Anish Kapoor's Installation Art: Epistemology and Unsettling spectacle[s] of Nostalgia

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Abstract:

This essay produces a nuanced understanding of nostalgia through the study of Anish Kapoor's installation art. It challenges a clichéd understanding of nostalgia and argues the latter as a synthetic, performative emotion which can be invoked voluntarily through the use of "iterative[s]" and how it acts as a stylistic, aesthetic and constructive discourse in the choreography and cartography of spaces which are not inert but offer a complex understanding of history. The essay discusses the relevance and validity of nostalgia in new and unknown spaces to generate their epistemology and render them comprehendible. It further argues how nostalgia emerges as an ambivalent condition of modernity by critiquing and making it legible simultaneously.

Keywords:

Discourse, nostalgia, epistemology, iteratives, performative, spatiality, temporality

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Conventional understanding of nostalgia is that it is a baseless, plenary, melancholic indulgence and an embarrassing sentiment. In its aetiology, manifestations and praxis, nostalgia has often been dismissed as pathological, miasmal, conservative and regressive in nature. It has been routinely reviled and vilified as a lie, denigrated and rebuked as a cancerously intrusive problem of memory and therefore, has been dismissed as disappointedly subjective. Further, nostalgia as an emotion has been accused of lacking accuracy, analytical rigour and is seen to be beyond criticism because it lacks intellectual method. Nostalgia has met with disapproval because it addresses and cherishes a tainted, retrograde temporality which it recreates and reproduces as archaic replica in the present time and therefore, is condemned as anti-progressive and anti-modern. In a dialogue between Homi Bhabha and Anish Kapoor, centered on the installation of *Leviathan* (2011) in Paris, Bhabha loosely uses the term "iterative" to define and characterize Kapoor's installation art. Bhabha does not appropriately define, identify or classify these "iterative[s]" but they are certain nostalgic, repetitive, recurring motifs and methods in Kapoor's art along with a continuous performance and rhythm of "meaning-making" and meaning-disrupting so that "the object never sits or you never sit passively. You never sit passively, neither you nor the object." (110-11) Thus, "iterative" is a persistent exercise of nostalgia and a perpetual process where the object is being made and unmade by the viewer in proximity of the archaeological space of the installation art. It is significant to identify and attempt a critical analysis of the "iterative[s] in Kapoor's installation art and offer a nuanced reading of nostalgia where both its validity and viability are established by refuting against nostalgia's miasmic ontology and thereby, to discuss the versatility of nostalgia as a constructive, creative and a

critical discourse, a stylistic and aesthetic practice, a political method (where it proliferates into multiple significations of divergent forms, routes, meanings and intentions which are interspersed with sentimentality and intellectuality simultaneously) which initiates a productive dialogue between the past and the present and helps in the constitution and fabrication; definition and comprehension of the public space.

Spectral Presence: Kapoor's installation art, *1000 Names* (1979-80), *V Shadow* (2005) *Archaeology and Biology* (2007) and *Dirty Corner* (2010) present archaeological narratives where the neat and pristine spatiality is highlighted dominantly by the chaste, sacrosanct monochromes of beige and white. The scattered and smudged red dust on the white wall in *1000 Names*, the random pencil etchings and holes in the white wall in *V Shadow*, the tapered suspension in *Archaeology and Biology* and the accumulation of black crust in the corner in *Dirty Corner* are the liminal remnants of spectral, eerie and uncanny lingering indicative of doubt, tension and disquietude. The minimal spatiality contrived and attributed by Kapoor to the concerned objects of respective installations validate them as spectral traces and presences. These spectral presences distort and disrupt the otherwise homogeneous, seamless, abstract and varnished white narratives of spatiality but through their subtle, optimal and minimal spatiality acts as the synecdochic corporeality and access to context of the installation art and become legible as an allegory. These spectral traces are emphatic physical metaphors and a literal elongation of time which help to frustrate temporality and deny amnesia. *V Shadow* and *Archaeology and Biology* are clearly suggestive of violence with unsealed, innumerable holes in the former and a shrivelled suspension which looks like microscopic amplification of a wound or an abrasion. Both the installations show the spectral traces of violence which remains unhealed. These two installations are representative of trauma and the past and how they are inseparable from the present. *Dirty Corner* with its hierarchic arrangement of colours in the space, the black colour which occupies peripheral position sets up the framework of complex relations between the orient and the occident and highlights the problem of racism. The spectral presences undercut the varnished narratives and mythologies of white culture and initiates a fresh debate on diasporic tensions. Through the spectral presences, Kapoor makes bare and tangible the "stuffness" and theatricality of culture, how it is enacted and represented. These installations elucidate that culture is often articulated as a dominantly majoritarian and a partisan narrative, an art of selective narration which either flinches or tries to conceal and present in disguise its discordant elements. Therefore, spectral presences are the dissenting narratives which challenge the authenticity of a particular culture. In an interview with Douglas Maxwell, Kapoor says that unlike other Indian artists he is not interested in fabricating the narratives of Indian culture but what is interestingly significant for him is the phenomenon and materiality of culture itself and the latter as a process and a performance. This can be studied through two other "iteratives"- enfleshment of skin and other bodies, the colours or pigments.

