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INTERVIEW

"More than one world": An interview with Gulammohammed Sheikh

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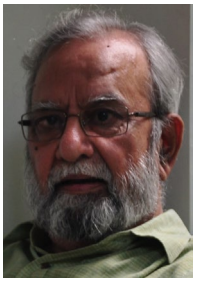
ABSTRACT

Gulammohammed Sheikh is one of the most important contemporary Indian painters. He is also an acclaimed writer, an art historian and critic, and a poet in Gujarati (*Athwa*). In this conversation, which took place on August 13 and November 3, 2015, he discusses the centrality of Bombay for writers and artists of his generation, and his own connection with the city. He also reflects on the influence of poetry and translation, and on the transactions between poetry and painting which are both emblematic of his own work and of little magazines like *Vrishchik*, which he started in 1969. Retracing the history of *Vrishchik* and of "Group 1890", he recalls his formative years at the Baroda Faculty of Fine Arts, and his lifelong engagement with the bhakti tradition, especially with the figure of Kabir. He also discusses the way modernity was reinvented in India, and the extraordinary cosmopolitanism of his generation of modernist artists, and of the Bombay they inhabited.

KEYWORDS

Bombay/Mumbai; modern Indian painting; Baroda Faculty of Fine Arts; little magazines; *Vrishchik*; Kabir; bhakti



A vital presence in the artistic and cultural landscape, which he helped to define and renew in the 1960s and 1970s, Gulammohammed Sheikh has been closely associated with the "little magazine movement" in English and in Gujarati. Although he is intimately connected to the city of Baroda and to the Faculty of Fine Arts where he taught for more than 30 years, Bombay has been as much a part of his world as Baroda. And although he is widely acclaimed as one of the most important modern Indian painters, poetry has nurtured his practice as a painter. These transactions between Baroda and Bombay, and between poetry and painting, are emblematic of the influential little magazine *Vrishchik*, which he founded in 1969 in Baroda with another prominent visual artist, Bhupen Khakhar (1934–2003), and where he published many of the "Bombay poets", such as Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Gieve Patel, Arun Kolatkar, Adil Jussawalla and Eunice de Souza. In a remarkable text titled "Among Several Cultures and Times", Gulammohammed Sheikh (1989) talks about the number of traditions, spaces and temporalities that have made him who he is, and reflects on the multiplicity of artistic models that fed his mind, from Italian painters of the Early Renaissance and the Sienese School to Picasso and Michelangelo, Soulages, Rothko and

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Klein, but also traditional Indian glass painting, Mughal miniatures, Shekhawati murals and lurid cinema hoardings:

> The multiplicity and simultaneity of these worlds filled me with a sense of being part of them all. Attempts to define the experience in singular terms have left me uneasy and restless; absence of rejected worlds has haunted me throughout. […] It was a multiverse of sorts. And I decided to use it all. I felt it would be impoverishing, unreal and artificial to give up anything. (108, 116)

The interview below maps the boldness and openness of a generation of artists who felt they could "use it all", and the extraordinary multiplicity of the "worlds of Bombay poetry", the routes of which extend to Gujarati language and literature, to Octavio Paz and to Allen Ginsberg, to Beat poetry, Hindi cinema and bhakti songs – and also reflect the constant overlap between poetry and painting, words and images, worship and dissent. The following conversation took place on August 13 and November 3, 2015. It was continued over email.

Laetitia Zecchini (LZ): Let us start with your connection to Bombay. You held your first solo exhibition in the city and have been closely associated with many Bombay artists and writers. Yet your life and your work are intertwined with the city of Baroda. So how was Bombay, either as a lived space or as an imaginary one, influential? Did you feel that Bombay and Baroda were part of the same creative space in the 1950s and 1960s, or did they represent two different "scenes"?

Gulammohammed Sheikh (GMS): You see, before the formation of the state of Gujarat in 1960, we were part of the same state, the Bombay State. For us Bombay was not "elsewhere": it was part of our own life and world. If we were to think of places within the state, we thought of Bombay as one of them. Bombay's film industry also cast a great spell on all of us who were growing up in small towns. Many of us wanted to run away one day to the city of Bombay, and either find our bearings in the film world, or lose them!

But the primary reason why Bombay was so important is related to the domain of the arts. We were in awe of the previous generation of artists. Many of them worked in a place called Bhulabhai Memorial Institute on Warden Road.[1] In the 1950s when I was growing up as a student in Baroda, I used to visit Bombay quite often, and especially the institute because that's where M.F. Husain, V.S. Gaitonde and other artists worked. One of the Baroda artists, Prafull Dave, and another from Ahmedabad, Dashrath Patel, also had their studios there.

