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Framework, Contextualisation, and Contemporary Approaches

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- <sup>1</sup> In 2015, West Bengali born artist Anupam Roy showcased his canvas entitled “Diversion” (Figure 1.). Selected as the cover illustration for this issue, this piece is a “combine painting.”<sup>1</sup> It amalgamates paint, cement, iron, and mud, incorporating two- and three-dimensional objects like a pickaxe, a plate, an adhesive, and blood infusion utensils. The artwork features two or three figures depicted with bold, expressionist brushstrokes. One of them wields a sickle in his right hand, while dripping blood connects his left forearm to a pickaxe handle; these objects are firmly attached to the canvas. The other figure, wearing a yellow builder’s helmet, is portrayed holding a shovel. The painting is characterized by its pronounced high-contrast and uniquely matte finish, with certain areas exhibiting notable thickness. The entire pictorial space is dominated by the working class, characterized by its professional attributes and political symbols. The title is stenciled in red lettering at the bottom of the canvas.
- <sup>2</sup> In this artwork one can observe a profound portrayal of themes revolving around violence, suffering, and brutality, suggesting they hold a pivotal role in the author’s artistic vision. Reflecting the title, these depictions raise questions about the nature of this “diversion” and its potentially deadly outcomes, hinted at by the skull and crossbones placed at the top of the canvas. The representation of a blood transfusion might imply a broader message regarding global themes of worker exploitation and alienation, intricately linked to the instruments of their oppression. The materials, colors, and portrayed scenarios situate the subject of the painting within a political context calls for a brief overview.
- <sup>3</sup> In addition to referencing nationwide phenomena such as the economic liberalization movement initiated by the 1991 reforms and the gradual rise of the Hindu nationalist movement, notably highlighted by the BJP’s securing of a majority of seats in the Lok Sabha in 1998, the piece also incorporates elements from the artist’s personal journey, specifically the political background of his home state, West Bengal. In 2011, the

Communist Party of India (Marxist)—CPI(M)—leader of the Left Front, lost control of the state presidency, a position it had occupied since 1977. The All India Trinamool Congress came to power and appointed Mamata Banerjee as Chief Minister, and she was re-elected in 2015. This series of events is at the root of the inherently political nature of Anupam Roy's artistic production, and the theme of the decline of the CPI(M) permeates a significant part of his work.<sup>2</sup> In this context, the term “diversion” seems to subtly allude to the ideological shifts taking place in the political trajectory of the CPI(M), more broadly reflecting the evolution of Marxist thought in India, which was transitioning from a stance of “revolutionary politics” to a “politics of compromise and reform.”

- 4 The decline of the CPI(M) in West Bengal is intricately connected to the state government's industrialization policies in the early 2000s and the intense public protests they triggered. The turning point occurred in 2007 when farmers mobilized against plans to construct a chemical plant in Nandigram, sparking widespread and violent police repression in response to the protests.<sup>3</sup> During that period, the Communist government led by Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was held accountable for instances of police violence resulting in injuries and fatalities. This period also witnessed a transformation of communist symbols like the sickle into instruments seemingly used for the exploitation of the masses. Anupam Roy, whose political leanings align closely with the radical left organizations, found inspiration in these events for his artistic expression, through which he sought to critically interrogate the “deviations” and “concessions” made by the mainstream left-wing parties and orthodox communists. His artistic work also subjects the so-called “progressive” ideologies of liberalism as well as the neo-liberal ideals like free trade to an informed Marxist critique.<sup>4</sup>
- 5 Like all his works, this piece identifies Roy as an “activist artist” or in his own terms, a “propagandist artist” (refer to the interview between him and Yashadatta Alone in this issue). “Diversion” blends artistic production with political and social contemplation, creating a dialectical relationship between the two realms. In essence, the artwork embodies a form of activism, positioned at the intersection of the artistic and the political.
- 6 While aligning with the foundational definition of activism as depicted in social movement literature, which associates it with a “collective identity connected to participation in social movements or collective actions” (Bobel 2007), its artistic dimension and distinctive characteristics within the South Asian context merit further exploration. On one hand, closely examining the distinctive attributes of art as a form of political expression helps avoid associating such artists with the conventional figure of the political activist. On the other hand, it offers valuable insights into the political landscapes of South Asia and the ways in which they are being contested and confronted through hybrid forms of political expressions. Therefore, it is crucial to consider art activism practices and the individuals within the unique artistic environment of this region, which shapes these practices within the same political, cultural and social context.

Figure 1



Anupam Roy, *Diversion*, 2015, acrylic, spray, distemper, enamel paint, toys, mud, cement, pickaxe, iron. Plate and infusion set on canvas, 121 x 182 cm.  
© Anupam Roy

## Intention

- 7 By focusing on “Art and Activism in South Asia,” this issue of SAMAJ seeks to comprehend the nuanced interaction between art, politics, and social movements in South Asia, and to capture the diverse ways in which artists shape cultural and political narratives in the region.
- 8 The expression “art activism” evokes a mode of artistic expression adopted by artists aiming “to engage in cultural warfare, with the ambition of constructing a cohesive cultural coalition capable of propagating what they perceive as progressive art and mobilizing public opinion” (Zecchini 2020:10). The terminology “art activism” or “artivism” (Lemoine and Ouardi 2010) has only recently emerged and has been globally recognized and institutionalized through instances of political and cultural protest in the 1980–90s. Still, it is important to acknowledge that the term refers to, and reflects upon, forms of political intervention in art practices that have been emerging from within a much longer history and that are rooted in a variety of local contexts.
- 9 This is the case in South Asia, where contemporary forms of artistic activism have long been nourished by a dense and relatively continuous history between art and politics. In their book *Articulating Resistance: Art and Activism* (2012), Deeptha Achar and Shivaji K. Panikkar explain that
  - one way to understand art activism is to track moments in the history of modern Indian art where it actively sought the provenance of the political. ... A key moment

can be located in the Swadeshi movement, where questions of art, art-making practice, art content, even the person of the artist, were subsumed under the sign of the national. (Achar and Panikkar 2012:20)

