
Original research

Interpreting New Media and Assemblage Approaches with Moving Images: The Evolution of Indian Art from the 1990s Onwards

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Abstract

The paper discusses how Indian artists from the 1990s onwards have used various mediums to create new installations and assemblages, incorporating moving images through screens and projections. It focuses on the works of artists such as Vivan Sundaram, Nalini Malani, Navjot Altaf, and Sheba Chhachhi, and how they have used assemblage techniques to reflect social, political, and cultural dynamics. The paper, moreover, explores the integration of video as a medium of moving images within the broader context of new media art trends during this period and how it relates to the concept of assemblage art and the philosophical dimensions of assemblage theory. The main argument is to establish a dialogue with the intellectual approach of assemblage theory as presented by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and further developed by other theorists discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Assemblage, Assemblage Theory, New Media Art, Video Art, Socio-Political Consternations.

Introduction

The discourse in visual arts reflects on its subjectivity and the critical approach of artists through which the reflection on current sociopolitical engagements can be discussed. However, there is another dimension of technical approaches that cannot be overestimated because societies are overwhelmed with developments. New technical approaches impact every aspect, and visual artists interpret these approaches. Every work of art is an incarnation, an investment of matter

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with spirit. The term "assemblage"ⁱ has been highlighted to denote a specific technical procedure and form used in literary, musical, and visual arts and a complex set of attitudes and ideas (Seitz, 1961, p. 10). Assemblage appears structural, an object possessing the materiality and stability akin to classic metaphors of structure. However, its aesthetic use intends to undermine these very ideas of structure (George E. Marcus, 2006, p. 102). The assemblage originated in the early twentieth century when many artists worked with found objects, metal scraps, etc. Assemblage involves the complex combination of materials where artists integrate discarded and leftover items, often found in obscure spaces. The main focus is on how artists merge and bring these discarded materials into the art space, defining a new art trend known as Assemblage.

Allan Kaprow's concept of happenings also deals with assemblage and environment. Shifting things around can be an excellent performance mode as much as composition. Just as an Environment or an Assemblage can be maintained in pro-longed transformation by rearranging its parts in several ways, the same can apply to a Happening (Kaprow, 1956). Though we can say happenings for Allan is a form of assemblage where action is significant. Allan Kaprow mentions that happening has no limitations of time and space but is concerned with environment and assemblage. Intrinsic to the medium of assemblage is an entirely new relationship between work and spectator: a reconquest (Seitz, 1961, p. 81).

Although assemblage in art emerged in the 1960s, it coincided with the rise of several other art movements. These movements paved the way for new media art, where artists and practitioners began incorporating emerging technologies. Video art, in particular, became a significant medium for representation and expression. New technology encompasses many machines, wires, and complex mathematical and physical components. However, the art that emerges from the fusion of art and technology is arguably the most fleeting of all: the art of time. (Rush, 2005, p. 8). Technological advancements in film and video were embraced by artists, leading to the development of what we now recognize as multimedia art (Rush, 2005, p. 14). While the diverse temporalities of film and video have undoubtedly contributed to the success of moving image installations in contemporary art, they have also, paradoxically, fostered a degree of critical blindness and historical oversight (Leighton, 2008, p. 26). While 'new media art' is often used interchangeably with terms like 'digital art,' 'computer art,' 'multimedia art,' and 'interactive art,' it's important to recognize their key distinctions. Understanding digital art's definition requires considering how everyday language evolves in response to technological shifts. For example, terms like 'digital media' and 'digital new media' have sometimes been used to describe 'new media.' In the early 1990s, following the release of the first commercial internet browser and the onset of the digital revolution, 'new media art' became a popular term among artists, critics, and curators working with emerging technologies (Cat Hope, 2014, p. 4).

As a post-humanist philosophical approach, the concept of assemblage revolves around the construction of agency and the individual's capacity to connect within a social-material network

ⁱ Random assemblage possible, the term can be traced in the Manifestoes of Surrealism, see Breton, Andre. (1929). Manifestoes of Surrealism. The University of Michigan Press. 41.

involving people, objects, and narratives. This paper investigates artists in India who depict assemblage approaches and their connection to various philosophical standpoints. These standpoints include the assemblage theory by Manuel Delanda, the Actor-network theory by Bruno Latour, and ideas rooted in Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's work.

This paper encapsulates the dialogue surrounding the rise of new media and other forms of representation, focusing on how Indian artists engage with diverse forms and technologies while incorporating philosophical and anthropological discussions. New media trends in India began in the 1990s, particularly by incorporating video and screen-based media. The central argument of this paper is to explore how artists integrated video into their practices of sculpture and installation and to examine the meaning that emerges from this combination within the assemblage framework. Assemblage remains a prominent method of representation, and as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari emphasize, its fragility becomes more pronounced when combined with other art forms. This discussion references significant artists such as Vivan Sundaram, Nalini Malani, Navjot Altaf, and Sheba Chhachhi.

Assemblage Theory: Account and Its Implications

Deleuze and Guattari designate that in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata, and territories, but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization, and destratification. In this manner, they combine all these lines and measurable speeds to constitute an *assemblage*.ⁱⁱ Assemblage makes connections with other assemblages and with other bodies without organs. The concept of the assemblage is used to articulate the point that you cannot view things in isolation - things are always connected and are always making connections (David Savat T. H., 2016, p. 6). Deleuze and Guattari use the term "assemblage" to denote a contingent ensemble of diverse practices and things that are divided along the axes of territoriality and deterritorialization (Aihwa Ong, 2004, p. 338). This theory was meant to apply to a wide variety of wholes constructed from heterogeneous parts. Entities ranging from atoms and molecules to biological organisms, species, and ecosystems may be usefully treated as assemblages and, therefore as entities that are products of historical processes (Delanda, 2006, p. 3).

