Intersections of Contemporary Art, Anthropology and Art History in South Asia

“Contemporary art is a complicated terrain. Artists everywhere are motivated by a critical impulse to engage with the ‘here and now,’ and they work like under-cover anthropologists, sociologists, archaeologists, political scientists, etc. In a scenario like this, contemporary art demands to be examined, and engaged with protocols that are beyond art history, art theory and aesthetics. As Sasanka Perera and Dev Nath Pathak convincingly argue here, if the nuanced nature of contemporary works of art is to be mapped and the organizational apparatus that makes it possible in the contemporary world is analyzed, then it must be placed in a wider canvas of critical engagement informed by disciplines such as sociology and cultural anthropology, and further, such an approach will transform contemporary art as a necessary focus of those disciplines. This is a volume that can induce a covert intellectual and political intervention in to the workings of individual eccentricities and curatorial, institutional and community politics that govern the art world today.”

—Jagath Weerasinghe, Artist and Founding Chair, Theertha International Artists’ Collective, Sri Lanka

“This is an unusual and vivid account of art and art history where its parameters are broadened to map its intersections with anthropology, sociology and history. Art and its crossovers are mapped with a view to enhance its horizon and making it more nuanced and complex. One of the first of its kind, the volume of essays by well-known art historians, art practitioners and sociologists, covers the wide arc of South Asian art from countries, apart from India, like Pakistan and Bangladesh as well as Sri Lanka and Nepal. The honing of artistic practices to disciplines like anthropology and sociology makes a valuable contribution to the existing framework of art history.”

—Yashodhara Dalmia, Art Historian and Independent Curator, India

“Intersections of Contemporary Art, Anthropology and Art History in South Asia: Decoding Visual Worlds attempts to understand the necessary dialogues between artists and sociologists in the postmodern world. It brings to us contemporary debates, which interlink art history, sociology, social anthropology and the thinking of practitioners. The contributors construct a map of South Asia as one, which beckons towards intellectual liberation.”

—Susan Vishvanathan, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India
“This is a unique book that brings together scholars from sociology, anthropology, art history and art practice who critically discuss and debate contemporary art practices in South Asia. The essays in the book are rich, textured and evocative and they point to what the editors refer to as the ‘polyphonic intersections’ between art practice, art history and anthropology/sociology in South Asia. This book will be of tremendous value to not only students and scholars interested in visual culture, but also to anyone interested in contemporary art practices in South Asia.”

—Janaki Abraham, Delhi University, India
Sasanka Perera • Dev Nath Pathak
Editors

Intersections
of Contemporary Art, Anthropology and Art History in South Asia

Decoding Visual Worlds
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Coming from a formal background in academic sociology and saddled with a personal and scholarly interest in art, we have often wondered why our discipline has been so obviously disinterested in contemporary art. Much of our concerns and the politics of undertaking a book of this kind have been mapped out in detail in our Introduction. This absence and our anxiety over it together constitute the point of departure for this book. It was very clear to us that mainstream sociology in South Asia was unlikely to undertake such a venture given its almost collective and pervasive perception of art as a ‘soft’ resource devoid of value in terms of data or information in narrow sociological terms. In this situation, the question was how to bring into a mutually sensible and intellectually benefitting conversation a group of sociologists, art historians, and artists focused on the broad theme, ‘how art might make sense in sociology in reading society and its politics.’ It appeared to us, in institutional terms, this kind of exercise would only be tolerated in a relatively new academic department such as ours. That is, though this venture was not a departmental activity as such, the Sociology Department’s and South Asian University’s lack of an established conventional approach to knowledge offered the necessary intellectual space for us to ‘dabble’ in the unconventional.

What we have attempted in the book is to locate contemporary art in South Asia in the intersections of sociology, social anthropology, history, biography, and memory in the study of society, politics, and culture. Obviously, this implies an engagement with works of contemporary art informed by various disciplinary sources and approaches. We believe the intersections we have facilitated to emerge in the constituent chapters of
the book provide a more nuanced intellectual forum to discuss art practices, works of art, life-worlds of artists, institutional interventions, curatorial politics, and the ways in which these issues are embedded in the evolving politics of the place we call South Asia. In this conversation, our attempt was not to ‘convert’ our colleagues from diverse disciplines to the mainstream thinking in sociology to talk about contemporary art. Instead, we have brought their own perspectives—both disciplinary and political—to bear upon a broad-based sociological understanding of South Asia.

