

INTRODUCTION

2009: IN ITS FIRST SHOWING, Sheela Gowda's *Behold* (2009, figures 1 and 2) occupied a cavernous space in the Arsenale section of the main exhibition of the Venice Biennale. Nearly four kilometers of rope twisted and braided from human hair was draped across the space and drawn up to the ceiling, from which were suspended more than a dozen chrome car bumpers against the wall. The installation was exemplary of the exhibition's curatorial frame of worldmaking in its basis in an everyday practice, common across India, of tying a piece of hair rope to the bumper of a car as a talisman to ward off danger. *Behold* refers to this practice but holds open the other connotations of the materials for exploration. Most important is the contrast between the sleek, machine-manufactured car part and the hand-worked rope, which is a complex congealing of the human body and its labor.¹ The work elicits viewer responses through the contrast in the materiality of its elements, the counterintuitive feat of its form, and its sheer scale. A confident work, it deftly anticipates the diverse forms of viewer engagement common to massive art events like the Venice

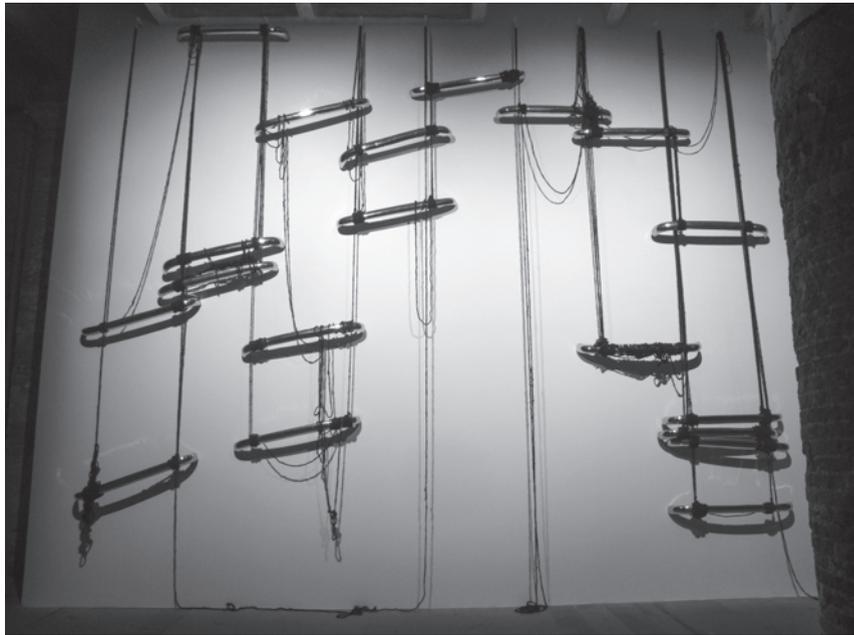


FIGURE 1 ▲
Sheela Gowda, *Behold*, 2009, hair, steel,
variable dimensions. Collection Tate
Modern, London. As installed at Venice
Biennale (photo courtesy of the artist).

FIGURE 2 ►
Sheela Gowda, *Behold* (detail), 2009
(photo courtesy of the artist).



Biennale. It uses materials and forms that resonate powerfully, but differently, with viewers with various levels of knowledge of the artist's context.

1993: Vivan Sundaram's *Memorial* (1993, figures 3 and 4) commemorated the anniversary of the December 6, 1992, demolition of the sixteenth-century Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu nationalist activists, a cataclysmic act of iconoclasm that spurred waves of civil violence in cities across India. Viewers entered the installation through the kind of steel fencing used to control access to official sites, before navigating paths made from the red sandstone used in the Mughal and Indo-Saracenic official architecture of North India. Two memorial structures, a tin-trunk arch *Gateway* and an inlaid marble *Mausoleum*, honor an unknown victim of communal violence, whom neon text calls a "fallen mortal." Inside the mausoleum lies a plaster sculpture of a man's body, imitating a photograph by journalist Hoshi Jal of a body lying crumpled next to a dumpster on a riot-torn Bombay street.² The photograph recurs throughout the installation in vitrines and frames, each individually titled and reminiscent of a different form of commemoration of the dead. Sundaram's installation is a sharp critique of the state's utter failure to protect its citizens, and an immediate recognition of the violence in and after Ayodhya as a watershed in contemporary Indian history. Addressed to viewers who are also imagined to be fellow citizens, the work asks people to mourn, and then to act.