The visceral vibrations are resonant throughout Kapoor's aesthetic. Skin focues his imagination as an artist and his work obsessively explores body in varied aspects from its translation of forms from plane to volume, from the tension between contour and space, from body's morphology and anatomy, from the inner

bodies and outer bodies. If the spectral presences are traces which occupy minimal space, the installations modeled along corporeality and viscera are based on materiality on which attributes density, volume and heft to bulk and membrane. These installations are an extensible representation of the body organs. Cecilia Delgaldo Masse aptly remarks in her essay, "Poetics of Space" that Kapoor's installation art "production reveals an astonishing dexterity of proportion, density, scale and equivalence that foregrounds as the raw material of his work." (15) The embroidering and designing of atmospheric topographies along the lines of body illustrates the idea of external is present in the internal and vice-versa. The installations *Marsyas* (2002), *Like An Ear* (2014), *Dirty Corner* (2015) and *Tongue Memory* (2016) with their boundless depths, orifices, layers of textures, cracks and fissures elucidates the idea of penetration of skin and reveals a boundless interior. But the archaeology of spaces at fabricated along the lines of corporeality at times is exaggerated and become grotesque and scatological in their physicality and meanings. This is particularly relevant with respect to his installations *Ga Gu Ma* (2011-12), *Place Under* (2015) and the installations which showcase orifices. These installations through their raw and earthy materiality vividly represent detritus and extruded matter. This infatuation to design geography based on body's interiority and exteriority at once aestheticize, eroticize geographic spaces and makes them phantasmic. But pushing it to a distasteful, gross and perverse representation of body to design geographies is equally pertinent as it reveals the obnoxious, inhuman, abased, abject and cursory conceptualization of certain race and communities. Dirtiness is indicative of a line of separation, the pathological "other". Dirtiness could possibly signify certain races and communities as surplus, redundant, unproductive and lethal. Dirtiness hints at the punitive tendency to discipline, sanitize and the proclivity towards genocidal impulse. Dirtiness visually evokes the violence enacted on certain races and communities. Kapoor's installation *Dirty Corner* is offensively referred to as queen's vagina. And *Ga Gu Ma* is a scatological representation in white. This again underlines the primitive and vestigial traces in white culture and undercuts the latter's purity. The designing of geographies through the use of metaphor of body suggests the desire of intimacy, agency and liberty as one chooses to exercise with one's body simultaneously flourishes in a relationship with land. Moreover, representation of geography along the lines of body's anatomy shows archaeology and epistemology of space and truth as a clinical, scientific process and with its gross, raw and scatological tones something to be excavated. According to Kapoor as Catherine Lampert puts in her essay "Archaeology: Biology", "unearthing of this [biological] state is an archaeology, one that is necessarily historical, cultural and poetic." (27) Kapoor's art strongly articulates the desire to return to maternal body or to the "pre-symbolic" as he mentions in his conversation with Julia Kristeva. The return to "pre-symbolic" is reflective of the return to an ambiguous space with no conflicts, a return if not to the unreal but definitely away from real, a fictive return to the womb or the place of origin and therefore, to a space of nostalgia.

