

kiran subbaiah

BY ABHISHEK HAZRA

Love All 1999 matches,
beeswax (1.3m diameter)

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In your work, particularly in your video work, one finds an ironic and idiosyncratic 'take' on the notion of narrative.

I find narratives interesting. Perhaps it has to do with ending something. If there is a beginning, then where will it end? The ending is something that I find necessary. I used to get really bored with some video art. I mean, it's boring if nothing happens to it over time. Would you also call my sculptures narrative in nature?

Well, there is a certain narrative aspect in the sculptures, too. Many of them evoke a very specific context by compacting an entire narrative sequence through their formal elements. For example *Love All*, the work with a football made of matchsticks.

Yes, when you look at that piece you can perhaps sense there has been a past and that there will be a future, and the 'now' of the sculpture is very much caught up within this flow of time. I remember seeing in the Mahabalipuram friezes the two different approaches in depicting Mahishasuramardini. There is one that is almost like a comic-book depiction of the sequence of events, and then there is the other iconic image of Durga with her foot on Mahishasura's head. This single image is like the sum of the sequence in the other set.

Love All 1999 matches,
beeswax (5.3m diameter)



Even though you were dealing with a notion of temporality in your sculptures, it's still a shift to video-based work.

I started using a video camera to document some of my mobile sculptures and process-based work. But I soon lost interest in that kind of video documentation, where I was essentially trying to convey the changing aspects of a sculpture. I felt that, if done properly, a photograph could achieve that, without demanding the input of time. Then I started getting ideas for making things happen specifically for a video camera. And some of these were also quite sculptural, such as *Pinnacle*, where I construct this pyramid from blocks and it's only when a rock is placed on it, and the whole thing falls down, that you realise the blocks were made from empty paper bags. So in these works you don't see certain effects until something happens. I guess that was pretty much how I got into video: doing things that you cannot do in sculpture – things happening in time. And then I also started cooking up narratives for video.

In the videos your own persona is quite strongly foregrounded. In a way, the artist's persona becomes the primary material.

I think that happened later. The earlier videos are not related directly to my persona. It could

Thirst 1999 salt,
glass, pebbles,
plaster, cloth, paper,
polystyrene, cotton
wool (2m high)



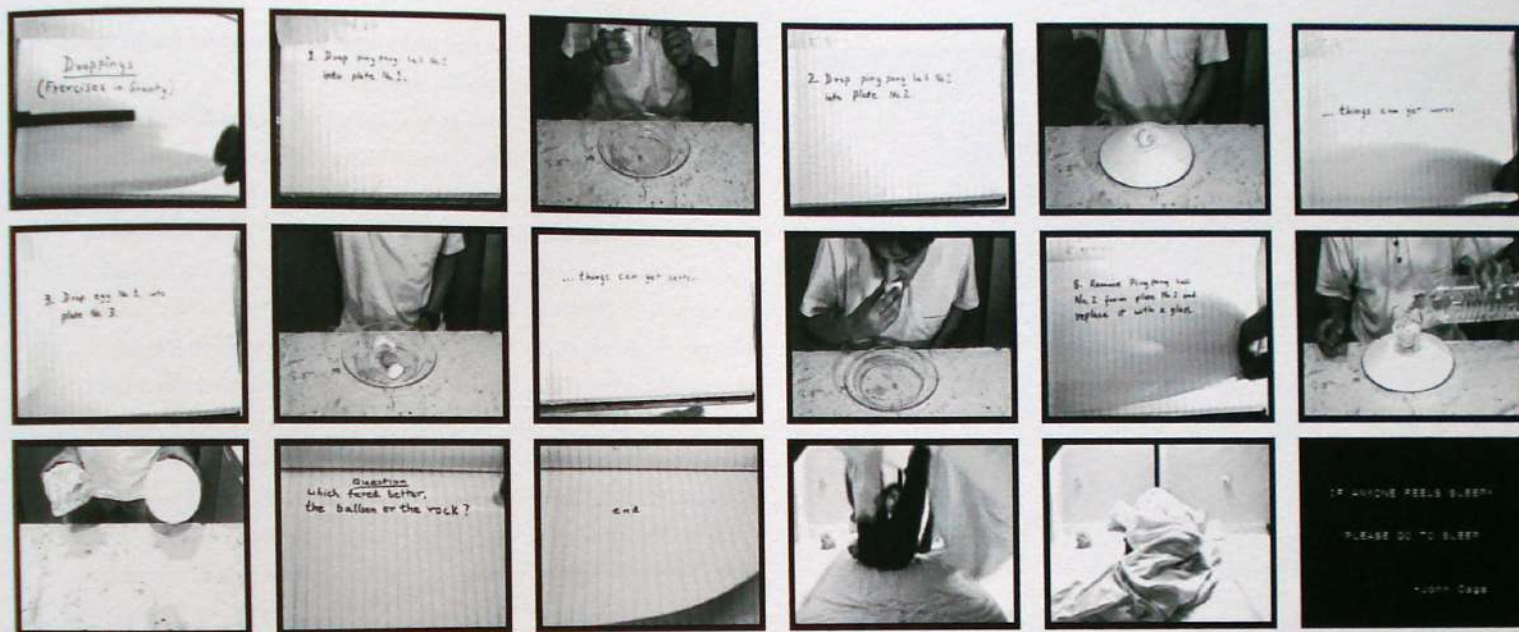
Now I See It 1998
video (1min 36sec)
FAR RIGHT BELOW
Occasion 1999 lice,
candles (variable)

have been anybody's. Though of course people started saying, 'We can see the real you in your videos: that is the real Kiran Subbaiah'. So after a while I started creating a mystique around this Kiran Subbaiah.