Assemblages are entities structured by specific organizational principles. For a long time, the prevailing concept of wholeness in philosophy and social sciences was based on the model of an organism—a unified entity with well-defined, interdependent constituents. This notion of wholeness is characterized by relationships of interiority.ⁱⁱⁱ In Deleuze and Guattari's framework, assemblages encompass the relations among every meaning, function, object, machine, ideology, element, and human. This concept spans from the functional relations between abstract machines

ⁱⁱ The author connects the example of the book as an assemblage with other lines of articulation, ranging from segmentarity to measurable speeds, all considered as forms of assemblage. See, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press. 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ The main emphasis of the section, "Assemblage: Greek Phalanx and Foucauldian Panopticon," is on the question of assemblage and its definition. See, Ian Buchanan, George Varghese K, Manoj N. Y. (2021). *Deleuze, Guattari, and India: Exploring a Post-Postcolonial Multiplicity*. Routledge India. 3.

and machinic assemblages to gathering diverse elements into cohesive structures. Assemblages mediate between different strata, forming the essence of interconnected societal structures—functionality, theories, economic systems, and languages.

An assemblage constitutes a comprehensive whole that links every construction and enunciation, bridging abstract and functional machines. Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theory is complex yet all-encompassing, defining everything from theoretical perspectives to linguistics as organizational dynamics of power and the assembly of bodies that shape the world as an interconnected whole. It marks both a beginning and an end, where the organization of labor and variable configurations of humans, animals, and things are pivotal. The assemblage is between two layers, between two strata; on one side it faces the strata (in this direction, the assemblage is an *interstratum*), but on the other side faces something else, the body without organs or a plane of consistency (here, it is a *metastratum*) (Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, 1987, p. 41).

Form of content and form of expression involve two parallel formalizations in presupposition: it is obvious that their segments constantly intertwine and embed themselves in one another, but this is accomplished by the abstract machine from which the two forms derive and by machinic assemblages that regulate their relations. If a pyramidal image replaces this parallelism, then content (including its form) becomes an economic base of production displaying all of the characteristics of the Abstract; the assemblages become the first story of a superstructure that, as such, is necessarily situated within a state apparatus; the regimes of signs and forms of expression become the second story of the superstructure, defined by ideology (Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, 1987, p. 68).

Understanding and exploring the term "assemblage," as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari, reveals various forms such as collective assemblage, molecular assemblage, territorial assemblage, deterritorialized assemblage, infra-assemblage, technical assemblage, and artistic assemblage. The territory is the first assemblage, the first thing to constitute an assemblage; the assemblage is fundamentally territorial (Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, 1987, p. 323). And every assemblage has two sides, the machining of bodies or objects, and group enunciation (Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, 1987, p. 439).

We may draw some general conclusions on the nature of Assemblages from this. On the first, horizontal axis, an assemblage comprises two segments, one of content, the other of expression. On the one hand, it is a machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand, it is a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations, attributed to bodies. Then on a vertical axis, the assemblage has both territorial sides, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and cutting edges of deterritorialization, which carry it away (Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, 1987, p. 88). Becoming is like the machine: present in a different way in every assemblage, passing from one to the other, opening one onto the other, outside any fixed order or determined sequence (Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, 1987, p. 347).

Assemblages are passionate, they are compositions of desire. Desire has nothing to do with a natural or spontaneous determination; there is no desire but assembling assembled desire. The rationality, the efficiency of an assemblage do not exist without the passions the assemblage brings into play, without the desires that constitute it as much as it constitutes them (Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, 1987, p. 399).

We know that modern art tends to realize these conditions: in this sense, it becomes a veritable theatre of metamorphoses and permutations. A theatre where nothing is fixed, a labyrinth without a thread. The work of art leaves the domain of representation to become 'experience', transcendental empiricism, or science of the sensible (Deleuze, 1995, p. 56). Perhaps the highest object of art is to bring into play simultaneously all these repetitions, with their differences in kind and rhythm, and their respective displacements and disguises, their divergences and decentrings; to embed them in one another and to envelop one or the other in illusions the 'effect' of which varies in each case. Art does not imitate, above all because it repeats; it repeats all the repetitions, by an internal power (an imitation is a copy, but art is a simulation, it reverses copies into simulacra) (Deleuze, 1995, p. 293).

Deleuze and Guattari use the term 'machinic' to describe the assembling of heterogeneous elements within communities and organizations. These include not only individuals and their bodies, but also diverse material entities like tools, machines, food, water, buildings, and furniture. These material bodies are linked through enforceable social commitments created by speech acts. Thus, communities and organizations are described as both 'machinic assemblages of bodies,' where diverse bodies interact, and 'collective assemblages of enunciation,' involving acts, statements, and non-physical transformations attributed to bodies (DeLanda, 2016, p. 55).