All this is easier said than done. One of the main hurdles we had to deal with is the variety of approaches to and styles in writing and exploration this exercise has necessarily allowed to flow into its discursive space. The way sociologists or anthropologists would look at the world and write about what they see compared to how an artist or an art historian might do the same thing is significantly different. We have not attempted to impose a singular narrative approach in how to be a scribe of society’s travails and politics. We have instead taken these varieties of seeing and writing as a given, as long as they allow us to travel across the political and social landscape of South Asia in such a way that would provide us the space for an informed gaze upon the region’s politics through contemporary art.

It was not so easy to convince colleagues in the practice of art history of the significance of the polyphonic intersections that this book envisaged unearthing. In the recent past, we had heard many exclamatory remarks from art historians about sociologists’ ‘interest’ in art. This may be due to the sacralized disciplinary silos, which do not allow an art historian and an anthropologist to engage with each other’s objects of enquiry. We would duly thank, in the midst of such challenges, some of the colleagues who allowed a dialogue, irrespective of the existing regimes of boundary policing. We have duly acknowledged our interactions with Iftikhar Dadi and Parul Dave Mukherji in the Introduction as well. And in the same breath, we would express our gratitude to Roma Chatterji, a fellow anthropologist who looks at art with adequate seriousness. Her work has deeply inspired us.

In the difficult task of ensuring the successful completion of this book, we would like to thank all the writers who have readily contributed chapters as well as the artists and other colleagues who have very enthusiastically allowed us to use their works of art and materials from their archival collections. These include Ruby Chishti, Vibha Galhotra, Bandu Manamperi, Pushpamala N., Ayisha Abraham and the extensive archives
of the Theertha International Artists’ Collective in Colombo. Binit Gurung photographed the artworks referred to in his chapter himself as he traversed through the streets of Kathmandu.

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CHAPTER 1

Intersections and Implications: When Anthropology, Art Practice, and Art History Converge

Sasanka Perera and Dev Nath Pathak

Many insightful reflections from history and philosophy of art could be stitched together to engender an anxious train of thinking not only about art as a process and cultural product but also about its relevance in reading society and politics. Among numerous articulations on the commonsense of art, we often hear that there cannot be a formulaic vantage point to judge art, that art is essentially about a mode of experiential expression or an expression of blissful imagination and therefore is embedded in a field of subjectivism. Within this popular commonsense, a sociologist might deem these relationships and conditions too messy to decipher in a way that would make sociological sense. Such a pronounced absence of art in sociology and anthropology and anxieties about art’s reliability in reading society and its politics are the foundation of this book.

At times, oscillating between the sublime and the ridiculous, the bones of dead and living ideologies and utopias begin to fall from studio
cupboards; regimes of exhibitionism and commerce of culture too join in the list, and the tales of art and art practices, become more telling than one can anticipate. And in this wake, it becomes self-evident how some social science disciplines have successfully and adamantly remained distant from intellectually engaging with art in general and contemporary art in particular. Sociology, social anthropology, political science, international relations, and history stand testimony to this situation globally, barring a handful of exceptions. In this scheme of things, monopolizing disciplinary interest in contemporary art has become the preserve of art history and curatorial practices. As a result of this discursive void, art, and the politics, it generates stand in the gulf between class and mass, art and craft, studio and gallery, street and art fare. And in that gulf, what art can say and what art becomes in social and political terms beyond their aesthetics have become inaudible. It is in this kind of void that the anxious but simple questions posed on art and politics by Das provide an initial signpost towards what direction we should travel in our own thoughts. He wonders, “when we wedge ourselves between politics and aesthetics,勇敢ly imagining that we have an enabling concept in such an art, what indeed do we want art to achieve?” (Das 2010: 11). Indeed, does art end with a sense of aesthetic and satisfaction and commercial success? Or, should it travel to the realms of cultural production and discursive practices such as sociology? Or, as Das further wonders, “if politics is about constraining the choices of others, what is art?” (Ibid.: 11). Indeed, art can be stifling too. But it is also enabling in reading society if one is adequately perceptive to work out how and when to situate contemporary art in reading the politics of contemporary social processes. It is in such a context of engagement with art and politics that Turner and Webb have attempted to make a case for art’s implication in discourses of human rights (Turner and Webb 2016: 15). Their argument is, whether artists opt to directly engage with evolving political crises or maintain a distance from such turmoil, they remain a part of a cultural system, “and in presenting a particular set of images and attitudes, will necessarily reflect something about the lived world” in which they are a part (Turner and Webb 2016: 15).

