



JNANAPRAVAHA MUMBAI QUARTERLY

JULY - SEPTEMBER 2024

CONTENTS

Director's Note	03
Aesthetics	04
Indian Aesthetics	04
Criticism & Theory	09
Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory	10
Curatorial Processes	25
Creative Processes	27
Community Engagement	29
Student Review	32
Announcements	37
JPM Supporters	44

Director's Note

Ostensibly on a well-deserved vacation as our academic year ended on April 30th, the backroom engines of our institute have been whirring quietly to create yet another staggeringly challenging year ahead for us starting July 2024. Being true to our self-professed mission of addressing not only current research but also virgin areas of enquiry, we have formulated a pioneering semester-long course beginning August 2024.

Our curriculum in Critical Theory courses has so far leapfrogged from Aristotle or classical antiquity to Late Renaissance, and The Age of Reason or Enlightenment. The intervening period or so-called era of perceived decline in popularly called the Dark Ages has never been a subject of pedagogical enquiry. Our course, 'The Age of Illumination: Philosophical Thought from Late Antiquity to the Islamic Golden Age', through 20 insightful sessions replete with lectures, discussions and readings, will throw light on the rich syncretic nature of knowledge production, philosophical discourse and theological debate, rejecting facile binaries. The integration of Platonic thought with Jewish intellectual traditions and the emergence of Neo-Platonist thinkers; the rise of Manichaeism and early Christian thought coupled with the flourishing debates of the Byzantine world form the bedrock to the Islamic Golden Age. Focussing on the Greek-Arabic and the later Greek-Arabic-Latin translation movements, we see the rise of formative thinkers and trace half a millennia of radical intellectual thought interspersed with Jewish thinkers and the early beginnings of Sufism. Please do visit our website to get details of the course, including topics and names of participating world-renowned scholars on the cutting edge of an emerging discourse.

Our flagship yearlong course 'Indian Aesthetics' continues its forward march with the inclusion of some subject matter excluded in previous iterations in the interest of time. Choices have been made and tweaks done accordingly, along with voices and expertise not heard in a while. We are very excited with the version thus created.

For the opening quarter, there are several additional lectures on the anvil – Mewar painting looked at through the lens of mood; Archaeo Broma addressing the archaeological history of food; Yoginis and Dance; the Shaiva school of Pashupata and its spread, to name a few.

This quarterly expectedly carries synopses of our programmes conducted this calendar year – some from April and some from January to March, like the seminars from the pathbreaking course 'A Spiralling Revolution – Technology, Culture and Crisis'.

We sincerely hope you enjoy reading it all. Wishing you and yours a restful monsoon.



Rashmi Poddar Ph.D.
Director

AESTHETICS

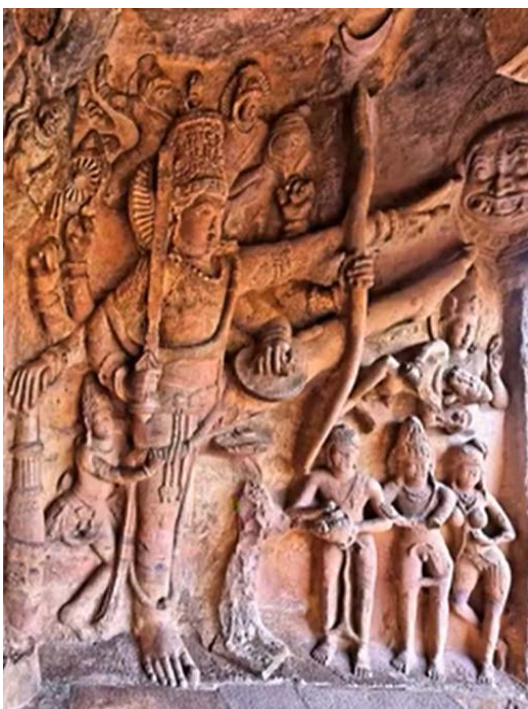


A Folio from the Manuscript of Kalpasutra and Kalakacarya Katha: Jaina Tirthankara Enshrined (upper panel), Celestial Dancers (lower panel). c.1475

JPM's Aesthetics offerings include:

(1) an academic yearlong Postgraduate Diploma/Certificate course in Indian Aesthetics, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (2) a quarterly Postgraduate Certificate course in Yoga & Tantra, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (3) a quarterly Postgraduate Certificate course in Southeast Asian Art and Architecture, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (4) a fortnight of public seminars and lectures in Islamic Aesthetics; (5) an ongoing series of public seminars in Buddhist Aesthetics; (6) an ongoing series of public seminars in Southasian Painting; and (7) occasional academic conferences and workshops in these fields.

Indian Aesthetics



Jnanapravaha's Indian Aesthetics (IA) certificate course completed a second successful year in hybrid (physical as well as online) mode this April. The course evolves every year, as we endeavour to bring in new scholars and current research, so that we can continue to offer unique insight into the subject. The pandemic seems to have irrevocably changed the world. While several local students came regularly to our beautifully appointed premises located in a heritage structure in Mumbai to listen to lectures in person, others preferred the convenience of viewing lectures at home. Students located in other cities of India and abroad (in USA, UK and Australia) as usual participated fully, asking questions directly despite being online. Resource scholars for IA were, as they are every year, spread over a wide geography (again an effect of the pandemic): Dr. Crispin Branfoot in London, Dr. Shailendra Bhandare in Oxford, Dr. Parul Singh in Germany, and other resource scholars in the Indian cities of Delhi, Gurugram, Kolkata, Pune, and

Hyderabad.

An unprecedented sixty-four students enrolled in the course this year. Careful curation ensures that, after nine months of stimulating four-hour Saturday-afternoon classes, these students think deeply about Indian aesthetics and apply learnings from the course to a wide range of related ideas. Some Friday evenings are also set aside for class. Archaeology, architecture, anthropology, literature, philosophy, and religion are brought to bear on the insights offered by history and art history by the IA course, which selectively addresses 5,000 years of visual material from South Asia. Each session includes illustrated lectures that make our students familiar with seminal examples of Indic art. Scholars encourage both, questions as well as focussed discussion which addresses the political, economic, social, and cultural context of art. Most students attended regularly this year, though some attrition is inevitable in a yearlong course in which working professionals enrol to enrich themselves.



Dr. Rashmi Poddar

Students attended a brief orientation session before Dr. Rashmi Poddar introduced the subject of classical Indian aesthetics through insights gleaned from particular Sanskrit texts and by deploying Indic philosophical tenets. This framework provides a basis for the study of the visual culture of the subcontinent. Bharata's *Natyashastra*, which offers the framework of *rasa* in the context of dramaturgy, was harnessed by Dr. Poddar to bring this unique aesthetic framework to bear on examples of Indic visual art, which were also analysed through the concepts of rhythm and harmony, iconometry and materiality, line and colour as well as proportion. Apart from these formal aspects, Dr. Poddar analysed the content,

subject matter and meaning of art and dwelt on the vital aspects of iconography, iconology and symbolism. Dr. Veena Londhe provided a brief overview of Sanskrit poetics and the *rasa sutra*, drawing in the concept of *dhvani*, expounded by the medieval Kashmiri scholar Abhinavagupta, which can be applied to visual art.

Dr. Kurush Dalal's comprehensive examination of recent research on the material remains of the Harappan civilisation and Dr. Naman Ahuja's lecture on Sunga terracotta showed that South Asia had strong links with West Asia at this time. Dr. Shailendra Bhandare's exposition of Satavahana numismatics revealed their importance in the mapping of the historical details of the time. Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism were discussed by Dr. Supriya Rai and Swati Chemburkar. The rich vein of extant Buddhist art in the subcontinent and the still vibrant narratives of the *Jatakas* and *Avadanas* bolstered the understanding of Buddhist philosophical tenets. Dr. Viraj Shah's painstaking exploration of Jain philosophy, art, and narratives used the *rasa* theory to explain the Jain worldview. Her presentation of her primary research on the Jain caves of the Western Deccan showed our students the ability of scholarly work to illuminate little-known aspects of art.

The iconography of Vedic and Hindu *Agamic* deities was presented to IA students by Arvind Sethi. His exploration revealed the changes that occurred through time in the iconography and the worship of both major and minor deities such as Shiva, Vishnu, Surya, the *navagrahas* and the *dikpalas*. Dr. Rashmi Poddar's exposition of Devi and Shakti introduced students to feminine deities who did not rely on male consorts for their power. She also discussed tantra, with its practices that are misunderstood to this day due to their secrecy and deviation from the grand narratives of mainstream religion and philosophy. Dr. Pushkar Sohoni, Dr. Crispin Branfoot and Kamalika Bose offered surveys of temple architecture from different regions of the Indian subcontinent. Dr. Riyaz Latif's overview of Islamic funerary architecture introduced the genre through its most important West Asian examples and then recounted its varied architectural expressions in many regions of India.

The IA course then dipped into the examples of

painting found in the subcontinent. Beginning with Dr. Leela Wood's riveting and analytical presentation on the Ajanta caves, this visually captivating stream of the course meandered through early manuscript painting, focussing on the *Chaurapanchashika*, Jain examples as well as the Sufi *Chandayana* with Dr. Shaillika Mishra. Roda Ahluwalia offered an enthralling module on Mughal, Pahari, Rajput, and Deccani painting, bringing in insights from the most recent scholarly research. With the withering of central Mughal authority, Awadh and Murshidabad came into their own in artistic terms, a journey of painting that was mapped for IA students by Dr. Parul Singh and Mrinalini Sil. Dr. Harsha Dehejia delved into the sensuous realm of Krishna *shringara* and its philosophy.

Dr. Himanshu Prabha Ray presented a lecture on Indian maritime historiography, a view that focussed outward from the Indian subcontinent and recounted its long-standing trade links with Southeast Asia, West Asia and coastal Africa. In her second lecture, she discussed the orientation of coastal shrines facing the ocean, and their probable audiences. The littoral links with the Indian Ocean island of Socotra in Yemen are revealed by inscriptions in multiple languages found there in the Hoq cave. The presence of Brahmi among these languages confirms that travellers from the subcontinent found their way there. Dr. Jaya Kanoria presented the art of colonial India through the lens of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. She uncovered the Orientalist underpinnings of European examples of Oriental painting and British literature, extending this argument to Company painting as well as other examples of Indian art. Dr. Suryanandini Narain's session on photography showed how the medium was harnessed differently by the coloniser and colonised at this time. Dr. Jaya Kanoria's examination of early-20th-century Indian aesthetics presented the multifaceted and influential lives and work of Rabindranath Tagore and Aurobindo Ghosh.

In April, the course examined colonial architecture, beginning with Dr. Pushkar Sohoni's overview of Indian examples and a vignette of his primary research on the colonial market hall. His research of this typology of architecture reveals the gaps between intentions and outcomes as the latter is dependent on unpredictable

factors. Dr. Himanshu Burte's explication of the concept of 'whitespace', a term coined by him which succinctly expresses the inability of Indian architecture and architects to move away from the colonial mindset, proved to be illuminating. Dr. Burte pointed out that barring exceptions such as B.V. Doshi and Laurie Baker, few architects were able to create a built form truly fitting for the subcontinent's environment.

The Indian Aesthetics course closed with an online lecture by the young, thoughtful and especially talented Dr. Varunika Saraf, who shared her insights on her own creative practice which encompasses both painting and embroidery. Her sensitive and generous sharing drew many questions from the audience. The lecture was also free for the public and was a part of Jnanapravaha's Creative Processes rubric.

As usual, we provided specially curated readings and bibliographies for each session of the IA course on our learning management portal JPM Think. Thirty-five students enrolled in the IA diploma, which necessitates the careful selection of topics for three assignments. Each student discussed these topics and related images with Dr. Jaya Kanoria, Course Director of Indian Aesthetics. Students were also required to identify authentic source material before writing their academic essays and thesis. As always, two evening sessions on the basics of academic writing were held early in the course by Dr. Kanoria to orient students to the requirements of the IA Diploma and to provide insights on reading academic writing effectively; assignments received detailed feedback and students were given time to revise their work; the goal was to produce academic writing that was publishable. Several essays first written for the IA Diploma have found publishers over the years, the most recent being one by Vedant Srinivas, an alumnus of IA 2022-23. IA 2023-24 students wrote well-researched theses on topics such as '*Like a needle going through a pile of lotus leaves*' on the richness and depth of Indian Aesthetics, '*Black Mountain: Northern influences on Western Deccan during the Satavahana Period*' on the Buddhist caves at Kanheri, '*The Universe as an Artifact: Four Cosmological Episodes and an Ideal Society in the Bhagavata Purana*', '*Tipu Sultan: British representations of an "oriental despot" and justification for colonial rule*' and '*Standing Tall, Invoking Awe: Exploring Mrinalini Mukherjee's*



Upright Fibre Sculptures at the Intersection of Tradition and Modernity’.

The Indian Aesthetics course has gone from strength to strength in terms of curated lectures. Our students have responded by asking deep questions which extend us and our resource scholars, as well as by writing excellent academic

papers. We are truly proud of each student. We will continue in the hybrid mode for the foreseeable future, as teaching and learning in the physical environment is too precious to discard, while the reach of the online mode permits us to project the IA alumni web to many more interested students and to unprecedented locations. – **J.K.**

PAST PROGRAMMES

Hand-held Hubris: Decolonizing British Medalllic Art, India and Beyond

April 30th, 2024, 6:30 - 8:00 PM IST | Dr. Shailendra Bhandare (Assistant Keeper, South Asian and Far-eastern Numismatics and Paper Money Collections, a Fellow of St. Cross College and a member of Faculty of Oriental Studies)

Understanding the difference between collective histories and history is an important aspect of the ongoing attempts within academia and research to decolonise our present. Dr. Shailendra Bhandare’s lecture titled ‘Hand-held Hubris: Decolonising British Medalllic Art, India and Beyond’ seemingly discusses a rather small object, one that, as the title suggests, fits in the palm of one’s hand. However, the nuance of its

implications on our understanding of history is far more layered. Bhandare’s lecture at Jnanapravaha started with him explaining how he interacts with “decolonisation from a curatorial standpoint”. He demarcated a clear distinction between the terms ‘decolonised’ as a verb of the ‘60s and ‘decolonising’ as a contemporary term that addresses breaking the visuality of established Eurocentric canons. Before jumping into the

medallions and medals, Bhandare illustrated his point through a larger example, namely the iconoclasm of the 'Rhodes Must Fall' protests. While the 2015 protests looked to bring down large statues and sculptures as an allegory for the state of decolonisation in South Africa (where the protests began), it did raise the question: how does one affect a similar relooking at the past through fixed objects that cannot be removed or uninstalled? As a numismatist working largely with objects that either commemorate or celebrate colonial triumphs, Bhandare emphasised the importance of not just the historicity of objects but also the language used to discuss them. In addition to decolonising, he added that history also needs to be "de-triumphalised" and "de-patriarchalised". Bhandare broke down the visual lexicon of the British medals, using this layered idea of reading iconography. One of the ideas that emerged was the creation and conception of visual canons that relied on othering as a norm.