There were very few private galleries in India at the time. But there was, and still is, a public art gallery known as the Jehangir Art Gallery in Bombay, which you could hire for an exhibition, and it attracted us all. Every young aspiring artist desired to have an exhibition in there! That's where my first solo show took place, in 1961. Bal Chhabda,[2] who later became a visual artist, but was a film distributor originally, and a close friend of artists of his generation, especially M.F. Husain, opened a gallery in the Bhulabhai Memorial Institute called "Gallery 59" because it opened in 1959. Another interesting connection was Ebrahim Alkazi, the theatre man who was also well versed in art history. He had an office in the building where he used to store his collection of colour slides of world art. I remember he gave lectures on European art with a carousel projector, an object of great curiosity in those days. He was very well known among all the artists, and was especially close to Husain, who used to make sets for his theatre productions. Alkazi came to see my solo show in 1961, and he invited me to his theatre site, which happened to be on the roof of one of the buildings near the institute. To be able to meet people like Husain or Alkazi, to see the work of all these artists or to spend time at the Jehangir, those were exactly the kinds of things that attracted us to Bombay!

We used to visit the city at any available opportunity, for a conference, for an exhibition or just to see friends. You see, for us in Baroda, it was an overnight journey. One could just take an 11 p.m. train and be there at 6 a.m., spend the whole day in Bombay, then take the train back. Bombay was also a kind of imaginary, in the sense that it was a place where you could feel free, where you could have fun loafing around, meeting friends and artists, even have a beer, for instance, and you can't do such things in Gujarat.

The second connection with Bombay has to do with Gujarati literature. There were a lot of Gujarati writers living in Bombay – that is still the case today – and a lot of Gujarati journals being published from Bombay. So there was that kind of overlap. After the death of my literary mentor, Suresh Joshi, who edited and published a number of journals and little magazines from Baroda during his lifetime, the last journal he was editing, *Etad*, is now run and published from Bombay. So as far as Gujarati literature is concerned, Bombay was, and to an extent still is, as much a part of my world as Baroda.

The third connection has to do with the world of Hindi cinema. When I was a student in Surendranagar where I grew up and had my school education, I studied Hindi and English besides Gujarati at school, and I also got interested in Urdu. Born into a Muslim family, I used to go to the madrasa to read the Quran in Arabic, but I did not learn to read or write Urdu. We learnt it orally from the film songs that we all knew by heart. We also discovered that there were a number of Urdu poets in the film world or the Hindi cinema in Bombay, who were also well-known figures in the world of literature, like Sahir Ludhianvi. I still remember Ludhianvi's heart-piercing poems and songs in Guru Dutt's (1957) film, *Pyaasa*. A schoolmate of mine in Surendranagar, Devendra Doshi, who was interested in Urdu literature, got books on Urdu poetry in devanagari script,[3] so we could reach out to Urdu poetry.

LZ: So Bombay and Baroda were part of the same world. But then was it a conscious choice on your part to study and stay in Baroda instead of Bombay? And if it was, does this choice have anything to do with the need to distance yourself from the Progressives[4] to create your own space?

GMS: Well, you know, I came from a small town in Kathiawar. I had not been to any place bigger than my home town until I finished school. A veteran Gujarati artist, Ravishanakar Rawal, who was considered to be *kalaguru* or a master teacher, happened to come to Surendranagar for medical treatment while I was at school. It was he who suggested I go to Baroda to study. My knowledge of art, artists or art schools was limited, but I knew the names of a few artists. The Birdwood Library of Surendranagar, my home town, had subscribed to *Marg*,[5] in which I had seen illustrations of the works of F.N. Souza. I remember being quite struck by them, but that's about it. I didn't know anything about the Progressive Artists' Group. There was no question of going to Bombay or anywhere else because it would have been more expensive. Santiniketan, for instance, was too far. If I had been brought up elsewhere or had enough money, it would have been a different story.

But I can say I was lucky. I felt very happy in Baroda because of the liberal air that pervaded the campus. In contrast, the J.J. School of Art in Bombay was far more conservative. The best thing about Baroda was that our teachers came from different parts of India, and they all had an international outlook. We were exposed to European art. We had French and English and Italian journals, like *L'Oeil* or *Art d'Aujourd'hui* or *Domus*, and great books in the library. Students too came from different parts of the country, and artists from all over the world visited the Fine Arts College. So in a sense you were exposed to the whole world. And since we were such a small community (a small college, with a maximum of

200 students), we had an opportunity to interact personally with visiting artists, and were also given personal attention by every teacher.

The college was also a place where we literally lived. Our studios remained open day and night. Our teachers were among the best around. Most of them had married outside their community, or their state or their language. N.S. Bendre, who was a Maharashtrian, for instance, was married to a Tamilian. K.G. Subramanyan, who was from Kerala, had married a Punjabi. Sankho Chaudhuri, a Bengali, had a Parsi wife and so did Markand Bhatt, who was the first dean. So it was a mini-India of sorts. In emulation of their examples we learned to develop friendships across caste, and religious or linguistic divides. I also remember that A.K. Ramanujan came to teach English at the Arts Faculty for about a year in the mid-1950s, and I got to know him through Suresh Joshi who was a good friend of his. Much later, when I met him first in Chicago and later in Cambridge (Massachusetts) in 1987, Ramanujan and I continued to have a wonderful dialogue.

