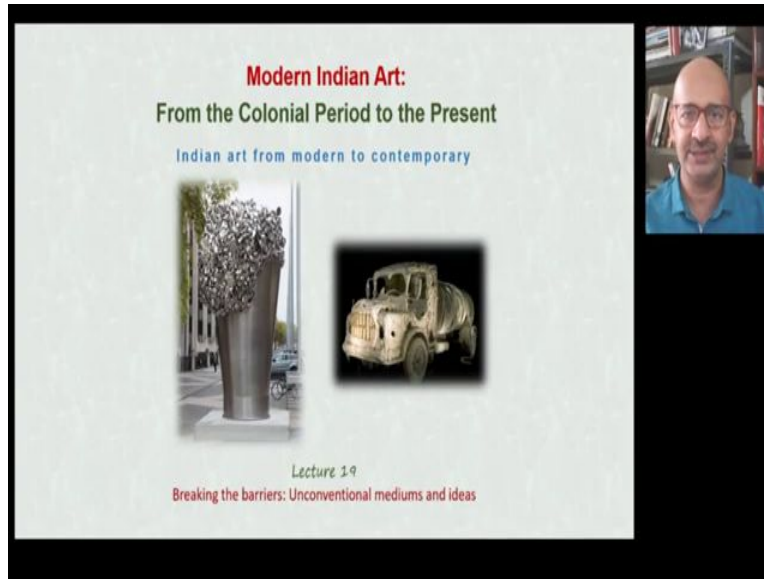


Modern Indian Art: From the Colonial Period to the Present
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Lecture - 19

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Hello viewers. Welcome to MOOCs online course on Modern Indian Art: From the Colonial Period to the Present. This is the 19th lecture from this course and it is in this lecture that we are going to touch upon what we understand by the present that is contemporary scenario of modern Indian art.

Now, one of the ways to look at, understand, and comprehend the contemporary scenario of modern Indian art is to notice the radical and visible changes taking place not only in the subject matter, themes, and content but also in the medium. In fact, when you look at the various examples of the present scenario of modern Indian art, and by present, we do not just mean this particular time, that is only 21st century or 2020, we mean this present, the formation of the present, formation of the contemporary which has been taking place from 1990s onwards slowly.

And by the turn of the century, this formation of the present or contemporary gained momentum and became a history of fast and rapid changes. Not only is it all about the changes in mediums and techniques and subject matters, it is also about constantly pushing the boundaries of modern

art. Therefore, often art critics and scholars would like to categorize or classify the present scenario of modern Indian art not just as an extension of modern art, not just as a paradigm shift, but also as a way to understand postmodern. So we have modern and now we have postmodern.

Now, these two categories are not very hard and fast categories, this classification as far as modern Indian art is concerned is a convenient way to understand that everything that was happening under the framework of modern art was not very satisfactory, or let us say enough for the new generation of artists, who started working from 1990s because they were responding to various case.

This new generation of artists really did not give up canvas painting or bronze or terracotta or watercolor, any of these modern mediums as such. They did continue, but the emphasis shifted, emphasis is no more on the- what now we call the conventional modern materials like canvas, watercolor, bronze, etc. Their emphasis is more on unconventional mediums. And what those unconventional mediums are, this is something that we are going to look at today's lecture.

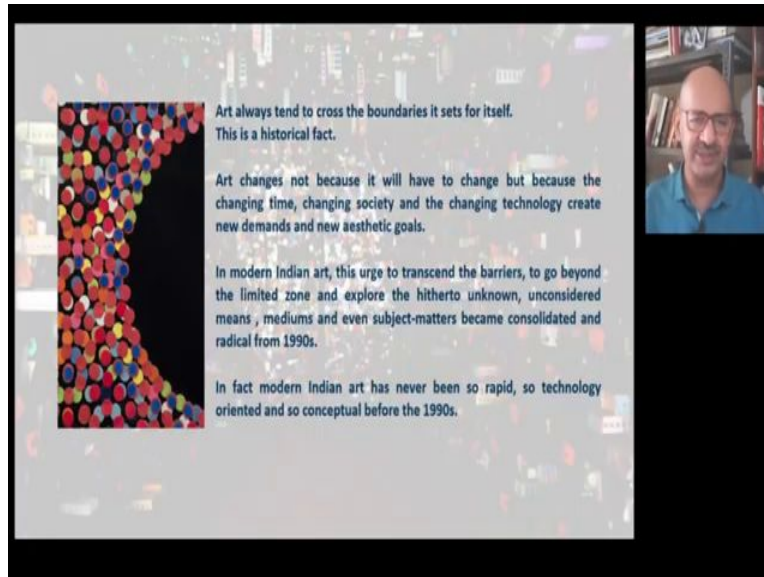
And also why do we call or we want to call this entire attempt of shifting, moving away from the modernist practice to what some scholars would like to call postmodernist practice or for some, it can be simply contemporary practice, the present practice. What does it mean? It means that you are breaking the barriers; the barriers, the limits, the boundaries that you have set for yourself while practicing modern art.

Now, modern art has also undergone as we have already seen massive changes, it has also undergone different kinds of interventions, it is not a static history. But now, the new generation of artists want to push the boundaries of that history to include and incorporate the new technological possibilities and not only possibilities, technical possibilities, or medium related possibilities.

The contemporary artists, at least many of them, actually altered the way we look at art. So when we study this shift from modern to contemporary, that is our time, we need to be very careful about this fact that when we are looking at many of those examples of our time, if not all, but many. Some of the examples we are going to see now in today's lecture and also the next lecture subsequently, which is going to be the last lecture of this course where the whole approach to a work of art on part of a viewer and the student is going to change.

So let us start looking at the various examples and try to notice what are the changes we are talking about when we want to study the shift from modern to the present. Now, as you can see already, right on the title page, here, we have two sculptures, which are very different from whatever we have seen so far in terms of the material, in terms of the subject, in terms of the idea of the art, we shall come back to them.

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This is also true that art always tends to cross the boundaries it sets for itself, it is nothing new that it is happening only in contemporary art practice, this is a historical fact. Art changes not just because it will have to change, but because the changing time, the changing society, and the changing technology create new demands and new aesthetic goals.

In modern Indian art, this urge to transcend the barriers to go beyond the limited zone and explore the hitherto unknown, unconsidered means, mediums, and even subject matters became consolidated and radical from the 1990s.

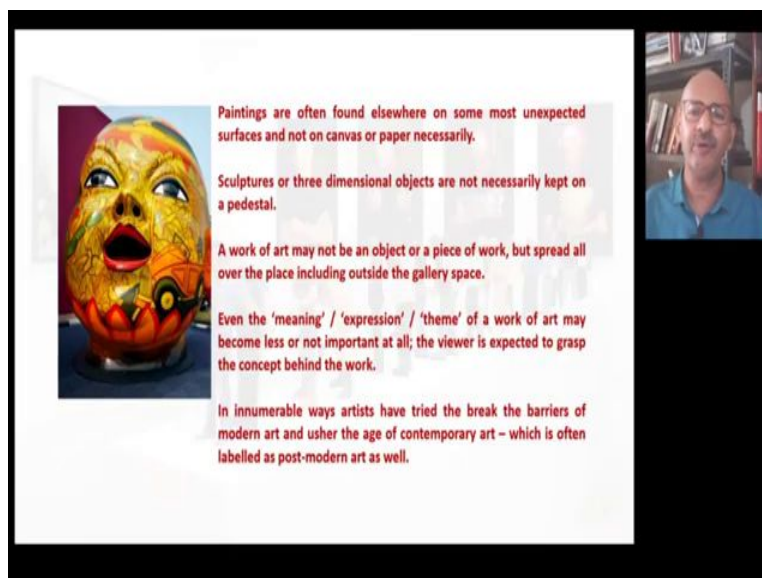
Now, why is it radical? This is, this really does not need an explanation, because when you look at the works of different works of art done by many of these contemporary artists, the very surprise and sometimes even the shock that you get when you look at that work of art because this is something that you did not expect in the first place. This is beyond your expectation, this is not something that you could have predicted. So this is unpredictable.