Another "iterative" in Kapoor's art is colour. His art makes use of selective pigments which are either used monochromatically like the soft dirty white of *When I am Pregnant* (1992) or the stark, vociferous red of *My Red Homeland* (2003) or the materiality the colours shape are set up in conspicuous contrasts. A good example is *1000 Names* where diverse shapes in different colours are

places in the single space of art. It presents a phallic pillar in red at the centre which has fallopian spirals on it which makes it somewhat utopian and fantastic. In the corners are separate mounds of red and white. The installation could be symptomatic of separatism or tolerance at the same time. But it is relevant to interrogate the relationship between colour and race. The stark colours of red and white juxtaposed against one another can be read as cultural polarity, representative of conflict and difference. Such conspicuous contrasts create a sharp effect on the viewer and provoke him/her to think. But the small little mounds of islands also articulate aesthetics of harmony and geometry and articulates a sense of voluntary choice with what is negotiable in a space.

Kapoor's reliance on "iteratives" with their heterogeneous arrangements in materiality, spatiality and temporality gains a mythic energy, cultural memory and historical significance of its own that undercuts the linear and official narratives of a place and its history, and renders inefficacious any attempts to periodization of temporalities of a place by highlighting how various objects traverse and transpose across multiple temporalities and spatialities which strongly articulates their ability to be recast and acquire a global significance. The heterogeneous objects, their arrangement and their materiality carves a narrative which bespeaks of agency and therefore, makes nostalgia as a synthetic and performative emotion which can be voluntarily retrieved, recollected and recreated; a selective, stylistic and aesthetic discourse with its own system of objects that seems like a physical enactment of an ideological constellation. Thus, nostalgia is redeemed from the cliché of a sheer maudlin and mindless sentiment but a creatively desirous and stylistic discourse to etch out a geography which reflects the anxieties of the self. Thus, nostalgia helps the readers to understand that a geographic space is not inert and passive physical dimension which is extrinsic to human consciousness but is rather actively and intimately shaped through human agency and desires. Spaces are also imaginary and fictive in nature. This discourse on nostalgia evinces signs of agency from which nostalgia derives energy to design a space. Therefore, nostalgia can be recovered at an individual's convenience and hence, it can be seen as a performative and a critical method charged with a political rhetoric. Therefore, nostalgia is not merely restorative in the sense that it replenishes a new space but it is also a mode of reflection and enquiry about the relevance of a place. Since, here the shaping of a space merges with human agency and desire, nostalgia can be seen as a more, secular and ever fresh methodology which can continuously dismantle spaces and recreate them. Nostalgia introduces a modular approach to address spaces. Bhabha in his essay "Race, Time and the revision of Modernity" argues that the "iterative[s]" which help to amplify, extend and make tangible nostalgia in Kapoor's installations by relying on the remnants of past produce epistemology of the new and unknown space and also a savage and scathing critique of modernity through their "archaic doubling". The "iterative[s]" of nostalgia are jarringly invoked and juxtaposed in Kapoor's installations and this collapses and conflates simultaneously diverse and multiple temporalities and spatialities together for the revaluation and rendering familiar the culture and geography by providing a context through the familiar "iterative". The notion of "archaic doubling" can be extrapolated to dismantle the differences between places and rather can be seen as infinitely stretchable and extensive. The notion of expansiveness implicit in "archaic doubling" entails and enhances the possibilities for higher unity and the formation of affective

communities beyond those circumscribed by the geography of a nation and therefore, makes a space global and cosmopolitan in nature. Nostalgia stems as an ameliorative amidst foreign spaces as it helps to make them intelligible and at the same time, fosters legibility and credibility of the self by keeping him/her safely accommodated and rooted in a culture by relying on memory to render the places maximally knowable. Ironically and as an oxymoron, since nostalgia relies on personal memory and experience to make tangible a new terrain and the self when it comes in contact with the new space, therefore, it preserves and maintains intact its old self and yet, the same old self proliferates and disperses as global identity in the new places. This can be addressed as ambivalent mourning. Bhabha refers to this condition as antiquity of novelty, a "temporal-split" where there always arises the disjunction between the reinvention and redefinition of the self and remaking of the society, a flawed yet a compulsive and an inevitable "performative deformative structure" which helps to transpose and propagate values, identities cross-culturally. Nostalgia makes use of catachrestic methodology to map and architecture new spaces.