LZ: Could you tell us a little bit more about your interest in world poetry, and about your relationship with other English or Gujarati language poets?

GMS: I have always been interested in poetry. My reading was not limited to Gujarati. I read Hindi and also a lot of European poetry translated into English. Suresh Joshi introduced us to many Latin American and European poets. He translated Saint-John Perse and Francis Ponge into Gujarati. He introduced us to Gabriel Garcia Lorca, to Pablo Neruda, to Octavio Paz and to many others including Eastern European poets. Because of Suresh Joshi, we got equally interested in "medieval" poetry. When I came to Baroda, he was running a quarterly journal called *Maneesha*, and then *Kshitij* started, which I joined as an art editor. He published several of my poems and wrote an essay on one of them.

It was also around that time, the early 1960s, that I came to know Gieve Patel, and we became good friends.[6] Gieve had just started painting. He was very keen to have a dialogue, and I remember meeting him on the lawns of Prince of Wales Museum in Bombay in September 1963, a few days before I left for England. In the later years, he visited Baroda and met Suresh Joshi, who introduced him to the poetry of Akho.[7] Gieve was greatly taken by the poems of Akho and after talking with Suresh Bhai (as we used to call Suresh Joshi) he took extensive notes for a translation. Akho is a bit like Kabir, who wrote mystical poetry but also wrote a lot of social satire. His poems were known as *chaabkha* (whips) in Gujarati because they were hard-hitting. Gieve is still busy translating them, and we are all waiting for his translations to come out.

LZ: In the late 1950s and early 1960s you began working with other artists and writers, and one of the spaces where these artistic communities were created were the literary journals and little magazines. You just mentioned the journal *Kshitij*, for which you edited a special issue, but there is also the highly influential little magazine *Vrishchik*, that you started with Bhupen Khakhar. I wonder if you could retrace for us the history of *Vrishchik*, and perhaps tell us why these kinds of "little" publications seemed necessary at the time?

GMS: In the early 1960s, I got greatly interested in Beat poetry. By the time I left for England in 1963, I had learnt that Beat poets often published their own collections. Allen Ginsberg had already published *Howl* (Ginsberg 1956). It was the period of little magazines with small editions. And people all over the world were bringing them out. You see, you don't have to wait for the big magazines and publishers to publish your poems, you can publish

them yourself! In London, there were a number of small bookshops where you could get these little books and journals at an affordable price. I acquired many, and built a kind of collection of my own. Unfortunately I lost it all. At the end of my first year, I went travelling in Europe and left my suitcase packed with these magazines and books at a friend's place. His house was burgled, and my suitcase disappeared along with a lot of his stuff.

Before we started *Vrischhik*, we came to know that Arvind [Krishna Mehrotra] published a small magazine in English, called *damn you*, from Allahabad. And in 1966, an artist friend, J. Swaminathan,[8] had also brought out a small journal called *Contra*, which folded up after four numbers.

The genesis of *Vrishchik* is somewhat fortuitous. The idea was brewing for some time, but actual publication happened later. From 1966 to 1969 there was a lull on the art scene with very little dialogue among artists. I remember that some of us, Bhupen Khakhar, Vinod Ray Patel, Feroz Katpitia, Nilima [Sheikh],[9] myself and one or two others, were sitting casually in the Residency Bungalow where we lived, and we all felt that we needed a journal of dialogue among artists. There was no journal of contemporary art except the *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, which was most erratic and rather conservative, so we decided to venture into publishing our own journal. Our idea was not to restrict it to visual art alone. It should be for writers too, we felt. That's how Bhupen, a fellow painter who also became a writer in the following decade, and I, decided to publish *Vrishchik* in 1969. Vinod Ray offered to do linocut designs, and eventually made the scorpion image on the front page of the first number (Sheikh and Khakhar 1969). The name *Vrishchik* (Scorpion) came up, like Group 1890, rather unintentionally. Someone noted that the majority of people gathered there were Scorpios, and we jumped on it. It was also convenient, because it meant the same thing in Sanskrit, Hindi, Gujarati and other Indian languages. And it could "bite" a little! We put money from our own pockets and later asked friends to contribute. We published the first few issues on packing paper. We loved it because it had an original brown colour, which worked well with the linoleum prints. In fact, it was a radical experiment to print directly from hand-cut linoleum and obtain editions of "original" graphic prints in each number. Replacing the zinc "block" (made through photo processing) that was used conventionally, we managed with linoleum blocks in a limited print run of 500 copies without much difficulty. And in addition it was far cheaper!

LZ: You just mentioned Group 1890, and I would love to know more about that other venture, and also about the connection with Octavio Paz.