- 10 Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the pursuit of national emancipation has fostered particularly innovative artistic productions (Lal 2022). These works, entwined with the political orbit of the anti-colonial struggle, remain a vital source of inspiration in contemporary creative endeavors. The links between art and politics remained strong during the post-Independence period and the formation of the various nations composing South Asia. From the 1950s to the 1980s, in the context of a cultural geopolitics imposed by the Cold War, many artistic productions sedimented forms of protest such as rejection of military dictatorships, rejection of the imposition of a “State of emergency,” demands for art aimed at the most deprived, and the voiceless in the political and economic life of South Asia.<sup>5</sup> The opening up of the region to economic liberalism and its consequences in terms of accentuating inequalities between territories and populations, the eviction of urban or rural areas to serve major projects, but also, in response, the fight for freedom and fundamental rights (given the challenges to democratic rights and minority rights within national cultural spaces) have largely nourished contemporary artistic practices as several contributions of this special issue underline.
- 11 Hence, the scientific literature on artistic activism in South Asia has increased significantly over the past decades across the different art fields (literature, visual arts, performing arts, cinema in particular), with the remarkable works in the visual arts represented in publications by Shivaji K. Panikkar (2003, 2012), the SAHMAT collective (2013), Nancy Adajania (2004), Geeta Kapur (2007a, 2007b), Malvika Maheshwari (2018) or Anuradha Roy (2016), among many others. Reflections on the relationship between theatrical practices and the field of protest, political performance and emancipation are just as abundant, as can be seen in the writings of Rustom Bharucha (1983), Eugen Van Erven (1992) and Aparna Dharwadker (2009), who focus on India and the Asian continent. Among the many fields that that have produced a strong series of works on the problematics of art activism, literature has been particularly prolific in South Asia. Since the emergence of the All-India Progressive Writer’s Association in 1930s to which eminent figures such as Mulk Raj Anand, Yashpall Singh or P. Kesavadev were affiliated, many authors have critically commented and addressed this entanglement between the creative and the political. Far from being limited to prominent figures with a global audience, such as Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, or more recently Amitav Gosh, South Asian literature is greatly involved in this area of study. Its engagement with political matters represents an invaluable contribution to addressing the most recent political issues, especially those related to minority expressions and causes, examined through the prisms of gender, race, and identity. This is evident in seminal works such as that of Amit Chaudhuri (2017), and in the numerous fictions emerging from lesser-known writers of fictions, both in regional languages and in English.
- 12 The richness and diversity of these productions does not, however, prevent a highly compartmentalized approach to the question of activism in different fields of artistic practices, which this issue aims to help overcome. It also appears that recent political events across South Asian countries—from massive public demonstrations against India’s Citizenship Amendment Act (CCA) and major farmers’ uprisings to considerable protest against the Sri Lankan government—are reviving ancient debates on

domination, authoritarianism and the crisis of nation states, strengthening the relevance of artistic activism. Consequently, the ambition of this issue is to understand the recent revitalization of “engaged art forms” through a multi-disciplinary approach, focusing on the diversity of art activism’s expressions, on the causes it defends and on its related discourses and practices. The contexts explored here range from the popular and “dominated” realms, whether they be peasant, dalit, adivasi origins, or gender minorities, to certain dedicated circles within the dominant cultural strata of South Asian societies. As editors with geography and art history backgrounds, we explore artistic activism from the perspectives of our individual disciplines and move beyond them to situate our reflections at the intersection of the sociology of social movements and art sciences.

- 13 In brief, the questions that encompass the contributions could be formulated as follows: How can the study of artistic activism shed light on the changes taking place in contemporary societies in South Asia? Through the forms of artistic and political expression they allow, the channels and modes of dissemination and their public reception, how do these productions inform us about the social and political issues which are specific to the South Asian contexts in which they are expressed? How do they help reveal tensions, power plays and conflicts? In return, to what extent does the dissemination of these committed artistic productions help reformulate some of these issues, to nourish them or to insert new references which are specific to local and regional contexts? In what way can the artistic experience still be seen as a critical or even emancipatory journey? To what extent are forms of engaged art serving as catalysts for the renewal of artistic creation and the evolution of political discourse in South Asia?
- 14 Each contributor to this issue analyses one or more aspects, forms, and perceptions of activism within the realm of the arts. From their own perspective as scholars, or in some cases as activists adopting a detached stance, these contributors advocate for a situated approach that provides insights into the local contexts of their study—in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—mobilizing diverse disciplinary perspectives. Notably, some authors explicitly position themselves within the contentious category of “activist.” Rooted in anthropology, sociology, ethnomusicology, art history, and media studies and, for some, embedded in the productions they are analyzing, they mobilize ethnographic investigations and firsthand data, and develop an interpretation of the world of the arts in situations often characterized by violence and oppression (Das et al. 2000; Das and Poole 2004).
- 15 In this introduction we first discuss the notion of activism as applied to the arts, before shedding light on two specific related elements: the social figure of the artistic activist, and the positioning of activism in relation to both the artistic and political fields. In the second part we explore the roots of artistic activism in South Asia, focusing on its role within the changing relationship between art and politics on a global scale, and in the context of the rise of religious fundamentalism that has been occurring for a few decades in the region. Drawing on case studies from the articles, in the third part we address the diversity of the trajectories of artistic activism, highlighting individual narratives from the socio-economic margins. We also explore how these actions contribute (or fail to contribute) to reconfiguring power dynamics and the paradoxes they may present, such as the appropriation of artistic activism by the art market or following the dynamics of a so-called digital capitalism (Barassi 2015).

# 1. Artistic activism: terminological considerations and general framework

- 16 Poet and writer Amit Chaudhuri insists on the importance of the circulation of literary and artistic works that situate art activism as a medium strongly influenced by global phenomena and also anchored in local political contexts (Chaudhuri 2017; Orsini et al. 2022). This double aspect needs to be emphasized as it helps to circumscribe the phenomena of art activism in relation to its direct and distant environment.

## 1.1 What activism does to art and politics

- 17 The terms “art activism” or “artivism” was used sporadically for a long time, and has gained increased recognition since the 1990s. The end of the Cold War and the rise of global capitalism have underscored the emergence of a notable trend in contemporary art worldwide. Several international exhibitions<sup>6</sup> have prominently featured art activism as a central theme, addressing a diverse array of subjects or political issues, spanning from ecology to alterglobalism, (eco)feminism, responsible consumption, social and economic alienation, and immigration. Likewise, numerous academic works<sup>7</sup> and articles in scientific journals<sup>8</sup> examine, from various disciplinary perspectives and through a multitude of analytical angles, the contemporary manifestations of the relationship between art and politics. However, many academic endeavors aimed to define art activism/artivism and its expressions, they have not succeeded in eliminating the ambiguity surrounding its meaning.
- 18 Additionally, the reception of the works and their potential political co-optation complicates the establishment of boundaries for the phenomenon. This complexity extends across traditional media (such as painting, drawing, sculpture, theatre, prints) to encompass ephemeral practices that are deeply embedded in specific times and places (urban spaces, neighborhoods, warehouses, factories, school and university campuses), and even interventions disseminated through online channels (net art, hacktivism, etc.). The extensive array of artistic mediums, modes of intervention, contexts, and discourses accompanying these works makes it challenging to categorize artistic activism and its practitioners in a straightforward manner, and they are better characterized as multi-positional (Bautès 2010).
- 19 The ideological and aesthetic paths taken by these creators are equally varied, shaped by rhetorical styles and techniques that convey distinct stances and degrees of engagement. An argument could be made that art activism encompasses artistic endeavors with a direct or indirect intention to address social and political issues, thereby revitalizing practices of agitation and resistance in response to the ideological dominance that is expressed in neoliberal politics, or in repressive, radical and religious states. In this perspective, artistic activism serves to rejuvenate the connection between artistic vocation and social or political intervention, employing strategies “that reposition one side of art as a lever for transgression, to muddy the waters and better infiltrate the inconsistencies and deviancies of the system” (Sans 2003:6). It is important to highlight that the very existence of activism originates from this distancing with contemplative or aesthetic approaches to art, in order to prioritize creations that stimulate critical and reflexive reactions, some of which lead to political



action. This may involve blending “agitation” or “noise” with “action.” Like political activism, activism manifests itself immediately, generating a form of radicalism infused with a sense of morality.<sup>9</sup> This focus on the political dimension of artistic creation challenges the widespread approach to the neutrality of art and aesthetics,<sup>10</sup> affirming its imperviousness to the disturbances of the world. Simultaneously, it distances itself from a conception that would unquestioningly recognize the transformative capacity of art on society.