And therefore, the shift from modern to contemporary seems to be very radical, very sharp, very visible. In fact, modern Indian art has never been so rapid, so technologically oriented, and so conceptual, before the 1990s. So from 1990s the shifts or changes that we see taking place in the history of modern Indian art, that is during this transition period from modern to contemporary is not just about exploring new mediums, new subject matters, new themes, or new way of looking at art; very important character or a feature of the art of this time, the history of art of this time is its speed.

The speed, the rapidity with which the art history of this period is progressing, as if every next day you can expect something new happening in the field, something extraordinary is going to happen the next day. Maybe what you would predict generally, looking at a certain work of art today is going to be completely shaken, your expectation is going to be radically altered by the artwork coming up tomorrow by a new artist.

So this is the time, this transition from modern to contemporary is a time of great innovation, the time of most novel ideas. It is also a time of intervening, intervening with the given ideas, the set of ideas. Now all these things are going to happen slowly from the 1990s.

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Paintings are often found elsewhere on some most unexpected surfaces and not on canvas or paper necessarily.

Sculptures or three dimensional objects are not necessarily kept on a pedestal.

A work of art may not be an object or a piece of work, but spread all over the place including outside the gallery space.

Even the 'meaning' / 'expression' / 'theme' of a work of art may become less or not important at all; the viewer is expected to grasp the concept behind the work.

In innumerable ways artists have tried to break the barriers of modern art and usher the age of contemporary art – which is often labelled as post-modern art as well.

Now, painting generally are often found elsewhere during this period or from this period. Of course, we still have paintings hanging on the walls of the galleries or personal spaces like

homes and offices. But beside that, now we have works of art placed, located in most unexpected places, and paintings on very unexpected surfaces, not on canvas or paper necessarily.

And that is the reason why you see that a contemporary artist like Atul Dodiya is going to do some paintings, not on canvas, not on paper but on the shutters, shutters that you see in front of the roadside shops. They pull down the shutter, for the safety of the shop, they pull it up again next morning, when they need to reopen the shop.

Now, this painter, Atul Dodiya, selects these shutters, which is a very strange surface as you know. It is corrugated and it is a kind of up and down, it is not a kind of even surface. Now, this corrugated surface of a shutter is chosen by a very important artist like Atul Dodiya, of course, with a different intention. And this kind of huge sculpture, sometimes even the size and the scale of the sculptures and the look of the sculptures also dissolve the boundary line between a sculpture and a popular object.

So there are various ways of challenging the conventional modernist notions of art by the contemporary artists. Now, sculptures or three-dimensional objects usually are expected to be found on a pedestal, but not anymore. A work of art may not be an object or a piece of work but spread all over the place, including outside the gallery space.

Sometimes, a particular location is selected to display your work, not just one work, but several units of work altogether and this leads to what we call installation art. Inside a gallery space or outside the space, inside a conventional room or outside the most unconventional and unexpected space. Even the meaning, expression, theme of a work of art may become less or not important at all. The viewer is expected to grasp the concept behind the work.

Now in innumerable ways, artists have tried to break the barriers of modern art and ushered the age of contemporary art, which is often labeled as postmodern as well.

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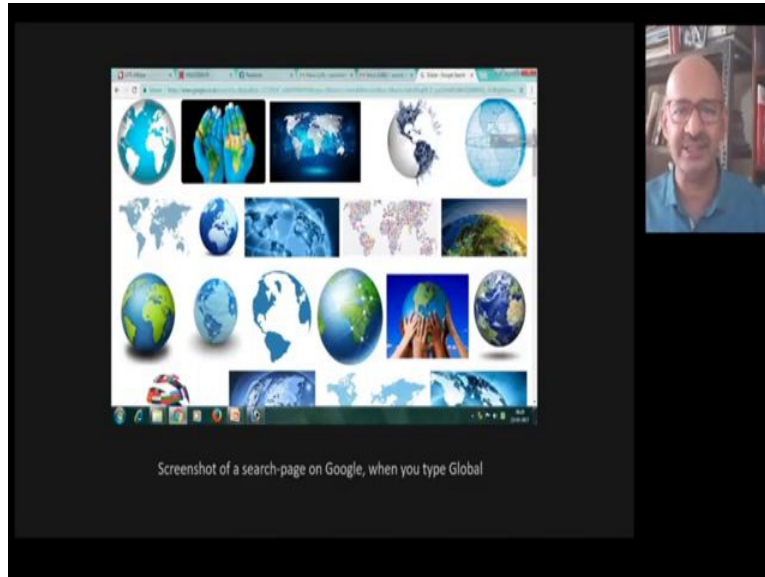


Now, another very important issue here that was slowly becoming very important from the 1990s is the impact of globalization along with a huge change in communication technology. We all know due to this massive change in the communication technology and the impact of globalization which was happening simultaneously, the art world could not remain isolated from each other. In a fraction of second sitting somewhere in India, if I want, I can have immediate information or knowledge or data about the art practice of another country of another time or maybe the same time.

Now, it is this passage, exchange, and transformation and transmission of information that makes contemporary art a very different challenge altogether. Because it is very difficult, it becomes very difficult also to make something very unique, because what you conceive as a unique idea or unique work of art may be seen as an idea, which has already been conceived or thought about by another artist in another country, just the previous day. So it is not that we knew each other, it is just that because of globalization, similar things are being thought of, conceived by artists from different countries who do not know each other.

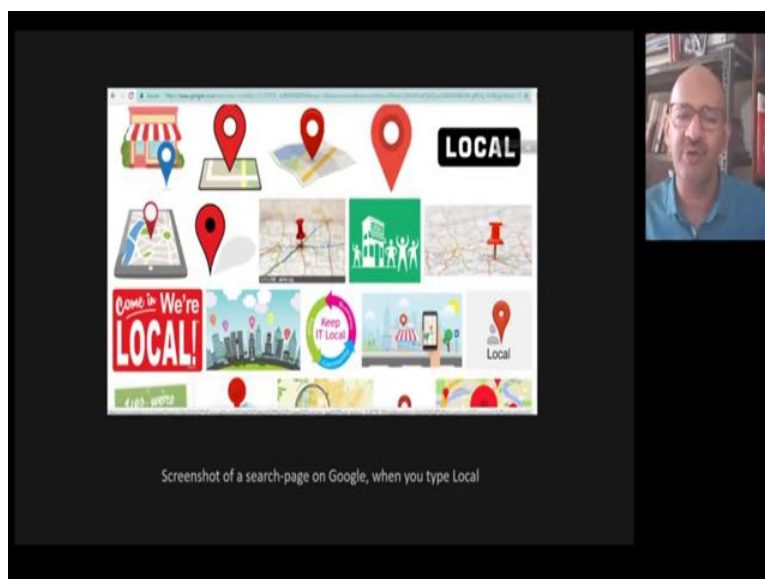
So this is another issue now, that in the face of globalization, how do you redefine the identity of your culture or your country. Often the context of a work of art may be Indian, but the look of many contemporary Indian art begins to assume a global and international identity.

