# The Ludic Epiphany of Kiran Subbaiah

## http://www.geocities.com/antikiran

Objects, Virus and Videotape. **Abhishek Hazra** attempts a response to Kiran Subbaiah.

-------------------------------------------------------------

Let it be made clear at the very outset, Kiran Subbaiah's work is a joke. Almost all of his artworks are performed with a sort of earnest, deadpan seriousness that puts even the most hard-boiled irony to shame. The fact that as a viewer, one cannot but help chuckling to one-self while engaging with his work is perhaps only a minor part of this joke. And as the tug of the facial muscles inform the viewer of the smile spreading across his face, he receives instant confirmation of this nascent smile from the work itself; the work seems to offer up a mirror for the viewer to gaze at his own smile. Or perhaps the scenario really is of a vertiginous regress of mirrors, where this reflected image of confirmation is really another, perhaps virtual viewer laughing at the smile of this other 'real' viewer: a garrulous community of viewers, with each acutely aware of the other. And somewhere among this uproar, history comes in and sits down quietly.

*

Consider for example, one of his earlier video works, '*Hello, I am…*' (1997-1998) where Kiran trains the video camera on his own image in the bathroom mirror and keeps up an uninterrupted monologue - though contextualized in the video as a putative dialogue with



Hello! I am not Kiran Suubaiah. I am not even the person whose name is Kiran Subbaiah.

**From the video *Hello, I am…'* (1997-1998)**
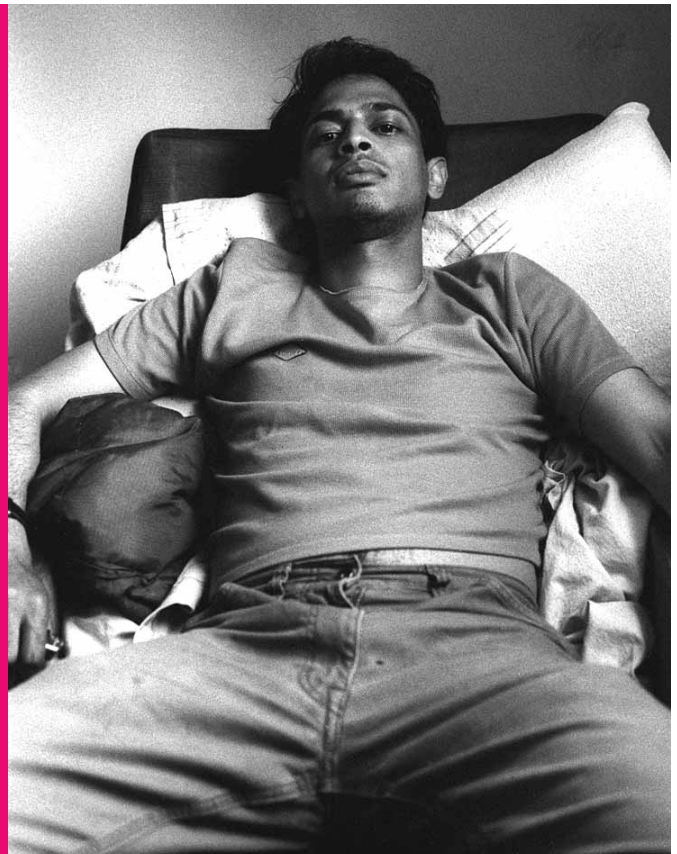
the intended viewer - on the epistemological nature of the video image and the material conditions of its production and consumption. A similar monologue - albeit with some crucial differences - is performed in another video work from the same period, '*Reality and the Mirror*' (97-98). Here, Kiran begins with a brief explication on the manner in which a private space, like an enclosed bathroom produces a specific kind of interiority where the subject within enjoys a complete lack of the other's gaze on her/him self. Midway through the video, Kiran disrupts the narration with a sudden turn to a dramatic enactment of seizing upon a spear thrown at him.

The irony and the humor in these works arise from a complex interplay between two strategies: citation and pedagogy. Today, when an artist who works from within the envelope of institutionalized avant-garde art practice - Kiran's work has been exhibited at the Apeejay Media Gallery, New Delhi, Royal College of Art, London as well as the Rijks Akademie, Amsterdam - makes a video piece on the mediation between the real and virtual/mechanically reproduced image in front of a self-portrait-ish mirror, one cannot but help recapitulate the rich and sedimented history of such a meditation. A star cast of characters from art history cast their long shadow. To take a random picking: Velazquez's Las Meninas, Foucault's brilliant unpacking of the same, Dürer's self-portraits, the long tradition of Trompe l'oeil paintings. In a smorgasbord of references, Kiran piles them up even higher, relentlessly. In staging an act of communication within the private space of the bathroom, isn't he alluding to the Wittgensteinian notion of the 'private language' that can only enact itself as a game? Isn't the sudden inclusion of a spear, a theatricalisation of the figure of the indexical arrow - that venerable mark of deixis that binds the signifier to the signified? Its almost as if at every screening, the real action shifts from the video to the viewer, to the blurred lines of motion he creates as he frenetically jumps from reference to reference. Perhaps the joke is on him.