- 20 Such ambivalence carries along with it the difficulties in clearly defining “art activism.” Regarding its role in both art and in political spheres, some scholars argue that instead of indicating a potential political and artistic revitalization, it serves as a symptom of a deep crisis, encompassing the discrediting of political, social, cultural, and artistic institutions. From this viewpoint, the capitalist system’s capacity for co-optation seems considerable, with market forces subtly framing in certain contexts, a new form of cultural regulation and, in others, new forms of censorship. Aesthetics specialist Marc Jimenez underscores this perspective:

In little more than a decade, the cultural consensus—that is, the proven collusion of art with the economic, political and technical system that “manages” the industrial production of cultural goods—seems to have put a definitive end to the “subversive,” “committed,” “involved” or simply “polemical” pretensions of those we persist in calling “artists.” The power of art ... has now become the power of those who administer art and ensure its economic and institutional promotion, dissemination and criticism. (Jimenez 2007:7)

- 21 This statement aligns with a significant characteristic of art activists: their position of in-betweenness that prevents any attempt to definitively categorize activists. However, it seems crucial to consider the possibility that they may engage in (efficient) critical or subversive actions, either by criticizing or deviating from the cultural, media, and consumerist conformity of the “society of spectacle” (Debord 1967) or by daring to contravene the law in societies dominated by limited freedom of expression, and oppression.
- 22 There is a pervasive sense of strangeness and confusion within intellectual discourse concerning this phenomenon which arises, in part, from the inherent ambiguity that “artist” practices have maintained since the 1990s. The questions and challenges that have come up encompass an ideological spectrum as broad as the one to which activists themselves allude. Indeed, not all new forms of artistic protest appear to social issues. Moreover, the analysis of modern societies upon which these forms are based—whether explicitly or implicitly—is no longer conducted in terms of social classes and their struggle for the appropriation of material and symbolic resources.<sup>11</sup>
- 23 Since the 1990s, within a global landscape undergoing profound economic, social, and cultural transformations, the legacy of anti-conformist politics and protest philosophies has undergone a substantial shift. The aspiration to transcend social, economic, racial, sexual and gender relations stands as the foremost goal for numerous activist collectives globally. A new conception of politics is taking shape, rooted in the belief that power and domination extend beyond government institutions and multinational corporations and permeate the social fabric, infiltrating the most intimate aspects of daily life.

- 24 In his essay on Brecht, Walter Benjamin asserts that the engaged artist should ground their solidarity with oppressed classes not merely on ideological sympathy, however sincere it may be in content, but on a solidarity of condition (Benjamin 2003).
- 25 The artist is called upon to question their position within the production process. As an artist-producer, the imperative is to strive for the modification of the production apparatus itself rather than merely supplying it with revolutionary themes. This perspective arises from the recognition that the system tends to co-opt works inspired by protest, repurposing them into counter-revolutionary consumer products.<sup>12</sup> The enduring and essential principle lies in the inalienable responsibility of the artist. It extends beyond determining whether the produced art leans towards revolution or reaction. Instead, it entails a deep inquiry into the social relationships inherent in the very production of their art (Vander Gucht 2005).

## 1.2 The artist as activist

- 26 The activist artist seeks to create works that cultivate “disjunction,” which produce emotional shocks by breaking apart pre-existing social forms. It is largely in the light of political, ideological and ethical inclinations that the activist artist will select sites of intervention, and choose their aesthetic principles and artistic tools and media. This is linked to a militant attitude that makes art a field of constant political struggle.
- 27 Artistic activist productions prompt “a modification of the visible, of the ways of perceiving and expressing it, of experiencing it as tolerable or intolerable” (Carnevale, Kelsey, and Rancière 2007). On the basis of their intentions, which are explored in the questions raised in this issue, it would seem that the challenge for activist artists often goes beyond mere denunciation, condemnation, or glorification. Instead, it involves opening up possibilities and alternatives for the future, awakening aspirations, and inviting dialogue while mapping out paths for the construction of renewed utopias, whether collective or individual.
- 28 According to Claire Moulène and Jacques Capdevielle, the activist artist is “one who follows in the footsteps of society, one who accompanies it, dissects or decodes it and offers alternatives, often critical ones, that allow us to think differently about reality” (Moulène and Capdevielle 2007). Jean-Marc Lachaud adds that “they (activist artists) conceive polemical works and actions, disturbing public order, sketching utopian landscapes, sparking liberating experiences and ultimately posing, aesthetically, the inescapable political question of individual and collective emancipation” (Lachaud 2015).
- 29 To cultivate these heterotopias,<sup>13</sup> many observers assert that the work of activist artists should not be confined to the institutionalized and politically “sanitized” spaces of the White Cube (O’Doherty 1986), namely the gallery and the museum. Figures such as Peter Weibel (2015), Ben Davis (2013) and Nato Thompson (2015) argue that only ephemeral actions like performances, installations, theatrical interventions, or video reporting techniques executed in public spaces and in direct engagement with specific populations can truly infuse activism into art. Their emphasis is on siting artistic production in the very spaces of social demands and political conflicts, such as factories, offices, educational institutions, trade union premises, farming collectives, and so on.

- 30 Thus, from the 1970s on in Bombay, Indian artists Navjot Altaf and Altaf Mohammedi worked to make their productions visitable in “alternative public spaces” to reach “a wider audience” (than the classical audience of museum or gallery exhibitions). They plastered posters, drawings and lithographs on the walls of hospitals, colleges and factory entrances, as well as in slums (notably the Matunga Labor Camp in Dharavi) and in the Dalit colony of Chembur (a suburban Bombay neighborhood and one of the bases of the Dalit Panthers) (Adajania 2016). From the 1980s, Navjot Altaf continued her search for “alternative” audiences and places, organizing workshops with women and children from villages in the rural district of Bastar (state of Chhattisgarh). She worked on the design of public spaces to meet and share, to be as places of resistance against the combined attacks of free trade and identity politics. In the early 1980s, the painter Sudhir Patwardhan produced a series of paintings, entitled “Pokharan” in Thane on the outskirts of the town of Pokharan in Rajasthan. He had direct contact with the workers, discussing and sharing their living and working conditions to carry out what he called an “act of painting.” This series was exhibited in a factory shed, a bicycle repair shop and a school in Pokharan.
- 31 The artistic productions discussed and analyzed in this volume reveal that many activist artists navigate a delicate balance, a back-and-forth, between exhibiting outside institutional walls and presenting their work in galleries. While in situ actions allow for a form of political efficacy, gallery presentations provide space for more refined formal work and institutional recognition, which can an artist may have trouble giving up. The coherence of an activist artist’s approach, both politically and aesthetically, is gauged by this interplay.