Actor-network theory (ANT) is described as the 'sociology of associations,' focusing on the social functioning itself as an assemblage. This theory aims to understand the interconnectedness of social structures. Broadly, it uses an assemblage approach to define specific characteristics within the functionality of these structures. ANT investigates deeply how actors interact and communicate within various social formations. Using a slogan from actor-network theory (ANT), "follow the actors themselves," we strive to understand their often-wild innovations and learn from them what collective existence has become in their hands. This involves examining the methods they have developed to make things fit together and identifying the best accounts to define the new associations they have been forced to establish. While traditional sociology works well with already assembled social constructs, it struggles to reassemble participants in what is not yet a defined social realm. This challenge tested semiotics, and although it passed, a price was paid. In ANT practice, semiotics was expanded to create a completely open framework, allowing the study of any assemblage of heterogeneous entities, including the "natural" entities of science and the "material" entities of technology.^{iv}

^{iv}Actor-network theory (ANT) is primarily associated with society. Bruno Latour extends this theory to encompass a wide array of elements present within society, highlighting their vast interrelations. See,

An actor-network theory doesn't claim to definitively categorize society as either composed of small calculative agents or large macro actors. Instead, it embraces relativism, using controversies to trace social connections. Understanding these shifting frames of reference, provides a clearer view of how social phenomena arise, offering more objective judgment than common sense's arbitrary settings (Latour, 1996, p. 30). As Latour pointed out, the goal of actor-network theory (ANT) is to expand the list of participants and modify their shapes and figures, assembling them into a cohesive and durable whole (Latour, 1996, p. 72).

Then we can say that an assemblage is the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic. The temporality of an assemblage is emergent. It does not always involve new forms, but forms that are shifting, in formation, or at stake (Aihwa Ong, 2004, p. 12). Assemblage, as a formation comprising entities defined by their function and theoretical understanding, encompasses a collection of functionalities, survival mechanisms, and theoretical descriptions. The concept of assemblages has expanded, with Manuel Delanda providing significant attention to framing assemblage theory. Assemblage theory aids in accurately framing problems, thereby paving the way for their eventual resolution—a solution that involves detailing every mechanism involved (Delanda, 2006, p. 32). The relationships that exist between social components form an assemblage. Manuel Delanda explores the social definitions of family, neighbors, and institutional organizations, offering a reflective insight into the construction of assemblages as described by Deleuze and Guattari.

The above discussion on the concept of assemblage, which connects fragments to a unified whole, now shifts focus toward Indian artists whose works offer complex and intriguing representations. Their art is a composite of diverse materials, layered narratives, and the integration of moving images. This analysis highlights the emergence of new media as an assemblage of juxtaposed elements, reflecting the works of certain artists to better understand this evolving formation.

Multiplicity in Art: Vivan Sundaram's Innovative Juxtaposition

Vivan Sundaram left a significant mark on India and South Asia by redefining the concept of gallery spaces. Through his intricate arrangement of diverse materials, Vivan Sundaram's intuition manifests in his interpretation of color, used materials, and various mediums. Rust, in particular, emerges as a compelling force, symbolizing his empathy towards discarded objects. His recent works also convey a sense of age and diversion from tradition. Moving away from the conventional juxtaposition of nationalist symbols and modernist techniques, Sundaram's artistic focus in the late 1980s shifts towards a programmatic avant-garde exploration of the semiotic potential inherent in cultural materials. His work during this period reflects a heightened ideological fluidity in contemporary Indian art. Instead of earnestly striving to symbolize 'Indianness,' there is a noticeable shift towards a politicized intertextuality (Roberts, 1994, p. 32).

Latour, Bruno. (1996). On actor-network theory: A few clarifications plus more than a few complications. *Soziale Welt*. 9.

He explored the dynamic between historical archives and avant-garde practices, blending them in works that oscillate between monumentalism and bricolage. One of his most renowned projects is the *History Project* (1998),^v hosted in Memorial Hall, Kolkata. This site-specific installation challenged the architectural grandeur associated with imperial history. It created a monumental mise-en-scène to house a historical archive of Indian modernity, meticulously crafted as a sophisticated bricolage of images, objects, scripts, sounds, and cinema, imbued with political undertones (Mathur, 2019, p. 133). The *History Project* incorporates a diverse array of sculptures, installations, video works, performances, and other programs, thereby reshaping both the concept of the artwork and the art space itself. My primary aim is to highlight an earlier work where we see the installation alongside its video counterpart. However, exploring the *History Project* provides a deeper understanding of our exploration of assemblage and how moving images, specifically in the form of video as a new media, integrate into the overall artwork or exist independently. When discussing the relationship and describing assemblage in this context, moving images serve as an additional dimension that enriches our understanding of how assemblage has evolved through its presentation in earlier works.

Vivan Sundaram's site-specific installation, the *History Project*, commissioned to commemorate India's fiftieth anniversary of independence from British rule in 1947, marked a pivotal shift towards installation and site-specific art practices during the 1990s. It remains a seminal example of such experimentation in India, distinguished by its unprecedented scope and scale. Sundaram's installation, comprising about two dozen components, occupied the expansive domed space of Curzon's building. It featured a diverse array of found and fabricated objects—such as cabinets, vitrines, photographs, texts, and audiovisual media—that deliberately disrupted established taxonomies, grand narratives, and didactic pathways (Mathur, 2019, p. 73).