Several of the medals commemorated important moments of the British colonial project. Considering the scale of these medals – which, as the title suggests, were no larger than the palm of one's hand – required the use of symbolism to communicate ideas in a very limited space. Some of the icons included the personification of Britain as Britannia, seen as a woman in what Bhandare called "pseudo-classical visuals". The colonies were often represented as animals native to or associated with the region, a form of 'animalising the native'. That being said, Britain was also assigned an animal. Often denoted as a lion – the king of the jungle, both Britannia and the lion were seen as a form of benevolence that showcases the good that Britannia can do and the superiority of the lion as the king of the rest of the animals. Perhaps one of the most notable medals to feature both icons simultaneously

is the Indian Mutiny Medal. Devoid of any depictions of the British Raj India – typically denoted by a tiger. The reverse of the medal is an image of Britannia in the foreground with a wreath and Union Jack shield in hand, and a lion in the background. The negation of any symbol, icon or visual to represent India, on this medal, feeds the idea of triumphalism that defined the conception and design of most colonial medals. It also signifies a singular narrative of a mutiny perpetrated against Britain. In doing so it has erased the Indian narrative of a revolt.

Bhandare concluded by emphasising the importance of the close and cross-disciplinary reading of imagery as a way of understanding the visuality of these objects. He also summarised that the medals offered a "prism to observe and analyse the construction of the colonial other". Despite their demure size, medals have the potential to help develop alternate narratives through a trans-geographical study of the moments they commemorate. – **D.S.**



Dr. Shailendra Bhandare

CRITICISM & THEORY



Apnavi Makanji | Untitled - Significant Other | 2018 | Courtesy: Vadehra Art Gallery

JPM's Criticism & Theory offerings include: (1) a Certificate course in Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (2) an ongoing series of public seminars and lectures in Indian Intellectual Traditions; and (3) occasional academic conferences and workshops in these fields.

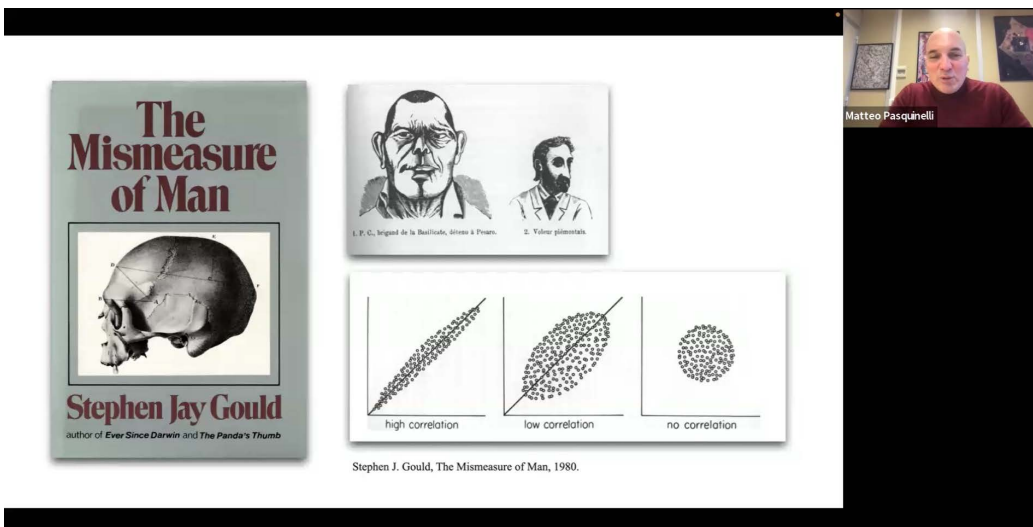
Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory

A Spiralling Revolution – Technology, Culture and Crisis

PAST PROGRAMMES

The Eye of the Master: A Social History of Artificial Intelligence

February 27th, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Matteo Pasquinelli (Associate Professor in Philosophy of Science at the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage of Ca' Foscari University in Venice)



further back than even he had anticipated, back to ancient Vedic mathematics and the tradition of the *Agnicayana*, a ritual in which the symbolic bird-like body of a god is reconstructed piece by piece in a precise arrangement of bricks following a set of instructions that have not changed in millennia. One of the

The third session of the ACT series, *A Spiralling Revolution: Technology, Culture and Crisis* was delivered by Matteo Pasquinelli, Associate Professor in the Philosophy of Science and Cultural Heritage at Ca'Foscari University in Venice. Professor Pasquinelli focussed the talk on his latest book, a groundbreaking exposition on the history of AI titled *The Eye of the Master: A Social History of Artificial Intelligence*. While the talk itself was shorter than the usual length of our lecture programmes, this talk was one that the series continued to return to, as we grappled with questions, concerns and our own fascination with a technology that seems beyond human, but that has, as Professor Pasquinelli demonstrated, emerged from very human ambitions.

Professor Pasquinelli's research into the book began with an intuition – that the perception of abstraction that AI holds across society hides a very concrete reality that is rooted in labour and social relations that can be studied and understood. Fascinatingly, this research led him

most ancient rituals still practiced today in India, the *Agnicayana* has also been called an algorithmic ritual, if we consider an algorithm at its most basic to be a set of step-by-step instructions, to be carried out mechanically to achieve a desired result. For Professor Pasquinelli, the *Agnicayana* is one prominent example from the ancient world of a logical form, an abstract algorithmic form arising from a social form – from labour and ritual, from discipline and power, from ritual and repetition.

One of the central tenets of this book has been to investigate the possibility of arriving at a theory of automation that considers both the abstract as well as the social form. Here, Professor Pasquinelli further broke down the theory of automation into three formulations that have been acknowledged within the discourse so far, that is – an internalist theory, a culturalist theory and an externalist theory of automation. The internalist approach is the idea that scientific or mathematical paradigms like the notion of numbers are eternal ideas which

are completely divorced from history and evolve purely through their own internal logic. Within contemporary discourse, Artificial Intelligence has often been seen through this internalist approach. The second theory of automation is a culturalist theory, which argues that automation is also a form of social constructivism. Finally, there is the externalist approach, which Professor Pasquinelli also traces more favourably in his book, which argues that technological innovation reflects larger socio-economic metrics.

To understand the externalist theory of automation, however, Professor Pasquinelli observed that we would first need to make sense of the evolution of the idea of automation in the 20th century into what we now know as Artificial Intelligence. A foundational event for which was the Dartmouth Conference of 1956, where the idea that human thinking could be encoded into mathematical logic and that this logic could be materialised as an artefact came into the mainstream. This was not the only stream of thought, however, as the contemporaneous building of the first Perceptron – the first neural network – by Frank Rosenblatt and his team at the Cornell Aeronautical Laboratory postulated a nearly opposite hypothesis, that the machine

should be a technical model of the world. For Professor Pasquinelli, it was interesting to see how although both the Dartmouth and the Perceptron model came to being around the same time, only the Dartmouth model found wide acceptance across the technology industry. It is in tracing flows like this that Professor Pasquinelli has been articulating the externalist theory of automation.

What was most interesting about Professor Pasquinelli's talk was his illustration of the flows of labour, power and capital that have determined the forms that technology has evolved into, thereby demystifying in many ways the idea that technology and the idea of intelligence it uses is a universal idea without influence from social and political formations of the world we live in. Although detailing the many fascinating examples that Professor Pasquinelli used to further clarify his thesis, including the logic of Large Language Models like ChatGPT, would be outside the scope of this report, the talk certainly urged us to reconsider the foundation of the logics of technology, and acknowledge the human circumstances within which they came to be.

- A.T.

Toward Invisual Literacy (Learning Experiments in Computer Vision and Visual Literacy)

March 5th, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Geoff Cox (Professor of Art and Computational Culture at London South Bank University, co-Director of CSNI and Adjunct at Aarhus University, with a research interest in software studies and contemporary aesthetics)



Geoff Cox, Professor of Art and Computational Culture at London South Bank University, and Co-Director of the Centre for the Study of the Networked Image (CSNI), gave the fourth lecture

of the ACT Public Lecture Series, 'A Spiralling Revolution: Technology, Culture and Crisis'. At the very beginning of his presentation, Professor Cox highlighted the fact that the work he would show us through his talk was highly collaborative and community driven, expressly rejecting the notion that technological innovation/study or even its critique was a singular effort, which is how it is often touted in the public sphere. He then zoomed into the term '*Networked Image*', which he framed as a "relational social technical assemblage which both limits and creates possibilities for how and what can be thought or known and imagined". In our present technologically mediated world, an image, any image is inextricably entangled

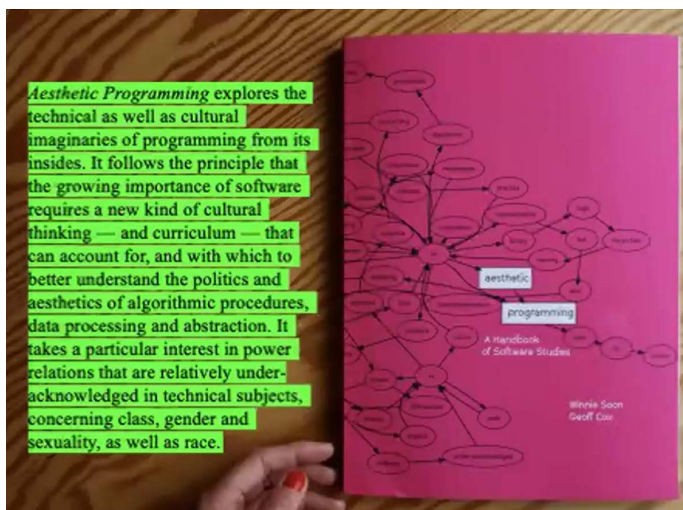
and interwoven with software, hardware, code, programmers, users, platforms, and the wider infrastructures that work in circular formations to produce the images we encounter. Terming this a “networked mess”, Professor Cox highlighted how the production and, in fact, the existence of images is also an assemblage of visibility, technology, politics, and social relations.

How do we then understand images both as visual and relational objects, particularly the images we encounter within the digital sphere? For Professor Cox and his research collaborators, what is fundamental is the development of tools to encourage visual literacy. Here, the idea of visual literacy is not merely to understand images sociologically, historically, politically or through the lens of art history, but also within structures of global capital, technological innovation, data flows, and platforms of access and dissemination. Pointing out the title of his talk, ‘Toward Invisual Literacy (Learning Experiments in Computer Vision and Visual Literacy)’, Professor Cox detailed how the impetus for his collaborative project arose from the iconic 1972 television series and later book by John Berger titled ‘Ways of Seeing’, and how their aim is to expand Berger’s seminal discourse to also consider the impact that computer vision has had on our world. While Berger had emphasised the ways in which elite forms of knowledge were legitimated to support class, gender and racial privilege as well as prejudice using canonical images from Western art history, for Professor Cox and his team, the questions go deeper, considering the ways in which the idea of the networked image maps onto and reshapes Berger’s original thesis. Furthermore, how could an even more contemporary understanding of images be useful

in furthering visual literacy in a world that is shaped by images more than ever before, and yet one in which images are increasingly becoming black boxes of information.

Interestingly, as Berger pointed out in the now-famous final scene of his television series, visibility itself is constructed and arranged – what was shown on television being a vision of its creators – and by extension, the knowledge of the world is also produced and consolidated into worldviews. As Professor Cox succinctly put it, “Seeing, therefore, is an effective way in which power differentials are legitimised.” And yet, crucially, as Berger also pointed out, the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled and has now only become further unsettled. In such a scenario, how much more difficult does the project of visual literacy become, given that networked images no longer simply represent things in the world as they are, but are an active part of furthering new, invisible forms of power? Furthermore, as the seminal theorist Harun Farocki has shown us through the notion of Operational Images, images possess the ability to act in the world and upon us by being part of an operation, and not simply by representing things in the world.

Professor Cox further clarified here the idea of literacy, articulating that for them, “literacy indicates not only the cultural ability to read and write, but more broadly demonstrates competence or knowledge of practices that allow users to maintain and build social imaginaries”. Drawing from the history of literacy in language, and especially from critical theory’s engagement with literacy, Professor Cox highlighted the ways that literacy is known to be socially constituted and takes material forms, and how this is also the case in visual culture, popular culture as well as computational information, given that it is based on material infrastructure and language. Literacy thus could be understood as a combination of individual skills, a material system, and a social practice that is also dynamically evolving in relation to the social, political and economic forces. If literacy at its most basic – the ability to read and write – could be understood to be a moral imperative for society, then so too should visual literacy, and increasingly, also coding literacy. The ability to read, write and programme helps us to understand what words mean and do



in their operative capacity.

