

KRISHNA'S DILEMMA:

Art museums in human development

Amareswar Galla

When we write about the experience of a group to which we don't belong, we should think about the ethics of our actions, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce or perpetuate domination.

— bell hooks

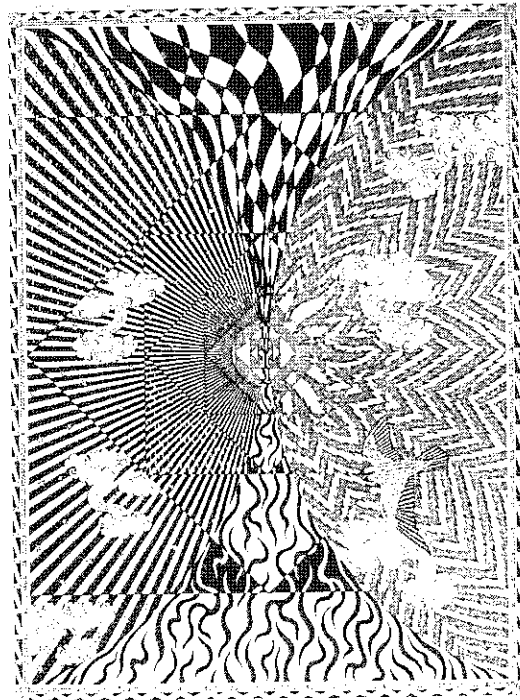
CHALLENGES OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM

The decades leading up to the turn of the last millennium witnessed considerable interrogation of the role of art in cultural democracy and human rights. Intense discussions, dissent, protests and transformations of art museums and arts-funding bodies led to new discursive encounters that have now become symptomatic of any dialogue on art and representation. Art history as a discipline is increasingly becoming interdisciplinary, with many new pedagogical challenges presenting themselves as a result, and art museums are

endeavouring to become relevant beyond the coteries of their élite clientele. In fact, the liminality of the borders between art museums and other museums and cultural institutions is becoming increasingly apparent. Art museums are struggling to become community-centred and relevant within the framework of cultural democracy. However, learning to open the door is only the first step. Keeping an open house as institutions in the service of society is the long road to emancipation from cloisters of élite discourse. The challenge is to establish a seamless dialogue among creativity, creators, innovators, interpreters and multiple stakeholder publics. The shift from consultation and representation to relevance and engagement requires a participatory process for shifting the paradigm of the notion of the art museum itself through appropriate interrogation.

In the past, the context for change has been provided by community cultural action, self-conscious professional endeavours and social justice agendas. However, the renegotiation of borders of cultural heritage practice has been sporadic and rarely systematic. The post-apartheid convention in Johannesburg in 1994, entitled *Bringing Cinderella to the Ball: arts and culture in the new South Africa*, challenged the cultural sector to become relevant and engage with reconstruction and development. In many ways South African cultural heritage discourse evolved in the context of an unprecedented disengagement with the immediate past. Developments in South Africa enriched art and cultural practice and professional frameworks across the world. This is evident from the final report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, entitled *Our Creative Diversity* (1996), and the subsequent Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Development, which resulted in the *Stockholm Action Plan* (1998).

More recently, the Stockholm+5 meeting in 2003 and the various activities of Forum Barcelona in 2004 have, for the first time, provided a framework for cultural indicators in development.