A PERIOD OF RAPID CHANGE

Between the years in which these two works of art premiered, the forms of practice commonly undertaken by Indian artists changed radically, and the infrastructure for Indian art's production and circulation expanded and grew in complexity. Sundaram's work introduces, through its formal language, a number of gestures that became central to Indian contemporary art in this period: a renewed focus on questions of medium, acknowledgment of the ubiquity of photo reproduction technology, and recontextualization of infrastructural materials and architectural forms common to everyday life. Conceived by Sundaram as a final break with his past practice of painting, *Memorial* is accepted as one of the first important works of installation by an Indian artist. It is also broadly representative of wider efforts to explore new mediums by Sundaram's contemporaries and the generation who had followed, all of whom had developed sophisticated practices of painting or, less often, sculpture. Sundaram's *Memorial* resonates with the other artists' experimentation with form, such as Nalini Malani's 1991 painting-based installation *Alleyway of Lohar Chawl* (figure 5), and experiments with Xerox reproduction in a series of artist books, Rummana Hussain's post-Ayodhya assemblages that used everyday materials, like terracotta pots, to refer to iconoclasm (1993, figure 6), and Sheela Gowda's 1993 turn to the ubiquitous and densely significant material of cow dung in a series of paintings, which were closely followed by dung-based earthworks and installations (see chapter 3). Sundaram's *Memorial* contains within it the seeds of the formal experimentation that flourished in India in the two decades surrounding the turn of the twenty-first century.



FIGURE 3 ▲
 Vivan Sundaram, *Memorial*, 1993, steel, metal trunks, sandstone tiles, marble, glass, wood, concrete, ceramic, plaster, iron nails, neon, photograph, gelatin silver print and photographs, inkjet print on paper, dimensions variable. Collection Tate Modern, London (photo courtesy of the artist, facilitated by Asia Art Archive).

FIGURE 4 ▼
 Vivan Sundaram, *Iron Pyre*, from *Fallen Mortal* series, shown as part of *Memorial*, 1993, black-and-white photograph (by Hoshi Jal, *Times of India*, Bombay, February 23, 1993) with nails in vitrine, 29 × 40 × 15 in. (73.7 × 101.6 × 38.1 cm). Collection Tate Modern, London (photo courtesy of the artist, facilitated by Asia Art Archive).



FIGURE 5
Nalini Malani, *Alleyway of Lohar Chawl*, 1991, installation of five reverse paintings on Mylar, stones (photo courtesy of the artist).

And yet, *Memorial's* direct address to the state, as well as its installation in the All-India Fine Arts and Crafts Society (AIFACS) gallery—a space closely associated with the modernist movement in Delhi—connects the work to an art infrastructure that was already being displaced by new networks and new institutional forms. Sundaram, together with his partner, the art historian Geeta Kapur, had himself spearheaded many of the most transformative art initiatives. Those included the Kasauli Art Centre, which hosted a series of critical workshops beginning in 1976, and SAHMAT, an arts-based political advocacy organization they helped to found in 1989. After the 1991 liberalization of India's economy eased the flow of money into the country, commercial institutions took on a much more important role in India's art infrastructure. International auction houses began to stage modern and contemporary sales in