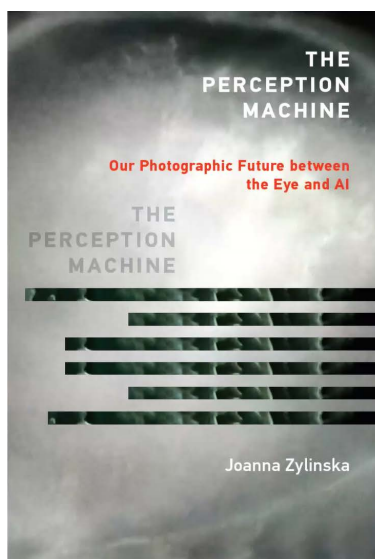
Professor Cox's recent book, *Aesthetic Programming*, co-written with Winnie Soon, an artist and scholar who also lectured as part of this course, is an important example of an accessible (freely downloadable) resource that aims to further visual as well as computational literacy. The book follows the principle that the growing importance of software requires a new kind of cultural thinking and a new kind of curriculum that can account for and with which to better understand the politics and aesthetics of algorithmic procedures, data processing and abstraction. As Professor Cox stressed, new ways of seeing require new forms of literacy to account for the invisible realm of algorithms and database infrastructures of computer vision, and it is specifically these invisible realms that he referred to as *invisual literacy*. However, he also clarified that the issue of literacy is not simply a

case of how humans see the world or how they use machines to see, but rather how machines see and produce the world. Thus, it also means to transform our understanding of the relationship between machine learning and pedagogy and to consider seriously the question of how each can learn from the other.

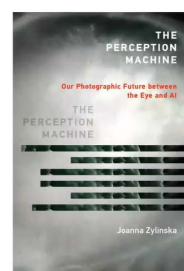
Professor Cox's talk was especially revealing of the critical role that literacy must play in understanding and even addressing our technologically mediated world, particularly as artists, writers and those concerned with the increasing complexity of our visual landscape. While his talk did not attract as many questions during the live session, it was one that we repeatedly returned to as we progressed with the series, gradually processing the complexities of the ideas of networked images, why literacy is important, and how it can be achieved within local and community contexts. – **A.T.**

The Perception Machine: Our Photographic Future between the Eye and AI

March 12th, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Joanna Zylinska (Artist, Writer & Professor of Media Philosophy + Critical Digital Practice at King's College London)



The Perception Machine



Can machines see? Can they not just *image* but also *imagine*? Are we living in the perception machine?

A provocative investigation of the future of imaging and human perception in the age of AI, by 'one of today's top thinkers-makers'. Available open access from MIT Press (click here for a free download).



"More images are being seen, shared, and produced, than ever before in history," shared Joanna Zylinska. In her lecture about our photographic future, Zylinska highlighted that we are not only photographing but are also constantly being photographed by machines of

different scales and sizes – which is where her interest and interrogation converge. In her book, *The Perception Machine: Our Photographic Future between the Eye and AI*, Zylinska describes the technical universe of images and their infrastructure, the perception machine, naming the socio-political condition of our present resulting from the automation of visioning and imaging. She states, "AI is revealing the conditions of both possibility and injustice a bit more explicitly."

Polarised decisiveness around photography suggests that the medium cannot be easily forgotten or abandoned. Using Vilem Flusser's

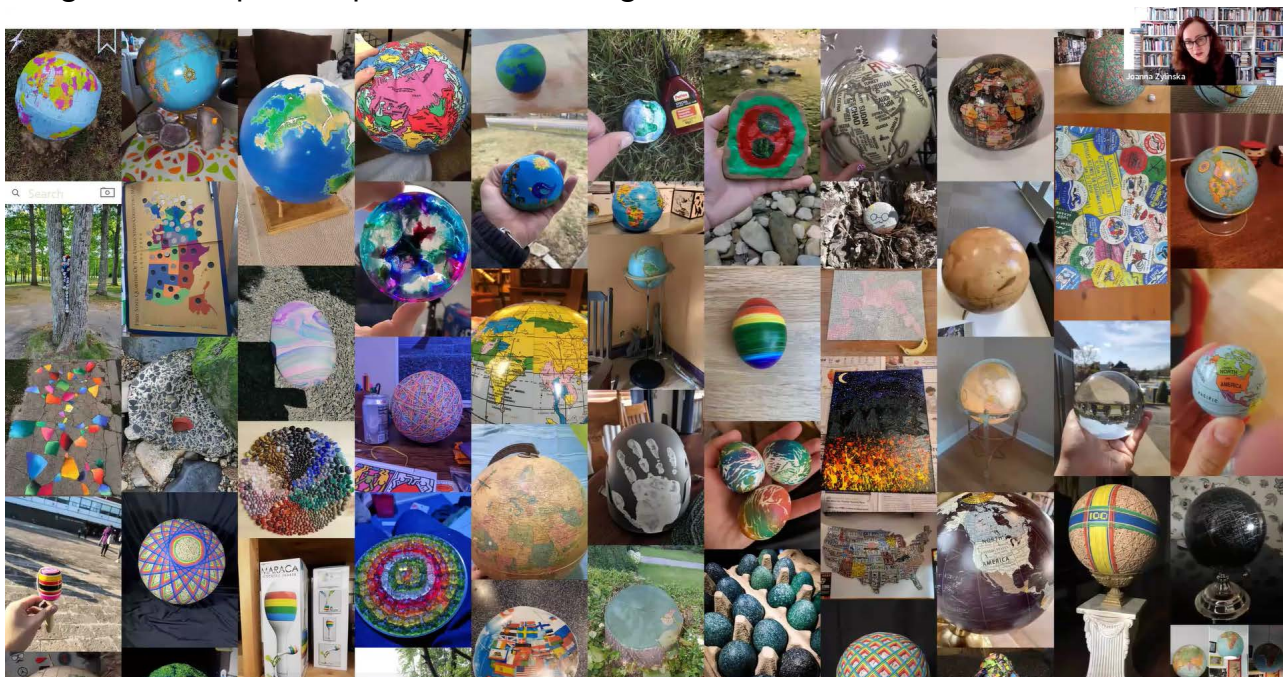
work, *Does Writing Have a Future?*, Zylinska asks if photography has a future, and where Flusser proposes that writing does not, in fact, have a future, she believes photography is the future. In her lecture, using artefacts and references, Zylinska shared that a medium like photography is central to our society and constitution. It cannot be so easily forgotten or abandoned because it has actively shared our epistemological horizon and our technical infrastructure. But to postulate its future, we have to reckon with its technical and social nature, as photography itself is undergoing a transformation. It is being reconfigured.

Zylinska is interested in decoupling the human view and the camera view to understand the impact and role of non-human participation in photography and imaging. In her lecture, she argued that studying photography as an existential medium is urgent – with its profound significance for our individual self-esteem, society, economics, and politics. Photography has played a significant role in our human constitution as a practice of imagination and imaging, wherein the primary role of photography today is informational. Photographs relate to more than just humans and they are consumed by non-humans just as much as humans. They are categorised, copied, transmitted, networked, and platformed every day.

In her lecture, Joanna Zylinska introduced her open-source book, *The Perception Machine*, and its vision to recognise the key role of visibility in human perspective experience in order to challenge and expand upon understanding.

Presently, humans are increasingly recognising themselves as planetary beings in the planetary condition of living, which influences how they imagine, create images, and visualise. As a result, Zylinska is interested in investigating the role of photographs as devices that help us see, sense, and grasp the world. She also references Andrew Dewdney's practice to illustrate how photography is everywhere but differently than we have understood. Along with Dewdney, she believes the term 'photography' has become a barrier to understanding its altered state – visual image.

Finally, grounded in the discourse about photography from authors and practitioners such as Tomas Dvorak and Jussi Parikka, Joanna Zylinska recognises that the key conversational partners about the photographic future have been Western male philosophers and media theorists. Rightly so, this informs her position as a feminist and where she would like to begin the conversation. In using photography, its scale, and media as an exploration, Zylinska aims at becoming an unruly daughter like Goneril or Regan, without malice, to reimagine the discourse of this masculine field. In her own words, "Immersed in both critical thinking and feminist sensibilities, the concept of the perception machine outlined in the book is thus ultimately an attempt on my part to offer a more nuanced, more ecological, and less paternalistic understanding of what it means to live in a world which is increasingly dependent on the production and creation of mechanical images." – **N.S.R.**



Doing Critical Technical Art Practice

March 19th, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Winnie Soon (Associate Professor in Art and Technology at UCL – Slade School of Fine Art)



The sixth lecture of the ACT series, *A Spiralling Revolution: Technology, Culture and Crisis* was delivered by Winnie Soon, a Hong-Kong born artist, coder and researcher who is currently Associate Professor in Art and Technology at UCL – Slade School of Fine Art. Their talk, titled *Doing Critical Technical Art Practice* was a special one in this series for a number of reasons, one of them being their perspective on the technology industry and its impacts in Asia, and the other being their own practice as an artist which provided an especially interesting lens from which to think about the issues of technological innovation coupled with the threats of censorship, surveillance and control that their work investigates.

Winnie began their talk with a breakdown of what they meant by ‘critical technical art practice’. Winnie’s formulation of this term emerges from the American AI researcher Philip Agre’s conceptualisation, Critical Technical Practice in which both critical and cultural theories are brought together to inform the work of designers and technical engineers. To quote a phrase from Philip Agre that Winnie highlighted, “A critical technical practice will, at least for the foreseeable future, require a split identity – one foot planted in the craft work of design and the other foot planted in the reflexive work of critique.” While for Philip Agre the emphasis was to merge the worlds of critical theory and technology, for Winnie the idea is to allow both technology and the humanities to inform and understand each other.

The first project that Winnie showed us from their

practice was called *Unerasable Images*, a collection of screenshots taken over a year in 2017 from Google image search with the Chinese keywords “六四” that correspond to the numerical 6 and 4 and refer to the Tiananmen Square Protest of 1989 that took place on June 4th in Beijing, China. In their rendering of the work, Winnie intentionally removes all other images from the search result grid except for a Lego recreation of the iconic Tank Man photograph from the protest. The photograph itself has always been censored in China, and yet, the Lego tank-man image found a way to evade censorship in numerous instances, and as Winnie worked on this project, the Lego tank-man image would still occasionally resurface in the first few rows of Google Image Search results. Consisting of over 300 screenshots, for Winnie, this project aimed to create a temporal and empty network space where the thumbnail images move within the hidden infrastructural grid. While the work is undoubtedly about Chinese censorship and surveillance, in its deeper layers, it also begins to question the idea of an image – does a Lego reconstruction of a photograph warrant censorship, and why? Why is it still dangerous? Winnie takes time with each body of work, and they often take different forms as they evolve; in this case the work exists as a video work, in different iterations for exhibitions, as well as an academic investigation in the form of research papers written with collaborators she has worked with.

In a follow-up work that emerged, titled *Unerasable Characters*, Winnie takes their investigation of online censorship in China into the realm of text. The project works with ‘tweets’ that have been censored from the popular Chinese platform Weibo, using the data collection and visualisation platform ‘Weiboscope’ that has been produced by Dr. King-wa Fu from the University of Hong Kong. Presented in two parts, *Unerasable Characters I and II*, the first body of work plays with machine learning, using the input data of censored Weibo tweets collected over a one-year period that was then presented as a stack of printed papers consisting of over 6,000

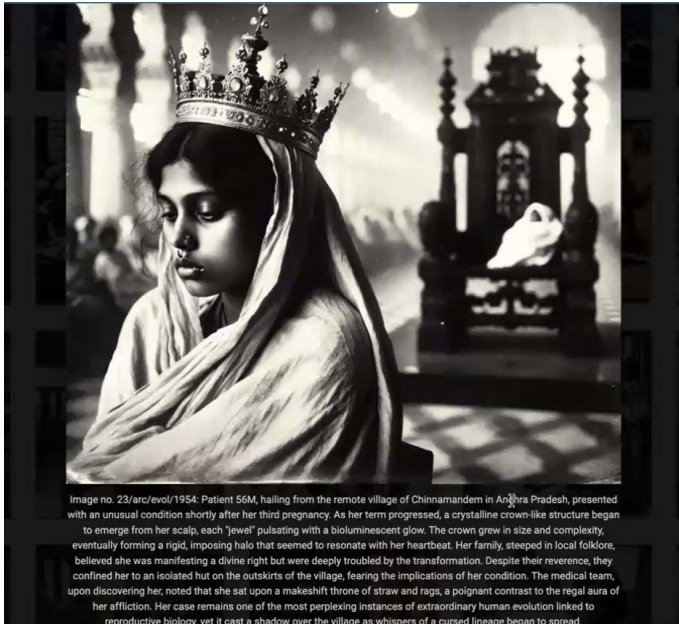
pages. The output data of the machine learning was also presented as a DIY book that audiences could build collectively, inspired by community movements like the White Paper Protest and the Blank Paper Revolution, the book being generative and yet unreadable to circumvent censorship. The second iteration, *Unerasable Characters II* presents the scraped Weiboscope data in a grid format that deconstructs each tweet into its characters, rendering them unreadable. The installation depicts each tweet for the period it remained live until they were censored, and in this way, it is ever evolving.

Winnie also took us through other bodies of

their artistic as well as research work, particularly their scholarly books, one of which was written in collaboration with Professor Geoff Cox who had lectured earlier as part of this series. While it would not be within the scope of this report to detail all the projects they discussed, their talk was especially engaging to participants, given the extensive question-answer session that followed their talk. As many members of our audience were artists themselves, Winnie's practice resonated particularly with their own concerns around technology and art, and particularly the role that art can play in intelligently subverting the bounds of state censorship. – **A.T.**

care<codes>: Care work, AI, Motherhood

March 26th, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Computational Mama (Co-owner of Creative Technology Studio - Ajaibghar & Consultant for GenAI startup Gooey.AI.)



The sixth talk of the ACT Public Lecture Series, 'A Spiralling Revolution: Technology, Culture and Crisis', was given by the Indian artist and researcher, Computational Mama. In a series that aimed to consider the impact that technology has had on creative practice, Computational Mama's own journey as an artist was particularly interesting to encounter. The talk began with a brief background of her early work as a designer working on large-scale exhibitions and museum

spaces in India. Around this time, her experience as a caregiver to her elderly grandparents also proved to be an important influence in shaping her understanding of time, availability and the toll that caring can take. However, it was while being pregnant with her son in 2017 that her practice took a more artistic turn. On the advice of her doctor, she was confined to bed for much of her pregnancy, and during this period, began to learn the basics of creative coding. As she progressed through online tutorials, she shared small projects online, and began to engage with a growing audience of like-minded artists, and others who were also experimenting with creative coding alongside her, and her practice began to take on a new shape.