John Frank Sabado
(the Philippines)
*Six Cardinal Points
of the Universe*

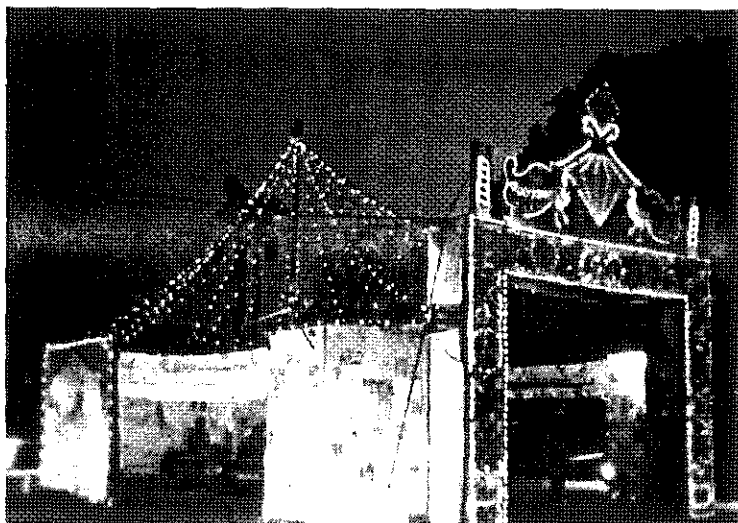
2000
Pen and ink on paper
51 x 69 cm
Collection: Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum

The Annual Human Development Report and Index of the UNDP will use these cultural indicators. Art museums, arts governance and arts funding will be evaluated and their outcomes measured using these indicators. But two fundamental questions must be asked. First, do art museums have the capacity to become agencies of human development? And, second, how can the rhetoric of art and cultural democracy be translated into the reality of human development?

The process leading to Forum Barcelona has parallels. The final report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, entitled *Our Common Future* (1987), led to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, resulting in *Local Agenda 21*, which provided the framework for ecologically sustainable development. The World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2002), popularly known as Rio+10, brought about new synergies and a convergence of global agendas. The parallel lines of the nature and culture agendas were brought together into the framework of sustainable cultural diversity using the framework of the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. Arjun Appadurai, in his seminal paper in Johannesburg, argued for sustainable development, cultural diversity and cultural heritage — both tangible and intangible — to be brought together in an integrated paradigm. It is this paradigm that informs the Sustainable Heritage Development Programme and the Pacific Asia Observatory for Cultural Diversity and Development currently being established at

Durriya Kazi and
David Alesworth
(Pakistan/UK)
Arz-e-Mauood
(The Promised Land)

1997
Installation:
Karachi, Pakistan
Image courtesy the artists



The Australian National University. These initiatives are strategic activities with local, national international partners, including intergovernmental bodies such as UNESCO and ICCROM. The course entitled Art Museums in Development is an integral part of these new developments, addressing the challenges posed by the need to locate art museums in human development.

The concept of art museums in development is seminal and most timely. The dialogue on cultural diversity is at the heart of the Asia-Pacific region, home to more than half the world's population. Interrogating the epistemological basis of art museums in postcolonial societies of the region and their location in sustainable development has become critical, as well as symptomatic of a reflective heritage profession that is concerned about the relevance of its endeavours. The struggle has been to move beyond the dichotomy of hegemonic occidental and subaltern oriental discourses into a new era of shared heritage language for meaningful debates and global outcomes owned by humanity in general and the respective heritage communities in particular. Cultural conservation is not only about the preservation, continuation and management of cultural heritage resources but also the processes of evolution and continuation of community cultural contexts. The recognition of cultural diversity in several countries poses a direct challenge to the development of appropriate processes for cultural representation. Cultural democracy also means redressing the erosion of cultural heritage self-esteem leading to the breakdown of well-being and alienation. In many ways, cultural heritage has become the focus for the exploration and articulation of the sense of shared and contested meanings of cultural borders and subaltern histories across the world.

The way forward requires us to ask certain fundamental questions. One of these relates to the embedded nature of binary oppositions, such as the occidental and oriental dichotomy mentioned above. I will explore this question through a personal illustration. Krishna is a dark-skinned cowherd, loved as an indigenous personality. He is symbolic of the reconciliation of the so-called great tradition informed by Sanskritic elements and the small traditions of local communities in India. Sanskritisation as the agency of the former is the globalising element while indigenous traditions are the localising centripetal forces. In this process of acculturation and integration, Krishna is the reconciliatory

personality that transcends all barriers of caste, class, race, ethnicity, language and regionalism.