GMS: Our generation that came after the Progressives went through a churning to create its own space in the art world. As a result, a group of artists decided to get together for a plan of action. We met on August 25–26, 1962 to draft our manifesto and we formally established a group called Group 1890, adopting the number of the house we had gathered at.[10] The first exhibition of the group was held at Rabindra Bhavan in New Delhi. It was opened in October 1963 by Jawaharlal Nehru, and the preface in the catalogue was written by Octavio Paz. I missed the occasion because I had to leave for England on a Commonwealth Scholarship for further studies, literally a fortnight before the opening of the exhibition.

The connection between Octavio Paz and Group 1890 happened rather unexpectedly. A Gujarati writer friend in Bombay, Jayant Parekh, read the news that Octavio Paz had come as Mexican ambassador to India. I was visiting Delhi in connection with my scholarship and was staying with Vivan Sundaram.[11] We discovered that Octavio Paz was staying at the Ashoka Hotel, so we decided to go and see him. Vivan Sundaram, his sister Navina and I

landed in Ashoka hotel and knocked at his door. We introduced ourselves, and said that we were artists. You can't believe how delighted he was to see us. "I've been meeting these damn politicians and diplomats all the time!" he said to us, "I was longing to meet artists". After I left for England, he became involved in the activities of the group. Swaminathan established a close personal bond with him, and Octavio wrote a poem on him, which is published in his collection *Ladera Este* (Eastern Slope; Paz 1969).

LZ: To come back to *Vrishchik*, I was struck by the importance of poetry, and especially poetry in English, in its pages. You published many of Mehrotra's early poems, but also Eunice de Souza, Adil Jussawalla and others. There is also a whole issue in 1969 devoted to the memory of Gujarati poet Ravji Patel and several notes stating that you hoped to publish more poets.

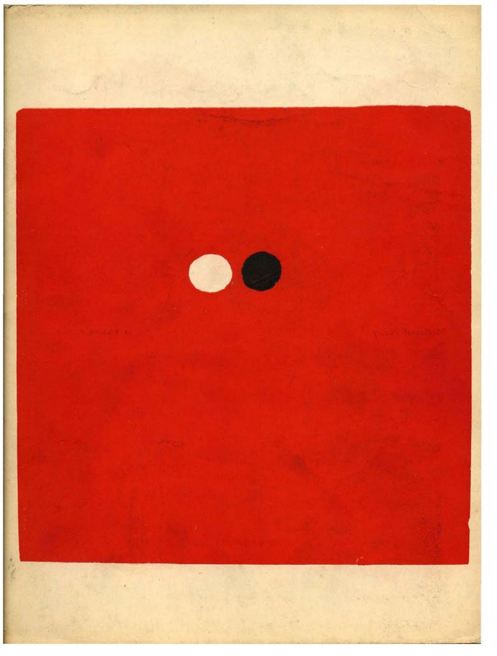
GMS: Yes, poetry was very much part of our, or at least my agenda. We thought *Vrishchik* could also form a bridge between different languages by publishing translations. In one of the early numbers we also put out a small text in Gujarati by Bhupen, but found that it was limiting the scope of the journal, and concentrated on publishing it in English alone. We didn't go very far insofar as translations are concerned, but managed to publish a special number on "saint" (bhakti)[12] poetry covering Marathi, Hindi and Gujarati (1970). It carried the extremely evocative translations of Janabai, Muktabai and Namdev made by Arun [Kolatkar], Kabir's translations by Arvind [Krishna Mehrotra] and translations of Vasto by Gieve (see Figure 1(a–d)). Arvind happily gave the text of his cycle of love poems "Bachchichakra" which Bhupen and I illustrated for an exclusive number devoted to it. The special issue devoted to the memory of Ravji Patel also carried Suresh Joshi's article on the poet in the hope that it would reach out to larger audiences in India who would be interested in modern Gujarati writing.

LZ: This little magazine "bohemia", of which you were a part, also positioned itself against the mainstream. Geeta Kapur (2001) titled her article on these small publications "Signatures of Dissent". You just mentioned the Beats. Would you say that you saw yourself as part of a broader international counterculture? At the same time, how were these signatures of dissent specifically "Indian" in their aims, and perhaps in the ways they were articulated?

GMS: I do not know to what extent one can identify with the international countercultural movement that took place in the early 1960s. It is very difficult for me to claim that I was part of an international poetry movement or of a global signature of dissent. But we felt, at least in spirit, close to what was happening elsewhere. We, however, remained actively engaged in our own language cultures, and tried to bring about change on our literary scene. To go back to the late 1950s, I abandoned the use of writing in conventional, Sanskritic meters, or in the "song" tradition, or in the ghazal form that Gujarati poetry was known for, and ventured into writing free verse. I began to use the diction of spoken language. It was poetry full of angst with strains of violence and erotica, in a Baudelairian mode that angered many. Despite attacks from the establishment, Suresh Joshi however continued to publish it.