It was particularly interesting for us to encounter Computational Mama's early journey into creative coding through the aspects of time and care. Given that her role as a caregiver and mother to an infant restricted much of her own time, to engage in large-scale or team-based projects was much harder. Coding, however, was something she could practice on her own in the little shards of time she could snatch from the day, and its results were immediately apparent – if the code

worked, the screen would yield its visual outcome. The practice of an artist is one that is often mired by long periods of uncertainty in working through an idea, to build or paint or draw or even record, is time-and-labour intensive, and often proves especially difficult for artists whose time is not entirely in their own control (a privilege only a very limited number of artists have had access to throughout history). In that sense, to be able to create something within the short bursts of time that Computational Mama had access to was both, validating as an artist and as an act of self-care that pushed her to continue exploring this medium.

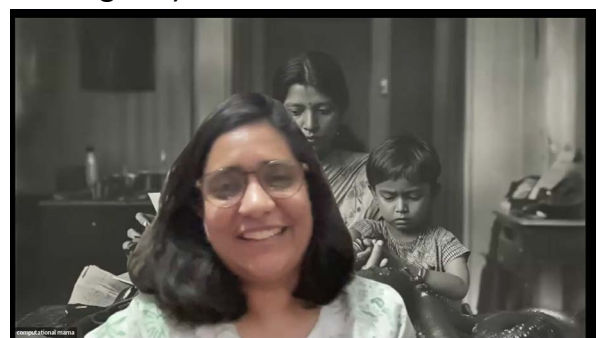
While Computational Mama's extensive practice would be hard to consolidate within this report, I will focus on three projects that allow for a broad understanding of her concerns as an artist. The first is an early body of work called *Coding with Friends*, involving gatherings that she organised of young artists, and people interested in learning how to code. While conceiving of an engaging way to approach creative coding for a Southasian audience, Computational Mama drew upon the work of the American New Media artist Zachary Lieberman, whose work with students re-creating the work of computational artists from the past through contemporary coding had prompted her to think of what it would look like to re-imagine the work of Southasian artists through code. Using the work of prominent female artists Nasreen Mohamedi and Zarina Hashmi, she involved a group of participants in learning creative coding while also engaging with and understanding the work of these artists through an art-historical perspective.

In a more recent body of work called *Mother Machine*, drawing from the concept of the machine used to build machines used in large-scale industries, Computational Mama has been thinking through the convergence of motherhood and AI. Using AI image-generating tools like Midjourney and DALL-E to generate images of mothers using differing prompts, she has been questioning how much the contents of a dataset can influence the generation of AI images. Beginning with the seemingly simple prompt of a mother with child, the images generated led her to interesting directions, particularly when she used the prompt 'mother sitting on a pile of garbage' where the race of the mother depicted

distinctly shifted to a woman of colour. A subtle yet distinctly evident example of bias within the datasets used to train Large Language Models, the process of generating, and then regenerating images reveals the lack of 'objectivity' and neutrality within datasets. The prejudices of race, class, gender and even caste held by those who build datasets, as well as the images that end up on the public as well as private domains – from which datasets are constructed – inevitably find their way into the technology that is then marketed to the world.

In the final body of work looked at with Computational Mama, *The Archive of Lost Mothers*, we encountered a fictional archive of AI-generated images depicting a "secret scientific society that suppressed radical new birthing, [with] new womxn beings developing limbs and post-human babies". In the form of a platform where this archive can be searched/generated based on a prompt with two variables that viewers can dictate within the phrase – "an archival photograph of a patient with {...} in the background, there is a {...} inside a Bombay hospital". Each image generated then gets added to the archive, and is accompanied by a short fictional text describing the story of the person in the image. Using generative AI to generate both text and image, while also giving room for human intervention, this ongoing archive serves as a fascinating window into the thinking of fiction, representation and bias, as well as deeper questions of birth, power, life and death.

Computational Mama's talk was particularly engaging, given that her practice is situated within questions of care, representation, community and access within South Asia. Her artistic as well as community work found resonance within our audience, as many of us are artists, writers, technologists and students ourselves, finding our way through an increasingly technologically mediated world. – A.T.



Operations All the Way to the Bottom, or Is there Life on Earth?

April 2nd, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Jussi Parikka (Professor at Aarhus University in Denmark, leading the Digital Aesthetics Research Centre (DARC))



Grounding the lecture in Carl Sagan's work, Jussi Parikka explores the question, "If the inhabitants of Mars set out to do a preliminary exploration of the planet Earth, what would they have to do to detect life here?" The driving force in Parikka's work and lecture was identifying and assessing the instruments we use for imaging and how we use them to validate life. Sagan wrote, "At occasional times of exceptional clarity – when the tin Martian atmosphere was free from dust – scientists using a large telescope on Mars could achieve a resolution of about one kilometre in extent. But features smaller than one kilometre, even if of high contrast to their surroundings, would not be visible. Would this be enough to detect life?" This question inspired Parikka to interrogate at what resolution and using which tools we could demonstrate life. The idea of exploring and questioning life on Earth was not to answer the question itself – which we know the answer to – but to identify the assessment tools and methods through which we could explore life outside of Earth. Parikka believes Sagan's question about life on Earth was more about resolution than life itself.

Parikka's unique perspective lies in his exploration of the transformational visual culture through the lens of operational images. His interest and work are a reflection of the documentation of life on our planet. In his book, *Photography Off the Scale: Technologies and Theories of the Mass Image*, co-edited with Tomas Dvorak, Parikka elaborates: "Weather and the climate may serve as acute reference points and metaphors to discuss

how computational culture and big data have transformed forms of photographic discourse as part of visual culture, leading into discussions of data visualisation, cultural analytics by computational means, and the sheer storage capacity for the organisation of images as datasets." His focus is not just on operational images as surveillance and military imaging and artefacts but also on their systematic approach to contemporary forms of photography and visual culture.

In 2000, Harun Farocki defined operational images as images that do not depict, represent, entertain, or inform but instead navigate control, detect, identify, and visualise. These images span from autonomous cars, home robots, and industrial scanners, to geographic information systems. Parikka's study of this datafication of images through operationalisation underscores its significant role in shaping our perception of images today. Furthermore, through his book, *Living Surfaces: Images, Plants, and Environments of Media*, co-authored with Abelardo Gil-Fournier, Parikka interrogates the different scales of vegetal images to understand how artistic and architectural reference points intersect and interact for the Anthropocene. Ultimately, his work prompts the question: When does the image-ness of an image become less important?

In his lecture, Jussi Parikka argued that remote sensing is not just about what is out there in the universe but also about better understanding ourselves because an image contains a multitude of scales and potential interpretations that redefine what counts as an image and what does not. Operational Images utilises ubiquitous computing and visual culture to investigate the question: How does the concept of operational image inform an interdisciplinary focus on photography, and how can this be developed into a full-fledged methodological set of approaches? Through this project and book, Parikka delves into how operational images are central to visual culture and its transformation into invisual data culture. However, the most important question

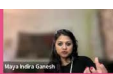
and takeaway from Jussi Parikka's lecture was that questions about life on any planet are questions about detection and media through which we can claim the presence or absence of *something*. The

questions that arose were: As humans perceive in their own scales, what is perceivable? What is understood? Whose scale are we using? – **N.S.R.**

What is the Body in AI Times?

April 10th, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Maya Indira Ganesh (Technology & Digital Cultures Researcher, Writer, & Educator on AI, Ethics, and Society at the University of Cambridge, and Senior Research Fellow at the Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence)

Backstories; feminism
gendered violence;
online and offline; online harms;
embodiment and disembodiment;
the separation of mind and body
feminized digital bodies; feminized digital labouring
bodies;
the cyborg;
desire at a distance; is desire in the body or in language
or in both?
conditions of data that determine the digital;
the status of chatbots in relationships: are we just alone
and talking to ourselves?;



The class titled 'What is the body in AI times?' began with a trigger warning about discussing gender-based violence. It explored how life online affects daily life, emphasising the need for language to address gender-based issues. The discussion focussed on two essays by Maya Indira Ganesh, *Between Flesh: Tech Degrees of Separation* and *Body Machine*, which examine the interplay between bodies, data, and the internet.

Digital spaces, often perceived as offering freedom from the physical body, are not truly borderless; they are controlled by corporations and governments.

The concept of being a gendered, feminised and automated body was explored, with examples like femme bots representing heteronormative ideals of femininity. Dr. Ganesh critiqued these notions through examples such as Ashley Madison, a website with femme chatbots, and platforms like Replika and Cutie Caryn. She also discussed cyborgs, combining digital and fleshly existence, as another critical lens.

The first essay highlighted the dual nature of the

internet as a space for both harm and exploration, especially regarding gender and sexuality. It discussed the body's relationship to data and the tension between freedom and regulation in the digital age. Examples included a Brazilian zine on safely sending nudes, and the risks of non-consensual image sharing. The essay also explored the concept of the "datafied body", where one's online persona is shaped by data controlled by corporations and governments. Maya referenced the #MeToo movement as a constructive use of the internet to address gender violence.

The second essay, *Body Machine*, delved into the implications of image technologies and language models in AI. It critiqued how personal data is used to create large-scale models and how digital representations, like avatars, allow individuals to present idealised versions of themselves. The essay addressed the pervasive issue of online gender-based violence and the need for regulation to prevent it.

Several real-life examples were used to illustrate the intersection of online and offline experiences:

1. A Pakistani woman who was murdered by her brother for posting photos on Facebook with her head uncovered.
2. Two Kuki women who were stripped, paraded naked, and gang-raped by a mob in the Thoubal district of Manipur on May 4, 2023, during ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki communities. The videos were recorded and circulated. But they didn't go viral due to governmental control of the internet.

3. Instances of digital and physical violence, such as cyber-rape were discussed, where the physical body was not involved.

4. The honour killing of content creator Qandeel Baloch was also studied. Her posts were considered provocative, which challenged traditional Pakistani norms for social womanly conduct.

5. The creation and circulation of deepfakes and explicit imagery of Taylor Swift on X was also mentioned, as well as how when a celebrity is facing the backlash of AI, people with influence, such as Satya Nadella, speak against it.

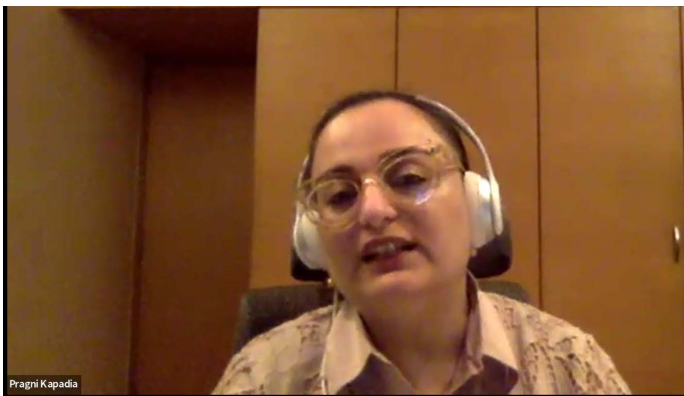
The class also discussed feminist technologies and their critiques, particularly regarding their applicability to women in the Global South. Early feminist technologies focussed on escape, whereas women in poorer regions view the internet more as a development tool due to socioeconomic constraints.

The lecture touched on the need for policy changes to move away from monopolistic capitalist structures. Lawrence Lek's concept of Sinofuturism was mentioned as a reimagining of internet possibilities. Cases of digital embodiment and disembodiment were examined, highlighting the complexities and dangers of online interactions.

The session concluded with reflections on the importance of ethical considerations in AI, the need for regulation, and the impact of monopolistic corporations like Jeff Bezos's and Elon Musk's on the internet. The importance of feminist infrastructures and the limitations of AI's cognitive abilities were emphasised. The recommended reading of *Machine Readable Me: The Hidden Ways Tech Shapes Our Identities* by Zara Rahman was suggested for further exploration of these themes. Additionally, the Cyberfeminism Index was recommended as a valuable resource for understanding the intersections of gender, technology, and digital culture. – **P.B.**

AI and Art: Legal and Ethical Issues on Copyright (Ownership, Authorship, Infringement and Fair Use)

April 16th, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Pragni Kapadia (Lawyer & Associate Partner at DSK Legal)



The final talk of the ACT Public Lecture Series, 'A Spiralling Revolution: Technology, Culture and Crisis' was given by Pragni Kapadia, an independent legal expert with over two decades of experience practising in India, specialising in

intellectual property and corporate law. In a two-part lecture, she tackled two critical aspects of the debate on AI from a legal perspective, the first being on copyright and authorship, and the second on fair use and infringement.

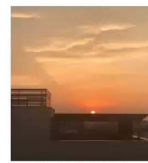
Pragni began the first part of the lecture with a breakdown of the three basic Intellectual Property laws that are applicable in India, with copyright being the weakest protection, followed by trademarks, and the strongest protection being the patent. Interestingly, a copyright follows the principle that the *original* expression of an idea is what is protected, and *not* the idea itself, as an idea can occur to multiple people while its particular method of expression is what makes it unique. The

first question that arises at this point is whether it is possible to get copyright protection for a work made with generative AI. And here the answer is not a simple yes or no. Within a legal framework, while any tangible expression of an idea is eligible for copyright protection, including a work made by generative AI, it is also limited by doctrines of Fair Use and derivative-works rights. Here, it is also worthwhile to point out that generative AI models use images, text and other information that is both in the public domain as well as those that already have copyright protection in creating the datasets from which it generates its outputs. In such a scenario, artworks that use generative AI may possibly be infringing on a human artist's copyright, also impacting their livelihood by producing a work with far less effort than the original artist. Globally, most courts have held that AI is not human and therefore work produced by it cannot be copyrighted. Another key position that courts have taken is that AI works are created by referencing the work of millions of artists, and as such they are derivative works that compete against the originals, thus human artists lose out. Interestingly, the Chinese position is different in that it has allowed for AI works to be copyrighted in an effort to encourage the growth of the industry within China.