Representations of Krishna abound with all the sensuousness and playfulness that have come to be seen as characteristic of him as both god and human. Krishna's discourse on duty to Arjuna in the classic text the *Bhagavat Gita* has become celebrated among people in many different places and at many different times, from the followers of Einstein to Amartya Sen. However, it was the counter-culture movements of the 1960s that provided the theatre for Krishna to dance across from conventional museum collections to the world of the art museum. Krishna has transcended the confinement of material culture collections and crossed over to the popular displays of galleries, now enjoying the same sort of popularity he has historically always been accustomed to in India. Krishna is personified in sculptures, Kangra works of art on silk and miniatures from Rajasthan that abound in the public museums and private collections of the world. His role in the Mahabharata in its dozens of recensions and local adaptations in South and South-East Asia is well known. Wayang, the Indonesian art form, exemplifies his continuation as an integral part of local cultural systems beyond India.

For those of us brought up in rural India and introduced to art museums and galleries through formal education and professional practice, the context of Krishna remains a benchmark for locating culture in development. Confronting the out-of-cultural-context museum displays on India in North America and Europe for the first time in the 1980s appealed to my childhood memories of playing in a museum. Statues of gods and goddesses, including Krishna, provided cross-cultural comfort in alien environments. Often categorised as works of art, they were shown with minimal captions within a Western aesthetic discourse that often left me wondering how the visitors could ever understand anything at all about the spiritual significance of Krishna. Where was the performance and ritual, the story and significance, the intangible heritage without which the tangible was only stone or metal? It was playing hide-and-seek behind comparable sculptures set in lime and concrete in the local site museums in Andhra Pradesh that formed my earliest impressions of the heritage field as a child. Neither my friends nor I could have dreamt that Krishna would travel all over the world, except in the local temples where

expositions on Krishna gave him credence for flying all over the world on his mythical *vahana*, or vehicles.

I remember a seminar at which a British historian of Africa, keen to shift his research focus to India, upon returning from a field trip to India expressed amusement at the fact that South Indians spelt the word 'unique' 'Unike'. Little did he realise that 'Unike' is one of the many popular names of Krishna. Obviously, his edition of the Hobson Jobson Dictionary failed to illuminate him in this respect.

More recently, the missionaries of Krishna consciousness, or Hare Krishna devotees, have become the un-intended interpreters of Krishna from London to New York and even Mathura, the place of origin of Krishna. The different stories of Krishna are not simply mythologies. Visitor responses show that in the face of minimal text, visitors go away amused by Krishna's playfulness, his 18,000 maidens, his devotees distributing the *Bhagavat Gita* and other Krishna consciousness literature and offering free pure vegetarian meals. Only the minority that purchase museum catalogues or have a genuine research interest tend to see beyond the object or art work to the realm of embedded meanings and histories. Deep research into Krishna representation, audiences and appropriate interpretative tools could lead to a sufficient understanding of the context to provide a meaningful experience to visitors. Krishna could become an educator about India and its impact beyond its borders, a cross-cultural mediator in multicultural societies, a community actor in development. But the challenge lies in reconciling Krishna's presence in the intangible heritage of Mathura and its highly impoverished hinterland and neighbourhoods with his image as it exists in the imaginations of the affluent art museums of New York.

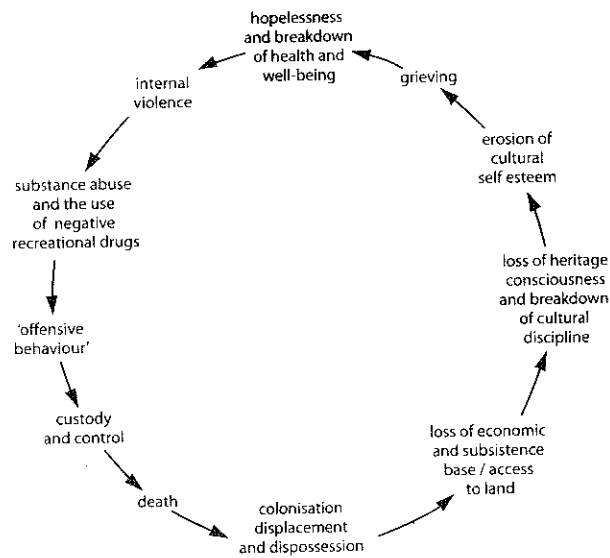
The question, however, is this: Even with all the interrogations of the two decades since the publication of Edward Said's seminal work, is Orientalism as discourse really a thing of the past in art museums? Addressing the dichotomies embedded in art museum discourse and what I have referred to as Krishna's dilemma challenges art museums to locate their signification in the community context from which their past and present collections originate. In addressing authenticity and significance in heritage management, David Lowenthal has referred to dichotomies of true and false, real and fake, sacred and profane. Many other dichotomies,