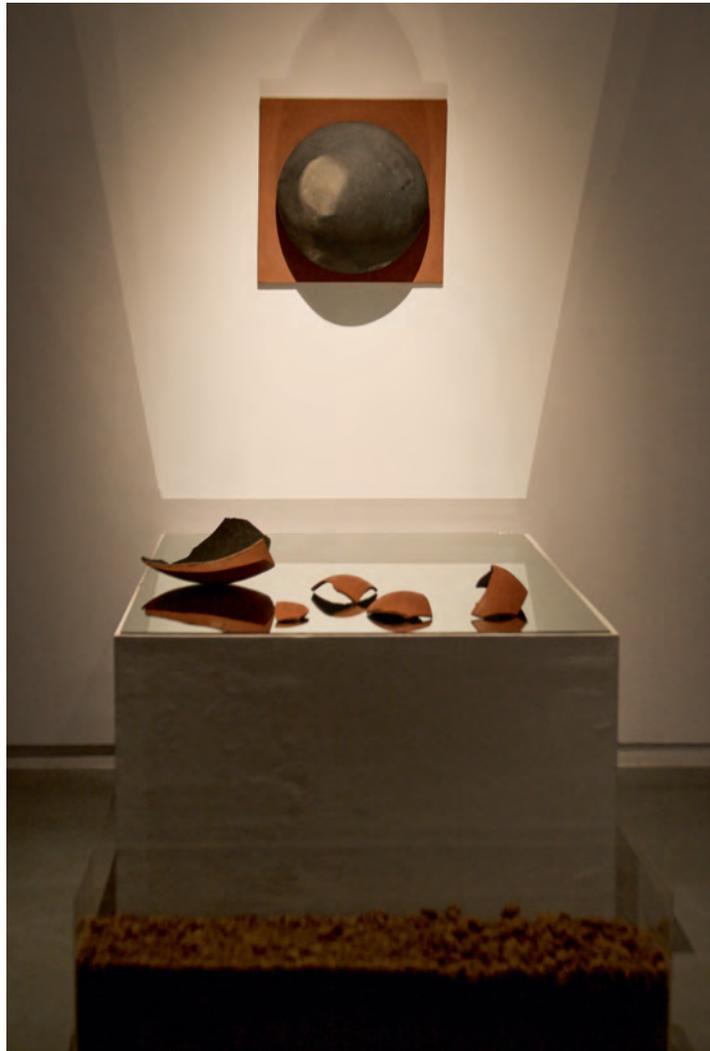


FIGURE 6
Rummana Hussain, *Dissected
Projection*, 1993, wood, mirror,
terracotta, acrylic, and earth, 18 ×
18 in. (45.7 × 45.7 cm) wall-
mounted pot, 60 × 36 × 24 in. (152.4
× 91.4 × 61 cm) wooden box, 36 × 12
× 12 in. (91.4 × 30.5 × 30.5 cm)
acrylic box (© Estate of Rummana
Hussain, courtesy Talwar Gallery,
New York | New Delhi).

India in 1992, the first New York sale followed in 1995, and India-based auction houses were established beginning in 1997.³ The number and size of commercial galleries in Mumbai and Delhi, as well as in smaller cities like Bengaluru, grew steadily across the 1990s and into the next decade.

The rise in purchase prices and other forms of patronage had enormous implications for artists, both in their everyday lives and in their ability to invest money in the production of their work. Supports like larger studios and regular studio assistance became common for a larger number of artists. This kind of backing was crucial, because the rate at which artists were expected to show work increased to a huge

degree, with the most productive artists holding solo exhibitions once or even twice a year at the height of the boom. The most influential group of artists in this period was diverse in important ways, ranging in age from their twenties to their sixties and including nearly equal numbers of women and men. But relatively few artists emerged from minority religious communities, nondominant caste communities, or poor communities in this period. Social markers, like the ability to speak fluent English, remained extremely important, for they eased artists' mobility across and outside of India.

Led first by initiatives that connected sites in Asia, Australia, and Africa, and then by those in Europe and the United States, national and international art networks changed in character and geographic reach, with nonprofit institutions and foundation-funded projects acting as powerful forces. Through the patronage of institutions like the Ford Foundation, the Goethe-Institut, and others, opportunities emerged for much more frequent artist travel abroad, as well as the circulation of Indian art both physically and as images transmitted electronically. Such mobility forged significant networks across arts communities. India was just one site in an unprecedented global expansion of art infrastructure at the time, which was integrated in a broader set of global processes by which strong local civil society organizations with transnational connections became much more closely linked with one another. Indeed, nonprofit arts institutions closely resembled nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in their structure and financing. And yet, while contemporary criticism emphasized the difference in the sort of work that for- and nonprofit art institutions tended to support, the institutions were in fact very closely interconnected and interdependent. They also tended to shape the careers of the same groups of artists.