The EU's position on the issue of copyright is to take a 'hybrid' approach, where they determine copyright claims on a case-by-case basis, considering whether the artwork produced has had *sufficient* human oversight. Under Indian law, the author of a work is the person who *causes* the work to be created. And this is important in relation to AI, as both in India and the UK, AI-generated works seemingly have stronger protection. But who is the person in this case? Under copyright law, a person could technically be the developer of the AI tool, or the user who inputs the query, and these are often not singular individuals. So who should the copyright go to? These are tricky questions, and are often decided on a case-by-case basis. However, on one aspect the law is clear, that as per the Copyright Act, the author of a work must be human, and so even in a computer-generated work, the copyright can only be given to a human author if at all. But since AI-generated works are software outcomes, the question of whether it is a product of human expression or a work of synthetic creativity remains. And as such, copyright claims are tricky

to litigate and consensus is difficult to arrive at. To illustrate this complexity, Pragni presented us with a recent case where an individual named Ankit Sahni attempted to register an image produced by an AI engine that combined his own photograph with Vincent van Gogh's famous *The Starry Night* painting in both the US as well as India. While the US Copyright Office rejected his claim stating that the resulting image did not demonstrate sufficient human input, in India he was initially able to secure a copyright for the image, which was later withdrawn, stating that the author of the work must be a natural person.

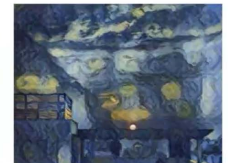
Case Study Ankit Sahni and RAGHAV



Mr. Sahni's Original
Photograph
(base image)



Vincent Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*
(style image)



The Work
(output)

The other side of this argument is the question of infringement. With respect to generative AI, what can count as infringement of copyright? Given that Large Language Models are trained using datasets consisting of the work of millions of artists, many of whose works do possess copyright, does work made by AI infringe on these artist's copyright? The answer is both yes and no, and again points to the limitations of copyright as a legal protection. A particularly sticky area is the idea of 'Fair Use' which a lot of the AI companies including Open AI and Stability AI have attempted to use in order to justify their use of copyrighted material in their training data. Fair Use is a protection provided for research, education or news purposes, which are not seen as profit generating, but rather as acting for the greater good of society. An example is where a politician's image or their words can be used when reporting a news story. While AI companies have attempted to use the Fair Use doctrine to claim their right to use artists' work in their data sets, the courts have largely not seen this position favourably, particularly as there have been numerous instances of companies like OpenAI obtaining information through illegal methods, including hacking into *The New York Times's* servers, or Stability AI obtaining access to the Getty Archive illegally through a German university account. Within the context

of infringement, AI companies also claim that AI works cannot be legally framed as infringement, as works generated by AI models from datasets are not direct copies of original artworks, since every time a prompt is generated, even if it is the same prompt, a different outcome is produced. This makes a case of infringement brought by an artist difficult to prove in court.

While the challenges posed by AI for artists is significant, the constant fluidity of AI technology combined with the rigidity and slow pace of the legal system makes legislation equally challenging. However, in the second half of her talk, Pragni also demonstrated that both the legal framework as well as the economic frameworks of technology do adapt to reduce resistance. A

prominent example that Pragni took us through was on the crisis faced by the music and film/television industry with illegal pirating and distribution, which has since been resolved to a significant extent through the emergence of streaming platforms, initially with iTunes and more recently with Spotify, Netflix, and a host of other platforms that pay a licensing fee to artists while charging a reasonably affordable subscription fee to consumers while giving them access to millions of artists. It is possible that AI too will find a way to stabilise itself as a technology that is both beneficial to millions of users while also fairly compensating artists whose work is used for training. Of course, it remains to be seen how AI evolves as we move forward. – **A.T.**

Who is Mona Ahmed? | What Does it Take to Survive?: Towards the Abolition of Transphobia

February 8th & 9th, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Vikramaditya Sahai (Visiting Faculty at School of Culture and Creative Expressions, Ambedkar University, Delhi)

The Inaugural Mona Ahmed Lecture Series, supported by the artist Dayanita Singh, was held in Mumbai over the 8th and 9th of February. Delivered by the Delhi-based scholar, teacher and researcher, Vikramaditya Sahai, the lectures were an urgent and profoundly articulated discourse on Mona Ahmed, refusal, love and collective survival.

The first of the two lectures was titled 'Who is Mona Ahmed?'. It is difficult to articulate into a report the thesis of Vikramaditya's lecture, as so much of it was felt by this writer rather than understood, known or learnt. To quote Vikramaditya – "To ask who is Mona Ahmed is to ask how do we know there is or was a Mona Ahmed? How can a *hijra* have a name that is remembered, let alone be a memorial? How does she have a name that isn't qualified by identity – *hijra*, trans, Muslim, poor – but a name that belongs to her? One that she can make you say? To ask who is Mona Ahmed is to refuse to ask what is Mona Ahmed – boy or girl? Eunuch or unique? *Hijra* or trans? To ask who is Mona Ahmed is to

refuse to make another abandoned person into an object, one we could use to critique – *hijra*, trans, Muslim, poor – which frankly sounds like a depressing and lonely thing to be, and she had had enough of that! To ask who is Mona Ahmed is to ask how did she survive, how did she not die a death we do not know?"

A particularly moving aspect of Vikramaditya's talk was their insistence on staying with Mona's name – Mona Ahmed. To stay and to listen, and therefore to refuse to brush off easy- and surface-level readings of her name as representing a conflict of gender, of allegiance, of visibility, or of representation. Vikramaditya's pause at Mona's name instead beautifully resonated with the pause in Mona Ahmed's own name, a pause Vikramaditya suggested was one of play, a break, a space to rest, and suggestive of movement, of mobility, even if not freedom. If this break allows us to rest, Vikramaditya also urges us to use it to think, and gradually to question – "How to be in the world without belonging to it, being of it,



property to it? How to tinker and tamper this world, delay its hurt, stretch some joy longer in the hope that it will be convincing, linger in ambivalence in the scene of utter dispossession? What refusal can be animated by a weak will, a compromised sovereignty? What kind of attachment to a world is broken heartedness? What loving can also be a losing? What kind of attachment to a world is broken heartedness? What loving can also be a losing? What to build with the brick and mortar of our loneliness? What forms of care can we perform from the thickness of things, from feeling stuck, with our slowness or inability to get somewhere no matter how we move, from this surrender?"

In staying with Mona as a person, and not simply as photograph, as representation, as an identity, both Vikramaditya's careful reading and Dayanita Singh's original photographs of Mona transform Roland Barthes's idea of a punctum into a different kind of wound – a '*dard*'. And yet a '*dard*' is not merely a wound that generates pain, it is also a fount of love for a profoundly unkind world that Mona refused to turn away from, even while refusing to let it consume her.

The second lecture of the series was delivered by Vikramaditya the next evening, and in restricting

it to those who could attend it in person, this talk was delivered in a more intimate, and yet also urgent space. Titled 'What Does It Take to Survive: A Practice of Abolition', it was an intentionally rigorous academic talk. Vikramaditya began with the now-iconic 1990 Jennie Livingston film *Paris is Burning*. Drawing on queer theory through Judith Butler, and through the challenge posed by Biddy Martin, they considered the central figure of the film, Venus Xtravaganza. Her death in the film has been much debated as a central crux of the seeming impossibility of transcending the bounds of gender and of Venus's contradictions, "her desire for normative white womanhood or her realness as a trans Latina". Vikramaditya observed that while Biddy Martin disagreed with Judith Butler's reading of Venus's death being a result of her transness, Biddy's own reading also assumed that her death was because of her gender – a result of passing 'too' well and being killed for being a woman, even though we do not have any real evidence of *why* Venus was killed. Why must lives be so totalised by gender, and strikingly, by everyone who is not a cis-man? Vikramaditya's critique of feminist and queer scholarship sees "trans lives only in terms of their transgression or failing, much like the pharma-pornographic complex, and adjudicates on the proximity to death; one wonders what politics we can turn to which is not also another incarceration".

One of the most interesting aspects of Vikramaditya's talk was their urging for us to consider the act of 'passing' as an act of erasure of certain forms of inhabiting gender, and to see violence not only when it is external but also when we subject ourselves to it internally. What happens when we see the violence and erasure that Venus subjects herself to within her acts of passing, but which is so integral to her survival and flourishing? And how can we consider Venus's own agency to be a subject or be subjectivised? Vikramaditya did not offer easy answers, but moved through these questions, asking us to refuse an objective, or a decisive reading.

In the second part of their talk, Vikramaditya stressed that transphobia was not simply an affliction of the cis world, but that internalised transphobia has had a deep impact on trans folks. Through a heartbreaking account recounted by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a renowned *hijra* activist, in her autobiography *Me Hijra Me Laxmi*,

Vikramaditya made evident that transphobia exists in all of us, even when our life's work is expressly to counter it. What was also interesting about the story, one where Laxmi Narayan Tripathi had a romantic encounter with a transman and felt deep transphobia despite herself, was in the way in which the man's identity as a transman seemed to be particularly striking to her, a particular reliving of a wound, a haunting even. How can we attempt to understand this? As Vikramaditya noted, "I am suggesting that in our attempt to understand transphobia, we step away from the colonial creation of the criminal – the condemnation of a person engendered on racial/colonial profiling and myth – and instead think of the structural and ideological place transphobia has in making all lives livable. Maybe because to be trans is to be so close to murder that survival becomes a kind of refusal to be trans. It is what comes to haunt our love affairs. Killing them before they could become love stories."

using the issue to further Islamophobia during electioneering, all contributed to muddying the waters of a case where no easy answers were available. Here, Vikramaditya urged us to ask, what would it mean to offer Omar the same complexity of humanity as the trans and queer folk who were brutally murdered? Drawing on Jacqueline Rose's work on the suicide bomber as a figure similarly condemned to mere cruelty and brutality, Vikramaditya urges us again to go beyond the generalisations we paint onto both the perpetrator and their victims and engage with the intimacies of their lives instead. To quote a particularly profound conception, "At the limits of empathy and in the face of the uncertainty of why people do things we find difficult to bear, might be the struggle to face the dilemmas they face and a language that might enable us to survive the impasse and death."

It is an impossible task to accurately 'report' on a talk of this scale, and for this writer, it has been an experience of deep learning to revisit it. It was a privilege for us to be able to invite Vikramaditya to deliver the Inaugural Mona Ahmed Lectures at Jnanapravaha. As a conclusion of this report, I leave our readers with Vikramaditya's own concluding lines, to read and reflect on the difficult, yet essential task of working towards freedom:

"I merely attempt to perform a practice of freedom already too late, suggesting that our

resistance must assume abolition and write 'as if we were already free', than return us to the sources of our oppression. To turn to Saidiya Hartman's words again, 'Given the condition in which we find them, the only certainty is that we will lose them again, that they will expire or elude our grasp or collapse under the pressure of inquiry.' There is no recovery, no restoration. There is no guarantee. Only the promise of a writing towards freedom." – **A.T.**



Venus Xtravaganza, Brooklyn Ball, 1986. Still from Paris is Burning, 1990. Jennifer Livingston

In the final example of Vikramaditya's talk, they looked at the 2016 brutal shooting and murder of 49 Latinx/Queer and Trans Persons of Colour at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, by a man named Omar Mateen. The shooter's Muslim identity claims to his internalised homophobia – some survivors of the shooting attested to having had seen him at the club earlier, and also to having had sexual encounters with him – coupled with the political climate of the United States at the time, with Trump

Curatorial Processes

PAST PROGRAMMES

Curating For Change: The Exhibition “Environment, Health, and The Body in Traditional Paintings from Contemporary India.”

March 27th, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 pm IST | Dr. Chandreyi Basu (Associate Professor at St. Lawrence University, USA)



Dr. Chandreyi Basu's presentation, part of the Curatorial Processes series initiated by Jnanapravaha Mumbai, provided a detailed walkthrough of her recent curatorial exhibition at the St. Lawrence University in New York. Titled 'Environment, Health, & the Body in Traditional Paintings from Contemporary India', the exhibition broke new ground on two distinct levels: not only was it Dr. Basu's first curated exhibit, but it was also the first time almost fifty paintings from distinct (Indian) regional styles had been put up on display in northern New York.

Dr. Basu began the talk by taking the audience through the intricate process of conceptualising such an exhibition. By focussing on regional painting styles – namely Mithila, Warli, Gond, and Bengal Pat – Dr. Basu aimed at highlighting living traditions that lie outside the mainstream of both modern and contemporary art movements as well as the elite traditions of medieval and early-modern court paintings. In so doing, Dr. Basu also wished for viewers to closely engage with and reflect on issues of marginalisation and social inequity.

Two past exhibitions had a direct influence on Dr. Basu's curatorial endeavour: one was a 2019 exhibition organised in Syracuse with a distinct focus on Mithila art and social justice, while the other was a pathbreaking show at Radcliffe University revolving around Mithila-style paintings by Dalit artists. Dr. Basu wished to incorporate these objectives of social justice and inequality, while at the same time expanding the scope of regional painting styles beyond Mithila art. Dr. Basu, however, was quick to add that the exhibition was not by any means a collaboration; she was in charge of the exhibition, the presentation, and the overall narrative, and was thus implicated in the hierarchical power relations that her exhibition was attempting to critique.

Dr. Basu then elaborated on the three overlapping themes that the exhibition was centred around: environmental impacts of human actions, human health and wellness, and social constructions of the body. Many works intentionally commented on gender, colourism, and class and caste hierarchies, while also foregrounding issues like water rights, access to healthcare, and human-animal interactions. Dr. Basu also walked the audience through some prominent paintings from the exhibition, such as a Warli painting, *Spider*, by Balu Jivya Mashe, and a painting in the Gond style by Mayank Shyam, both of which triggered animated discussions on the intertwined nature of humans and the wider world. For the second theme (health), Dr. Basu showed images of a flowing rectangular *pat* on AIDS that took up an entire wall, along with Mithila painter Kamlesh Roy's striking painting *Burning with AIDS* (also on the cover of the exhibition) and Shalini Kumari's



Life in Covid. For the third theme (the body), the highlights were three paintings by Dalit artists Channo Devi, Ranjan Paswan, and Jamuna Devi, with an emphasis on how they resisted upper-caste hegemony and came up with their own singular styles, and a unique collaboration between a scroll painter from Bengal and a writer and poet from Syracuse University, which brought together Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, thus drawing parallels between racism and casteism.