such as primitive and civilised, literate and illiterate, traditional and contemporary, occidental and oriental, dynamic and static, have dominated art and heritage discourse until very recently. It is critical to confront the tyranny of binary oppositions, if we are to recognise creativity in the emerging cultural heritage values of contemporary societies. After all, where does one delineate traditional and contemporary heritage value systems and their manifestations in complex societies? The old English adage, 'once a practice, twice a tradition', is the reality in community cultural development.

The conventional place, site, art work, sculpture and object-centred approaches pose another dichotomy of tangible and intangible cultural heritage resources. In September 1991, an unprecedented number of Aboriginal people from 200 communities across the Kimberley met at the Crocodile Hole near Turkey Creek in Western Australia. The gathering included famous Aboriginal artists. The first day of the meeting was led by Aboriginal elders of great traditional standing and custodianship, the cumulative repositories of thousands of years of cultural heritage values. Such intangible world heritage has been under continuous threat through displacement, dispossession and colonisation in several parts of the world. An old African proverb says, 'When an old person dies a library burns down.' As the seeds of a universal cultural heritage system, indigenous cultures are 'of outstanding universal value'. In considering sustainable heritage development, it is critical to consider the interrelationship of intangible and tangible cultural heritage values.

Another construct is the nature and culture binary, which is based on universalised 19th-century knowledge. In many parts of the world the non-duality of nature and culture informs cosmological and worldview systems. In response to this dichotomy, the Aboriginal elders at the Crocodile Hole meeting stated 'Culture is a map. It is written in the land.' The dichotomy of nature and culture was dismissed as superfluous. Perhaps the most significant outcome of the meeting was the advocacy for the location of museums in human development. At the same time as the Crocodile Hole meeting, the Western Australian Government was conducting a review of museums and galleries in the state. I was brought in as the resource person for the taskforce to work with the Aboriginal Interests Committee chaired by Peter Yu.

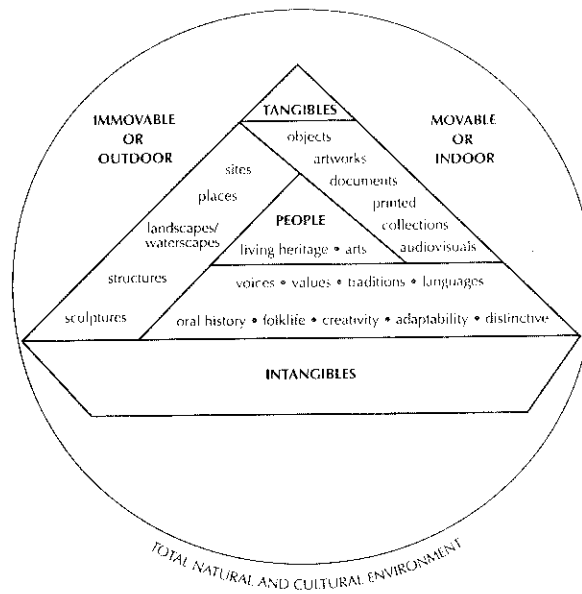
It was also the time of the deliberations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. We asked members attending the meeting about their view of the role of cultural institutions such as museums, galleries and site management agencies. A diagram drawn in the sand is reproduced below.



A dimension of the relationship between heritage and the breakdown of well-being

©A.Galla & P.Yu

It was pointed out that the role of museums and galleries in human development was to address the erosion of cultural self-esteem. I have argued in several forums that all heritage is intangible and that so-called natural heritage is culturally perceived. It is an integral part of our evolving collective consciousness. It is often perceived through disciplinary-based tangible constructs such as sites, monuments, objects, art or 'things'. The holistic framework for understanding cultural heritage should consider integrated approaches to movable and immovable, tangible and intangible cultural heritage resources, and place the people in all their diversity, with all the creativity, adaptability and hybridity of their arts, culture and heritage, at the centre (see figure below).