The *History Project* represents a stage focused on the narrativization of histories, offering a new approach to integrating material with their own stories about time and space. An example of this project is a site-specific, architectural-scale installation, which functions as an assemblage combining practical uses, survival mechanisms, and theoretical descriptions. A key aspect of the project is the building in which it is displayed—a power-sharing space whose atmosphere, along with the artwork reflections, forms a significant reference to both political and artistic assemblage. In this context, the moving image plays a dominant role, shaping different narratives that emerge from the objects, interacting with symbols of movement, smell, color, and form.

^v See Kapur, Geeta. (2005). *The Dismantled Norms: Apropos other Avantgardes*, in Caroline Turner, *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and The Pacific*, Pandanus Books. 90.

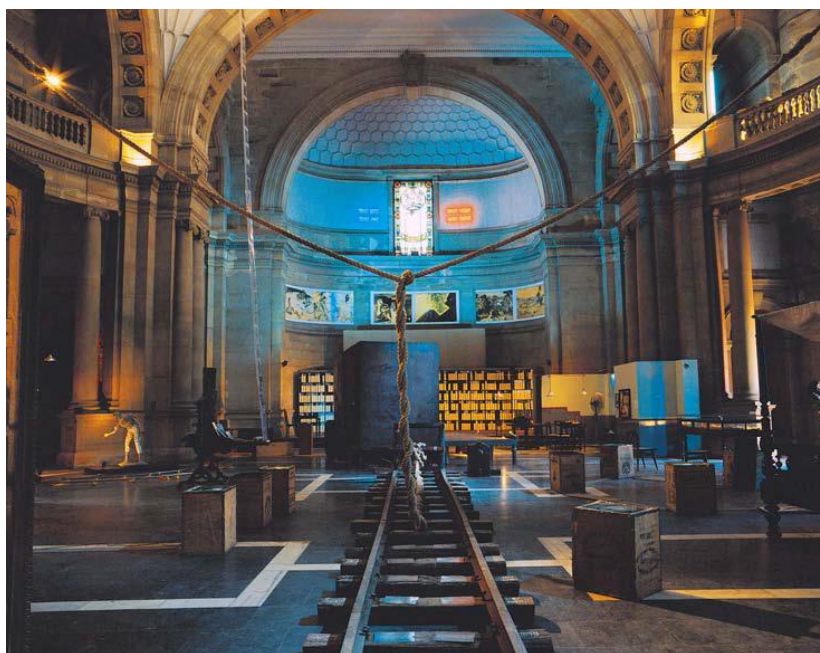


Fig. 1, Vivan Sundaram, History Project, 1998. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist.

Vivan Sundaram's work introduces several key gestures that became central to Indian contemporary art during this period through its formal language: a renewed emphasis on medium, recognition of the pervasive influence of photo reproduction technology, and the recontextualization of infrastructural materials and architectural forms found in everyday life (Zitzewitz, 2022, p. 3). Widely recognized for his installation-based work that emerged in the 1990s, Vivan Sundaram initially established himself as a leading easel artist in post-independent India over nearly three decades. His transition to video/digital media, assemblage, and installation works came later. Sundaram's monumental works from the 1990s still resonate strongly with contemporary developments. They persistently reflect the transformative impact of a new global order as experienced in India, particularly amidst sectarian politics, urban violence, and state-sanctioned terror (Roy, 2013, p. 269). What his work produces, with varying degrees of explicitness, is a set of metaphors and metonyms that address an India that can no longer rely so confidently on the pre-industrial myths of the community (Roberts, 1994, p. 33).

The primary objective is to highlight works that feature extended video projections alongside installations and assemblages imbued with social and political contexts. One notable example is *"House/Boat"* (1994). In Vivan Sundaram's artistic journey spanning four decades, the boat motif has evolved through various forms across his paintings, installations, and video/new media works. It has transformed from full-scale architectural models to minimalist elemental structures, from fragmented representations of floating debris to sculptural assemblages crafted from recycled components. The motif has also appeared as abstract boat-like forms and mythical vessels, and even as shipping containers repurposed into repositories of historical narratives (Mathur, 2019, pp. 17-18). Sundaram's boat assemblages continually reclaim and expand upon their critical exploration of the traditional connection of artworks to loss. They function as conveyances of

collective disillusionment, challenging the foundational myth that national modernity is achieved by transcending the past through art (Roy, 2009, p. 369).



Fig. 2, Vivan Sundaram, Boat, (installation view from House/Boat), Kalam Khush handmade paper, steel, wood, video, 1994. Courtesy of the artist.

Nalini Malani: Articulating History Through Moving Images and Diverse Media

Nalini Malani is a significant artist whose work bridges national, regional, and international influences. Her transformative approach to assemblage profoundly impacts conceptual understanding, offering visual representations that intertwine past events with contemporary definitions of national and global identities. This juxtaposition creates contradictions that Malani's visual assemblages navigate, integrating moving images and their surrounding contexts to evoke powerful narratives. Malani's works reflect a continual exploration of interdisciplinary forms aimed at investigating and communicating personal and political issues. Her approach involves a temporal and corporeal engagement with the past, present, and future, resulting in a dynamic synthesis of memory, fable, truth, myth, trauma, and strategies of resistance (Miro, 2020, p. 3).

Nalini Malani consistently seeks to anchor her art to a sense of place, drawing from both physical landscapes and the psychic sensations that shape people's experiences of those places. As a contemporary Indian artist, Malani has gained renown for her richly textured and politically charged mixed-media paintings, drawings, videos, installations, and theater works. Pioneering the explicit inclusion of feminist issues in her art during the 1980s, she made a significant impact with visually and conceptually intricate theater and installation pieces.