The focus on individual artists with their own unique life experiences and histories was also an attempt to critique the conventional viewpoint that treats them merely as representatives of their regions or styles. The programming too was equally geared towards this goal: there was, for instance, no overarching catalogue, but rather unusually long and detailed panels. There were

also QR codes with links to websites – featuring, for instance, songs performed with the Bengal *pat* – and two screens showing videos on Mithila art, an attempt to confront viewers with the living presence of artists. Dr. Basu, however, was also humble enough to admit that the long texts and the criss-crossing of styles often confused the viewers, and even went so far as to call it one of the failings of the exhibition.

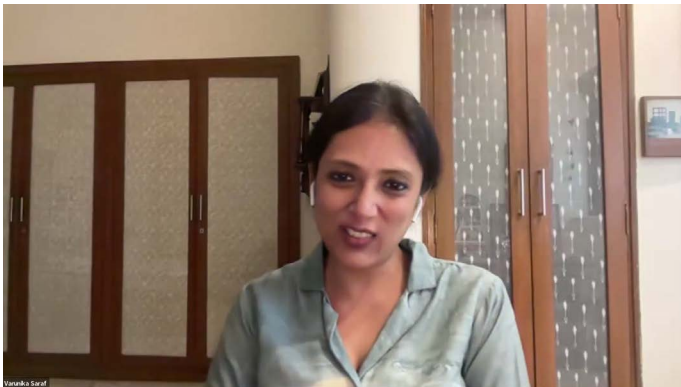
Dr. Basu's talk was followed by a lively question-answer session, with topics ranging from the polyvalence of paintings and the ritual origins of these styles to the connection of the artworks to the daily lives of artists and their communities. All in all, Dr. Basu's exhibition reflected in spirit something of the initial etymology of the word 'curation', coming from the Latin '*curare*': an act of care, empathy and responsibility. – **V.S.**

Creative Processes

PAST PROGRAMMES

Caput Mortuum

April 27th, 2024, 5:30 - 8:00 pm IST | Dr. Varunika Saraf (Artist & Art Historian)



How does art (both as theory and practice) intervene in history, especially Southasian history? How is it made: this art that seeks to make meaning out of a nation's past, a past whose socio-political complexities thwart all attempts at meaning-making? And finally, how does an artist's paradoxical love for and discomfort with 'tradition' help or hinder our interpretations of their art?

Engaging with these and other similar questions was the germ and gist of Dr. Varunika Saraf's lecture. Apart from being the title of her last solo show with Chemould Prescott Road (2021), *Caput Mortuum* as "a metaphor for decay and decline" lies at the heart of her artistic practice. The speaker defined this practice as "a subversion and perhaps even a hijacking of complex and ever-changing processes that we call tradition". A light-fast (resistant to fading) and synthetic iron oxide pigment, *Caput Mortuum* is Latin for 'dead head', and appropriately resembles dried blood. Organised under Jnanapravaha's Creative Processes series, Dr. Saraf's was an illustrated lecture. As such, the works with which she engaged during her talk and in the Q&A conveyed to the audience the power of this pigment to penetrate a painting and represent the strains of

physical and mental violation that so preoccupy this sensitive artist thematically.

To begin with, Dr. Saraf split her lecture into two compartments: the former afforded her audience insights into her early/studio practice and pedagogical training; and the latter half delved into her literal and metaphorical use of *Caput Mortuum*.

In the first half of what the speaker called "the autobiographical section", Dr. Saraf mapped the trajectory of her initiation into painting which began with a (lifelong) fascination with imperial Mughal paintings. *Dying Inayat Khan* (a sketch in ink c. 1618) has "loomed over [her] practice like a spectre"; so much so that her earliest pictures were "attempts to inscribe [herself] into the tradition of Mughal court painting". And yet, those "tongue-in-cheek" self-portraits of a young woman as *Inayat Khan* taught her that "art history is not about the past, but alive, about the here and the now". It was because artworks from bygone eras have "felt like familiars", and "persistent knocks on the doors of the present", that Dr. Saraf holds that "every region has its own unique relationship with modernity", and that "universalising history" (as is commonplace in most art history curriculums, and which fact tends to alienate practising artists from academia) "is nothing short of intellectual laziness".

The second chunk of the autobiographical section was essentially a primer on the *Wasli* and colour-formation. *Wasli* is a Mughal technique of binding together multiple layers of paper to form a hard-yet-resilient surface that can absorb multiple layers of paint. Since what is essential to her vision and practice is "to radicalise past

modes of thinking, doing and making”, modifying the technique and scale of *Wasli* enables Prof. Saraf to be “informed by tradition” as much as to “deviate from it”. Accompanied by delicious visuals (both stills and time-lapse videos of the artist in her studio), Dr. Saraf next launched into an informative and yet a jargon-free discussion about pigments which are “what gives colour to any medium”.



Dr. Saraf’s mesmerising embroidery works were the focus of the final part of this section. These works include *We, the People; Woman: the longest revolution* and *Jugni*. In all these, Dr. Saraf enlightened the audience, she had attempted to “politicise the aesthetic”. Whereas the former *search[es] for the keys in the past history to explain our time* (Eduardo Galeano) the latter two works pay tribute to, even as they trace the history of Indian women’s liberation movements. This is a history that constitutes a “feminist tradition”, one that has empowered the artist “to push the imaginary and dream of love and all the radical possibilities it engenders”. Speaking of radical possibility, *Citizen Z* (a drawing series) was another work brought under discussion; one which sets out to challenge the idea of progress as a *catastrophe which keeps piling ruin upon ruin* (Walter Benjamin). Such a socially conscious art, argued Prof. Saraf, empowers us to witness the Other’s pain, and bearing witness, we are rescued from the emotional desensitisation and the collective amnesia that is the bane of our media-mad world.

As if her paintings quested for just such a respite, Dr. Saraf resumed the post-break proceedings

with an exclusive focus on the use of Caput Mortuum in her practice.

Historically, after alchemists had failed at their gold-making experiments, Caput Mortuum was what remained at the base of the flask. This is the origin of Dr. Saraf’s novel thesis that Caput Mortuum can be an objective correlative for our society, equally the “worthless remains” of a flawed

experiment; her paintings liberate us to interpret that experiment as what-we-will: democracy, gender equality/ fluidity, religious tolerance, environmental care, political agency, etc. All these are utopias (states of innocence); they are longed for and their losses lamented through the length, breadth and depth of her politically personal art.

Miasma (bad air) is one such series of paintings that displays the artist’s use of Caput Mortuum as an insignia

of injustices that cannot go unaddressed. Caput Mortuum has an agentic power that can ‘haemorrhage’ through layers of colours, in a similar way in which the past can and does seep through the present. In this idiosyncratic manner, Caput Mortuum, as a profound marker of memory in Ms. Saraf’s works, comes to make the past *agitate the present* (Griselda Pollock).

In conclusion, it may be summarised that Dr. Saraf’s morally compassionate iconography reveals her immersion in the “stains, scars and disruptions” that make the present a product of the past. And yet, if *art is imagining the possible* (bell hooks), then Dr. Varunika Saraf’s practice is not one devoid of the lightness of hope, even as it is frequently overwhelmed by the heaving darkness of despair. It was fitting, then, that Jnanapravaha organised this seminar as the final offering of its yearlong postgraduate course on Indian Aesthetics. As Dr. Jaya Kanoria, who moderated an elaborate and immersive Q&A post Dr. Saraf’s talk, observed: there is no better way to understand and answer for the contemporary in art than by catching the artist in the very act of quest(ion)ing (for) their version of the past(s). – **N.S.**

Community Engagement

PAST PROGRAMMES

The Construction of British India 1690-1860

February 29th, 2024, 6:30 - 8:45 pm IST | Dr. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones (Author & Member of the Order of the British Empire)



Although several books exist on the subject of the Indian military, and innumerable more are available on that of Indian architecture, there hasn't been enough written on the intersection of the two, i.e., India's military architecture. The little that does exist on the subject is in the form of obtuse academic articles which are, admittedly, inaccessible to a large section of readers.

Noticing this, Dr. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones thought to bridge the gap with her latest book, *Empire Building: The Construction of British India, 1690-1860*, published in India in 2023 by Penguin Viking. The richly-illustrated book eschews restrictive jargon and focusses on how, under the occupation of the East India Company, India's built-environment transformed in the context of defence, urbanisation and infrastructure.

Amongst other aspects, the book turns the lens onto military engineers employed by the Company – who the author believes have been overlooked by history – and the constructions they were involved with, such as factories, cantonments and hill-stations.

Rosie Llewellyn-Jones's presentation on the book

was thus divided into two sessions – the first was titled 'The Company's Engineers', and the second, 'How India Has Changed'. The former session highlighted the workforce and provided a detailed survey of their constructions. The second session elucidated the overall effects and changes caused by these built structures.

The period covered in the book, 1690-1860, is particularly significant. The year 1690 marks the entry of the British into Calcutta, and the beginning of the building of Fort William as a factory. It's interesting to note that the engineers employed by the Company were all initially called military engineers. It was only around 1860 – the year that concludes the purview of the book – that civil engineering was recognised as a separate field. 1860 is also the year by which most institutions, such as the forestry and medical services, were established.

It is also interesting to note that the field of engineering did not initially involve formal training. The East India Company, which was set up in 1600 and was abolished in 1858, imported Italian engineers until the end of the 18th century when it decided to set up its own academies to train engineers so as to avoid hiring foreigners.

A large part of the book concentrates on Bengal where most of early colonial history occurs, due to its being a hub for trade. The British, like other European powers, came to Bengal for this purpose. The Dutch, of course, arrived long before the British. Both set up their factories there, which served not as places of manufacturing, as we understand factories to be now, but rather, as trading posts. To study these extant European enclaves, Llewellyn-Jones took several trips up

and down the river Hooghly.

It seems inevitable for everything the British erected to have had made a political statement, even if unconsciously. *Empire Building* examines the subtle infiltration this would have affected in the minds of those who saw and used the various built structures of the Company, such as the railways, docks, municipal buildings, hotels, barracks, cemeteries and canals. In this well-researched book, the author assesses India's

responses to the changing landscape. The shift – from formerly private, Indian-controlled functions such as education, entertainment, trading and healing, to British public institutions such as universities, theatres, chambers of commerce and hospitals – is also examined.

Stepping aside from ongoing colonialism debates, this is a fascinating account of India's physical transformation during the occupation of the East India Company. – **S.P.M.**

Between the Visual and Performing Arts

March 22nd, 2024, 7:00 - 8:30 pm IST | Prof. Ajay Sinha (The Julie '73 and Helene '49 Herzig Professor in the Art History and Architectural Studies Department at Mount Holyoke College, USA)



When the arts and cultures of different societies collide, it often results in brilliant sparks of beauty. This is what the audience experienced during Ajay Sinha's talk in which the art historian and author presented captivating details and stunning images from his latest book, *Photo-Attractions: An Indian Dancer, an American Photographer and a German Camera*, published by Rutgers University Press in 2023.

As the book's title suggests, it comprises a fascinating account of a series of portrait sessions conducted by an American photographer named Carl Van Vechten, in New York City in 1938, where the model, an Indian classical dancer named Ram Gopal, was photographed using a Leica (German) camera as he struck various poses in fantastical costumes and ornaments.

The black-and-white images are astounding – full of the drama of performance and the skilful artistry of both the man behind the camera and the subject before it. The full views, midshots and closeups of Ram Gopal assuming various poses foreground not just the dancer but also his manipulation of the camera, while Vechten plays with the studio lighting and fabric backgrounds. Through the series of photos, a spellbinding dialogue of cross-cultural exploration takes place, underpinning the interpersonal desires and cultural fantasies of the American photographer and Indian dancer.

Professor Sinha adeptly drew us into this conversation between the two men by recounting how the accidental discovery of the photographs led to his writing the book. "It all began in the Spring of 2015 when I was invited to participate in a semester-long conference on the history and practice of photography in South Asia at Yale University, New Haven, US. The organisers of the conference gathered a small group of scholars and practitioners to evaluate the collection they had at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale...The sessions were in the library itself... Between our organised sessions, we were also encouraged to explore the Beinecke Library on our own. It is during one of those free visits that

I chanced upon a cache of 111 black-and-white



photographs that stopped me in my tracks.”

Prof. Sinha began taking stock of the material before him. “Each photograph was an enlargement of approximately 8 by 10 inches, meticulously framed on cardboard mounts that included on the back a personal stamp of a photographer named

Carl Van Vechten, and a negative number and a date in April and May of 1938, written mostly in pencil, and sometimes in green ink...No one at the conference, including the Yale organisers, knew about the existence of these photographs. None had heard of the photographer or his model.”

Prof. Sinha began an investigation to unearth the historical details and circumstances surrounding the photographs and both men. He closely observed each image, and began to place Vechten and Gopal within the context of their time through immersive research. Over time, he built a narrative interconnecting scholarship on American photography, literature, race and sexual economies with work on Southasian visual culture, dance, and gender. The photographs Prof. Sinha showed us, coupled with his deft narration, made the presentation as spellbinding as the photo session between its two interlocutors must have been, and as the book proves to be. – **S.P.M.**

STUDENT REVIEW

Sensory Affordances of the Pitalkhora *Yaksha*

Vedant Srinivas - JPM Alumna | Indian Aesthetics course 2022-23



Fig. 1: *Yaksha* from Cave no. 3, Pitalkhora, Maharashtra. National Museum, New Delhi

Much has already been written about the *yaksha* sculpture from the Pitalkhora caves located in Maharashtra, India. Free-standing and carved in the round, both its arms are raised upward to support a shallow bowl, although its left forearm is now missing, as seen in Fig. 1. A two-line inscription on the right wrist records that the sculpture was made by the goldsmith Kanhadasa who is presumed to be either the patron of the piece or the craftsman who executed the work.