Holistic Representation of Cultural and Heritage Resources¹

©A. Galla & P. Yu

Another challenge for art museums in dealing with the art and heritage dichotomy is to address their location in discussions of heritage diversity and cultural diversity. Cultural heritage should be regarded as dynamic, living value systems of layered significance, central to individual, community, national and global senses of cultural esteem and identities. A holistic approach should be advocated, and the usefulness of systematic cultural mapping and planning must be recognised. These approaches enable balanced developments that take into consideration a range of economic, historical and social impacts. In essence, cultural mapping allows communities to explore the special meanings of the places in which they live. Partnerships between planners, architects, community historians, heritage practitioners, artists and community agencies are crucial if communities are to take control of the spaces in which they live. Art museums could play a pivotal facilitating role in working with artists and communities to establish the diverse significance and unique qualities of cultural spaces, and thus promote the recognition that culture, health and well-being are inseparable. Cultural mapping also contributes to

community awareness of local history and cultural achievement, and promotes preventive conservation. The articulation of subaltern cultural ideologies, facilitated through cultural mapping and planning in postcolonial and transitional societies, offers exciting opportunities for the democratisation of hegemonic cultural and heritage constructs and contributes significantly towards rethinking the cultural borderlands in pluralistic societies.

The proliferation of commercially constructed art and heritage discourse is increasingly becoming the new 'cold war', eroding heritage value systems and challenging notions of integrity, authenticity and heritage diversity. The inevitability of adaptation of heritage spaces, the impact of market forces or mass tourism and the realities of cultural economics must move us to become more proactive. The unique Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian cultural heritage values and hence their creativity are under threat due to the pressures of tourism on local economies. For art museums, there are three ways of addressing this concern:

- the refinement of art museum discourse itself through a balance of inclusive recognition of heritage diversity and cultural diversity, with appropriate negotiation through participatory democracy and professional practice;
- the development of frameworks that distinguish heritage tourism from the broader notions of cultural tourism. Heritage tourism should be developed within a best-possible practice framework that does not compromise the cultural integrity of non-renewable resources; and

Centre Culturel Tjibaou
(Noumea, New Caledonia)

Exterior view
Image courtesy of the
Centre Culturel Tjibaou.
Architect: Renzo Piano
Building Workshop



- the strategic promotion of art museum literacy in diverse community contexts and the recognition of community literacy in art museums.

The context of art museums could be *synchronic*, referring to creativity at a given period of time in history or the present, or *diachronic*, referring to a historical and continuing process over a period of time. The validity of any 'postcolonial approach to representation' informing art museums in pluralistic societies will depend on three different levels of approach that should be considered holistically.

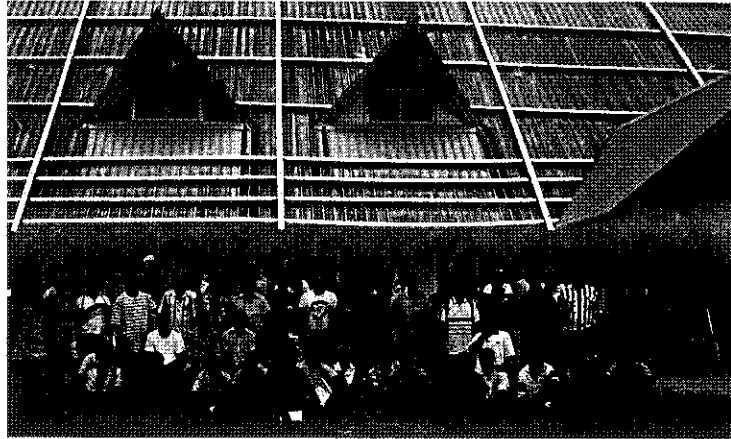
The first approach is grounded in community cultural development discourse that is informed by the many voices that articulate cultural heritage values. In several subaltern cultural groups, the cultural centre or community heritage networks at once bring together movable and immovable heritage resources, tangible and intangible cultural elements. The cultural centre is a keeping place, a place of creativity, a community museum, a living heritage centre, an interpretation centre and an educational centre where different generations and heritage value systems converge or diverge. It is an integral part of the cultural fabric of the society that it represents and promotes. The cultural centre is a mechanism for cultural heritage preservation and concentrated community cultural activity. It is also an important vehicle for reclaiming cultural values and advocating the postcolonial position of accepting non-Western notions of cultural development. Frameworks for establishing partnerships should be open to being informed by community cultural heritage mechanisms.