It was in the early 1960s that we came to know about the arrival of Allen Ginsberg in India. We learnt that a Gujarati poetry lover, Girish Damania, had hosted Ginsberg in Bombay. So yes, I can say that we did identify with their poetry, which was a poetry of dissent, but I do not know to what extent we "went into" that dissent. They were subverting

(a)



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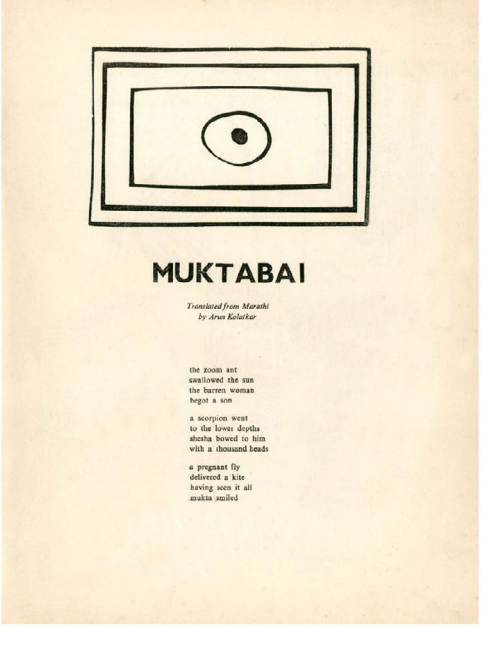

MUKTABAI

Translated from Marathi
by Arun Kolatkar

the zoom ant
swallowed the sun
the barren woman
begot a son

a scorpion went
to the lower depths
shesha bowed to him
with a thousand heads

a pregnant fly
delivered a kite
having seen it all
mukta smiled

MUKTABAI

translated from Marathi
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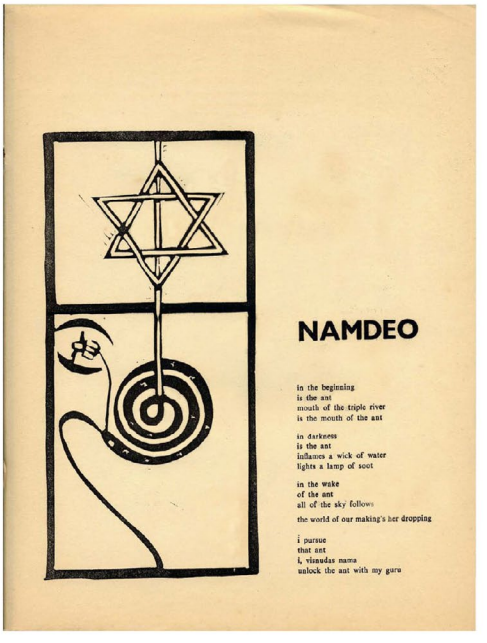
Figure 1. Front cover and inside pages of the *Vrishchik* special issue on bhakti poetry, 1 (no. 11–12), edited by Gulammohammed Sheikh and Bhupen Khakhar, Baroda, September–October 1970. The cover and linocuts are inspired by Tantric motifs made by Vinodray Patel, and the issue was also illustrated by Bhupen Khakhar and Jyoti Bhatt. (a) Front cover; (b) Muktabai translated by Arun Kolatkar; (c) Namdeo translated by Arun Kolatkar; (d) Kabir translated by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra.

(c)



NAMDEO

in the beginning
is the ant
mouth of the triple river
is the mouth of the ant

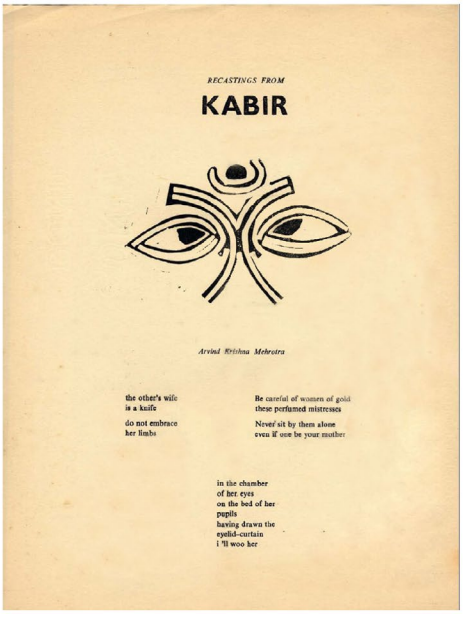
in darkness
is the ant
inflames a wick of water
lights a lamp of soot

in the wake
of the ant
all of the sky follows

the world of our making's her dropping

i pursue
that ant
i, visnudas nama
unlock the ant with my guru

(d)



RECASTINGS FROM
KABIR

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

the other's wife
is a knife

do not embrace
her limbs

Be careful of women of gold
these perfumed mistresses

Never sit by them alone
even if one is your mother

in the chamber
of her eyes
on the bed of her
pupils
having drawn the
eyelid-curtain
i 'll woo her

Figure 1. (*Continued*).

a whole culture, whereas some of us, who were active in our own languages, were working *within* the culture. We were not directly sabotaging it.