Awash with *joie de vivre*, the corpulent *yaksha* sculpture has expressive eyes and a mischievous grin on its face. The lower garment around its waist is supported by a rope that hangs just above the knee, resulting in sinuous pleats that fall on both sides. Festooned around the neck is a string of “gadrooned and collared beads (*mani-mala*) with a large, gadrooned central bead flanked by human-faced amulets” (Deshpande 1959, 82), while its perforated earlobes are adorned with “spiral earrings (*kundalas*), and the upper parts of the ears imitate an animal (*shanku-karna*) – a traditional feature of the *yakshas*” (ibid.).

Interestingly, the Pitalkhora *yaksha* is also part of the National Museum’s novel initiative to provide a “rich and engaging experience to visitors aesthetically, historically, and intellectually” (National Museum). To this end, the *yaksha* figure, along with several other prominent objects, has been housed in a special tactile gallery titled *Anubhav: A Tactile Experience*. Viewers here are free to explore objects through the sense of touch, and, one would assume, through other modalities of sensory experience.

Running one’s fingers lightly over the front of the *yaksha* sculpture, one encounters an exceptionally intense feeling of volume in its rendering. The unyielding coarseness of basalt, in sharp contrast to the inviting nature of fine-grained sandstone, pushes back against one’s touch, in the process calling attention to its voluminous mass. The striated surfaces – the ringlets at the top, the beads in the torso region, and the flowing pleats at the bottom – allow for constant juxtaposition of protruding ornamentation with the sensuous plasticity of the nude form. Lines criss-cross, intersect, and diverge, creating a feeling of rhythmic undulation, as if the stone itself is imbued with kinetic movement. Small details gradually stand out as the tactile exploration continues: a subtle protrusion of the thumb bone on the right hand, the elbow joints which form bulging convex shapes as one goes down the length of the arms, and the fusing of the armlet on the right shoulder with the ear ornament just above, in contrast to a noticeable gap between the two on the left side, the latter emerging as a detail overlooked in almost all scholarly accounts of the Pitalkhora *yaksha*.

Such a tactile reading of the *yaksha* statue enables us to situate it in the burgeoning field of what has been referred to as the sensory turn in the humanities and social sciences, even though, in technical terms, the purely visual is also sensory. Briefly put, the sensory approach critiques the ocularcentrism that has been a staple of modernity since the 18th century. Along with the Kantian notion of

disinterested aesthetic response, modernist aesthetics is also grounded in the Cartesian mind-body split, thereby resulting in a detachment between the subject and what it sees (Lauwrens 2012, 8). The sensory turn, on the other hand, advocates an *aesthetics of embodiment*, one that acknowledges the audience's bodily participation in works of art (ibid., 12). The embodied practices of seeing, observing, and interacting with the material world are thought of as directly aiding knowledge production; moreover, this seeing takes place in collaboration with the entire body, forming "an interconnected and multi-sensorial experiential spectrum" (ibid., 6).

Sensory scholarship in art history thus implies a rigorous immersion in the lived realities of archaeological evidence. This, however, is not to be restricted to mere phenomenological description. Rather, it is an interdisciplinary mode of investigation that evocatively opens new lines of enquiry, much as Devangana Desai's (1990) study on social dimensions of art combines both art-historical and socio-historical research. Desai has pointed out the great upsurge in trade and commerce that took place during the second urbanisation of India (300 BC–300 AD), when monuments were commissioned by the "joint cooperative efforts of common people" in a close nexus of religion, economy, and polity (1990, 7). More importantly, the decline of the formal and austere court art of the Mauryan period was followed by a revival of popular elements – the tribes and cults of *yakshas*, *nagas*, and tree spirits – in both religion and art, seen most conspicuously in the Buddhist monuments of Sanchi and Bharhut (ibid.). Indeed, during this period, there was a perennial absorption of aboriginal beliefs by Buddhism, whose own richly developed traditions of myth and craft would come into existence only by about 100 BC (Spink 1958, 102). In such a case, to attend to the sensory dimension of things "means recognising things to be bundles of sensual qualities (*qualia*) and relationships as well as concretisations of social relations" (Howes 2020, 27). In other words, it means "honing in on the sensori-social life of things" (ibid.).

A cursory look at the historical genealogy of the *yaksha* cult, replete with primitive and animistic beliefs, reveals its non-Aryan nature. The earliest mentions of *yakshas* make it clear that these entities are entirely sensuous in nature. A *yaksha* is described either as a nebulous or amorphous entity, or as a being given to excessive enjoyment. Thus, Ram Nath Misra remarks that "the whole content of the word '*yaksha*' includes the notion of sudden luminosity, wonderful or awe-inspiring manifestation, of something normally invisible, or a mysterious power properly to be worshipped" (1981, 33). Elsewhere, while drawing on the common etymological basis between *yakshas*, *gandharvas*, and

apsaras, he remarks that “they liked fragrance, possessed women and controlled speech, had great beauty, and were also great music lovers” (ibid., 23). There are also multiple references to dancing, singing, playing, and the resounding of cymbals and lutes under trees, all integral aspects of the *yaksha* sensescape.

There is now increasing evidence that there was a practice in ancient India of smearing rough and flat stones with vermilion, which were then placed on raised platforms under banyan trees and worshipped as *yakshas* (Deshpande 2010, 96). *Yaksha* depictions have also been found in the context of aniconic symbols such as conch shells and handprints, probably meant for decorating the abodes of *yakshas* (Misra 1981, 124). This shows an emphasis on tactility, and on the material nature of ritual *yaksha* worship.

Significantly, from an art-historical viewpoint, the earliest corpus of large-scale figural imagery in South Asia is almost exclusively made up of local spirit deities, exemplified by material found at sites such as Besnagar, Parkham, and Didarganj (Decaroli 2008, 25). The subsequent presence of such representations as subordinate deities and guardian figures, often dwarfed and grotesque, at Buddhist monastic complexes is proof of their subdued but continued presence and of the assimilation and supersession of *yakshas* by higher cult figures across sects and religions. This assimilation was not simply intellectual or ideological; the sensory also played a part in it. Buddhism, like other philosophical and religious systems of the time, was incorporating indigenous sensescapes, and indeed reworking established sensorial genealogies. For instance, the abundant references in Buddhist texts to *yakkha cetiyas* or *bhavanas* – terrestrial habitats usually found in scenic spots such as mountains, forests, lakes, trees, etc. – do not only speak of the widespread nature of *yakkha* worship (Misra 1981, 62), but also provide insight into the sensory affordances of specific sites. Furthermore, according to Misra, “Not only is the Buddha often seen staying at the sites of such *cetiyas*, but some of these *cetiyas* were also later converted into Buddhist *viharas*” (ibid.).

In just one such instance, the present-day cluster of fourteen caves at Pitalkhora is located along a picturesque ravine with a riverbed below and a waterfall at one end (Shah, n.d.). It is also believed that the caves lay on an ancient caravan route near Pratishthana, the capital of the Satavahanas, a great commercial centre before and after the Christian epoch (Deshpande 1959, 68). If one takes into account the unique sensorium of a Buddhist cave, replete with multi-sensorial elements such as

variations in light and shadow, vivid changes in smell, weather, temperature, and wind intensity, and the aural presence of echoes and chanting, in addition to the wondrous transmutation of living rock produced from the womb of the earth, one is left with an indelible synesthetic experience that, at the same time, builds upon centuries of indigenous ritual worship.

Such a sensory approach to art history and art makes it apparent that not only is our experience of the world embodied, but also that the senses are always already historically and culturally informed, situated, and structured (Danis and Tringham, 2020). More importantly, it alludes to the fact that museum artworks such as the Pitalkhora *yaksha* also have a material and affective presence beyond their denotational and functional aspects. Rather than being inert, passive objects, these sculptures played an active role in the events that occurred around them, and continue to do so in the museum space. Indeed, it would not be incorrect to say that they have always been imbued with life.

Bibliography

Danis, Annie, and Tringham, Ruth. "Doing sensory archaeology: The challenges." In *The Routledge Handbook of Sensory Archeology*, edited by Robin Skeates and Jo Day, 48-75. New York: Routledge, 2020.

Decaroli, Robert. "From the Living Rock: Understanding Figural Representation in Early South Asia." In *What's The Use of Art? Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context*, 21-45. USA: University of Hawaii Press, 2008.

Desai, Devangana. "Social Dimensions of Art in Early India." *Social Scientist* 18, no. 3: 3-32, 1990. Accessed November 3, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3517423>.

Deshpande, Brahmanand. "Yakṣa worship in ancient Maharashtra." *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 91: 91-104, 2010. Accessed November 6, 2022. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41692163>.

Deshpande, M. N. "The Rock Cut Caves of Pitalkhora in the Deccan." In *Ancient India, Bulletin of the Archeological Survey of India Number 15*, 66-93. New Delhi: Archeological Survey of India, 1959.

Howes, David. "Digging up the sensorium: On the sensory revolution in archeology." In *The Routledge Handbook of Sensory Archeology*, edited by Robin Skeates and Jo Day, 21-35. New York: Routledge, 2020.

Lauwrens, Jenni. *Welcome to the revolution: The sensory turn and art-history*. 2012. Accessed October 15, 2022. [Welcome to the revolution: The sensory turn and art history](#)

Misra, Ram Nath. *Yaksha Cult and Iconography*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Private Limited, 1981.

Shah, Viraj. *Rock-Cut Caves of Western Deccan*. Accessed October 20, 2022. [\(PDF\) ROCK-CUT CAVES OF WESTERN DECCAN | Viraj Shah - Academia.edu](#)

Spink, Walter. "On the Development of Early Buddhist Art in India." *The Art Bulletin* 40, no. 2: 95-104, 1958. Accessed November 10, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3047760>

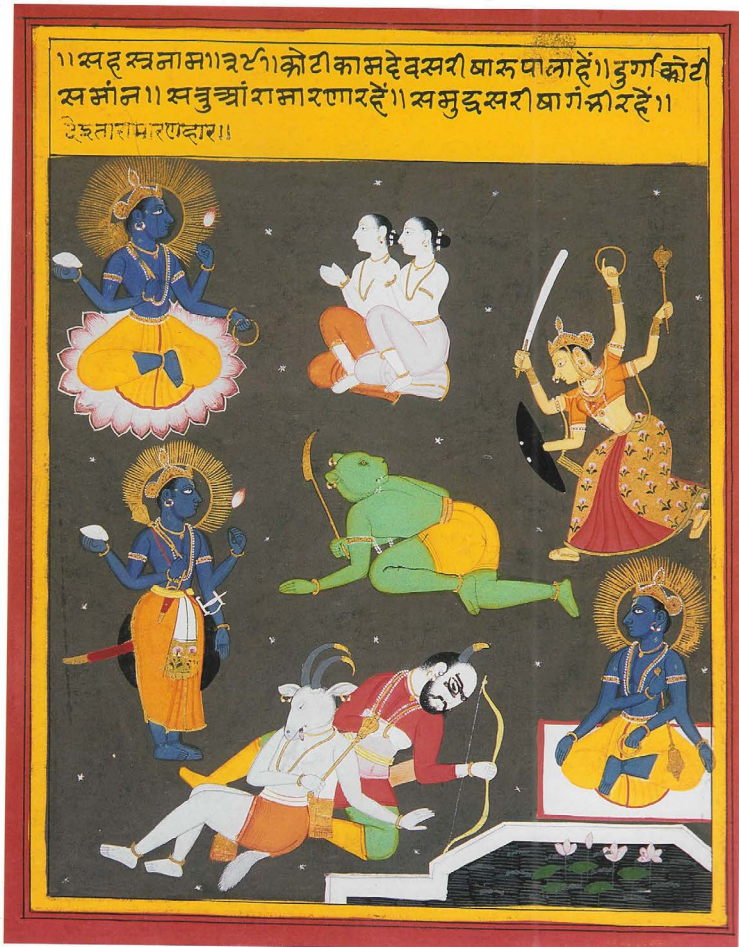
<http://www.nationalmuseumindia.gov.in/en/anubhav-a-tactile-experience>
Accessed October 1, 2022. *Anubhav: A Tactile Experience*. National Museum, New Delhi.

Announcements

POSTGRADUATE COURSE IN INDIAN AESTHETICS

Copyright © Jnanapravaha Mumbai | All Rights Reserved

July 2024 – April 2025 | Typically Saturdays, 1:30 – 5:30 pm IST | Hybrid Mode: Physical & Online* | Platform: Zoom



Introduced in 1999, Jnanapravaha Mumbai's academic, year-long Postgraduate Diploma/ Certificate course in Indian Aesthetics (IA) examines the historical development of visual forms in context, employing the disciplines of art history, archaeology, architecture, anthropology, literature and philosophy. The course traverses 5000 years of Indian visual art, including pre-modern, modern, and contemporary forms as well as popular traditions, to illuminate aesthetic trajectories in the sub-continent. Internationally renowned scholars introduce students to this art, ensuring a material, geographical, historical, social and cultural base that is broad and extensively representative. In keeping with JPM's mission, the course has evolved over the years to include topics of current research.

*Vishnu the Vanquisher of Demons
Illustration to the Vishnu Sahasranama
Udaipur c.1680-90,
25.5 x 20.5 cm
Gouache with gold on paper*

For admission, you are required to submit:

A digital copy each of your last degree certificate, CV, short bio (100 words) and passport size photograph.