## 2. Exploring the roots and transformations of artistic activism in South Asia

- 32 The exploration of activism must be contextualized within a historical framework characterized by changes that are reshaping social issues both at the sub-regional and local levels. It is indeed essential to consider these ongoing transformations within the artistic sphere, encompassing its practices, discourses, and modes of action. To avoid the pitfalls of generalization, both in terms of regional history and aesthetic-political expressions, this issue primarily focuses on contemporary artists who have been active over the course of the past decade. Individuals such as Anupam Roy in India, Qadir Jhatial in Pakistan, or Janani Cooray in Sri Lanka exemplify this commitment. They often respond occasionally to specific political events, such as the recent military offensive in Sri Lanka (the latest occurring in 2022) or the Anti-CAA protest in India (2019–2020). More commonly, their works align with enduring protest movements that resist underlying injustice, repression, and inequality. Although the artistic works discussed in these articles may appear simultaneously unique and commonplace, they often extend and renew long-standing practices, as seen in the case of Ambedkarite songs or Dalit literary forms. Furthermore, despite their often-universal denunciations, many of these works are not designed for a global audience; instead, they are firmly rooted in local social or spatial structures and circumstances.

## 2.1 Art and politics in South Asia: old links reconfigured

- 33 The various forms of contemporary artistic activism observed in South Asia have roots in a rich history—the still tumultuous relationship between art and politics that has shaped the contours of modern and contemporary South Asia. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the period of the anti-colonial struggle appears as a strong source of inspiration in the work of contemporary artist practices from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh who explicitly refer to this complex relationship.
- 34 The writings of Partha Mitter (1994, 2007) and Tapati Guha-Thakurta (1992, 2004) have informed the intricate relationship between Indian artistic modernity and the anti-colonial struggle. They demonstrate that the emergence of modern Indian art from the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century was intimately tied to the ideological commitment of constructing an Indian nation free from British colonialism. The objective was to counter the imposition of a “colonial art” advocated by the colonial power and lacking local roots. The academic painting of Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906) elevated mythology and the great Hindu epics to the status of “history painting.” At the end of his career, Varma’s art was seen as an expression of “national genius” by the anglicized Indian bourgeoisie in the colonial metropolises.
- 35 Nicolas Nercam’s article takes a closer look at the dual relationship between art and politics by examining three artistic movements that have left a lasting imprint on the broader South Asian artistic landscape: the Bengal school emerging in the early 20th century and its links with the Swadeshi movement, the artistic primitivism in articulation with the political primitivism initiated by Mahatma Gandhi in the 1920s–1930s, and finally the progressive art movement unfolding between the 1930s and the 1950s, and its connections to the international antifascist and progressive movement. While these movements did not establish direct links between political change and artistic innovation, they were closely tied to pivotal political moments in the anti-colonial struggle, bringing about significant formal and conceptual advancements in the South Asian *avant-garde*.
- 36 The example of the Bengal School underscores the potential of a heritage rooted in classical and medieval art as a constitutive element of South Asian modernity in the arts. In the case of primitivism, the focus is on the contemporary utilization of still vibrant practices in popular arts—be they rural, urban, or tribal—as a means of rejuvenating forms and concepts in the arts. Lastly, the example of progressive art, while laying the groundwork for a progressive ideology—now subject to contention—that was temporarily embraced by the Indian Congress party, allowed activist artists to position their artistic creations in close proximity to social demonstrations and political protest movements in South Asia.<sup>14</sup> Within this overview, Nicolas Nercam also emphasizes the ideological and aesthetic trajectory of the progressive movement, which significantly influenced committed art in the immediate post-independence period.
- 37 Today, the diverse forms assumed by artistic activism in South Asia still maintain an aesthetic tradition which seems largely to draw upon what is referred to as the “Marxist cultural movement” (Pradhan 1979).<sup>15</sup> Many artists and collectives explicitly identify themselves as activists, contributing to the visibility of universally shared themes while simultaneously denouncing situations that closely resonate with the local

contexts in which they emerge. Without claiming to be exhaustive, it is worth mentioning a few of them which are considered as representative of a particularly dynamic activist sphere: Vivan Sundaram, Navjot Altaf, Tejal Shah, Shilpa Gupta, Pushpamala N., Anita Dube, Amar Kanwar, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Habib Tanvir, Namdeo Dhasal, Shishir Bhattacharya, Shahidul Islam and Munem Wasif in India. These activists also include collectives such as Open Circle, the Raqs Media Collective and Sahmat. In Pakistan, there have been numerous interventions by artists, writers and artists' groups denouncing both national political events and universal issues (violence and political repression, freedom, women's rights, violent extremism, etc.), from artists such as Malala Yousafzai, Kishwar Naheed, Tahira Abdullah, Shamim Awan, Amina Bano and Hira Sultan, to collectives such as PAIMAN. In Sri Lanka, the movement to oust President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was actively supported by many artists from the worlds of music and film, but it was also largely driven by activists, such as Shaju, a transgender artist from the Fearless Collective, and digital artist Marco Manamperi.

- 38 Since the 1990s-2000s and the acknowledgment of the “emerging” status of the economies in South Asian countries serving as a catalyst for their integration into the global framework of world trade, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka have experienced profound changes in all areas—economic, social, cultural, and artistic. The geopolitical shift in the 1990s, globally indicated by the collapse of the USSR, appears to have coincided with a notable decline of the institutional Left, evident in the waning influence of Communist parties and the challenges faced by the Congress party in India. In the Indian Union, the commencement of economic liberalization in 1991 with the introduction of the New Economic Policy marked a departure from the principles of the Indian path established by the founding figures of Independence in 1947. This original path was rooted in secular democracy, self-reliant growth characterized by a significant public sector, and a policy of non-alignment in external affairs. The subsequent economic liberalization and the subsequent rise to power of the Hindu nationalist right further challenged these foundational principles.
- 39 In this political, social, and economic landscape, where the societies of South Asia are now deeply enmeshed in globalization,<sup>16</sup> contemporary forms of a novel type of engaged art are evolving. This development spans a wide range of situations, social contexts, artistic trajectories, and modes of action, rendering this region a distinct laboratory for the evolution of artistic activism and renewed interactions between artistic practices and social and political engagement.
- 40 As in the case of *Diversion*, rooted in the controversies surrounding the choice for the CPI(M) to rule in the State where the artist resides, the local context tends to play a crucial role in the deployment of an engaged approach and the intention of the art forms. Thus, while most artistic productions carry a message whose scope extends far beyond the local audience, they often take as their starting point very concrete situations, intimately and immediately linked to local experiences. For the visual artist of Dalit origin Prabakar Pachpute, his large mural frescos of mine workers, denouncing labor exploitation as well as the damaging effects of mining on the natural landscape, are drawn from the experience of his home region Chandrapur (Maharashtra), where his family has been working in mines for several generations. The performances by Adivasis of Eastern India, especially dance and singing, used to be essentially directed towards village audiences bearing “highly local social undertones.” With new means of expression (films, documentaries), Adivasi engaged art is still very much centered on

local narratives but addresses a more globalized audience, as Raphaël Rousseleau explains. The powerful performance by Sri Lankan human rights activist Sandya Ekneligoda in Colombo discussed by Ruhanie Perera represents a direct form of protest against the kidnapping of her husband more than ten years ago. However, it also became a strong symbol of larger forms of political violence in a country that has been undergoing armed conflict and repression for decades. Among the multifaceted forms of violence denounced by artists, the ones related to the rise of religious fundamentalism and authoritarian regimes in the different countries of South Asia have been significant over this period.