Her artistic expression is deeply informed by her personal experience of displacement due to the Partition of India, alongside a profound fascination with Hindu and Greek mythology, 19th-century English "nonsense" literature, and early 20th-century experimental theater. Malani's works are characterized by a blend of abstraction, figuration, and textual elements, through which she

explores themes such as gender roles, transnational politics, and the effects of widespread globalization (Priyanka, 2021, p. 65).

Nalini Malini's artistic journey has traversed communities, classes, and countries, marked by a quest for transcendence. She has utilized diverse mediums to convey these experiences, emphasizing the evocation of mythologies and literary texts to challenge narratives of oppression (Yashodhara Dalmia, 2007, p. 151). Most of Malani's images refer to narratives, mythological, historical, and contemporary; Eastern and Western (Bal, 2015, p. 47). Malani's artistic evolution took a significant turn in the 1990s, responding strongly to renewed religious conflicts by expanding her mediums beyond traditional canvas work. She pioneered a new art form she termed "video-play," allowing her theatrical productions to travel effectively. Her video plays such as "Hamletmachine" (2000), "Unity in Diversity" (2003), and "Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain" (2005) garnered immense acclaim and have been exhibited in fourteen countries (Isla Phillips-Ewen, 2023).

In video installations like *"Remembering Toba Tek Singh," "Hamlet Machine,"* and *"Unity in Diversity,"* there is an undercurrent of fragmentation and political manipulation that draws viewers into the immersive process, allowing them to gradually emerge from it. These works are not political manifestos or dogmatic declarations; rather, they present images that linger on the threshold of associative memory, igniting a heightened awareness and consciousness (Yashodhara Dalmia, 2007, p. 156).

Remembering Toba Tek Singh explores bodily, communal, and mnemonic dimensions through an installation featuring iron canteens with small video screens at the center of a room surrounded by large screens. The small screens display archival images of the Partition, depicting refugees' domestic lives, accompanied by a narration of Saadat Hasan Manto's 1955 short story, from which the installation derives its title. The story tells of a Sikh patient from Lahore's psychiatric hospital, forced to move to an Indian hospital three years after the Partition. When asked to cross no man's land, he refuses to choose a side and dies there.

The domestic images in the canteens, associated with mobility, contrast sharply with the 'big story' displayed on the large screens, which showcase international nuclear conflicts, including the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, US nuclear tests in the Pacific, and the Balkans conflicts. This work was prompted by India's announcement of its nuclear bomb capability, a claim echoed by Pakistan days later. Malani's use of seemingly unrelated archival images avoids direct commentary, instead emphasizing how memories and grievances fuel new conflicts. Some images are blurred copies made with a VCR, enhancing the sense of fragmentation.

Between these displays, Malani's footage shows two women, one Indian and one Pakistani, performing the same domestic task of folding a sari. As Malani explains, these shared gestures reveal their kinship beyond political and nationalist divides. During the vast double exile of the Partition, rapes and abductions were rampant, and women were exchanged as spoils of war and symbols of national power. This juxtaposition underscores the common humanity that persists despite historical and political rifts (Kayser, 2015, pp. 2-3).

Inspired by "Toba Tek Singh," a short story by Sa'adat Hassan Manto, the video installation traces the painful, horrific, and absurd journey of violence from the partition of India into two countries, India and Pakistan, in 1947, to the aggressive posturing that led to the nuclear tests in 1998. This work was created in response to India's underground nuclear tests on May 11, 1998, a significant day on the Buddhist calendar. The large central projection features a single-cell animation drawing by the artist, layered with archival footage of 'Little Boy' and 'Fat Man,' the American bombs that killed millions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. The installation is structured as a video triptych. Two videos show two women facing each other across a room filled with tin trunks, which contain monitors and bedding arranged in a grid formation. These trunks are symbolic of those used by refugees to carry their possessions. The monitors in the trunks display images of people uprooted from their homelands, crossing borders, rioting, and suffering. Many of these video images are sourced from archival materials from various countries. This installation powerfully portrays the division of nations and the irrational, inhuman use of technology (Lynn, 1999).

Remembering Toba Tek Singh (1998) is Nalini Malani's first video play and a powerful protest against the Indian government's nuclear tests. It features excerpts from Saadat Hasan Manto's renowned short story, which follows Bishan Singh, a Sikh inmate in a Lahore asylum, who refuses to move to India upon learning his hometown is now in Pakistan. The video opens with two young women from opposing sides of the Partition struggling to fold a sari, interspersed with images of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings' aftermath. When first exhibited, the director of the Prince of Wales Museum in Mumbai attempted to shut it down but was unsuccessful, drawing over 25,000 visitors during the ten-day exhibition (Isla Phillips-Ewen, 2023).



Fig. 3, Nalini Malani, Remembering Toba Take Singh. Video installation, 4 projectors, 4 DVD players [one split screen projection], sync with single remote sensor, 12 monitors, 12 tin trunks, 12 quilts, wall-to-wall mylar, mirrors, 1 audio CD player, 2 amplifiers, and 4 speakers. Dimensions variable, 1998. Courtesy of the Artist.