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Now, it is this globalization, it is this huge impact of information and information technology that so much of information, so much of data, so much of visual information, really speaking, that we are getting habituated with, that we are getting accustomed with, is going to lay a great impact on the contemporary art practice. Therefore, it becomes once again very difficult for a contemporary art practice to come up with something that is completely new, something that is absolutely original or absolutely novel because ideas are getting shared and transmitted very, very fast.

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So what is local may become global tomorrow or what looks like a global or international idea may be very local to you. So the indigenous, something that is very close to your culture and on the other hand, the International, the global, to what extent these two things remain two separate categories and where do they overlap constantly is again a very serious factor now which artists wanted to address and incorporate in their works of art.

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Now talking about the breaking the barriers, one thing is very clear even if, and before we move on to see the works of art done by some well-known, reputed, significant artists. Even in casual spaces like in an art college campus of Santiniketan in West Bengal, suddenly one fine morning you get up to see that there is a whole pile of bricks with some drawings on it.

Not that this is a wonderful piece of artwork, but I am referring to this only to say that there is also a growing tendency among the artists to make art on surfaces and spaces where it is least expected, this is very important. And also to make art in a situation, on a surface, in a space where it is not going to last long.

So this temporality of a work of art that it is very temporary, it is not a permanent object that you are making, it is not going to be there on this planet for a long time, it is going to be there for a short time; this leads artists to do many works of art which are ephemeral, which are not going to be there.

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Even works of art like this, made out of clay pots on which the kind of configures a pattern. And by executing, in the process of executing the pattern, the artist eventually builds up a full three-dimensional sculpture. Now, when we sip tea, hot tea from this kind of clay cups, we hardly think that one day this clay cup and several other clay cups could be used to create a sculptural construction with an aesthetic idea or visual approach.

Of course, this kind of construction is not functional, this is for purely aesthetic delight, and also to share the delight of using a very common and banal and ordinary object like clay cup to build an aesthetic structure, a visually attractive configuration in three-dimensional form.

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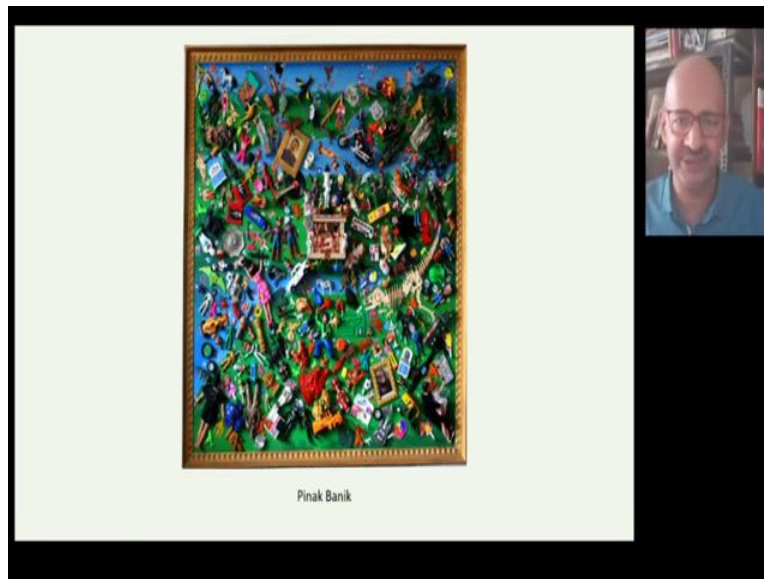


Pinak Banik

Now, this may not be very new to the Western modern art, but of course, quite new to the modern Indian art, modern Indian artists, and modern Indian art scenario. When an artist begins to use the industrially produced or mass-produced objects, which do not have any unique value, so you can buy these dolls, these toys, and these various kinds of plastic objects from the market. You can collect them, you do not make them, you collect them, and then you rearrange all these small little objects in a way to create a visual statement, to create a work of art.

Now, this is very conventional, not today anymore, because a lot of artists are doing it today. But at one point, it was very unconventional because the artist is not literally making them, he is re-arranging- that is his role. But the raw materials like these plastic objects and toys and everything have all been collected and or maybe bought from the market. And they, these are mass-produced objects, they were not meant to be used as art elements or ingredients for a work of art, but the artist is now doing that.

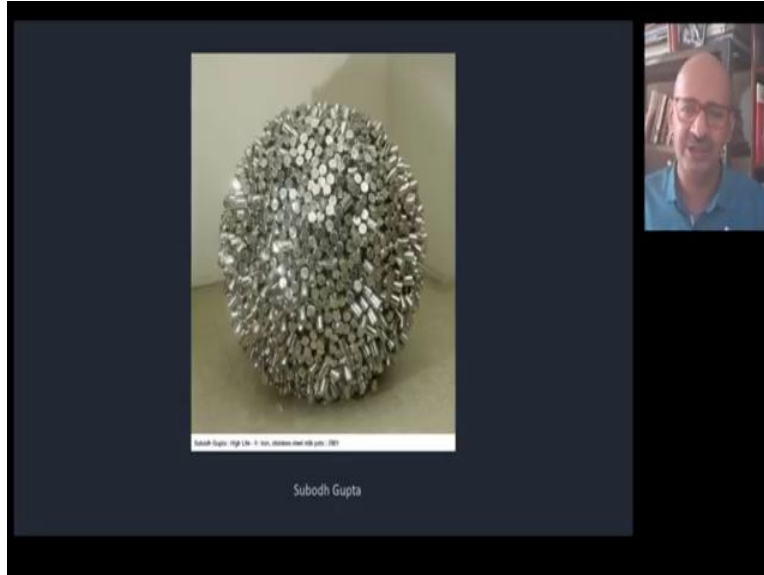
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So we have now many such examples of this kind of work of art, where if you call it a two-dimensional painting with a three-dimensional effect, then almost every element in this work is actually not something that the artist made by himself but collected from the market. You can call them found objects, you can call them industrial objects, you can call them mass-produced objects, but not made by an artist's hand anymore.

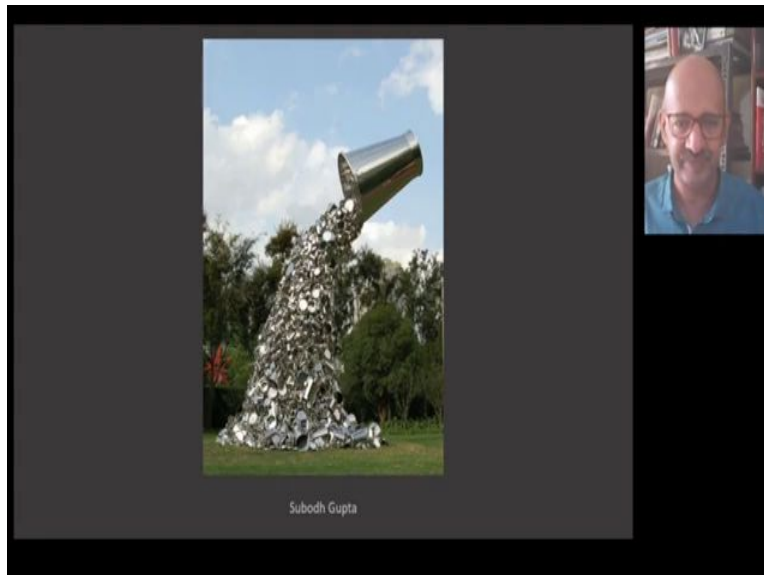
Artist more than a hands-on worker, somebody who works with his or her hands directly, an artist slowly during this period of contemporary art is becoming a planner, a director, somebody who conceives the whole thing, but may not be literally doing it all the time. So even the role of the artist tends to shift, begins to shift a little bit.