## 2.2 Political and artistic struggles plagued by religious fundamentalism

- 41 In India, the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque by Hindu fundamentalists in December 1992 accompanied by violent communal clashes, and the anti-Muslim pogroms in 2002 triggered by an arson attack on a train resulting in the deaths of Hindu nationalists in Gujarat. This strengthened the determination and mobilizing power of the paramilitary forces of the Hindu nationalist right. With the BJP taking leadership in the country, numerous collectives of activist artists united against the Hindutva policies endorsed by the government. The SAHMAT collective, established in 1989, and Open Circle (1998–2008) emerged as active platforms for cultural mobilization against Hindu nationalism (Sahmat Collective 2013).
- 42 The communal clashes and the BJP's political directives in India have disrupted previously consensual notions of democracy, nation, and modernity. These events marked a crisis in the representation of the working classes by the middle classes, urban bourgeoisie, and the intellectual sphere in India. Starting 1992, "the working class" ceased to be perceived as a source of political and cultural renewal as it had been since the 1920s, and instead became an entity primarily manipulated by the liberal cultural industry, propelled by conservative, and at times, anti-progressive, political motivations and values.
- 43 Artistic activism is often implicitly associated with the political principles of an anti-fundamentalist Left, defending what Geeta Kapur terms "A Secular Identity" (Kapur 2007a). According to Geeta Kapur, the notion of "secular" has been central to the development of Indian and South Asian modernity from the early twentieth century to the present, both in the construction of the values of citizenship and of the modern post-independence artist.
- 44 The articles in this issue testify to this ideological influence aimed at defending secular, democratic and progressive values. This influence is evident in the various contexts mobilized, which are marked by ideological biases that resist political frameworks dominated by nationalist fundamentalisms. However, it would be inaccurate to confine political activism—and its artistic counterpart—to left-wing groups predominantly aligned with Marxist values and ideology. To comprehensively understand the wide ideological spectrum characterizing contemporary activism in South Asia, it is crucial to identify individuals and groups advocating for conservative and fundamentalist values. In present-day India, where the principles of Secular Identity increasingly contend with those of Hindutva, to the extent that the former has become a minority or

keeps a low profile due to fears of reprisal,<sup>17</sup> the artistic sphere plays a pivotal role in a significant ideological struggle.

- 45 The idea of “struggle” often mobilized by activists is to be taken literally in such a context, given the extreme violence employed by Hindu nationalist organizations, including the burning of cinemas and art galleries, physical intimidation of spectators, the destruction of works of art, beatings, and death threats (Nercam 2017; Maheswari 2018; Zecchini 2020). Anthropologist Christiane Brosius has emphasized the dedication of Hindutva ideologues to video production and subsequent engagement in social networks to create new tools for political message (Brosius 2002). Faced with the highly effective activism displayed by entities associated with the Hindu nationalist movement in the realms of social networking and webcasting, the efforts made by proponents of progressive thought in the field of computer media in India appeared significantly inadequate, if not insignificant. It has been demonstrated how, in the “traditional” economy of Indian city markets (bazaars), plenty of them have now become street shops dedicated to selling multiple images of Hindu devotion, illustrated almanacs, calendars, portraits of political leaders, mystics, or historical figures directly affiliated with pro-Hindu organizations, and which promote the virtues and merits of Hindutva. A significant part of this propaganda art came together after the violent communal clashes of 1992.<sup>18</sup> Painters like Balraj and Satya identify as militants and label themselves as Hindu activists (Brosius 2007). They perceive their artistic endeavors as a form of devotion, akin to the attitude of a Hindu devotee practicing Deshbhakti, the veneration of Mother Earth (Brosius 2007).
- 46 The analysis of this conservative strand of political art in South Asia, advocating a communalist conception of citizenship, has been underexplored by the authors responding to our call for contributions. Perhaps this is because it presents an art of propaganda<sup>19</sup> where formal innovation and the individual creator’s singularity appear to be excluded. These aesthetic and political tendencies, which lean towards propaganda art, regardless of the intended ideological message, fail to align with the context current collective thought processes and the focus on an understanding of artistic activism as a catalyst for both the revitalization of political and social action.
- 47 In addition, the articles in this issue highlight the diverse trajectories of artistic activism in relation to politics in South Asia. While one strand of South Asian artistic activism drawing on the rich history between art and politics since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there is also evidence of a certain degree of political distancing in the activism of today. Committed artists who were once aligned with progressive political parties during the anti-colonial struggle have shifted their focus, displaying a level of distrust towards official institutions and established political programs. In the current landscape, there is a form of “propaganda art,” and some artists explicitly identify as both “propagandists” and “activists.” This is evident in the interview with visual artist Anupam Roy conducted by art historian Yashodatta Alone. While not covered in this issue, it seems important to note the presence of “propagandist” artists associated with political parties and advocating for Hindutva. Studies have examined the evolving relationship between artistic practices and Hindutva since the late 1990s, illustrating how they resonate with globalized forms of artistic activism in the service of nationalist discourses in the South Asian context (Brosius 2007, 2002; Kaur 2007).

### 3. Faced with unequal societies and radicalized powers: placement, intention and scope of activist action

- 48 As the creations produced by activists embody a diverse array of forms, intentions, and discourses, it seems imperative to understand the career paths of artists as multifaceted. Drawing upon the analyses presented in this collection of texts, it is appropriate to delve into these trajectories, which the authors themselves have scrutinized through meticulous and repeated observation, or more commonly, through interviews with art activists. These interviews often serve to interpret the artists' works, decode the messages they convey, and provide insights into the locations and methodologies of their interventions. In certain instances, the authors are actively engaged in artistic interventions, conveying intentions and messages that they tend to scrutinize, sometimes without the critical distance typically demanded by academic standards, yet with a commitment to bear witness.
- 49 Biographical approaches and the trajectories of artistic interventions which are here put into question are examined in conjunction with the contexts in which activists' works unfold. This method presents the advantage of enabling the exploration of the multi-positional nature of the activist in society as well as the analysis of art as a production process. From local settings to the global stage, from streets to canvases, the resonance experienced by the works under study varies widely. The objective is to extract elements for discussion regarding the expected, hoped-for, and actual effects of the works on the worlds they target. This forces us to confront the crucial but delicate question of whether these actions contribute to reversing the balance of power or, at the very least, sustain mobilization forms that enable counter-power to persist where opposition faces severe repression. Analyzing the effects of these actions on the social world raises another question related to the frequently mentioned ambivalences of activist art forms, which has already been partially addressed. This includes the various forms of distortions and co-optations of the messages conveyed by artists who navigate multiple realms simultaneously: those of aesthetics and power, along with the realms closely associated with them, such as the art market and politics.

#### 3.1 Diversity of intentions, multiplicity of trajectories: the work of activist artists examined in its own right

- 50 The emphasis on individual narratives in this issue provides a unique perspective. Exploring artistic activism through series of portraits, biographical, or autobiographical accounts sheds light on the intricate connection between individual and collective action.
- 51 Within these movements, the issue of minority rights, especially for Dalits and Adivasis, plays a significant role. In their article "*Bhim Geet* and the Ambedkarite Movement: The Genesis of a Cultural Field of Protest," Joël Cabalion and Julien Jugand explore the genesis of *Bhim Geet*, the songs performed by Dalits in honor of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. This form of expression is intimately linked to resistance movements and the struggle against discrimination faced by the "low castes" or "untouchables" in India. By incorporating various genres (Tamasha, Jalsa, Prabodhan, Lavni, Powada) and



influences, these poems and ballads, sung both in private and by troupes in villages and towns, intend to raise awareness about the persistence of discrimination tied to the caste system and to instigate social change. These songs represent potent cultural counter-narratives, particularly in the current political context where Hindu nationalism is in power.