It is relevant to ask what the "iterative[s]" do to Kapoor's art and how do they affect the viewer's interpretation of his art. Bhabha discusses in his dialogue with Kapoor how the "iterative[s]" can initiate in the spectator the ambiguous and simultaneous movement of inside and outside on seeing the latter's installation art. "Iterative[s]" at once set up an intimate dialogue with the viewer because of the psychological implications that colour, bulk and traces might have for a viewer and also as the viewer views the oeuvre of the artist, s/he begins to become intimate with certain themes of the artist's art. The "iterative[s]" are capable of orienting a viewer inside of itself, appealing to his historical and cultural memory. But the absolute meaning is never achieved due to certain lack of proximity and because of the presence of "iterative[s]". The latter challenge the sovereignty of the viewer as they set up a compulsive framework through them to be viewed in a particular manner. But "iterative[s]" are the elements in Kapoor's art which have the potential to transcend a specific locality or temporality and perform in versatility across "different moments of recognition." Therefore, through the use of "iterative[s]", there is nothing but sheer accumulation of meaning where no one single meaning overpowers the other and there is a perpetual possibility to critique and reflect as the "iterative[s]" in Kapoor's art become loose signifiers legible in various idioms which proliferate into nostalgia[s] innumerable.

Kapoor's installation art with its fragmented transpositions and transactions across culture sets up a kind of space which seems at once like a self-designed mythology and like Rushdie's idea of imaginary homelands, "the mirrors, fragments, entirely personal which acquire a symbolic significance." It is significant to keep note of two things here. First, this symbolism of Kapoor's art disrupts the hierarchical model of positioning the artist and the viewer; it decenters the viewer's position and role not simply of optical contemplation but the viewer as an actor, an active collaborator in the production of meaning. Agency is further accorded to the viewer as Kapoor takes his art out of the usual gallery setting and places it in different contexts which challenges the public's perception of art and the surroundings. Kapoor's art prevents stasis for the viewer and through the symbolic currency that his art acquires, his art triggers infinite expansion of

reception, interpretation and analysis. Kapoor, exercises the notion of pragmatic operation of art where the formation of meaning is a phenomenon purely of encounter. Thus, his art invites and channelizes the possibility of proliferation of meaning so that the object of installation art gains its own telos or becomes autotelic and the meaning becomes surplus, disruptive, "rhizomatic" which moves in unforeseen directions. Immediacy conferred by kapoor's art disseminates perspectives ranging from critically and analytically accurate and relevant to those lacking methodological and analytical rigour, mindless, hysterical and sentimental in their response. A good example to understand this idea is Kapoor's installation art *Dirty Corner* where the work was attacked and had racist messages written on it which the artist later splashed with red paint and covered the graffiti with golden leaf. Innumerable interpretations of the installation art at once makes its truth fictive and aggregative. Kapoor himself acknowledges in his conversation with Kristeva that he does not desire the imprint of his "hand" in his art because it makes the meaning inhibitive and he says, " The hand always implies a kind of expression. It is as if then there is something to say. I am interested in *states of being* which are not expressive, that are beyond expression." (132)

What is significant to note is that in this endless proliferation of meaning, how the object of the installation art frustrates all the attempts to define its meaning. Therefore, this is a parody of meaning-making and as Lee Ufan puts it in his essay "The Wonders of Art", that "coming into contact with Kapoor's works of generation, one is faced with a message which contains elements of both warning and regret towards the thoughtlessness and foolishness of the proliferation of desires". (122) This makes the object of installation art a non-object and something that transcends its own form. This notion of non and not becomes significant as it elaborates yet again the fictive nature of Kapoor's art. In their dialogue on Kapoor's art, both Bhabha and Kapoor agree to make a move in their art to understand culture beyond polarities and binaries. Further, they think to elaborate things and thought not via the clarity of affirmative but through "a gathering of negatives". (106) In the opening to the section *Tarantara,* Kapoor says, "I have nothing to say/ I have nothing/ I have/ I." "Not" thus, is not insubstantial but full of plenitude. And the idea to focus on "not" obviously renders it imaginary, distanced from reality.