Or perhaps he needs to empty his mind, in classic Zen style and approach the problem from first principles just as Kiran does in the video. Just as one would prove a theorem in logic or geometry, Kiran's voice traces a quasi-pedagogic trajectory that exults in developing a complex formulation from simple propositions. Apart from being thoroughly enjoyable, does this tension between citation and pedagogy also betray the particularities of an artist's engagement with history? How else can one engage with history apart from recapitulating it in a manner that telescopes that history onto ones own trajectory of development as an artist?

The element of a binary play continues in Kiran's Objects and Spatial Works. **(http://www.geocities.com/antikiran/3d.htm).** There it reincarnates itself as the play between function/dysfunction, between action/reaction, between cause/effect. Take for example *Brakes*, where 4 castors are attached to a plastic ball. Or *Discontent Content* where a bucket half-filled with water is placed under a faucet which is connected not to any external water source but to the same bucket by a piece of actual plumbing. This absurd reconstitution of banal [1] objects that renders them dysfunctional even as it unpacks notions of truth and value poses interesting questions: is an object valuable when it remains true to its function? In conspicuously abandoning its use-value does an object circumvent the utilitarian circuit to arrive at a different realm of poesies?

It is interesting to note that in the long inventory of objects in Kiran's *All My Belongings* project **<http://www.geocities.com/antikiran/amb.htm>** the very last object is an escape ladder. Exhibited at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam in 2002, the project put up a public display of everything that Kiran possessed then, except for works of art or things connected to the making of art. Each object bore a label with the name of the artist and of the object. It might be pertinent here to revisit the penultimate proposition (6.54) in Wittgenstein's celebrated *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way; anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as *nonsensical*, when he has *used* them - as steps - to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed it up.) [2]

[1] In fact this aspect of Kiran's work has been widely commented on. (http://www.geocities.com/antikiran/others _text.htm) Perhaps when building a searchable archive of contemporary Indian artists, the entry on 'Subbaiah, Kiran. A' might have the following words in their metadata; banal, object, impossible, functional, etc.

[2] Emphasis added

Epistemic escape apart, some of these objects seem to point to other states as well - like possible future conditions in its own state of being. Consider for example, *Love All*. **<http://www.geocities.com/antikiran/loveall.jpg.>** Here a wax ball, its entire surface studded over with matchsticks, lies at the center of circular mat made up of match striking strips cut out from match boxes. It is almost as if the sheer potential energy of this arrangement leaks out to create an aura of a shimmering 'after-image' - possibly of a flaming ball in flight - around the innocently static object. Perhaps only after one has contemplated it for long enough does one realize the discrepancy between that imagined conflagration and the damp squib of the possible fire that might happen were one to actually strike the ball.

Kiran's recent work with viruses **<http://www.geocities.com/antikiran/pseudo_virus.htm><http://www.geocities.com/antikiran/netart.htm>** develops[3] and extends upon many of the thematics found in his Video and Objects/ Spatial works, particularly the function/dysfunction problematic. Delivered as executable programs (.exe files) these mock viruses simulate an actual virus attack when run on a normal Windows or Macintosh computer: like some sinister animation, a dense array of 'scary' events happen in quick succession. The computers freezes, the active window splinters up, the mouse, though alive, deposits a trail so thick with traces so as to render it invisible, familiar elements of the operating system - dialog boxes, radio buttons etc - show up as mutilated ghosts. And all this unfolds to the accompaniment of periodic shrieks from the computer.

A malicious computer virus is that classic dweller of the liminal space between function and dysfunction: its entire function is geared towards draining out all use-value from a computer, to render it dysfunctional (in various degrees). Also for someone who has been consistently engaging with objects and their (dys)functionality, this intense concentration on the interface is perhaps expected. Today, if we look around our homes, we see an increasing array of objects getting 'contaminated' with the digital. Consequently, the formal attributes of an object are no longer tethered to its primary function. When it's the same digital chip that controls the clock as well as the microwave, what defines the object formally are not cog-wheels or heating coils but its interface - the functional surface it offers its users for manipulation and control. We could possibly parody McLuhan and say, 'the interface is the object'.

However, what is more interesting is the ambivalent nature of the simulation. Even though we know that these viruses are not for 'real' - its just a harmless prank - our entire experience of this desktop theater is shot through with a palpable anxiety. Perhaps for those mildly disquieting moments the desktop transforms into a television of catastrophe: portraying not a distant genocide, but performing a catastrophe where the self and the other are brought in uncomfortable proximity. It might be different however, for the intrepid hacker. He has already looked at the source code (which Kiran makes available) and so, instead of anxiety he is only mildly amused, nonchalant even, as one would be while watching the drawing room aquarium. Perhaps Kiran seems to suggest a more spectacular way of disposing of ones junk data. Instead of consigning it to the utilitarian Recycle Bin/ Trash Can why not submit it to the imagined charms of a 'data aquarium' and watch its endless disintegration?

Such, then is the ineffable charm of Kiran Subbaiah's work. Visit his site, to indulge in it further. You could even download an image or two for that gentle touch of the absurd on your desktop. Pass it around friends. Kiran swears by Copyleft. I am sure he wouldn't mind.

**3** Mahiti (http://www.mahiti.org/), a Bangalore-based outfit that builds open source websites for NGOs and which is also involved in discussions around the intersections between technology, law and culture was Kiran's collaborator in the coding aspect of these programs.