Gowda's work, as commissioned for the 2009 Venice Biennale, is an extraordinary demonstration of the transformations of infrastructure and form traced by this book. The scale of the installation and its legibility to a wide audience, though especially elegant and accomplished, was exemplary of work made in the latter part of that decade. Gowda's *Behold* combines a disciplined approach to form with the use of significant materials to explore changes in everyday life, employing an influential strategy in Indian contemporary art practice. This particular work uses the exponential growth in car ownership as a metonym for a much broader set of social changes that accompany rapid urbanization and investment in automobility and that have affected habits, meanings, and the most concrete and fundamental technologies of everyday life.⁴ In a signature gesture of this period, then, Gowda's work refers to the role that changes in infrastructure have played in India, even as it capitalizes upon those changes as they had reconfigured the art world. The last chapter of this volume further explores this turn toward infrastructural systems such as roads, water systems, and waste disposal through the work of several artists. That includes Sundaram's work with trash, an image of which appears on this volume's cover.

ART AND ITS INFRASTRUCTURES

Infrastructure, as anthropologist Brian Larkin defines it, is an “architecture for circulation,” a “built network” that facilitates “the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow[s] for their exchange over space.”⁵ Anthropologists of infrastructure like Larkin emphasize the “politics and poetics” of what seem to be largely matters of engineering. The new anthropology of electrical, water, and road systems pinpoints the role of meaning in the operation of infrastructure, although it tends to place ultimate value on questions of citizenship and belonging.⁶ An examination of art infrastructure requires the opposite operation: an integration of the materiality of artistic networks into a discourse preoccupied with meaning, in which value is found primarily in art’s aesthetic and political significance. As Larkin argues, the combination of material structures and frameworks of meaning together “shape the nature of a network, the speed and direction of its movement, its temporalities, and its vulnerability to breakdown.”⁷ This account adopts the deliberate holism found in the anthropology of infrastructure in order to articulate the relationship between the conditions that make art possible and the form of art itself.

A principal argument of this text is that attention to the relationship between art’s infrastructure and its form is particularly important in studies of art and globalization.⁸ While art had long claimed to be grounded in everyday life, the artists considered here attended closely to the manner in which everyday life was being rapidly transformed by the technological innovations and forms of standardization associated with globalization, including communications technologies, the container ship, software code and data, and the financial instrument. Each of those larger technologies of globalization had a specific effect within the art world, as work could be more easily shipped, information and images could be more easily circulated, and art could be more easily funded. Whether or not works of art were specifically *about* globalization, their form—their scale, use of materials, or geographical reach—was strongly affected by that complex set of social processes.⁹ As Pamela Lee put it, “*the work of art’s world* [is] an intercessory or medium through which globalization takes place.”¹⁰

For, despite the art world’s investments in immaterial practices and frameworks of thought, the production and circulation of contemporary art is still largely a matter of moving people and things. And its workings are not always smooth. As with all infrastructure, art’s participation in broader networks of circulation is made readily apparent in moments of their recalcitrance or failure, such as the workarounds needed to move funding across the world, the holds placed on shipments of work by customs officers, or the visas denied to artists by embassies.¹¹ But art infrastructure not only depends upon broader infrastructural systems, it joins them together into its own networks. Art networks are, to borrow a key insight of actor-network theory, assemblages of human and nonhuman entities, in which people and things, practices and discourses share agency.¹²

While networks emphasize mobility, assemblages indicate the agglomeration of unlike things, often of radically dissimilar materialities and senses of time and space, which change as they move, adding and subtracting as they de- and reterritorialize.¹³ While quite different, both network theory and the idea of assemblages usefully dismiss the idea of “context,” and therefore the manner by which we differentiate events from the structures that produce them. They provide us necessary resources to resist the art historical discipline’s reflexive isolation of works of art: its insistence on artworks’ autonomy that grants to them a unique power that is reinforced as they are drawn out analytically from a largely passive infrastructure.¹⁴

Art in the 1990s quite famously engaged the artwork’s implication in the structures that produce it through relational aesthetics, as coined by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud. As he wrote in 1998, “the ‘Art’ network is porous, and it is the relations of this network with all the areas of production that determines its development.”¹⁵ Drawing together works of art that prioritize the creation of new social relations, Bourriaud carefully grounded relational aesthetics in the work of artists from inside and outside of Europe, and therefore in the productive convergences made possible by global flows. As David Teh argues, however, the global “currency” acquired by Thai proponents of relational aesthetics, including Rirkrit Tiravanija, involved acts of what he calls “arbitrage,” in which the disjunctures between systems of value were exploited for gain.¹⁶ By exploring the manner in which Thai systems of power structured even the most “international” of artists’ works, Teh articulates distinctions in apparently smooth transnational art networks.