- 52 Critiques of caste hierarchies and violence are prominently featured in the two interviews presented in this issue. The first interview is between art historian Yashodatta Alone and visual artist Anupam Roy (“Perspectives on Ambedkarian Aesthetics and Social Movements: A Conversation between Prof. Y. S. Alone and Artist Anupam Roy”), while the second involves Laetitia Zecchini and Tamil writer Perumal Murugan (“‘When my own writing is my enemy’: Notes on Perumal Murugan and an Interview”). Both discussions explore the complex issues surrounding caste dynamics, shedding light on the perspectives of artists and writers who help challenge prevailing norms and address social inequalities in their respective works. Denouncing a prevailing narrative of art history dominated by what he terms Brahmanical culture, Yashodatta Alone advocates for the concept of “Ambedkarian aesthetics.” This approach seeks to reevaluate modern and contemporary Indian art, emphasizing a politically engaged Dalit art created by artists from marginalized communities. Their work addresses issues related to caste-based discrimination, the challenges of political coexistence, and instances of lynching. In the realm of literature, Perumal Murugan consistently portrays various manifestations of “everyday casteism” in his novels. In the words of Laetitia Zecchini, his work attacks “the violence, hypocrisy, and shamelessness” concealed behind social or religious norms and hierarchies, a stance that has seen him subjected to controversy and challenges.
- 53 Raphaël Rousseleau’s contribution titled “From Performance to Literature and Cinema: Adivasi Art and Activism, with a Focus on Eastern India” examines the extensive history of Adivasi artistic activism in the eastern regions of India. The Adivasis, representing both a cultural minority and an economically disadvantaged tribal group (Scheduled Tribes), have engaged in artistic activism as part of their emancipation from colonial rule. Adivasi activists have established schools and created social novels and plays, intertwining politics, education, and the arts. In contemporary times, new avenues of expression have emerged, particularly through documentaries and films that persist and rejuvenate the fight for self-determination and against the exploitation of tribal populations and their habitats. Examples include the filmmaking duo Biju Toppo and Meghnath Bhattacharya from Jharkhand, renowned for their productions addressing indigenous issues, social discrimination, and environmental concerns. Their films, such as *Hamare Gaon me Hamara Raj* (translated as *Tribal Self-rule* [2000]) and *From Kalinga to Kashipur* (2004), shed light on Adivasi struggles against industrialization and violent repression. The Adivasi activism portrayed also emphasizes the environmental dimension, exemplified by poet Jacinta Kerketta’s collections that condemn the exploitation of forests and land, river pollution, and the despair of villagers facing debt.
- 54 The issue of women’s rights also cuts across the different contexts studied. In Pakistan, Samina Iqbal’s article “Not So Silent: Art, Political Expression and the Subtle Use of the Public Sphere in the Work of Pakistan’s Artists” revisits the Manifesto drafted and signed by fifteen female artists in Lahore in the early 1980s, and which urged women in various creative fields to unite for women’s emancipation and freedom of expression. Several decades later, there is still a clear-cut relevance for these demands. A

contemporary expression of this cause is demonstrated by the young artist Ayesha Jatoi, who rented an advertising billboard in one of Lahore's major markets. For ten days, she displayed the question: "How many women do you see at the moment?" aiming to draw attention to the absence and invisibility of women in public spaces.

- 55 Public space plays a crucial role in the resistance efforts of three women in Sri Lanka, as described by Ruhanie Perera in her article "Embodied Witnessing: Performance Expressions as Acts of Citizenship within the Sri Lankan Context." The performances of these women are authentic acts of resistance, commemoration, and citizenship, set against a backdrop of political violence associated with decades of armed conflict and repression, and they are in line with the popular protest movement "aragalaya/porattam" calling for the resignation of the president Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. Sandya Ekneligoda, who has received no news of her missing husband for over 10 years, political cartoonist Prageeth Eknaligoda, engaged in a ritualistic head-shaving ceremony. This act has served as both a symbol of mourning and a powerful gesture, shared on social networks to "remember and make visible the disappeared." This activist symbolizes the fight for truth and justice undertaken by countless families affected by contemporary armed conflicts, embodying what researcher Chulani Kodikara refers to as a "subaltern dissident citizen." (Kodikara 2022). The public space is also the arena that artist Janani Cooray transforms through her performance "Osariya." This art performance involves her walking down a bustling street of Colombo during peak hours, adorned in a mock wedding dress crafted from barbed wire and aluminum foil. The dress is inscribed with golden letters, relaying the expectations expressed by potential suitors who outlined their views on what constitutes a "good wife" after she published a matrimonial advertisement. While her work delves into issues of gender and the body, and her artistic practice has consistently been socially engaged, Cooray did not identify as an "activist" until this performance triggered complaints and threats of dismissal from her teaching position.
- 56 In the Indian context, to return to Joël Cabalion and Julien Jugand's article, the authors investigate the gendered dimension of Bhim geet, which is increasingly recognized as a problematic heritage. They highlight the distinctive role played by Ovi, the women's songs intertwined with their daily activities. This analysis echoes Smita Patil's discussion of Ambedkarite Feminism during the symposium organized in May, 2021 on the theme of this issue. Smita explained how this movement, which originated in Maharashtra and later spread throughout India, challenges the foundations of a "dominant" feminism in India led by feminists from upper castes, and emphasized the need to address the intersections of caste and Brahmanical hegemony.<sup>20</sup> Smita Patil's insight underscored the intersectional nature of the Ambedkarite feminists' struggle, condemning triple exploitation based on caste, class, and gender. These activists found expressive outlets, particularly in song, poetry, and theater as forms of artistic resistance.
- 57 As highlighted in other articles within this issue, activists are often play the role of mediators between different causes (Moulène and Capdevielle 2007; Van Essche 2007; Sholette 2017). They can, for example, act as a mediator between "exploiter" and "exploited" in a social conflict or trace the paths to the construction of new utopias (collective or individual). They may not always work for a specific ideological cause or on behalf of a political party, as they perceive power relations in politics to be corrupt and extremely violent. Instead, they collaborate with specific populations, and their

artistic practices can take on a highly participatory dimension. This generation of artists shaping contemporary artistic activism in South Asia appears more “disillusioned” by than “disengaged” from official political practices, opting for direct action on the ground with the people (as we also pointed out in 2.2).