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So, therefore, now you have this huge sculpture by Subodh Gupta. And as you can see, the entire sculpture is made up of stainless steel milk pots and a little bit of iron. Now this kind of stainless steel milk pots are commonly available in the market. So these are not made by the artist, they are bought from the market, but arranged in a peculiar way to create a very unpredictable form out of most ordinary elements.

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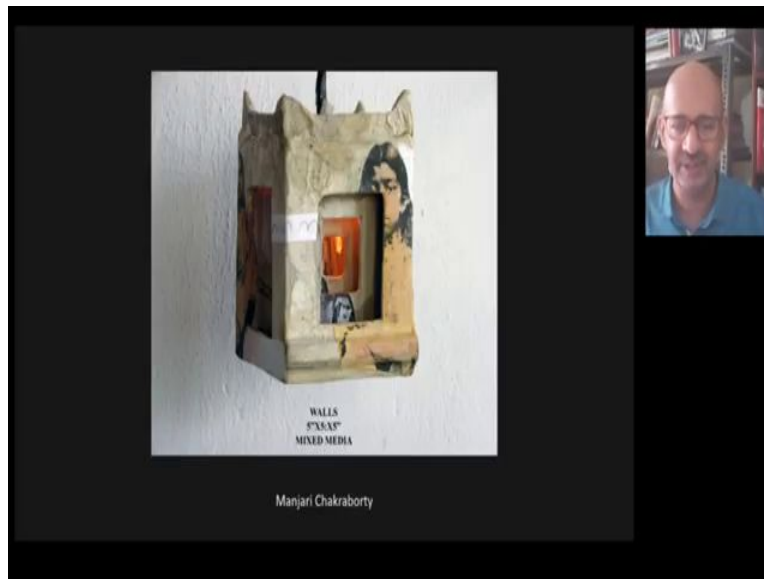


Look at this one by Subodh Gupta again. So definitely, there is a lot of technical ideas here involved to keep the sculpture stable. There is a lot of engineering that went into it without

which, it was not possible to make a sculpture like this. But we are also looking at it as an idea that Subodh Gupta comes up with this unique idea and executes them and therefore, this becomes again, an example of those works which have nothing to do with the previous practice of modern art.

This kind of work simply means that they have moved away, shifted from the paradigms or criteria of modern art.

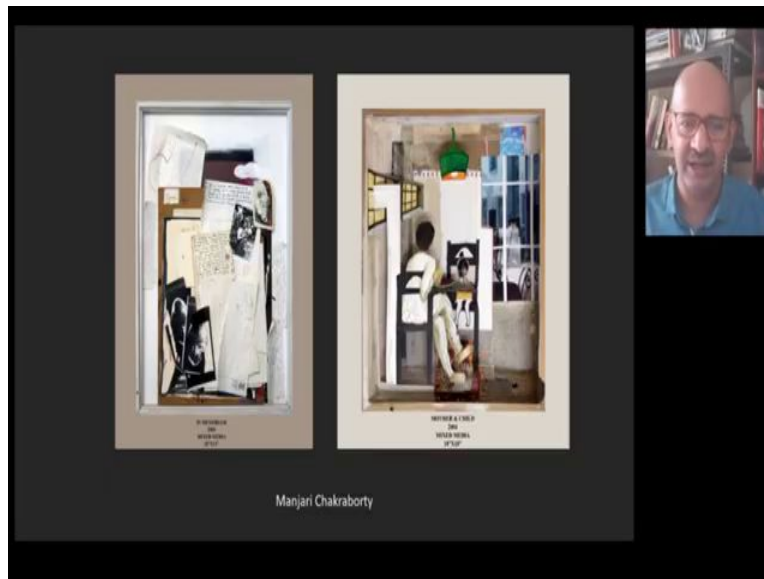
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Another artist, Manjari Chakravarty, she is using not only unconventional materials, like paper boxes, and then photocopies of images pasted on those boxes, and also use of some light source inside the box and creating a three-dimensional space. Now, the categories are also collapsing, becoming very difficult to classify these works. Can we call them sculpture? Can we call them a painting? Are we going to call it mixed media?

So this is not that we have an exact answer, but we have an understanding. And what is that understanding? That understanding is that in contemporary art, please do not try to classify or categorize the works in terms of the conventional categories like painting, sculpture, and all that. Because often you will see the boundaries between these categories have been completely challenged by many artists. So no need, we can simply look at these works as works of art.

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Now, medium and material can go to the extent that the work on the left-hand side actually contains a whole lot of letters, texts, pages from the diaries which originally were the personal belonging of the artist. Now they become the materials for the work of art. So what was a very personal object, a very personal thing, now becomes a part of a work of art for the public to see.

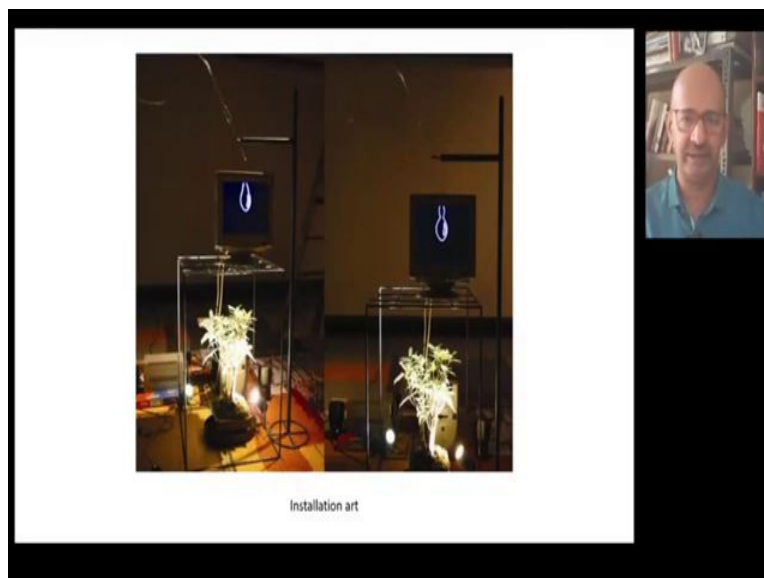
So what is the material for a work of art, this idea is also changing. Not only that it can be collages, or printed materials which you use as collage material and you collect those printed materials from magazines and various sources. But you are also using your own personal objects like letters and pages from diaries. This is again a very interesting shift because the neutrality of a medium is getting lost. When you paint with a pigment, which you either have made yourself or bought from the market is a completely neutral material because hundreds of other artists and painters are also using the same material. But when you are using a personal letter, then the whole idea of what is a medium for a work of art is changing drastically.

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Or you are also using a broken chair. The chair is not made by you. But you have turned into a broken chair from an industrially available which is available in the market, a chair. And then you have turned into something else, an object which is not functional anymore, nobody can sit on this chair, but this becomes an object like a sculpture.

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And gradually a work of art begins to occupy not just one particular space or one corner of a space, but maybe the entire room. And the work of art contains not one of two objects, but

several objects placed together. And when we look at this kind of work, we know that we are looking at a new category of work which has become very popular during the contemporary art period, and that category is known as the art of installation or installation art.