The second approach is driven by access and equity principles, which could apply across all public sector portfolios. These principles

Haryo Yose Suyoto
(Indonesia)
Noise Community

1999
Volunteers from the local
metal company in
Yogyakarta participating in
sound performance project
in Yogyakarta. The project
involved participation from
a number of local
communities
Image courtesy
Cemeti Art House
and the artist





Fieldworker network at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. These indigenous volunteers, and their female counterparts, represent the VCC and undertook research projects in their local areas. Image courtesy Stephen Zagala

embody a systematic way of dealing with cross-cultural issues. Access can be defined as the process of ensuring equality of opportunity to apply for cultural services (including advice), entitlements and benefits that are appropriate to the diversity in nature and presentation of community needs. Equity is the process of allocating public resources fairly, both in the disbursement of legal entitlements under a service or program without discrimination and in redressing an identified inequitable balance. The greatest challenges are to bridge the gulf between the rhetoric and reality of access and equity, and to ensure transformation strategies driven by workplace cultural diversity planning. The commitment of art museums to cultural diversity planning will be an indicator of their engagement with human development.

The third and most important approach is the diversification of mainstream practice. It is often mentioned that the so-called mainstream is a culture of public practice informed by the elite politics and practices of a dominant minority. Previously, change here was often driven by cultural action imperatives and the effective advocacy of the disenfranchised. Cultural equity issues inevitably give rise to tensions and divisions in cultural heritage endeavours. These are often due to the reluctance of the mainstream to change or of those in control to share. But the simple truth is that the push for cultural democracy in pluralistic societies cannot be swept under the carpet. The sustainable future is a global community that no longer focuses on cultural differences but reflects the diverse origins of different peoples and their varied cultural inheritances. In short, the structures and



Navin Rawanchaikul
(Thailand)
*Fly with Me
to Another World*
2004
Children's shadow
puppet activities
Lamphun, Thailand
Image courtesy the artist

basis for the consideration of the art museum world need to be diversified to reflect a pluralistic corporate culture of operations.

In conclusion, I would argue that in today's world of transitional cultural democracies and accelerated economic, cultural and digital globalisation, the relevance of art museums will be a negotiated balance between their *community groundedness* and the imperatives of market forces, given, however, that their fundamental commitment to the creative integrity and cultural heritage practices of different communities is non-negotiable. The future of the art museum as an agent for human development is interdisciplinary. In order to place the art museum at the centre of human development approaches should reflect the histories of the relevant cultural contexts and communities of interest to establish the synchronic and/or diachronic layering of validity. These

approaches to human development must reveal current practices of cultural construction and representation and the meaning of creativity in diverse cultural and heritage contexts. The processes of making connections and communicating across borders of heritage diversity and cultural diversity will be critical for the preservation, presentation, continuation and management of pluralistic world heritage.

NOTES

Amareswar Galla was elected as the Vice-President of ICOM, Paris, in October 2004.

- 1 Amareswar Galla, 'Authenticity: rethinking heritage diversity in a pluralistic framework', *Nava Concation on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention*, World Heritage Bureau, UNESCO, Paris, 1995, pp. 315–22; *Heritage Curricula and Cultural Diversity*, National Guidelines for Museum Training, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Prime Minister and Cabinet, Canberra, 1993; *Culture in Development*, UN Discussion Paper, UNDP, Hanoi, 2003. (Papers available for free downloading on <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/heritage/>.)