

Extract from: New-Context Media: A Passage from Indifference to Adulation by Nancy Adjanja (June 26, 2009)
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Man With Cockerel - 2
2004, single channel video, 6 min loop with sound

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This narrative of the shift from an art situation dominated by painting, to one in which new media practices set the tone, is adequate as the snapshot of a decade. Unfortunately, it is rather simplistic: it shows us only piecemeal solutions, tactical choices, and often derivative reactions to fast-changing circumstances. And indeed, in early 2000, in the course of a series of lectures that I gave in Germany and Austria, I realised that there were major issues that this narrative could not account for and that there was a gulf separating the mainstream Western history of new media art and the history of new media art in India. It seemed that the historical assumptions, chronologies of technical infrastructure, and regional histories of communication that I was proposing, as armatures for Indian new media art, were very different from the ones to which colleagues in Central Europe and North America were attuned.

It came to me there could be no global history of new media art, and that the history of new media art in any local context is dependent on the technological advances and the politics of communication as they prevail in that locale, a phenomenon for which I coined the term "new-context media". [1] For instance, video art in India does not have a regional tradition going back to the 1960s and '70s, as it does in industrially advanced nations – where, of course, advanced communications technologies, powered by the needs of the military, espionage, and surveillance concerns of the Cold War military-industrial complex, became available far earlier. Technological advances were far slower in India during the Cold War and the central planning era; the belated arrival and dissemination of video in India during the 1980s ensured that video art could flower in this country only in the 1990s.

The mercurial nature of the emerging technoscape in the 1990s and its associated social matrix influenced artists who chose to work with new media. They began to consider the possibility of replacing the gallery object with the project, and the market with the community. Economic liberalisation changed the look and content of print as well as televisual media. Photocopy machines were already evolving into an everyday medium of data duplication and personal computers were becoming available. The technoscape was dominated by major information technology corporations, but their monopoly was challenged by the new heroes of cyberspace: hackers, copyright defying pirates, exponents of the internet. This marked a radical turn in contemporary Indian art: as against the gallery routine of painting-as-commodity, those aspects of expressive and performance culture which had so far remained excluded were now given play in the new genres of video and performance art. These allowed for a far greater subjectivity, for an interplay between the illusionism of painting and the immediacy of performance, for the problematising of the iconic, for the generation of avatars and morphs, and for the politicisation of the private and the creation of solidarities and environments conducive to re-defining the role of art.

These initiatives used newly available media to insert themselves into situations beyond the existing purview of art practice, thus provoking into being new contexts for art: hence my term, "new-context media". Significantly, new-context media art is peopled by artists whose education and interests are not restricted to a Fine Arts milieu, but enriched by diverse subcultures. It stands at the intersection between various disciplines, genres, media, audiences, and economies of production, including activist documentary filmmaking, social research, street theatre, satellite TV, philosophy of consciousness, and the internet.

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