This reminds me of a literary group in Ahmedabad that was active while I was away in England in the mid-1960s. Some writers got together and formed a group called "Re-Math". It was strongly anti-establishment. They were inspired by the theatre of the absurd, wrote spontaneous poetry and improvised plays, devising them on the spot, and enacting them in an open space. Most of the members of the group were poets and writers, but there were also a couple of visual artists. They published a small journal called *Kruti* (A Work) to differentiate itself from the journal *Sanskruti* (Culture), edited by the senior poet and littérateur Umashankar Joshi. By the time I returned from England in 1966, the group had begun to disband, but poets continued writing in the modes they had adopted during the active years of the group.

LZ: It was also in the pages of *Vrishchik* that the struggle against the Lalit Kala Akademi [the National Academy of Art] took place. So there was this specific dissent against the art institution, right?

GMS: Yes, but that happened a little later. At first *Vrishchik* was conceived as a kind of forum to communicate with like-minded artists and individuals. In *Contra 66*, Swaminathan had written critically against the workings of the Lalit Kala Akademi, and we were in dialogue with each other about that. The events that followed triggered an idea of protest against this institution, which had been established by the government of India and had very little representation of younger and contemporary artists. Its various committees were formed of nominated members. We made a demand to democratize the institution. *Vrishchik* initiated the fight and became a medium for launching a countrywide protest against the Akademi. It also helped us to establish a dialogue between each other, through letters we received and published from artists all over India. Finally the government of India agreed to appoint a commission of inquiry, which recommended the electoral system for inducting democratically elected artists into the Akademi. Some of us got elected but alas, it lasted only a couple of years. You see, working freely from outside was one thing, and being in the establishment was another. When we started working within the institution, we faced the same intrigues and internal squabbles. Most of the changes that we wanted to initiate, in order to modernize the institution and bring contemporary art to a larger public domain, just didn't materialize at all. In a year's time I decided to quit and several others followed suit. A wonderful experiment brought to a tragic close . . .

LZ: The 1960s and 1970s were remarkable for the creative transactions between different arts, and of course you, as a visual artist and a poet in Gujarati, exemplify this extraordinary cross-fertilization. The relationship between writing and painting is also at the heart of your latest work. I wonder if you would like to comment on that intimate connection between (your) poetry and (your) painting?

GMS: You see, somehow writing and painting came to me simultaneously, and they remained with me all along. It's difficult to say when they overlap and when they don't. I wrote poems, I painted, but I also began to write discursive texts in Gujarati and later in English. I didn't write on poetry but I did write on painting and between 1959 and 1963 I also wrote a series on the history of art in Gujarati which were later published as part of an encyclopaedia of liberal arts and sciences brought out in 30 volumes by Sardar Patel University.

When I returned from England and visited my home town in 1966, I began to scribble odd thoughts about returning home, which later developed into an essay. And then it led to a series of write-ups. In the last 40 years, I have written 11 of them and am at present in the process of writing the 12th, which will hopefully be the concluding one. Some of these texts were first published in a journal called *Uhapoh* edited by Suresh Joshi, then in *Gadyaparva* edited by Bharat Naik from Bombay. My intention in these prose pieces was to write across genres, and they are part autobiography, part fiction, part short story, part poetic rumination. The purpose is to view different genres as part of the same narrative, intertwined into each other. These I call *Gher Jatan* (Going Home), but in English some of these texts have been translated as "Returning Home". I also made a painting entitled *Returning Home after a Long Absence* (1969–73). Finally, my solo exhibition of paintings held at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1985 was also called "Returning Home"! I have never prevented overlaps from happening. At times, poetry does step into painting, and painting finds a foothold in poetry. But more often, each of them finds its own independent course.

LZ: The feeling of emancipation which seems to come with the possibility of being able to express oneself through all kinds of media, and use everything at one's disposal, seems characteristic of the period. You talk somewhere about the "thrill of the modern" and have defined your generation as "hungry souls" lusting for modernity (Sheikh 2005, 51). So modernity could stand for that fantastic sense of freedom. But there is also a certain ambivalence towards modernity, and in the 1960s several Indian artists expressed their feeling of being "crushed" by modern western "masters". There is also the whole debate around derivative or belated modernisms . . .

GMS: Yes, but let me first put this idea of freedom in perspective. For me, even to leave my home town and come to Baroda was like encountering the modern. The kind of life that we lived at the Fine Arts College was what you call "bohemian" – living your life the way you like, eating or drinking what you like, even trying different substances, mixing between sexes – all this opened multiple doors and multiple channels of freedom to experiment with art, but also with life. So in that sense the "modern" came to us through education, because the society we came from or lived in was not receptive to our ideas or to the kind of art we produced. We felt like being outsiders. Not like the "beatniks" who had to break away completely from their background and from the older generation to invent a new world. *They* were real outsiders. They didn't go back to the world they had left. But here in India, for many of us, it was a little different. This may have to do with the family culture here, or with the way life systems work in India. We did not feel it was necessary to sever our ties completely with the world we came from, despite embracing modernism.

