

# Kunstmuseum Bern

## Horn Please

### Narratives in Contemporary Indian Art

September 21, 2007 – January 6, 2008

## Mural text:

### Githa Hariharan: Narratives in Contemporary Indian Art – A Concept Note

From the Catalogue Horn Please

#### Section 1:

##### Narrating Collisions

If you parachute-land in the middle of a busy Indian street, you may arrive at an instant metaphor for contemporary Indian narratives. There's the noise—noise that can be heard and seen.

There's the jostling crowd. Not a faceless crowd or a uniform one, but a dazzling, bewildering assortment of individuals wearing different sorts of clothes, speaking different languages, practically living in different worlds. The crowd does not make a melting pot but a salad bowl. The bowl overflows with a piquant salad of myriad contesting flavours. There's the great drama of survival being played out. A street play with a cast of thousands, partaking of dream and polemics, ancient ritual and steely commerce, leaps of imagination and blinkered chauvinism.

There are intersections, overlaps of these different lives. There's convergence. But more often than not, there are collisions. Sometimes these are accidental, and like a happy accident, they can produce strange joys. But sometimes the collisions are ugly. Like hit and run drivers everywhere, the hatemongers may insist that all complexity and difference be thrown on the garbage heap. Like the thought police anywhere, they may demand that everyone think and love and

dream and make art and life exactly the way they want them to.

All this is part of the crowded street, its many-tongued narrative. There's also the clutch of bystanders, a few of whom may, any minute, become actors in the narrative. They could be artists. They could take hold of the life-process around them, the unravelling complexities of survival, and turn them into the art process. Re-imagine the place and people, the experience, even as they are in the midst of living it.

#### Section 2:

##### Re-imagining *Place for People*

Does this street, this city that holds too many streets in the same place, belong to the people living in it? Or do the people belong to the city? There can be no one answer. As artists play with the implications of these twin questions, they locate, map, and re-map the relationship between the human image and its setting. The art critic Geeta Kapur—who wrote the manifesto for the path-breaking exhibition, *Place for People* (1981)—notes, "The Indian artist can treat himself like the privileged heir of an intrinsically more advanced art and... practice, in all innocence, an age-old modernism... What is clear is that (an important set of Indian artists) believe less in some mystical notions about the symbolic potency of forms and more in the reciprocal energies between art and life." In the modern Indian

context, re-imagining place for people means moving from “a thoughtless imitation of visible form, from a weak archaism of empty decoration, and from a falsely sentimental mysticism... to a transcendental objectivity.”

A place—the smallest, most dimly lit space—may become a place for people if there are stories in it. Stories that mutate, even stick one to the other as they grow like cotton candy to become full blown metaphors.

### **Section 3: Retelling Stories / Telling Metaphors**

There's a whole world of stories badgering the artist to pay attention to them. Stories that behave exactly as if they are part of the crowd in the Indian street. These stories artists and their subjects share may be old, they may even be “traditional”. But stories have many lives; they can be retold for the times. They can even live in different times simultaneously, the way an Indian city does.

The stories may be quiet stay-at-homes, home movies of people, little dreams, old books. Or they may be travelling stories, bringing the Phantom Lady to Bombay and the Marquis de Sade to Delhi, or making Ajmer in Rajasthan and Great Yarmouth in Nova Scotia neighbours.

The stories may be fractured, the splintered view social and political issues prefer to offer the curious eye. Or they may flow

like a river, braving cross currents to reach a point where many rivers meet in confluence.

Retelling stories, encrypting myth and metaphor, calls for adventurous journeys. Falling down holes, going through mirrors. Hitchhiking through Alicetime.

### **Section 4 Living in Alicetime**

There's a garden at the other end of the hole, but it's only a garden at first sight. It's really a forest, a jungle, in which nothing is what it seems.

In the country transformed by the art process, is Alice the artist or the subject? And what are the mysterious forces that drive Alice and her fellow explorers as they travel the contemporary world's underbelly? There's an upside down world on the other side of the mirror, a world in which place and placement melts into displacement. Protagonists, subjects and icons reveal an astonishing capacity to shift shapes, shift even the landscape they inhabit. It could all be an illusion, or a distortion, a trick of the mirror or of light and colour. A trick of art, if it weren't all so insistently real.

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