- 58 Several of the narratives explored in this issue underscore the recurrent threats and violence faced by art activists after the publication or exhibition of their work, particularly when it contradicts the ruling power or dominant religious values. Laetitia Zecchini notes that criminal proceedings, levelling charges of obscenity, blasphemy, and incitement to violence, were initiated against Perumal Murugan after the publication of his novel *Madhorubagan, One Part-Woman* (2010). The group of digital activists interviewed by Bhawna Parmar share a similar experience: they were subjected to trolling, surveillance, and threats on social media following their online publications. Both articles also delve into the artists’ encounters with censorship and self-censorship and the complexities these pose within the artistic creation process.
- 59 In these contributions, the interviewed artists express their feelings of fear, acknowledging that they had to revise or transform their writing or images, but they have not abandoned their creative pursuits. Perumal Murugan reflects on this relationship with fear, the contemplation it has provoked, and the radical choices he made in his literary work and professional career, including his appointment as vice-president of the international writers’ association PEN. Faced with the phenomenon of “online lynching” and the fear of government targeting, several digital activists have opted to remove some of their posts from social networks. They explain that they have come to terms with the reality that online violence has become an integral part of their daily lives. In a context where expressing one’s opinion without repercussions is increasingly difficult in contemporary South Asia, a surprisingly similar observation is made by the artists in these articles—that of finding more discrete, deviate or “subtle” ways of expressing their dissent, which appears to be a common survival code for many artists.<sup>21</sup>
- 60 Samina Iqbal highlights that in Pakistan, artists whose work addresses social and political inequalities—even subtly—often face penalties, censorship, and sometimes even the destruction of their work. She describes the work of several artists who have chosen to express themselves “in a manner that is not loud but still engages with their sensitive observations of injustices,” describing it as a “subtle” form of activism. One notable example is Qadir Jhatial’s performance “Silent Voices” (2019), where the young artist stands alone with an empty placard in front of various government institutions, mimicking the recognizable posture of a demonstrator. Samina Iqbal also recounts the arrest of artist Ayesha Jatoi during the installation of “Clothesline” on a roundabout in Lahore. In this performance, she draped scarlet-dyed clothes over a replica of a military aircraft used in the 1971 war against East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), which resulted in a bloody public massacre. Ruhanie Perera describes the ways the performances of three Sri Lankan artists she explored are “emblematic of resilience in a political culture of silencing and censorship that directly impacts the plurality of expression.”
- 61 Together, the articles uncover the myriad ways artists are using their craft to amplify dissenting voices within political landscapes marked by escalating state violence against protest movements.

### 3.2 Artistic activism in action: exploring role ambiguity and impact on power dynamics, injustice, and inequality

But there will be changes. Societal changes cannot be stopped. What has motivated me throughout my life and career has been to observe those changes. While things might not change as fast as we hope, and while there may be anger and frustration at all those who do not see the urgency with which things must change, I believe strongly that every struggle will bear fruit.

(Perumal Murugan, interview with Laetitia Zecchini)

- 62 In addition to various on-site interventions where the artist's physical presence is vital for nurturing the protest dimension of art production, artistic activism in South Asia is increasingly manifesting and spreading through online platforms. Those serve as vibrant hubs that facilitate new connections and solidarities across a spectrum of social, political, and intellectual domains. It is mainly through this media that the Dalit movements (Srinivas 2015, quoted by Sunderason and Hoek 2021) tend to form trans-political entities, resonating with anti-community protests, environmental advocacy, and the defense of freedom of expression.
- 63 As suggested by Sanjukta Sunderason and Lotte Hoek (2021), and consistent with numerous contributions in this edition, the post-1990s period witnessed a resurgence of progressive thought and action in both politics and the arts. This resurgence is evident in the revival of anti-fascist alliances, anti-capitalist and anti-racist associations and collectives, as well as movements against environmental degradation. In this manner, a transnational lexicon has gained renewed resonance, illustrated by the American slogan "Black Lives Matter" finding its counterpart in the struggles of minorities with "Dalit Lives Matter."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the slogan of the Palestinian movements, "Intifada," reverberates in the autonomist movements of Kashmir.
- 64 As Nancy Adajania has explained, the core of artistic activism in South Asia can be summarized as "Politicizing the private and endeavoring to foster solidarities and environments conducive to redefining the role of art in society" (Adajania 2004). This movement should be viewed in tandem with the actions by activists that extend beyond the "permitted spaces," as highlighted in Ruhanie Perera's contribution. In such cases, artists consciously exceed the boundaries of what the government tolerates, infringing on legality. This transgression not only delineates the borders between legal and illegal, but also marks the line between art and activism. This perspective could help situate Bhim Geet as a "Dalit counter-public social space"<sup>23</sup> (Rege 2008:20) comprising alternative institutions and networks of publication and dissemination. It also conveys a critical interpretation of history aimed at promoting popular education and political consciousness.<sup>24</sup>
- 65 Obviously, most of these actions are far from bringing about concrete political change. Still, they contribute significantly to bringing the power relations that structure society to light—sometimes highlighting long-term socio-economic and political entrenchment—and processes of resistance closer to greater justice and equality. They also frequently

contribute to amplifying voices “from the margins” or belonging to gender, ethnic, or cultural minorities, as exemplified in the cases of Dalit and Adivasis. Consequently, these actions play a crucial role in raising awareness on injustice and inequality. Nevertheless, resistance does not seem to escape the commodification process associated with capitalistic logic. How are market forces capitalizing on artistic activism? Or is the notion of resistance becoming a criterion in the creation of the artwork’s value as the art historian Isabelle Graw (2022) frames it? This prompts us to consider the permeability between the arts, politics, and the market. In South Asia, where the commercial art infrastructure such as galleries and private museums have traditionally been vital for the development of the visual arts scene, Malvika Maheshwari (2018) explains how the connections between market forces and activism have been intricate.

- 66 On one hand, there have been cases where artists’ work has been removed from large-scale events, an action that is observable in other regions of the world. For example, an artwork produced by two Delhi-based artists and referenced in the CAA protest was removed from the Delhi Art Fair in 2020 (Cascone 2020). Yashodatta Alone highlights the fact that while censorship has been the privileged mode of repression towards art when the latter is in reaction to violence (Kinna and Whiteley 2020), it has not always been straightforward (refer to his interview with Anupam Roy in this issue). Alone criticizes the lack of support and exhibition opportunities for engaged Dalit Art in galleries. Sometimes, censorship has contributed to increasing the visibility and value of artworks, as in the case of Perumal Murugan, revealing some of the paradoxes of the contemporary art market.
- 67 The issues of commodification and marketing mentioned above, exacerbated by controversies, have also expanded to online platforms with the widespread use of social media as significant spaces for art activism. In her contribution “Dissent Art in the Digital Age: Insights into the Culture of Artivism on Instagram in India,” Bhawna Parmar explains how platforms such as Instagram, Facebook or Twitter have paved the way for new expressions of digital activism. She also underscores the co-optation of online artivism by digital capitalism and the commodification of dissent. The structure of platforms, the demand for constant content creation, the necessity of maintaining the level of likes and shares, and the expectation to engage with current events, all contribute to a “reorganization of [artistic] practices according to the platform’s industrial and economic logic to enhance visibility.” Thus, social media also “promotes a politics that diverges from the emancipatory ideals pursued by social movements (Denick and Leistert 2015)” (See Parmar Article).
- 68 Exploring “artistic activism” through the lenses of its expressions in contemporary South Asia is one of the ways in which we believe we could scrutinize all at once both the complex relationship between art and society, and political practices, at the same time encompassing the perspective of their creation and their reception. As Bernard Fibicher (Fibicher et al. 2022:2) recalls, “Nowadays there is no dearth of opportunities and urgency to resist the ‘system’—whether named or not .... In countries with autocratic, oligarchic or single-party regimes, there are protests against freedom of expression, against corruption and for greater citizen participation,” while in democracies “there is also a growing distrust of the political authorities” (Fibicher et al., 2022:2).

- 69 The political and cultural landscape of South Asia, marked by its unique characteristics, serves as a laboratory for studying the dynamics of globalized emerging societies. These societies are characterized by the coexistence of growing market economies, rapid expansion in cultural and creative industries, and the rise of governments exhibiting authoritarian tendencies and/or religious fundamentalism.