Two things happened. One is that we were able to introduce the idea of the modern to the society that we belonged to. And since we continued to have a conversation with that society, there was a degree of reciprocation. It was crucial for us to have a dialogue with our families and with our past. That is the world we were born into. We could not live without it. It was an integral part of our life and our being. So we constantly went back and forth. Yes, people said it was schizophrenic as we moved between what they called "tradition" and "modernity", but in fact it allowed us to exist in plural cultures, or stay in more than one world. Painful sometimes, but fulfilling too. What I am trying to say is that the society we came from was also being modernized, so it did not reject us totally, but allowed us space within its own boundaries.

The second thing that I want to point out is that the idea of the modern came to be redefined. There is no such thing as a singular modern or a monolithic modern. There are multiple modernisms and modernities. We all have to define our own modern. So for instance, if we take something from western art, or use free verse in poetry, we reinvent the idea of the modern. We try to find a space for it in our own culture. I am not saying that these ideas necessarily have to "fit in" our culture, but they enter into a process of interaction, with the result that the idea of the modern undergoes a change, and can become the "Indian modern", or in a closer context the "Gujarati modern", or, in the case of an individual poet, his or her "modern". This modernity is much richer than if it was viewed in isolation. We don't have to "borrow" the idea of the modern from here or there. Or rather, we can borrow from anywhere. An idea cannot be the property of one civilization, for an idea is a fluid entity, like air. Once appropriated, an idea in interaction with other ideas undergoes a radical transformation. So the very notion of the modern has found multiple avatars in different cultures all over the world.

In the 1950s and 1960s, art was periodized and categorized in different schools. Somebody belonged to this or that school. When we began "borrowing" from these schools, we were in fact testing those ideas against our own context. I remember people telling us that "this has already happened over there", so we were "late" or outdated. It was actually a part of our make-up to absorb ideas from multiple sources and turn them into our own. It took us a few decades to realize that all these ideas were meant for universal sharing. Today we see past and present constantly intermingling and we celebrate our eclectic or hybrid visions. So in a sense we have come full circle from being exposed to the idea of the modern, to absorbing and internalizing it, to interrogating it and finally transforming it.

LZ: Yes . . . That's why I love the way Kolatkar blurs the line between what comes "first" and "second", what is "original" and "derivative", when it comes to his poems vs. his translations, or his texts written in Marathi vs. his texts written in English. And that may be a fantastic way to look at world modernisms. There is no point in asking what came from where. Everything is borrowed, translated, recycled and reinvented.

GMS: Exactly. And in my experience, you see, there is no end to a poem, no end to a painting. Every painting continues in another. And every work that we do continues a series of works. Every poem is a pregnant poem. There is no sharp end or beginning in a work of art or in a poem. A poem or a work of art continually looks back and looks forward.

LZ: So you could say that the modern in India is both a continuation and a reinvention of the modern elsewhere, that there is one endless genealogy of the modern? That also reminds me of A.K. Ramanujan's comment on Indian classical traditions, when he says that the "anxiety of influence" does not operate. Traditions are not violated but fulfilled by those who come afterwards. "The poet says, I will show you one more thing that the tradition can do" (Ramanujan 2001, 68). So when you "imitate", you always "imitate" with a difference and reveal what was in store in a tradition that is potentially infinite and open-ended.

GMS: That is absolutely true. This idea of "originality" is the onus of the modern! Originality is something which has been prized to such an extent, that generations and generations have been traumatized by the "anxiety of influence". But look at bhakti poetry. At one level you don't own it; it is really "people's poetry". If you compose a poem that is in the spirit of Meera or Kabir, it gets absorbed in the oeuvre of these poets. I am sure that

neither Meera nor Kabir would object if you end the poem by "says Kabir", or "Meera says", if it extends their own vision and wisdom, or brings out a new interpretation.

Yet such poetry is not anonymous poetry, as is often assumed. After all, Meera did think of lending her name to "her" poems. It's the same story in a lot of traditional art, which until recently was viewed as anonymous. But we now know that in a lot of buildings or temples, masons used to carve their own names or leave marks of their guild. New research has come to challenge the old idea of works being made by self-effacing artists. You see, the artist who carved these sculptures and temples did not belong to the dominant communities. They were mostly drawn from the low castes and from the *shudras*. Yet the interesting thing is that they carved their names. I'll give you an example of how they clandestinely slipped in their identity. My daughter, who is a historian, and I went to visit the Jami mosque of a world heritage site called Champaner near Baroda, where we noticed something on the column at the entrance that looked like the inscription of a name. It must have remained hidden or covered under plastered stucco through centuries. But as the stucco got peeled, the name suddenly revealed itself! It could have been the name of the carver, the mason or the architect. See the tricks artists employed to conceal and to reveal their identity!