Many authors join Teh in his desire to complicate the celebratory flattening of distinctions between works of art, people, institutions, materials, discourses, and events in the name of globalism. Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern wrote as early as 1996 about the need to identify “cuts in the network,” for those interruptions or slowdowns in circulation provide opportunities for interpretation.¹⁷ This account adopts the understanding of art as a network assemblage in order to emphasize the productivities of the impulse to understand such dissimilar things as elements of interconnected systems.¹⁸ It therefore provides a different sort of counterweight to the period’s excessive confidence in the frictionless mobility of particular artists and curatorial frameworks. Looking more closely at the conditions of possibility for art overcomes the art historical discipline’s polite silence about the shaping roles played by materials, the market, and infrastructures of circulation in contemporary art. Rather than just displacing human agency, as is common to network-based thinking, this account answers political theorist Jane Bennett’s call to “rais[e] the volume on the vitality of other materialities.”¹⁹

This choice makes it possible to reconsider the role of scholarship and debate, as well. Because the period in question also saw a significant increase in exposure to writing concerned with South Asia, *Infrastructure and Form* considers key intellectual currents as causal agents in the forging of new networks and prompting of new experimental forms. Some of these texts have been considered a more transcendent form of

“theory,” but this book foregrounds the operation of ideas within practice. Influential ideas within Indian debates, such as postcolonial feminism’s collective reconsideration of the ideological function of femininity-as-tradition in Indian nationalism and Arjun Appadurai’s use of Mumbai as the key case for his conceptualization of globalization as de- and reterritorialization, function in this text as historically situated interventions in practice. Ideas that are more removed from either a South Asian or an art historical context, such as Amelia Jones’s understanding of performance, Bill Brown’s thing theory, Latour’s Actor-Network Theory, or Deleuze and Guattari’s original formulations of de- and re-territorialization and assemblage, are also considered, as much as possible, for their connections to networks of practice.²⁰ A central contention of this volume is that frameworks of thought should be considered key elements in art’s infrastructure, granted even status with other actants in an art network, even as they maintain different proximities to and levels of entanglement with art and artists living in India. In each chapter, ideas have a shaping effect on the form of art that make them part of its conditions of possibility, rather than providing an interpretive context that lies outside of the phenomenon of art itself.

HISTORIES OF THE GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY

Critical curatorial discourse at once problematized and facilitated the global circulation of contemporary art. Geeta Kapur played a singular role in shaping Indian art’s production and its reception through her work as a historian, curator, and critic, as has been recently argued by Saloni Mathur.²¹ Having established her critical voice in the late 1960s, in this period Kapur wrote in dialogue with a group of key writers from the Global South. Most had established a curatorial or critical platform from which to speak, such as Gerardo Mosquera’s work with the Havana Biennial, Kuroda Raiji’s transformation of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Rashid Araeen’s establishment of *Third Text*, or Okwui Enwezor’s influential set of biennial exhibitions. Although active in a number of projects, Kapur had a relative lack of institutional obligations. She emerged as a strong partisan of the engaged and situated work of art, with a conception of artist citizenship that was profoundly opposed to multiculturalism, which she associated with unbridled capital. Within India, she advocated for the formal experimentation that is cataloged in this account and for the articulation of a place for Indian artists in various international art networks. Even as she curated a number of key exhibitions in the 1990s and the following decade, Kapur influenced a generation of curators working across the world in her role as a consultant and powerful gatekeeper.

By the end of the 1990s, Mumbai-based curators and critics Ranjit Hoskote and Nancy Adajania and Canberra-based art historian and curator Chaitanya Sambrani had emerged as foundational curatorial voices with individual sensibilities. Each understood contemporary art in relationship to aligned practices of poetry, media, and craft, respectively. They worked alongside an influential group of journalists who estab-