson's emphasis on duration similarly implies that creative insight arises through prolonged material engagement rather than through advance conceptualisation De Groot (2022). Practices of slow looking, repeated making, and embodied trial-and-error thus function not as regressions from criticality but as alternative modes of thinking.

From this perspective, pedagogical reform would involve recalibrating assessment structures, allowing unfinished works to circulate in critiques, and creating situations in which sensory experimentation precedes theoretical framing. Workshops might temporarily prohibit explanatory texts, requiring students to respond only to scale, colour, rhythm, texture, or sound. Such strategies echo the propositions of Playing Slow, which frame slowness and collaboration as epistemological resources rather than obstacles to seriousness Karjalainen et al. (2021), Vaishna (2021).

CONCLUSION

Post-1991 Indian contemporary art has achieved remarkable critical reach, yet this success has produced a new orthodoxy in which conceptual clarity frequently overshadows visual experience. This article has argued for a recalibration rather than a rejection of conceptual practice. By reintegrating affect, duration, and visual thinking, Indian art can retain its political force while preserving the open-ended qualities that distinguish visual art as a mode of thought.

Beyond artistic production, the future of Indian contemporary art will be shaped as much in classrooms and studios as in biennales and museums. If research-based and ethnographic practices have become dominant, pedagogical structures play a decisive role in either reinforcing or recalibrating their aesthetic consequences. The studio is not merely a site of skill acquisition but a laboratory in which attitudes toward risk, ambiguity, and experimentation are transmitted. When conceptual articulation is privileged from the outset, form becomes subordinate to argument; when material exploration is foregrounded, visuality regains its capacity to think.

This distinction carries institutional as well as aesthetic implications. Funding bodies, residency programmes, and assessment systems increasingly reward projects that demonstrate social relevance and methodological rigour before visual strategies have fully emerged. While such criteria reflect ethical commitments, they also risk narrowing artistic experimentation. A pedagogy attentive to duration, affect, and sensory labour would resist this compression of process into proposal, allowing political insight to arise through form rather than solely through explanation.

In this sense, reclaiming visuality is not a retreat from critique but its renewal. By cultivating pedagogies that value slowness, uncertainty, and embodied inquiry, Indian art education can sustain the critical energies unleashed after liberalisation while preserving the perceptual openness that distinguishes artistic knowledge from other modes of social analysis.

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