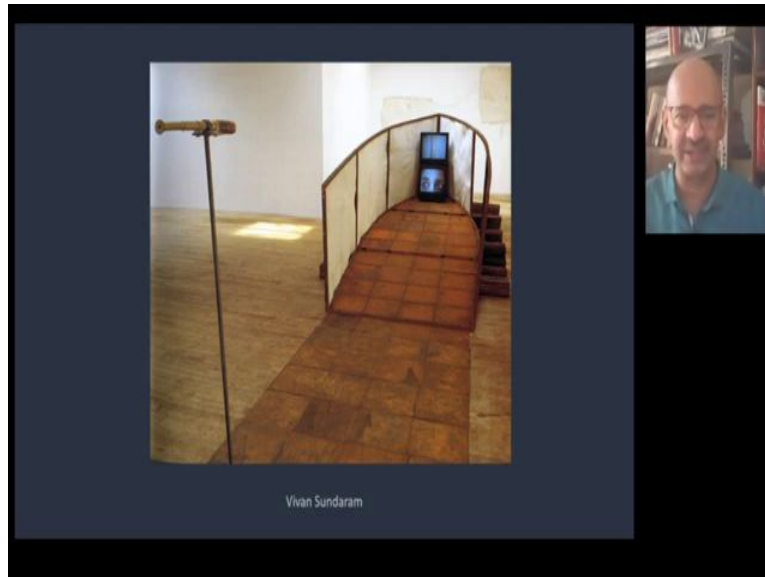
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So there are various such examples of work of art, where the artists are using different mediums of expression, like a video or a three-dimensional object, even a painting; something kept on the floor, something hanging from the ceiling, and various other elements; certain things handmade, certain things collected maybe from the market. So found objects, handmade objects, video, light, even in certain works artists want to use the smell of something to become a part of that artwork, sometimes the tactile quality, the touch.

Now altogether, it is not that you are looking at one particular work of art as such anymore. You are more than looking at a work of art, you are experiencing a work of art.

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Now, we have been always experiencing a work of art, nothing new about it, but when you look at a work of art like this, for example, this work by Vivan Sundaram again, a very important installation artist from the contemporary art of India, where of course, it is only by experiencing the entire idea that you begin to look at the details and you begin to also understand and appreciate the meaning.

There is a concept behind these details. So this is often said that when you look at contemporary art, at least many of them, it is not about just one object or just looking or reading, it is about experiencing the whole space.

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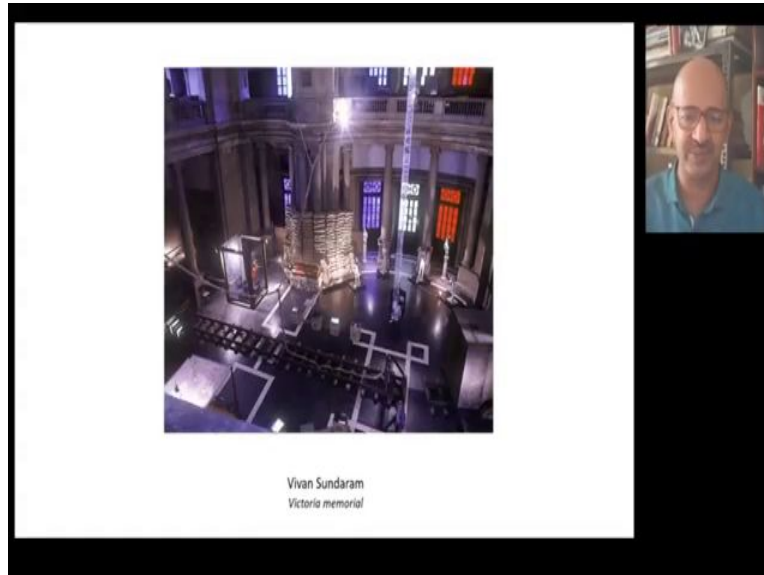


Vivan Sundaram



Vivan Sundaram
Victoria memorial



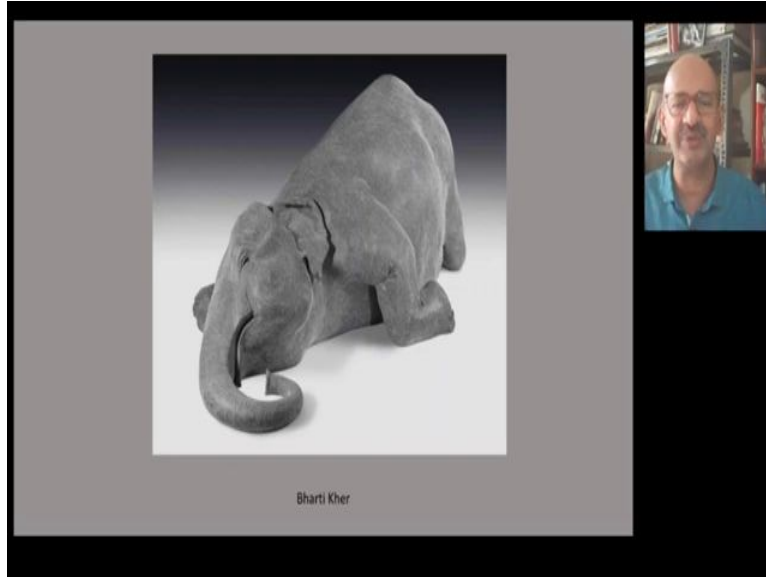


So such space, the three-dimensional real space is becoming very, very important in contemporary art, where artists are using multiple mediums, they are using multimedia, they are using various kinds of modes of expression within one work of art. And they are using up not just one part of the wall or one pedestal, but the entire space given to them like this work at Victoria Memorial, Kolkata, and this work by Vivan Sundaram where he used the entire inner space of one part of Victoria Memorial and he installed a work of art based on the history of Kolkata, Kolkata culture and Bengal with a lot of details.

Now, when you look at or enter an installation art space, you know that there are two things which are very important. Number one, you are not just looking at various works or various parts of that work, but you are experiencing it and you are understanding the entire work only by relating one with the other, you cannot look at them isolatedly.

And very important is the time that you take to look at a work of art like this. I mean for a painting, how long you are going to look at a painting depends entirely on you, but an installation artwork, an installation art usually requires a certain amount of time without which you will not be able to even comprehend the basic idea. So there is this time factor, which often is integral to many installation works of art.

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Now talking about different materials and mediums in contemporary art, you have Bharti Kher, another very important artist who uses hundreds of bindis which is very common in Indian society, common among Indian women who use it. So she uses bindis to enliven the surface of a sculpture, be it a reclining or a dying elephant or something else, she constantly uses that.