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## NOTES

1. The principle behind *combine painting* is to question the relationship between the artistic sphere and the everyday world. It involves combining the two-dimensional elements of paint and three-dimensional elements (everyday objects, sculpture, clothing, etc.). The term was coined by the American artist Robert Rauschenberg in the 1960s, and has become commonplace in today's globalized contemporary art scene, without any explicit reference to the American avant-garde.
2. For a detailed account of the artist's career and a selection of his work, see the page devoted to it on the Project88 website: <http://www.project88.in/artist-profile/18046000>
3. "2007, Nandigram violence. A state of failure," in *India Today*, December 12, 2009. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20091228-2007-nandigram-violence-a-s>
4. This paragraph was amended at the request of the authors on August 15, 2024.
5. See for instance the works by several visual-arts artists; Vivan Sundaram (anti-Congress political cartoons during the imposition of Emergency), Rameshwar Broota (paintings and drawings on political and military oppression), K. G. Subramanyan (clay bas-reliefs on the "Bangladesh Liberation" war), Bikash Bhattacharya (paintings on police repression of the Naxalite movement in Calcutta).
6. These include the exhibitions *Micropolitiques* in 2000, *Au-delà du spectacle* in 2000–2001, *Rhetorics of Surveillance. From Bentham to Big Brother* in 2001–2002, *Documenta XI* in 2002, the exhibitions *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art* in 2002, *Hardcore* in 2003, *Making things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy* (2005), *Dyonisiac* (2005), the Masters of Disorder exhibition (2012), the Berlin Biennial (2012), the *global aCtIVISm* exhibitions (2013–2014), *The Color Line*, African-American artists and segregation (2016), the 2017 Venice Biennial, *Manifesta 12* in Palermo in 2018, the 2018–19 Kochi-Muziris Biennial *Possibilities of an Unalienated Life*, the 2020 exhibitions *Global(e) Resistance*, and *Global Groove, Art, Dance, Performance, and Protest* in 2021.
7. Among the many references on the subject, see in particular: Balasinski and Mathieu (2006); Dreyfus and Lemoine (2022); Hartle and White (2022). Lieven De Cauter, Ruben De Roo and Karel Vanhaesebrouck (2010), Susan Noyes Platt (2011), Nato Thompson (2012) and (2015), Deeptha Achar and Shivaji K. Panikkar (2012), Claudia Mesch (2014), Daniel Vander Gucht (2014), Jean-Marc Lachaud (2015), Peter Weibel (2015), Boris Groys (2016), Gregory Sholette (2017) and (2022), Yates McKee (2016), Dominique Berthet (2018) and (2022), Annette Blum (2019), Julia Ramirez-Blanco (2019), Martine Bouchier and Dominique Dehais (2020), Steve Duncombe and Steve Lambert (2021).
8. *Artforum International* in May 2019, the online journal *The Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* and the aesthetic studies journal *Figures de l'art* n°40, in 2023, are just some examples.
9. See the article by Stanislas Chaillou (2020). On the relationship between morality and artistic activism: Hou Hanru (2019) and Carole Talon (2019).
10. Reference to the formalist critique of the American art historian Clement Greenberg, which became a modernist dogma after the Second World War. See Clement Greenberg (1995).
11. As recently as the 1970s, the term "social class" was omnipresent in all discussions about society, whether it was used to refer to the working class and its allies, or to celebrate its disappearance in favor of a central group, the "middle classes." On this subject, see Moulène and Capdevielle (2007).
12. For Walter Benjamin (2003), there is a danger in sublimating misery by anesthetizing it, thereby running the risk of making the unacceptable acceptable.
13. This field of artistic action leads the activist artist to invest in and propose spaces for experimentation close to what Foucault calls "heterotopias." Heterotopias would be radically "other" places, yet real, inscribed in social space, embodied "elsewhere." These heterotopias place the individual in a place where the disjunction from ordinary space is coupled with a

disjunction from ordinary time. The artist intervenes in the gaps in the materiality of reality and places his poetic and artistic interventions there (Foucault 2009).

14. It is important to note that, upon achieving independence, of South Asian countries placed at the head of their post-colonial power structures governments which (while affirming their sympathy for socialist values) developed a mistrust of Marxist political movements. J. Nehru made no secret of his concern about his left-wing opposition (the PCI was banned in 1949 and its activities went underground). In Pakistan, from the 1950s onwards, the disappearance of the communist left also meant the disappearance of the patronage of the progressive left, with strong repression by the new government. In the early 1950s, in Sri Lanka, Prime Minister John Kotelawala developed a policy similar to that of India. Viscerally anti-Communist, he regarded Communists as “unpatriotic” (with an anti-Communist policy at home and a superficially pro-Communist policy in external affairs). See Hoek and Sunderason (2022).

15. See also the article by Nicolas Nercam in this Volume “Artivism Unveiled: Tracing the Historical and Aesthetic Roots of Artistic Activism in South Asia” and more specifically the section “Political progressivism and artistic progressivism.”

16. This context, which has been widely studied, is marked by strong consumerism, in which religious nationalism, the stigmatization of minorities, the questioning of state secularism, the ethnic conception of the nation, inter-community violence, etc. tend to dominate, and where profound changes are taking place in the cultural and artistic world, with the advent of South Asian productions on the international art scene, the development of the art market, the expansion of cultural economies, the shift of the middle classes towards mass consumption, the questioning of freedom of expression, etc.

17. For a deeper analysis on Hindutva and India’s Authoritarian Turn, see the SAMAJ 24/25 (2020).

18. A number of painters and illustrators with diverse artistic backgrounds (both craftsmen and academics) were involved in creating these images. Within this vast production, the paintings of Balraj and Satyanarayan Maurya (nicknamed *Satya*: “the truth”) enjoyed considerable success with both local and diasporic popular audiences. These two artists have established themselves firmly within the *Hindutva* propaganda movement. Their works circulate within the *net-work* made available by the *Sangh Parivar* and are reproduced in pro-Hindu magazines such as *Organiser*.

19. As explained by Laure Gillot-Assayag (2016), it is controlled by the state or, at least, it objectifies the values of the ruling classes, with the aim of maintaining a certain view of society. Where the activist artist disturbs, the propaganda artist comforts.

20. See Smita Patil (2021).

21. “I have to find very delicate or subtle ways to voice it” (Quotation from Perumal Murugan in the interview with Laetitia Zecchini).

“[A well-known] activist advised [Krityam] to be more subtle and not direct to save himself from getting unwanted attention” (Quotation from Bhawna Parmar’s article)

22. This can also be seen as reminiscent of the Dalit Panthers of the 1960s and 1970s, who were inspired by the Black Panthers.

23. If Nancy Fraser’s notion of “subaltern counter-publics” somehow applies well, it falls short of providing an entirely satisfactory conceptual tool in this case to describe the latter’s situation wherein one does not just “invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (Fraser 1992); Dalits here claim to represent and speak for the better interest of the nation at large, not just for themselves. Their stake being better publics than casteist Hindus.

24. Rege reminds us of the essential historical mediation of “caste-based forms of cultural labour such as the *Lavani* and the *Powada* as grounds on which cultural and political struggles are worked out” (Rege 2002)

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