



## CALL FOR PAPER

### **Conference Day: *Artistic Activism in India (History, Practice, Paradigm and Circulation)***

The Research team ADS (Art / Design / Scenography – Research Laboratory MICA - EA 4426) of the University Bordeaux Montaigne, the CEIAS (Study Centre of India and South Asia – UMR 8564-EHESS-CNRS) and the IFP (French Institute of Pondicherry - UMFRE 21 CNRS-MAE) organize a **Conference Day, Monday, May 11, 2020, at MSH Paris Nord** (20 George Sand Avenue 93 210 La Paine Saint Denis, France).

Under the direction of Nicolas Nercam ADS-MICA (UBM) Associate Researcher CEIAS (EHESS-CNRS), Nicolas Bautès, IFP, Associate Researcher CEIAS (EHESS-CNRS) and Christine Ithurbide, LabEX ICCA, Associate Researcher CEIAS (EHESS-CNRS).

#### **Argumentary:**

"Arts Activism" is an expression often used since the 1990s in reference to a significant part of the production of contemporary art throughout the world, without any clear definition. Numerous international events - the Berlin Biennial in 2012, the Venice Biennial in 2017, the *Manifesta 12* in Palermo in 2018, or the Kochi-Muziris Biennial entitled "Possibilities of a non-alienated life" in 2018-19 among some other such events – made it a central question and broached a large spectra of thematic going from ecology, anti-globalization, feminism, responsible consumption, social and economic alienation or immigration. Similarly, a number of works (C. Mesch 2014, D. Vander Gucht 2014, JM Lachaud 2015, N. Thompson 2015, 2018, P. Weibel 2015, G. Didi-Huberman 2016, G. Sholette 2017, 2018, D. Berthet 2018, M. Reilly 2018) and magazines (the May 2019 *Artforum International* for example) address the question of contemporary forms taken by the interrelations between art and politics.

"Artivism" encompasses artistic actions, which tackle social and political issues, reviving agitational practises defined in resistance to the planetary ideological hegemony they refer to as neoliberalism . This resurgent awareness of the political nature of artistic creation questions consensual discourses on the neutrality of art and aesthetics, often confined in their "autonomy" and impervious to the disorders of the world. Within artistic activism a dialectic between two entities, traditionally perceived as being of a different nature, is played

out: on the one hand the field of art (too often defined as autonomous, with no other functionality than its own) and on the other hand in the field of politics and social activities on the other hand (thought out as a *praxis* of the exercise of the power in an organized society).

The central question posed by artistic activism could be stated in this way: How can we evaluate the capacity of art (visual arts, performing arts, literature, theatre, dance, video art, cinema, etc.) to function as social and political protest?

The diversity of its actors, and their intentions, targets and modes of expressions makes it difficult to propose a clear measuring of the very function of art in politics. Artistic expressions are large, going from so-called traditional medium (painting, drawing, sculpture, theatre, etc.), through ephemeral practices, *in situ*, inscribed in particular times and places (urban spaces, neighbourhoods, specific sites, warehouse, etc.) to the development of interventions on the Internet (net art, *hacktivism*, etc.). So large are the ideological backgrounds of their authors, being individuals or collectives, all mediated by rhetoric and diversion practices, expressing different postures, levels of radicalisms, etc. Therefore, to overcome the singularities of art activism, it is necessary to engage a common reflection enabling the drawing lines of analysis in the way to build a robust analytical framework.

Two radically different positions can be delineated, within all these practices:

- When artistic action is part of a form of enhancing the functionality of the message and political action, in order to make the latter more "attractive". In this case, the activist artist must be sympathetic (or at least in agreement) with the object of the political discourse. If this type of intervention allows the artist to cherish the hope of obtaining some social and political changes, it contains the risk of ideological subjugation, drifting into the art of propaganda and the reduction of aesthetic innovation.

- When artistic action participates in the diversion and dysfunction of political action and its discourse, in the cancellation of their practical and efficient dimension. This last position seems to have been adopted by a large number of activist artists, around the world, in order to call out the dangers, the excesses, the flaws, the hypocrisies of this or that political actions or this or that ideological principles. It ensures a greater autonomy of the artistic action and seems to avoid any subjection to one political discourse. On the other hand, it relegates to the background the impact of artistic action in the social and political domain (in a sort of objectification of a political and social status quo).