What I find interesting in your videos is the way in which the artifice of this mystique is held in tension. There is a constant play between the 'real', 'normal' Kiran Subbaiah and the performing Kiran Subbaiah of the video. A lot of the things I say in a video I could have said in reality, in my real life. But since I didn't, maybe because it didn't strike me at the time, I can work it up subsequently: make it perfect and make a video out of it. So the artifice comes in naturally. It is pre-planned. Nothing goes wrong. If something does, then you stop it and do it again, or you let it go wrong on purpose.

So it is all tightly scripted. Now it's quite evident that text, either written or spoken, is important in your works. Do you write otherwise?

Many of my videos started their life as text. But sometimes they are just too complicated to depict through video, so I make them into texts. Take *Immobile*, for example, which is basically about two guys with mobile phones on a double-decker bus: it could have been a video but then you would have to have shot in the middle of traffic. It's complicated and not really necessary because the text works as well. When I initially conceived *Flight Rehearsal* I thought it would be too complicated to execute on video. So I just wrote a text. Later, after almost five years, I realised that certain things which had seemed complicated could be simplified; then I did the video.



Dropping (Exercises in Gravity) 1998
video (3min 47sec)

Would you be happy with abandoning video altogether and working entirely in text?

Probably not. I like the physical act of actually doing it. Also, there is the advantage of having the final work on tape, which is like a book in a way – it's easy to circulate compared to, say, a sculpture that you have to physically transport to the venue each time, which gets quite tiring. In a video you can work on a large scale but eventually it all gets compressed to the dimensions of the tape or DVD. I also like to use my body to work. Writing is more a way of capturing and documenting an idea that suddenly strikes you. But I don't really like sitting at a computer and banging my head over a piece of text. It doesn't suit my temperament because it doesn't absorb my physical energy.

Another recurrent motif in your work is that of dysfunction – of things not working. Often that's set in a playful register, where it doesn't really matter if things work or not.

Anyway, an art object is not meant to work. It's not meant to serve a utilitarian purpose. A lot of my works give the impression you could do something practical with them, but you very soon realise that you can't. Either it's going to be terrible if you did, or the result would be quite redundant.

When I look at, say, a Renaissance painting, I am looking more at the time, what ideas they might have had then. It might have been made with interests quite different to those I appreciate in it. So, basically, I am trying to get at that non-use value.



Fast 1997 steel,
wood, enamel paint
(36cm high)



Brokes 1998
plastic ball, castors
(32cm wide)

Is this position of yours a reaction to the other position where the art object is seemingly invested with political 'use value'?

I am sceptical of art objects that pose as agitprop for the politics of the real world. You might as well deal with such issues through real action. You could say that some of my work is sarcastic about that kind of art. However, I am very consciously involved in the politics of the art object itself, of its 'here' and 'now' – of me as the artist, you as the viewer and the work as an art object – what I can do with it and abscond, and what you can also possibly do with it, or can't. There's a power game happening. But you should realise that it is completely psychological, it's not actually doing anything to you. It's completely in the mind. In this sense, one of the most powerful works for me was Duchamp's *Fountain*. I remember the first time I saw it in my first year at art college – when I was earnestly trying to cultivate academic skills – I felt offended by it. My immediate reaction was, 'How can they let artists do things like that?'. It was only many years later, when I had grown tired of my skills, that I began to appreciate *Fountain* as a very powerful full stop for art. I think I have been battling that threat by inventing or reinventing more full stops.

There's something of a hacker's approach to the way you rig up mechanical or electronic things. Have you always been a tinkerer, fixing up home-made radios and that sort of thing in high school?

Not really. At least, not with electronics – that's fairly recent. Though, in a way, even learning to draw a figure is a kind of hack. You could say that I am addicted to the kick you get from hacking. And, after I've hacked into something – after having worked out how to draw a figure, for example – I don't find it particularly interesting to do it any more. So I am always looking for new things to hack. In some cases, to be able to do a particular hack, I might need help from people who know how to do it better than me. That was how I worked with Mahiti on the virus project.

The work that you did at Khoj was also a mechanical contraption. How was the Khoj experience?

Artists need these kinds of workshops. After leaving art college socialisation is not just a natural thing that happens, you have to make an effort to meet people. So for a short period of time you have a temporary art college atmosphere, with exchanges happening, some politics and gossip, and all that makes life a little more interesting. For an artist who spends most of his time working alone in his studio workshops like this are always exciting.

So how did the Khoj work come about? Was it something you decided to do at the workshop?

No, it was something that I wanted to do a long time ago and it was just before the workshop that I was getting things together for it. I probably did around 10 per cent of the work at Khoj, and later worked on it for another two months before calling it finished.

The work you're doing now with self-organising mechanical systems seems to be an extension of the Khoj work. Do you see them as part of the same family?

In fact, the work that I did at Khoj is perhaps the only electrically powered mechanical sculpture I have made so far. The one I'm working on now will be the second. I also hope that it turns out to be the last, because these things keep breaking down and demand constant technical attention.

You never know. You might end up producing an entire bestiary of strange contraptions.

Well, I hope not!



Articulation
spg7 steel, hemp
(42cm high)