"Hamlet Machine" (1999/2000) is Nalini Malani's second video play, which traveled to seventeen countries and served as the poster and catalog image for her 2018 retrospective. Malani created the video installation during her residency at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, where it was featured in an anniversary exhibition. This work draws from the postmodern retelling of Shakespeare's *"Hamlet"* by German playwright Heiner Müller (1929–1995). The twenty-minute video plays on four channels across three walls of a square space. The floor features a projection on a bed of salt, referencing Gandhi's Salt March of 1930. Harada Nobuo, a Butoh performer from Fukuoka, stars as the protagonist in the video. The narrative follows a man born from salt and divided into four parts, symbolizing the Hindu caste hierarchy. He performs a prayer before transforming into a cultural hybrid, donning both a Hindu dhoti and a Western business suit. The video also includes clips from documentaries about Hindu fundamentalism, reflecting the work of independent filmmakers who were beginning to highlight issues of acute racism and caste hierarchy within the right-wing government. These documentary clips were provided to Malani gratis by those aiming to give a voice to the voiceless (Isla Phillips-Ewen, 2023).



Fig. 4, Nalini Malani, *Hamlet Machine*, 1999–2000, video play, 20 min, 9 monitors long, 6 monitors wide, 3.5 monitors high, four DVD projectors, sound, salt, mirrored Mylar, text: Heiner Muller. Courtesy of the Artist.

Nalini Malani's work with video has now become substantial enough to require us to ask new questions of the material itself: to ask whether the thickened, viscous matter that develops with slowed-down action spilling out into spaces on the ground and in the haze of neon and pollution might not be a new kind of art material that she has developed, and which was especially in evidence that evening (Rajadhyaksha, 2003, p. 53).

In exploring Nalini Malani's assemblage and variational practices, we see how she combines various forms and elements to reflect on the construction of identities, ideologies, and realities. Her conscious engagement with these constructions is evident in how her works seek to project

these complex narratives. Central to her approach is the moving image, which plays a pivotal role amidst the other elements, reinforcing the idea that her art results from multiple determinations and collective assemblages of enunciation.

Navjot Altaf: Articulating Socio-Political Realities

Navjot Altaf's art practice explores diverse concepts, ranging from the sociological dynamics of urban settlements to her deep engagement with tribal communities, each with its own unique set of challenges. Her work reflects on the complex sociological relationships and the political divisions that affect communities and daily life. As one of India's leading contemporary artists, Navjot Altaf has emerged as a significant voice in postcolonial Indian art. Her nearly five-decade-long career spans painting, sculpture, installation, video, and site-specific works, all of which cross disciplinary boundaries and have gained recognition both nationally and internationally (Gallery). Navjot Altaf explores themes related to memory, history, culture, gender, and sexuality by drawing from her personal experiences. She tackles social, political, and artistic issues, driven by a strong sense of social responsibility. Her work involves questioning established power structures and bringing to light injustices faced by marginalized sections of society (Foundation).

The rise of right-wing fundamentalism in Bombay gradually affected its cultural climate, especially during the Bombay riots following the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992. These events raised crucial questions about recognizing cultural differences in the so-called cosmopolitan city of 'Mumbai.' Many from a particular community were killed or displaced, forcing a redefinition of identity in their homeland. This prompted her collaboration with like-minded creatives from diverse fields, resulting in the installation *"Links Destroyed and Re-discovered."* This project featured documentaries by Teestha Setalvad and Madhushree Dutta, complemented by original musical compositions sung by Neela Bhagwat. Through this collaborative effort, she explores the intricate dynamics of interactive art-making, fostering a reciprocal relationship among collaborators without compromising independent thinking. The installation's interactive nature fostered connections between the viewer, the artwork, and the space, offering a multi-layered experience (Altaf, 1994).

The installation was constructed using 9,000 meters of PVC pipes, old wooden door frames, rails, bamboo, iron strips, soil, aluminum wire, burnt paper, and plastic. Painted canvases and plaster sculptures of heads were mounted on wood panels, while screen-printed female images were repeated across the panels and acrylic strips. Two TV sets, positioned adjacent to the panels, played films simultaneously (Altaf, 1994).



Fig. 5, Navjot Altaf, *Links Destroyed and Rediscovered*, 1994, 7x32x35 feet, Installation with sculptures, photographs, films & music. Courtesy of the Artist.

Another artwork by Navjot Altaf "*Lacuna in Testimony*"^{vi} explores listening to testimonies and the challenge of describing events that remain mysterious when sincerely examined. Testimonies, with their gaps, represent a boundary between internal and external, forming a connection that fascinates her (Altaf, 2003).

Creating "*Lacuna in Testimony*" relied on engaging with people in Ahmedabad's transit camps in 2002. Being there led to dialogue and a sense of creation beyond outcomes. Despite disagreements, new responses emerged, fostering dialogue and trust. Returning a year later to show "*Lacuna in Testimony*" to those who had moved to new places, it reignited connections. Watching it together opened dialogues about post-riot life, public trust issues, identity generalizations, and erasing differences (Altaf, 2003). In *Lacuna in Testimony*, a digital video created in response to the 2003 Gujarat massacre, the artist's use of the grid is not merely symbolic. She envisions the grid as a matrix for mapping the numerous visible and invisible elements, the conflicting layers of complex contexts, and the intricate connections between people, places, and events—both past and present, near and distant. In the work, this concept is reflected through windows that appear and disappear in a structured manner, though the content within them remains unpredictable and varied.^{vii}

^{vi} Altaf, Navjot. *Lacuna in Testimony* extract of Installation view with mirrors, 2003, video, published 25 Feb 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AchhWrtzLg>

^{vii} Amrita Gupta Singh engages in conversation with Nancy Adajania and Navjot Altaf, exploring the political and aesthetic concerns shared by the artist and curator, the commonalities in their readings and critical practices, and the curatorial imagination that informs the retrospective. See, Navjot Altaf, Nancy



Fig. 6, Navjot Altaf, *Lacuna in Testimony*, 2003, mirrors, three-channel video projection (color, sound, 9 minutes 26 seconds). Courtesy of the Artist.