These two contradictory traditions nourish, by mingling with each other, what we call contemporary artistic activism. An analysis of its productions sometimes reveals more or less contrasted aims.

The Indian art scene is no exception and a number of artists and artists' collectives claim to be activists (Vivan Sundaram, Navjot Altaf, Tejal Shah, Shilpa Gupta, Pushpamala N., Anita Dube, Open Circle, Raqs Media Collective, Sahmat, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Habib Tanvir, Namdeo Dhasal, etc.). They thus contribute to the global and local dimension of the phenomenon of arts activism.

Since the launch of the New Economic Policy in 1991, the Indian Union has undergone profound changes in all areas of activity (economic, social, cultural, artistic). The opening of the economy and the rise to power of the Hindu nationalist right have had the effect of deeply questioning the principles of the Indian way enacted by the fathers of independence in 1947 (secularist democracy, growth model self-centred organized around a large public sector and non-alignment).

The current political context of India (religious nationalism, stigmatization of minorities, questioning of secularism, ethnic conception of the Indian nation, bone of

contention around Kashmir, violence of intercommunity conflicts, etc.) as well as its cultural and artistic context (advent of India on the international art scene, development of the art market and cultural economy, shift of the middle class into mass consumption, questioning of freedom of expression etc.) make the Indian Union a specific laboratory for the contemporary development of interrelationships between artistic practices and social and political commitment.

The organizing team of this Conference Day intends to bring together researchers from all horizons to reflect together on the various forms and conceptions of artistic activism in India, since the 1990s - approaching crossings, transfers, intersections between art and politics, at work within Indian artistic activism, both in their global dimension and in their local specificity.

This Conference Day is organised around four thematic axes:

#### I – Arts Activism / History / Modernity

Approach of the relationship between the development of contemporary artistic activism in India and the history of an engaged art in the anticolonial fights, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the advent of modern Indian art in a context of non-alignment.

#### II – Arts Activism / Gender/ Feminism

Relationship between artistic activism in India and "subordinate" histories (the impacts of the evolving struggle for women's rights and for sexual minorities).

#### III – Arts Activism / Interrelation urban-rural

Issues of profound changes in developments in India's rural and urban worlds and their implications for artistic activism (including "Dalit art", "neo-tribal art").

#### IV – Arts Activism / Secularism / Freedom of expression

Approach to the development of artistic activism in India in the light of the questioning of the political and cultural heritage of the secularism, as well as the question of ideological and economical censorship.

For more information, contact Nicolas Nercam ([nicolas.nercam@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr](mailto:nicolas.nercam@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr)), Nicolas Bautès ([n.bautes@gmail.com](mailto:n.bautes@gmail.com)) and Christine Ithurbide ([christine.ithurbide@gmail.com](mailto:christine.ithurbide@gmail.com)).

#### **Submission of abstracts:**

Communication proposals, written in English or French, must include:

- The name and email (s) of the author (s),
- The institutional affiliations of the author(s),
- A short presentation of the (s), 200 words maximum,
- The title,
- A summary of 500 words maximum,
- A list of 5 keywords,
- An selected bibliography.

Proposals should be sent in pdf format **before 3 February 2020** to Nicolas Nercam ([nicolas.nercam@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr](mailto:nicolas.nercam@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr)), Nicolas Bautès ([n.bautes@gmail.com](mailto:n.bautes@gmail.com)) and Christine Ithurbide ([christine.ithurbide@gmail.com](mailto:christine.ithurbide@gmail.com)).

The communication proposals will be examined and selected by the scientific committee of the Conference Day.

The 20-minute speech will be followed by 10 minutes of discussion. They will be held in French or English. No interpreting or translation services will be provided. (The accommodation and transport costs will be covered by the participants)

**Scientific Committee:**

Yashadatta Alone, JNU, School of Arts & Aesthetics, New Delhi

Nicolas Bautès CEIAS (EHESS-CNRS)

Christine Ithurbide LabEX ICCA-CEIAS (EHESS-CNRS)

Malvika Maheshwari, Ashoka University, Political Science, New Delhi

Nicolas Nercam ADS-MICA-CEIAS (EHESS-CNRS)

**Organising Committee:**

Nicolas Bautès CEIAS (EHESS-CNRS)

Nicolas Nercam ADS-MICA-CEIAS (EHESS-CNRS)