LZ: If we return to bhakti, the lifelong engagement of so many poets and artists of your generation with bhakti is astonishing, and I know that Kabir remains a very important figure for you, who often finds a place in your paintings. Why was it so vital to reclaim this particular tradition?

GMS: You see, we were all born into one belief system or another. Most people just take these belief systems for granted and don't question them. With the advent of modernity we were able to question our own beliefs. Very few of us came to reject the system altogether. Many wanted to question it from inside. It was very important for us to find alternatives within the tradition . . . Kabir provides an answer here, and you don't have to be a believer or to be part of a sect to understand Kabir. He says "as there is oil in the sesame seed, and fire in the flint, / The one you are looking for is within you, wake up (find him) if you can". This is a very radical view of the world. Look into yourself rather than outside. This challenged all mainstream practices, and yet Kabir remained a sort of "believer". Another radical practice emerged in the process: art and poetry could become a form of worship. Music became a form of worship. You don't have to go to a temple or to a mosque, or read the ancient texts, or listen to the so-called great scholars, but discover the light, or what Kabir would call *shabda* (the ultimate "word") within yourself. Of course, much of what Kabir says is relevant in our times too.

LZ: Regarding the times we live in, I was thinking about a comment made by Gieve Patel, who said that the main thrust of your work is to put the whole world in one painting. And this worldliness also seems to take on a political form. I was struck, for instance, at the extent to which the horrors of the world, of Biafra, Vietnam or Bangladesh came into the pages of *Vrishchik*. You also said that until the 1980s the name you were born into did *not* ghettoize you, but now it does. So would you say that the world has shrunk in a sense? That the world of Bombay, of Baroda or even India, which used to include multiple worlds are now defined in singular terms?

GMS: Yes, *Vrishchik* kept its doors open to arts, literature, but also politics. We reprinted a selection of letters by American GIs written in Vietnam and a story about political upheavals in Greece written by a visiting Greek writer. I often wrote and commented on current

topics and wrote an anguished note on communalism when terrible riots broke out in Gujarat in 1969. And yes, we invited artists to make graphic works during the struggle for the liberation of Bangladesh.

To a certain extent, you could say that the world has shrunk because some of the ideas and ideals we espoused in earlier decades, like viewing the sense of the spiritual as part of the secular, are under attack now. While the world is expanding through internet and social media, all kinds of pressures are mounting up from rightist politics to curb the diversity as well as the plurality of life and belief practices. So artists and poets face challenges that are far greater than the ones they encountered earlier. But what is heartening is that rather than being despondent, they are far more committed to what they believe in. We have to be vigilant in combating these constraints and pressures. The times Kabir lived in were not conducive to his poetry, but he was able to say what he wanted to say. And he said it in a language which still resonates in our times. It reaches you across centuries, and opens multiple doors within your own world. We need to find a language of our own for the times we live in. We need to form that *sangat* (assembly) of different arts and artists.

Notes

1. "Warden Road" like many other roads or monuments of Bombay/Mumbai has been officially renamed and is now called "Bhulabhai Desai Road".
2. Bal Chhabda (1923–2013) was also the brother of Darshan Chhabda, Arun Kolatkar's first wife.
3. The devanagari script which differs from the Urdu alphabet – itself derived from the Perso-Arabic script – is used to write Sanskrit, Hindi, Marathi and Nepali languages.
4. The Progressive Artists Group (also known as PAG) was founded by F.N. Souza and K.H. Ara in 1947 in Bombay, and is generally acknowledged to be the first school of modern art per se in India.
5. *Marg*, one of the most important art magazines of India, began in 1946, with Mulk Raj Anand as founding editor.
6. See Gieve Patel's interview in this issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*.
7. Akho is a 17th-century devotional Gujarati poet who can be broadly included in the bhakti movement.
8. J. Swaminathan (1928–94) was an influential Indian artist and writer. He was instrumental in "discovering" tribal artists such as Jangarh Singh Shyam; he founded and edited the little magazine *Contra 66*.
9. Nilima Sheikh is Gulammohammed Sheikh's wife and herself an extremely important visual artist.
10. The house where "Group 1890" was founded was located on1890 Atabhai Road in Bhavnagar (Gujarat).
11. Vivan Sundaram (b. 1943) is a prominent Indian artist. He was educated at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Baroda and is married to noted art critic Geeta Kapur.
12. Many different forms of medieval devotionality are known as bhakti, which first emerged in South India around the 6th century before spreading to the rest of India. Bhakti represented a compelling movement of popular devotion, which included men and women from all castes, classes and stages of life. "Bhakti poets" such as Tukaram, Namdev or Jnandev from the Marathi tradition, or the 15th-century Kabir from North India, rejected Sanskrit to produce extraordinary compositions in the vernaculars.

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