Fee structure:

Diploma (subject to writing and attendance) – Rs. 100,000 | Certificate (subject to attendance) – Rs. 75,000

Registration click here: www.jp-india.org

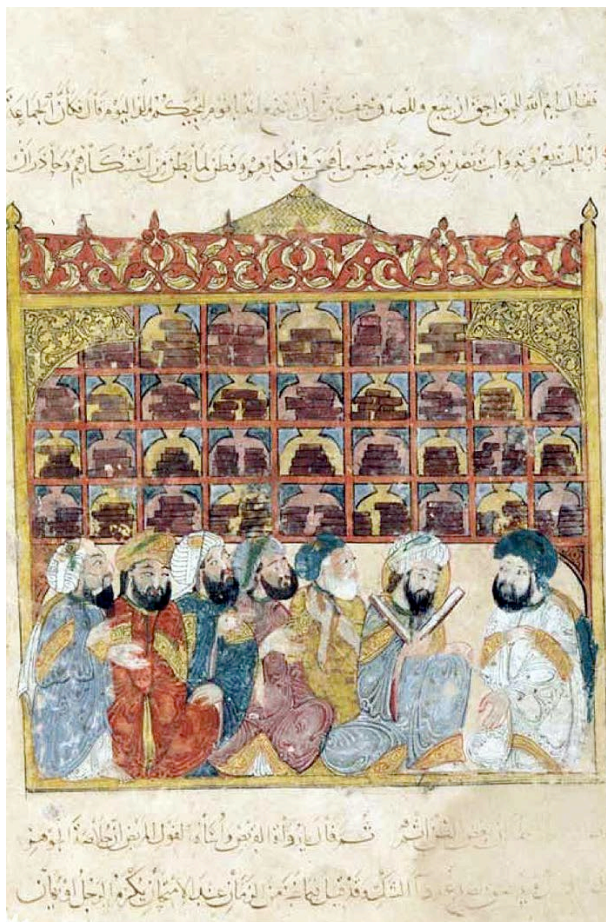
* Please check details of hybrid mode on our website before registering

THE AGE OF ILLUMINATION: PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT FROM LATE ANTIQUITY TO THE ISLAMIC GOLDEN AGE

Copyright © Jnanapravaha Mumbai | All Rights Reserved

August 06th - December 17th, 2024 | Mainly Tuesdays | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:30 pm IST

FEE: Rs. 25,000 | Online Platform: Zoom | Register: www.jp-india.org



Scholars at the Abbasid library (Maqamat al-Hariri). Illustration by Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti, 1237

This year, the Aesthetics, Criticism and Theory (ACT) programme investigates the history of philosophical thought from late antiquity to the Islamic world. The series begins in Egypt, examining the early integration of Platonic thought with Jewish intellectual traditions and follows it through seminal Neoplatonist thinkers. Moving eastward, we trace the rise of Manichaeism in the Sasanian empire of Persia, and engage with early Christian philosophers, bringing critical insight into a highly volatile intellectual and political landscape.

The second half of this series zooms into the *Islamic Golden Age*, tracing half a millenia of radical intellectual thought. Here too, the work of Jewish and Christian thinkers alongside burgeoning Sufi movements are a critical intervention within the series, urging us to reflect on a truly syncretic and formative intellectual environment.

FACULTY SCHOLARS:

Alexander Knysh
Catherine Conybeare
Dag Nikolaus Hasse
Dimitri Gutas
Emma Gannage
George Zografidis
James Diamond
Jari Kaukua
Jon McGinnis
Matteo Di Giovanni
Nadja Germann
Peter Adamson
Sean Adams
Thomas Benfey
Ursula Coope

*More details available on website: www.jp-india.org

Jnanapravaha

Queen's Mansion, 3rd floor, Ghanshyam
Talwatkar Marg, Fort, Mumbai - 400001
022 2207 2974/75
info@jp-india.org

www.jp-india.org



think critical. think art.



Supported by:
Harish & Bina Shah
Foundation

ECOLOGIES OF EMOTION AND POLITICS OF PLEASURE FROM MUGHAL TO COLONIAL INDIA

DIPTI KHERA

August 7th & 8th, 2024 | Lecture: 6:00 - 8:30 pm IST | Registration Fee: Rs. 2000/-, Students*: Rs. 1000/-

Online on ZOOM | Register: www.jp-india.org



Maharana Ari Singh II enjoying Jagmandir. Attributed to Jiva and others, ca. 1767, Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 66.9 × 122.5 cm. The City Palace Museum, Udaipur, 2011.18.0037. Image Courtesy: The City Palace Museum, Udaipur ©MMCF

How do emotions and artifacts (re)constitute places, ecologies, politics, and human experiences? Iterating the exuberant and ephemeral atmospheres in paintings that celebrated a city of lakes, artists from Udaipur visualized the *bhava*—feel, emotion, and mood—of particular places in scores of artworks commissioned by courtly connoisseurs, mercantile collectives, and colonial officers. Offering a critique of past narratives of Oriental decadence and artistic inadequacy circulated in colonial accounts and beyond, this series of lectures expands the archives, methods, and limits for sensing and making sense of the ordinary, exceptional, and idealized moods of historical times from Mughal to colonial India.



Dipti Khera is Associate Professor in the Department of Art History and Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. Khera's *The Place of Many Moods: Udaipur's Painted Lands and India's Eighteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, 2020) was awarded the Edward Cameron Dimock, Jr. Prize in Indian Humanities by the American Institute of Indian Studies. Her co-edited volumes include the catalogue for the exhibition *A Splendid Land: Paintings from Royal Udaipur* (Hirmer Publications, 2022), which she co-curated at the National Museum of Asian Art, Washington DC and Cleveland Museum of Art; "The 'Long' Eighteenth-Century?" *Journal 18* (December 2021); and *Readings on Painting: From 75 Years of Marg*. Volume 74 No. 4 and Vol 75/ No 2. Mumbai: Marg Publications (June-September 2023). In 2023-24, Khera holds the American Institute of Indian Studies-National Endowment for Humanities Senior Fellowship and is affiliated with the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

THE ANCIENT TOWN OF SI THEP IN THAILAND: A CROSSROADS OF INDIANIZATION

NICOLAS REVIRE

August 28th, 2024 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:00 pm IST | Free Online Public Lecture on ZOOM



Si Thep, located in northeast Thailand, thrived from the mid-first millennium CE to the thirteenth century. Positioned near the Indianized kingdoms of Dvāravatī and Zhenla (later Angkor), it served as an important hub for cultural exchange between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. The site revealed impressive Hindu-Buddhist sculptures, significant architectural remnants, and enigmatic inscriptions in various languages. Recently designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Si Thep remains a focus of scholarly interest.



Born in France, Nicolas Revire holds a doctoral degree from Paris, specializing in Buddhist art and archeology of early Southeast Asia, particularly pre-modern Thailand. As a Research Fellow at the Art Institute of Chicago, he brings expertise from two decades of teaching and research in Bangkok. The speaker has published extensively on the subject and has taught modules for the Certificate in Southeast Asian Art at Jnanapravaha, Mumbai.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF FOOD: HOW AND WHY WE EAT WHAT WE DO

KURUSH DALAL

September 4th, 2024 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:30 pm IST | Free Public Lecture | Register: www.jp-india.org



Oldest Olive oil in a glass jar 79 AD from Pompeii

Most of the history of our food is lost to antiquity. This is because humans and their eating patterns are much older than history. At its very oldest history goes back 5500 years, humans on the other hand have been on the face of this planet for over 2 million years. Human Food History is divided into 2 very clear sets; Prehistoric where for most of the 2 million plus years we went from scavengers and opportunistic hunters gatherers to specialised hunter gatherers and the ultimate pack killing machines on the planet, and Neolithic till date the story of peoples who grow their own food. The first starts 2 million plus years ago and ends roughly 11 thousand years ago where the second period starts and in which we live today. The study of human food is thus mainly the province of archaeology and not history. This talk, which dwells mainly on the subcontinent and mainly on the 2nd period is the introduction to that story.



Kurush F Dalal has a BA in Ancient Indian History and History from the University of Mumbai, an MA in Archaeology as well as a PhD on the early Iron Age in Rajasthan, both from Deccan College, Pune University. Subsequently he has excavated the sites of Sanjan, Chandore and Mandad: the last site has revealed a hitherto unknown Indo-Roman Port site with ancient antecedents. Dr. Dalal also actively works on Memorial Stones and Ass-curse Stones in India and dabbles in Numismatics, Defense Archaeology, Architecture, Ethnoarchaeology and allied disciplines. He is the Co-Director of the Salcette Explorations Project.

He has published extensively and taught widely. Dr Dalal inherited a catering business and has been researching food all his life. In the last decade he has lectured on Food and Archaeology and Culinary Anthropology, and has run *The Studying Food Workshop* since 2019. As a culinary museum consultant and an archaeological museum consultant he is currently working on a corporate multi-museum project. He has been the Director of the INSTUCEN School of Archaeology, Mumbai since 2020.

“WHY DO YOGINIS DANCE?”

PADMA KAIMAL

September 13th, 2024 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:00 pm IST | Free Online Public Lecture on ZOOM



Dance postures are among the most dynamic poses struck by the sculptures that once filled temples dedicated to the worship of yoginis, the powerful goddesses who straddle the boundaries between nurture and destruction. This lecture proposes that the meaning of their dances has to do with the marking and counting of time, the rhythm of the dance but also the rhythm of the cosmos which yoginis' open-roofed temples invited visitors to track.

Sculpture of Yogini Goddess dancing on two wheels and playing a drum, at the Yogini Temple in Hirapur, Odisha, India, ca. 900 CE, black basalt stone (Photo: author, 2006)

Padma Kaimal is the Batza Family Chair in Art History at Colgate University. Her research questions common assumptions about ancient art from the Tamil region. Her 2020 book, *Opening Kailasanatha: The Temple in Kanchipuram Revealed in Time and Space*, reconstructs the aspirations, profound wisdom, Tantric secrets, and distinctive world view of ancient kings and queens of South India through the monument's material forms. Her previous book, *Scattered Goddesses: Travels with the Yoginis* (2012) disrupts categories of East and West, scattering and collecting, as it traces the worship, ruination, dispersal, and re-enshrinement of nineteen sculptures from a ninth-century goddess temple.



THE ART OF JAINA TEMPLE BUILDING IN INDIA

JULIA A. B. HEGEWALD

October 9th, 2024 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:45 pm IST | Registration Fee: Rs. 1000/-, Students*: Rs. 500/-

Online on ZOOM | Register: www.jp-india.org



The Candranātha Basadi (1429) at Mudabidri, Karnataka, is a three-storeyed Jain temple structure.

Jaina temple structures in India have generally been portrayed as following the same principles as Hindu sacred architecture. Therefore, studies of Jaina shrines have generally been neglected. In these two lectures, Dr. Hegewald will introduce the audience at first to the unique spatial complexities of Jaina temples throughout the Indian subcontinent. In the second lecture, she will focus on the idiosyncrasies of Jaina places of worship in Karnataka, illustrating resource and climate responsive traditional and modern architecture.

Session I: Jaina Temple Architecture in India: The Development of a Distinct Language in Space and Ritual.

Session II: Jaina Basadis in Karnataka: Climatic Dependencies and Artistic Freedoms.



Julia A.B. Hegewald has been Professor of Oriental Art History at the University of Bonn since 2010. She was Reader in Art History at Manchester, a postdoctoral Fellow in Heidelberg and a Research Fellow at University College Oxford. She studied at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, from where she also holds a PhD. Her books on Jaina art include: *Jaina Temple Architecture in India: The Development of a Distinct Language in Space and Ritual* (2009; 2018; 2024), *The Jaina Heritage: Distinction, Decline and Resilience* (2010), *Jaina Painting and Manuscript Culture: In Memory of Paolo Pianarosa* (2015) and *Jaina Tradition of the Deccan: Shravanabelagola, Mudabidri, Karkala* (2021).

Jnanapravaha Mumbai is deeply indebted to the following for their support:

BENEFACTORS

Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation
Vineeta & Arvind Kanoria
Dipak & Rohitashwa Poddar
Saroj Poddar, Adventz Group Of Companies
Madan & Usha Sethi
Sohni & Dipak Tanna

PATRONS

Vinod Doshi, Echjay Industries (CSR) Foundation
Dhruv Khaitan, Trustee, Kumudini Devi Khaitan Samvedna Trust
Dilip Piramal, VIP Industries Ltd.
Jai & Sugandha Hiremath, Hikal Ltd.
Harish & Bina Shah Foundation

PARTNERS

Shekhar Bajaj, Bajaj Electricals Ltd.
Minakshi & Shishir Bajaj
Avantika & Puneet Dalmia, Avanee Foundation
Deccan Heritage Foundation
Poddar Foundation
Rochna & Tarang Jain, Varroc Foundation
Priyam & Gayatri Jhaveri
Ajay & Vandana Kanoria, Asiatic Oxygen Ltd.
Anurag Kanoria
Deepak & Smita Parekh, HDFC Ltd.
Maithili Parekh & Shashank Singh
Aditya Ruia
Shamina Talyarkhan
Bahram & Arti Vakil
Dayanita Singh

FRIENDS

Lolita Shivdasani

Jnanapravaha is a registered Trust. Contributions qualify for 80G benefits. We are eligible for CSR contributions, as specified in the Companies Act (2013), and have been awarded FCRA clearance from the Government of India. For further information, please contact our support team at support@jp-india.org.



We know we have made a difference. Our endeavour to encourage and facilitate pedagogy meaningfully continues with the firm belief that the humanities are indispensable to the well-being of the community and the individual.

Contributors to the Quarterly:

AT - Adira Thekkuveettil
DS - Devanshi Shah
JK - Jaya Kanoria
NSR - Nidhi Singh Rathore
NS - Nupur Shah
PB - Priyanka Bhatia
SPM - Suchita Parikh-Mundul
VS - Vedant Srinivas

Text Editor: Suchita Parikh-Mundul

Design and Layout: Sharon Rodrigues

Queens Mansion, 3rd Floor, G. Talwatkar Marg,
Fort, Mumbai - 400001. India.
www.jp-india.com
Facebook: [JnanapravahaAtMumbai](https://www.facebook.com/JnanapravahaAtMumbai)
Twitter: [@Jnanapravaha_M](https://twitter.com/Jnanapravaha_M)
Instagram: [Jnanapravaha_Mumbai](https://www.instagram.com/Jnanapravaha_Mumbai)