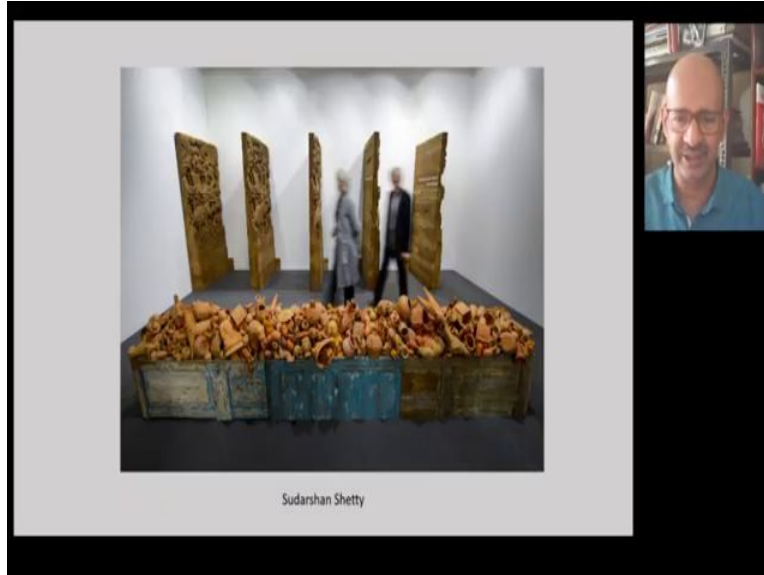
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Now, when we talk about this installation work, we must remember that artists, for example, here N. N. Rimzon has been using often the entire space where he arranges the different elements associated with a work of art. Therefore, it is not just a single object, but everything together that creates the experience we are supposed to encounter.

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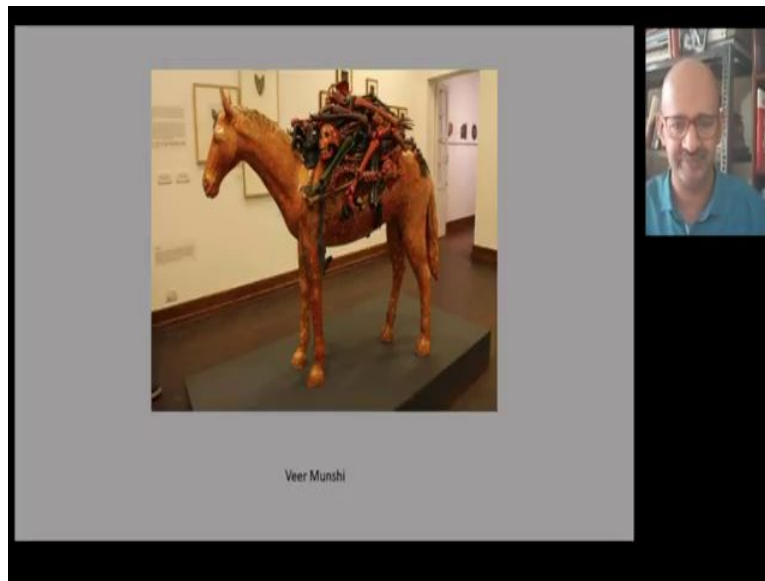
Now, works by Sudarshan Shetty can be found again using or let us say recycling different materials which are already there or found or collected. In fact, metals, irons, terracottas, absolutely unconventional materials used to create a work of art. And it is not only Sudarshan Shetty, many artists do that. They may not be making each and everything by their own hands, but it is the idea that drives them to arrange the elements in a particular way is very, very important.

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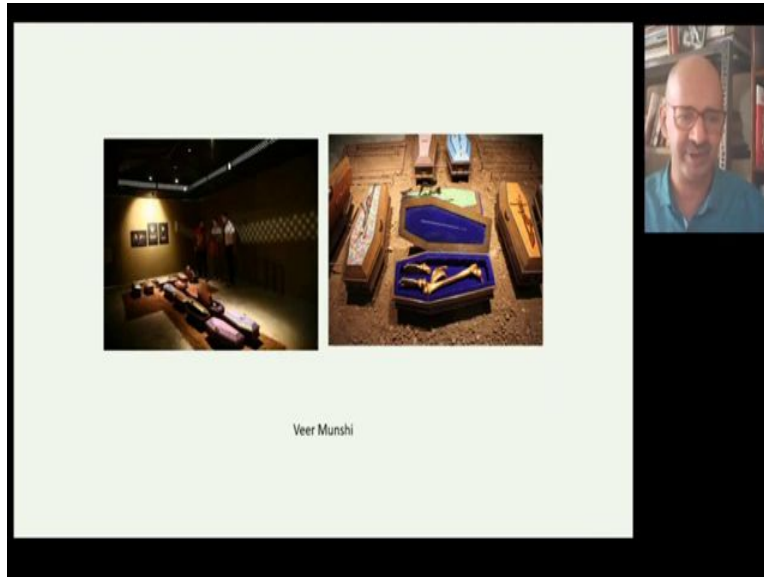
And in certain works of art, there are movements. Certain things are moving, something is swaying, and you also get sound. So, art is not necessarily a still object, art by use of some motor or some mechanism, certain parts of art can be moved, the stillness can be broken. This is happening with many works of art in contemporary art practice.

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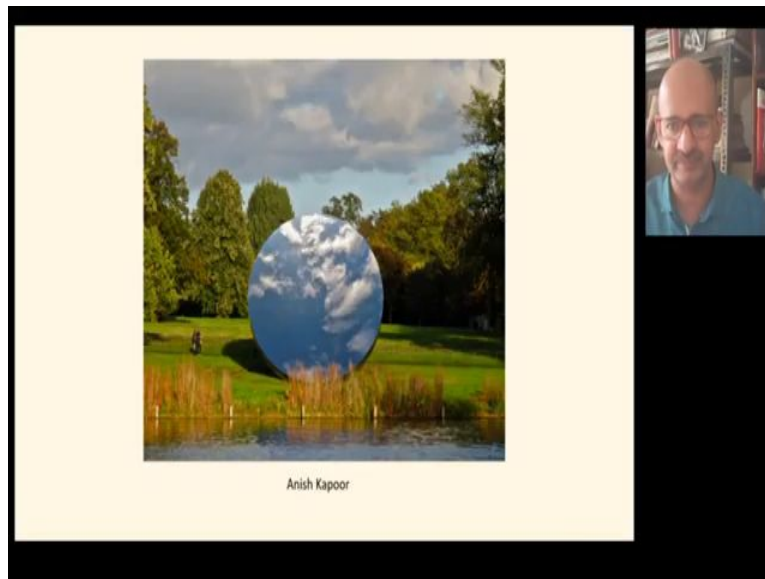
This is by Veer Munshi. Again, the video material, everything is unconventional. And there is obviously a very strong message or a content in this kind of work. when you look at the details, you can find out.

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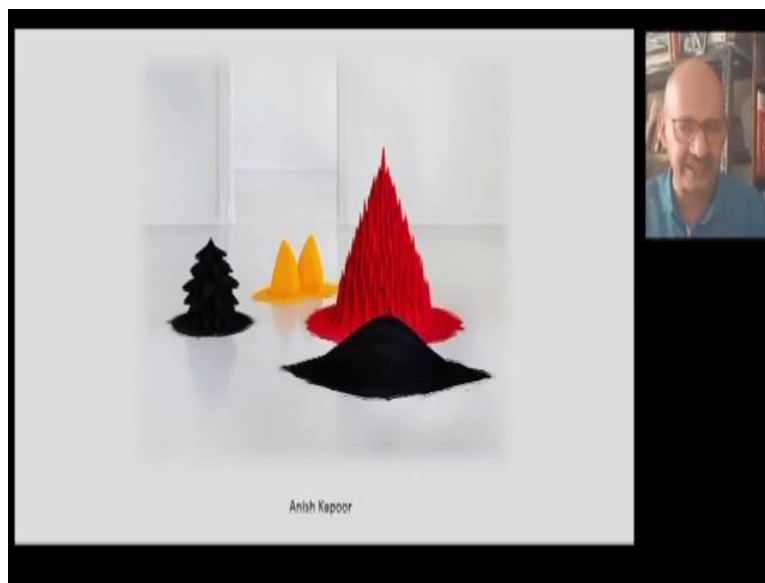
Now, this same artist, Veer Munshi, just for one single work of art occupies a large part of a room in the gallery and as you can see, there are several units in a work of art and all together it creates a subject matter, a theme or an experience.