The representation and selected works of Navjot Altaf are deeply intertwined with sociopolitical nuances. The artist's combination of diverse materials and activism heightens the provocative nature of her work. By reflecting on current societal turmoil and pressing concerns, her art engages with a complex assemblage of meanings and representations. A broader perspective reveals the amalgamation of different materials and moving images as a powerful medium for conveying an ongoing process. Consequently, these artworks suggest lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization, and destratification.

Temporal Reverberations: Sheba Chhachhi's Reflections on Memory and Time

If there is one contemporary artist in India who cannot be easily contained within the genre of a monograph, it is Sheba Chhachhi (Mukherji, 2015, p. 128). Sheba Chhachhi's work has been pathbreaking present at several major political and formal crossroads: the women's movement in the late 1970s and the 1980s, the emergence of multimedia installations in the early 1990s, and public art in the 2000s (Sangari, 2016, p. 6). Sheba Chhachhi's art practice offers a critical analysis of historical and contemporary narratives, creating a unique approach to visual representation. Her site-specific installations are composites of various elements, with a primary focus on imagery, both moving and still. Surrounding this imagery are assorted materials that enhance the overall theme.

An example of her work is *The Water Diviner* (2008), which exemplifies the concept of assemblage. This piece combines various materials to convey a unified theme and conceptual understanding within a selected context. Through such works, Chhachhi bridges the past and present, creating a dialogue between historical and contemporary elements. *The Water Diviner* (2008), exemplifies the intersection of knowledge, culture, nature, and the body. Set within the defunct site of a swimming pool in the Delhi Public Library, the installation explores the social memory of water in a city suffering from severe water depletion. This depletion has led to a loss of traditional ways of understanding and interacting with water. In the installation, bundles of library books are stacked like stalagmites and bathed in aqueous light. These are interspersed with book-shaped light boxes that illuminate miniatures, mainly depicting narratives about the Hindu deity Krishna, symbolizing a lost river culture. The sound of flowing water accompanies a serene projection of an elephant falling into the water, guiding us toward the embodied source of cultural memory. Inside Chhachhi's installation, we all become water diviners, searching for the lost connections to our cultural heritage (Kovskaya, 2020, p. 82).

The installation occupies a large room in the basement of the library, with piles of books arranged to resemble waves. Among these piles, lightboxes of miniature paintings seem to float, depicting scenes of the Yamuna River and Krishna mythology, alongside montaged shots of modern-day Delhi. One lightbox on the ground, resembling a pathway, features a detail from a pre-colonial map, connecting a bust of a lion's head—evocative of the fountain from the former colonial swimming pool—and a screen showing an elephant repeatedly diving and dissolving in the sea (Brosius, 2017, p. 150).



Fig. 7, Sheba Chhachhi, *The Water Diviner*, 2008. Multimedia Site-specific Installation with video, books, light boxes, light, and water. Courtesy of the artist.

A deep blue light saturates the space. Every object, every architectural element, and every person takes on the hue. Each person within the space is altered and rendered strange. We become spectral traces in this archive of traces, tracking the sedimentation of time and memory through the colonial back to the Mughal and the pre-Mughal period to calibrate an imaginary psychogeography of water. Time-based media, both visual and auditory, transform the exclusions of the official archive into an immersive experience, building a pool of intimacy in the midst of one of the most crowded areas of the city (Sangari, 2016, p. 26).



Fig. 8, Sheba Chhachhi, *The Water Diviner*, detail.

The Water Diviner integrates various aspects of visual representation, connecting assemblage elements and moving images to depict both mythical themes and contemporary metropolitan issues. It combines diverse elements, presenting images within an integrated setting where blue light alters the overall ambiance of the installation. In this immersive work, Chhachhi creates a contemporary epistemology about water, measuring its receding levels like a diviner. She poses almost apocalyptic questions: How have we fared in our times? Where are we going from where we were? (Mukherji, 2015, p. 136). This immersive artwork constructs both a narrative and a speculative space, with its visual presentation intricately linked to visual perception. A key aspect emphasized throughout the works discussed in this paper is the assemblage between the act of visualization and the spectator—the spectatorial assemblage.

Art as Assemblage: Convergences of Materiality, Semiotics, and Socio-Political Discourse

In these works, the artist explores the concept of assemblages and machinic assemblages in their various forms. This relates to the concept of assemblages as defined within a setup, encompassing both meaningful and non-meaningful objects. According to Deleuze and Guattari, assemblages relate to every construction, structure, meaning, and functionality. Collective assemblages of enunciation function directly within machinic assemblages, illustrating that it is impossible to make a radical break between regimes of signs and their objects (Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, 1987, p. 7). An assemblage, in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously. What constitutes any given assemblage or arrangement, or,

rather, what enables us to recognize any specific assemblage from another, is how its components are organized about each other (David Savat T. H., 2016, p. 20).