Second, with this deliberate transposition and transactions across diverse materiality and spatiality renders Kapoor's art expansive and cosmopolitan but more than that this is a voluntary dislocation, the idea of choosing to act as self-exile. This is a performative position, a stance and suitable to enact the role of artist in certain spaces or how certain spaces are conducive for art.

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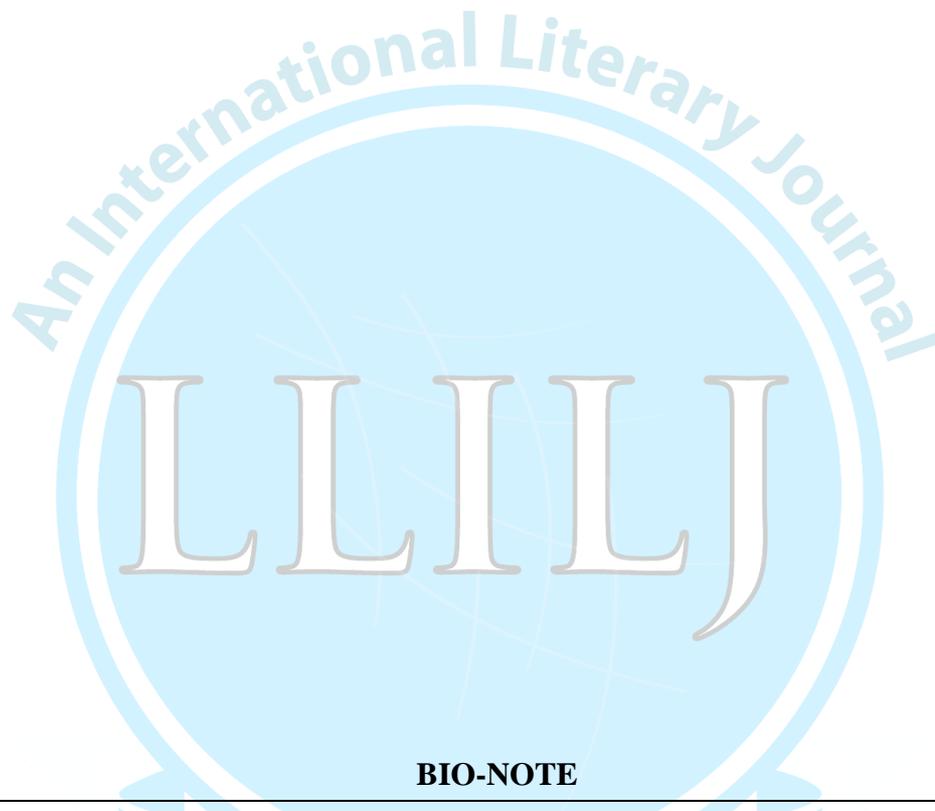
BIO-NOTE

Sheenam Batra is Assistant Professor at Sri Venkateshwara College, University of Delhi and a PhD scholar in the Department of English, University of Delhi. Her research is on contemporary children's fiction. She is interested in exploring and discussing the areas like the paradoxical and risky business of talking in contemporary children's fiction, discourses of paedophobia with special focus on proliferation, fascination and architectonics of the discourses of object oriented ontologies and virtual forms of materiality, pathology, ableism, physiognomy and disability studies; posthuman, cyborgian flesh machine, biopolitical anxiety and neoliberal enquiries in contemporary children's fiction and nostalgia, geopolitics, travel and epistemology.

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