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Anish Kapoor, a very well-known artist, Indian artist, but lives abroad also makes these huge, massive sculptures like this one, or this one, in different parts of the world. And by creating an excessively smooth surface, a certain kind of visual harmony and uniformity that Anish Kapoor in his sculptures begin to reflect the immediate surrounding on the sculpture. So the sculpture becomes a reflective surface, a kind of container which holds the experience of the world around.

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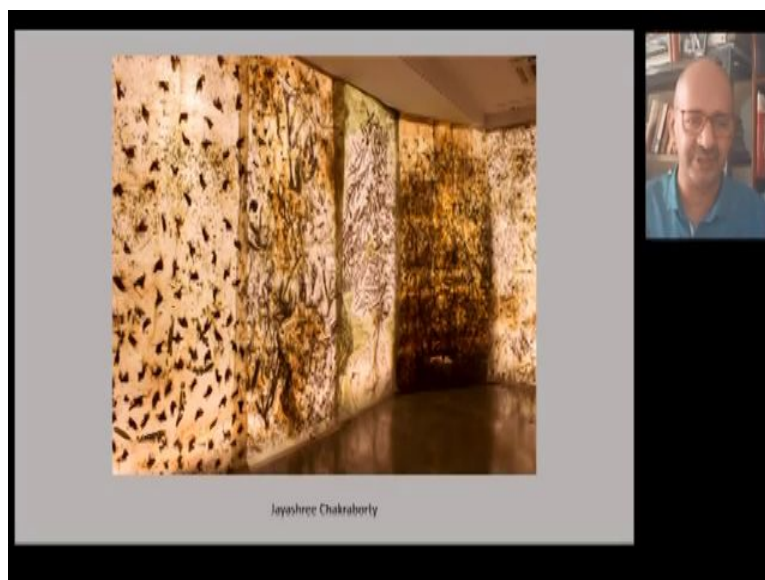
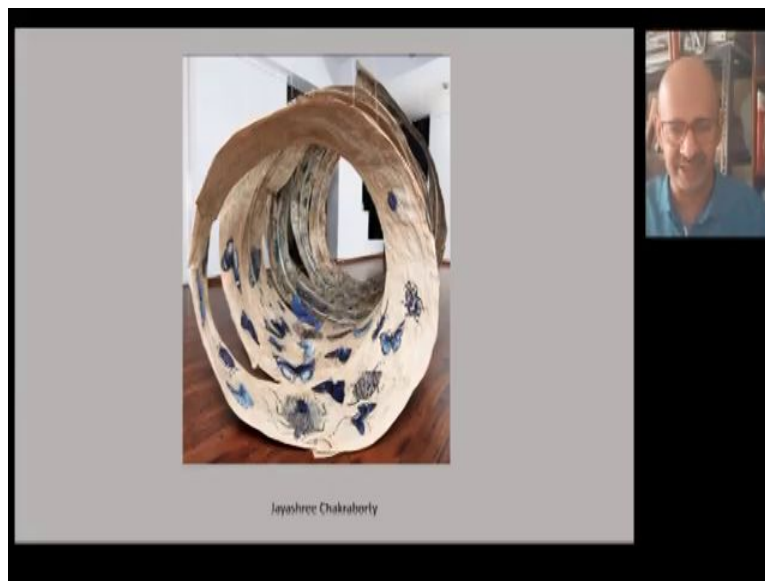
Anish Kapoor also uses colored dust. So it is extremely fragile in that sense. It is absolutely impossible to carry the sculpture to somewhere else, it can simply collapse. In that sense, it is very temporary, very fragile, and done with a strange kind of technique.

So that the shapes retain for a few days, but will certainly collapse when you want to carry the sculpture to some other place, it has to be made again and again. And yes, this is again a very important, very important aspect of many contemporary art, that once you do that work of art,

you do it just for once. I mean, if you have to do that again, you have to do that again. You cannot do a work of art and just simply keep it to be shown in various places.

So there are works like Anish Kapoor's works and many other works, that can be done only once, and if you want me to show that work again in another exhibition, I will have to do it again. Most of the installation art practices are like that. You install, then you have to dismantle once the exhibition is over. You have to reinstall again if you want to show the same work, but by reinstalling you are also reimagining, re-planning, and changing a little bit.

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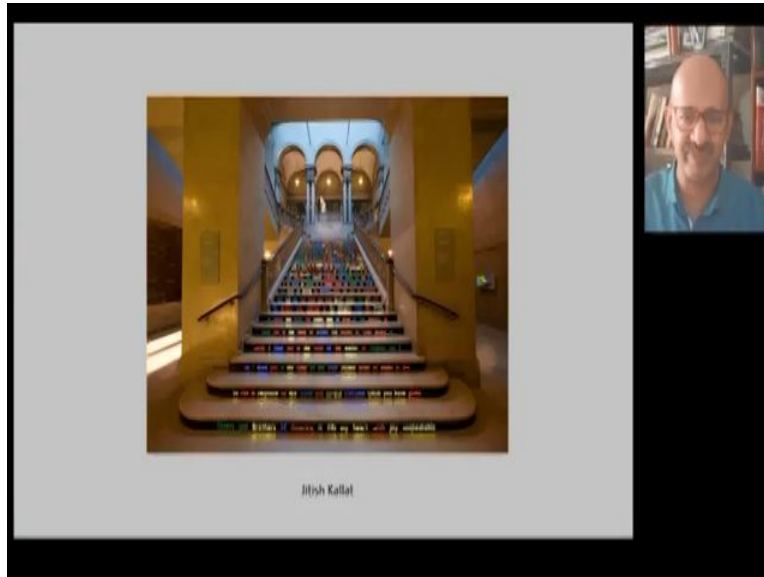
This is by Jayashree Chakravarty where she uses organic materials like handmade papers, to begin with. And later on, not only the paper, she uses twigs, dry leaves, seeds, and various kinds of organic materials that she is able to collect from her neighborhood. And this is very interesting that with all these organic materials she creates a translucent work of art, where all these materials, which are part of the surface can be seen clearly. When you put off the light, you cannot really see them, but you can touch them.

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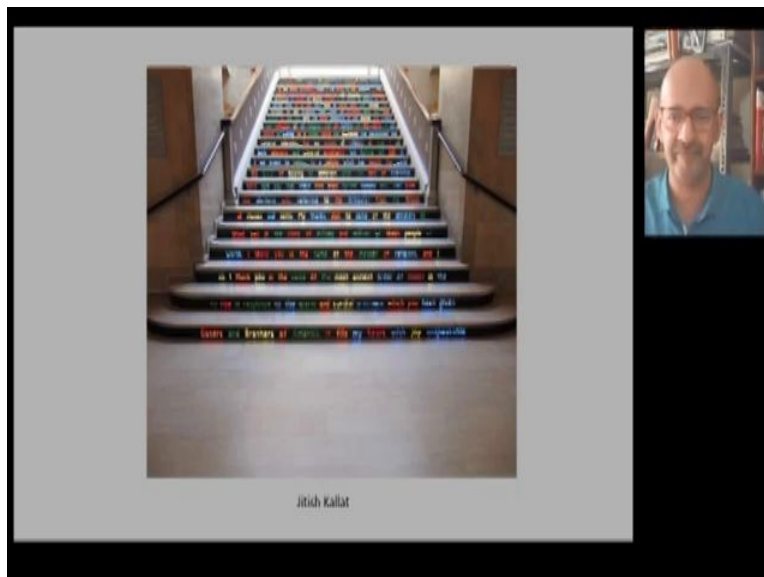
So it is this organic quality, organic materials, and constant search for the organic remnants in your life, which in an urban setup is fast vanishing. Artist Jayashree Chakravarty tries to reclaim that lost nature from our society by collecting and accumulating and then using them on her works, all these small little organic materials.