The assemblage approach to this work presents multiple meanings, with its definition evolving to create new nuances of representation. Significance and subjectification refer to distinct assemblages of power—despotic and authoritarian, respectively—each with its principles and thus different forms of expression (Henry Somers-Hall, 2018, p. 184). In the context of assemblage connectivity, we can see that the meaning of these works is shaped by both intra- and infra-assemblages, reflecting how the artist has conceptualized the artwork. This can be linked to ideological assemblages, while the work itself presents a physical assemblage. According to the definition by Deleuze and Guattari, the entire formation and execution of the work can be seen as an assemblage. However, there is a distinct difference in how physical objects are connected with moving images, with the moving image itself constituting an assemblage.

Art, we might say, consists of those becoming's mentioned above, frozen in time and space, waiting to be reactivated and unleashed. It is an artist's style that coheres this assemblage into a particular composition. Artists present new compositions of affect, creating new affective assemblages that differ from those we are accustomed to. This distinction differentiates art, as a specific form of thought, from mere opinion.^{viii}

William C. Seitz offers a profound analysis of assemblage within twentieth-century art movements, tracing its connections to movements such as Cubism, Surrealism, Futurism, Kinetic art, and various artistic practices. Assemblage, in his interpretation, is more poetic than realistic, where each constituent element can transform. Physical materials and their essences are transmuted into a new amalgamation that both transcends and encompasses its parts (Seitz, 1961, p. 83).

These artists' practices encompass diverse subjects, particularly in their works where the focus lies on how different assemblages converge to address current issues. The inclusion of moving images adds depth and complex relationships within the assemblages they create. In these artworks, complex arrangements of objects alongside video portrayals of people are prominent. This unique fusion of screens, objects, and video projections exemplifies assemblage evolving within new media practices. However, the primary significance lies in how these object arrangements convey socio-political meanings specific to their regions.

The concept of assemblage in art holds significant importance, particularly as it developed during the modern era in Western art. This approach connects various art movements and maintains its relevance throughout art history. By linking assemblage art with assemblage theory, the meaning of the artwork is extended, presenting it as a whole that combines the idea, materiality, creator, and the space in which it is displayed. This method seeks to clarify the combination of multiple

^{viii} Assemblage is an approach where its meaning connects with the artist's relation with the work and more reference with the elements constituting the artwork. See, Stephen Zepke and Simon O'Sullivan. (2010). *Deleuze and contemporary art*. Edinburgh University Press. 198-199.

processes and functionalities. This paper focuses on an additional feature where artists incorporate video into assemblage works, marking an early instance of new media practices.

We define an **assemblage** as any constellation of singularities and traits derived from the "How"—selected, organized, and stratified—in a way that converges both artificially and naturally, making it a genuine invention. Assemblages can group into extremely vast constellations, forming "cultures" or even "ages." Within these constellations, the assemblages further differentiate the phyla or the flow, dividing it into various phyla of a given order and level, and introducing selective discontinuities in the ideal continuity of matter and movement (Gilles Deleuze, 2010, p. 81). Assemblages are not defined by their components; they are defined, rather, by what they produce, and what they produce, ultimately, are the complex forms and objects that populate contemporary society (Buchanan, 2021, p. 47).

Assemblages are double-sided – there is a machinic side and an expressive side (Buchanan, 2021, p. 50). In addition to the exteriority of relations, the concept of assemblage is defined along two dimensions. One dimension, or axis, defines the variable roles that an assemblage's components may play, ranging from a purely material role at one extreme to a purely expressive role at the other (Delanda, 2006, p. 12). This conception of the ontological scope of the question animates works of art as much as philosophical thought. Works are developed around or based on a fracture that they never succeed in filling (Deleuze, 1995, p. 195).

The artists selected in this paper are prominent figures in the art of the subcontinent, each having adapted to a variety of expressive mediums. Crucially, they reflect on geopolitical and socioeconomic conditions, as well as the impacts of historical events and contemporary challenges. This paper concludes that the articulation of assemblage theory, about the situated aspects of lived experiences, is essential. The complex situations presented by these artists, along with their approaches to assemblage in visual arts and the integration of new technologies, imbue their work with fresh meaning. The primary aim is to explore this process and to understand assemblage theory and construction. Ultimately, the entire process of art production, alongside the artists' reflections on societal conditions, culminates in a rich assemblage.

The artwork and the process can be formulated with the definition where Deleuze and Guattari constituted the assemblage of physical matter and discourse that an artwork provides which means one part is visible and the other part articulated (Ian Buchanan G. V., 2021, p. 43). When art space is transformed and its meaning is combined with assemblage, the relationship between theory and the physical collection of objects becomes apparent. While theory and the collection of assemblages are two different entities, the representation of theory through these collections in art space captures the essence of the theory. In many respects, this challenges traditional maxims of how artwork is described, highlighting the complexity of both society and the multiplicity of the artwork.

The central conclusion of this paper is that both the artist's practice and the artist themselves are intimately connected with assemblage. In other words, actor-network theory itself can be seen as an idea of assemblage, focusing particularly on the actors involved in the process and the

elements they constitute. The practices of these artists possess a unique quality that can be related to various philosophical references. While technical aspects play a significant role in advancing artistic practices, the complexity faced by artists from third-world countries, including current situations and limited access to technical resources, adds another layer of challenge.

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