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Now a real space like this building and the staircase can be used as a space for your work of art, like this one as has been done by Jitish Kallat. So what the work of art here is actually all these illuminated texts just below each step. So as you climb up, you climb up reading these texts, you climb up by responding to these texts, and therefore, by the time you reach top, you have gone through a certain experience.

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So again, by looking at this work, we must mention that apart from the different visual experiences, contemporary artists now have begun to introduce textual experience. There are

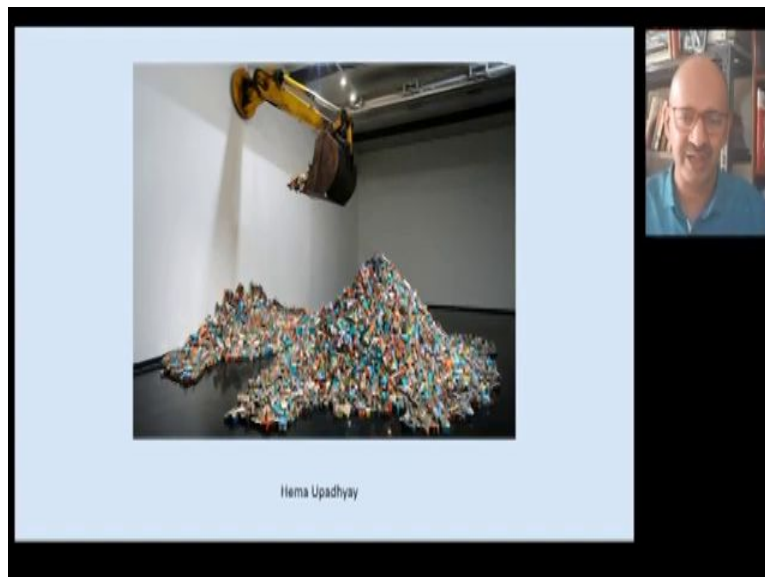
many works of art in contemporary art where the work is less visual and more textual. Text has become an integral part of work of art and sometimes text itself is the work of art along with a certain arrangement which you just saw now in the work by Jitish Kallat.

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And the same artist also does a work like this. And as you can see, a very ordinary object, but when cast in a certain way, assumes a very striking look, and then it is open to us for the interpretation.

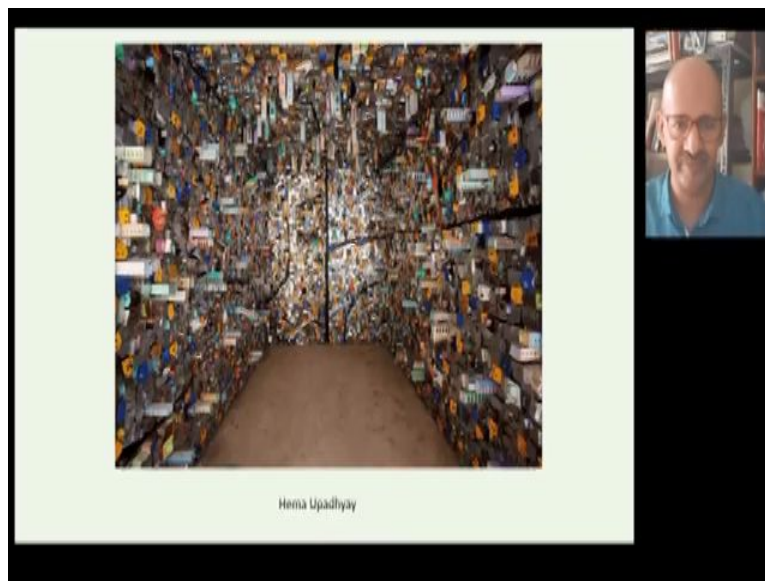
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So Hema Upadhyay, again an artist who occupies the entire floor, entire space of a gallery and by installing as you can see a machine and by dumping hundreds of objects, which she had collected from the market. And so, there is obviously a statement in the context of environmental pollution with reference to the excess of objects on this planet and all that.

I am not going into the meanings of each work of art, but as you keep looking at these works, it becomes very obvious that these works are not just mere arrangement, but these works certainly contain very strong messages and meanings.

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So one is creating like Hema Upadhyay here, a whole three-dimensional space and as a viewer, you have to be a part of this space, you cannot just look at this world from outside. The viewer is invited to step in and get surrounded by this overwhelming cityscape all around you. Again, obviously, there is a very strong statement regarding the claustrophobic life that we lead in a typical city life.

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Or you can keep hanging hundreds of objects which we use, but none of them is possibly made by us, but made by some different country, maybe made by China or something else. In fact, the title of this work is 'Made by China' or 'Made in China'. Therefore, this clearly refers to a strange cultural, social, and economic contradiction.

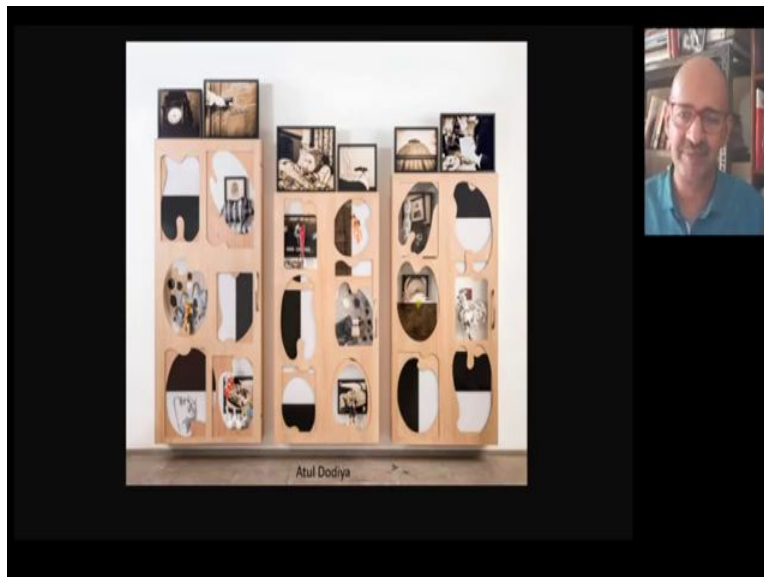
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As I was telling you, somebody like Atul Dodiya, besides doing several paintings on paper and canvas, also chooses to do some paintings on shutters, on the surface of the shutters like this one or this one.

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Sometimes he is arranging like an archive, like a museum; like your own drawing-room, setting up some shelves, arranging pictures, photographs collected from various sources. And therefore, creating out of one's own personal collections a certain archive, a certain space, which is not only meaningful to him the artist, but also extremely communicative with the viewers because the

viewers immediately understand that he or she is not just looking at a work of art, but looking at a certain cultural experience which refers to history, refers to our time, refers to various kinds of crisis of our life and as well as achievements of our life.

So contemporary art from the post-1990s is trying to address multiple things in multiple ways. We shall see a few more of these experiments in the next class. Thank you.