Contemporary art of the kind we focus on in this book needs to be understood as fundamentally a secular discourse (Zitzewitz 2014: 15). But within discourse, the complexity of artists’ practice acquires different meanings in their dealings with various artistic, religious, and political subjectivities which in turn are also linked to their individual social identities as well as historical experiences (Zitzewitz 2014: 15).
Seen in this sense, art can open up discursive possibilities beyond the delimiting aesthetics and commerce of art, which are of interest to us. Paradoxically, it is in the art world that a perpetual mutuality of class and mass unfolds in spite of curatorial politics of inclusion and exclusion. Then, why most dominant practices of social sciences shy away from the abundance of clues, data, narratives, hypotheses, and research questions that surface in the art world. This stands tall as an intriguing question worth dealing with. It is perhaps of the perceived “impurity’ of art” or due to the ‘excesses’ and or the possible ‘false movement’ of images that undervalue their truth and capacity to enhance experience” (Das 2010: 11). When we attempt to address this absence, we would mostly do so within our own disciplinary domains of sociology and social anthropology.

It is a somewhat baffling question why the extended domain of contemporary painting, sculpture, performance art, and installation has not become an area of consistent interest for those who formally practice social anthropology and sociology. This is particularly the case in South Asia even though the situation beyond the region is only marginally different.\(^1\) One may wonder whether the reason for this absence is due to methodological or theoretical limitations that are inherent in the dominant approaches of anthropology and sociology.\(^2\) But a self-reflective exploration would suggest that any methodological limitation is the result of the self-induced fear of the visual rather than any inherent limitations as such in either sociology or social anthropology.\(^3\) With anthropology, the problem historically has been its evolution into what Margaret Mead has called

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\(^1\) A sense of this divide exists in other parts of the world too. At times one hopes about a possible bridge across this divide that might lead to a hybrid field of art practice. See Schneider and Wright (2013).

\(^2\) We dwell upon a collective exploration on the limits and possibilities in sociology and social anthropology in South Asia in Ravi Kumar, Dev Nath Pathak, and Sasanka Perera eds., *Sociology and Social Anthropology in South Asia: Histories and Practices* (Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2018).

\(^3\) In our perception, the situation in academic sociology is no different. In fact, we do not find it useful to maintain the spurious division between sociology and social anthropology in the present project as well as in the way we see the world around us. The unison of sociology and social anthropology in postcolonial South Asia appears in some of our other pursuits, such as op cit Kumar et al. We have dealt with the anxieties of the visual in social sciences with a focus on visual, performance, and other cultural expressions more clearly in Pathak and Perera eds., *Culture and Politics in South Asia: Performative Communication* (Routledge, London, 2017).
a “discipline” or “science of words” (Mead 1995: 3, 5). Even though her ideas were mostly articulated in the context of film, what she outlines in her essay, ‘Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words’ (1995) resonates with the broader context of visuality’s location in anthropology as well. Her critique had to do with what she perceived as the discipline’s resistance to visual approaches because it clung “to verbal descriptions when so many better ways of recording aspects of culture have become available” (Mead 1995: 5). The obvious limitation in Mead’s argument is that she saw visuality, and in her case photography and film, merely in a simple utilitarian manner as technical devices for data gathering, instead of seeing visuality as a possible central focus of research or a broader kind of discourse. Banks notes, though “social researchers encounter images constantly”, it is not an exaggeration that in social sciences in general and sociology and anthropology in particular, “there is no room for pictures, except as supporting characters” (Banks 2001: 1–2). In other words, images have become mere decorative icons or at best supportive secondary signs to what the written text alludes to. This emanates from the reality that visuality, as a matter of method, research, or discourse, has not been contemplated seriously enough in sociology and anthropology.

What Mead and Banks have noted with regard to anthropology’s dealings with visuality reflects similarly upon sociology as well though sociology’s encounter with visuality is far more marginal. Anthropology at least had a longer encounter with imagery from the colonial period onwards, particularly with regard to film and photography and the discipline’s interest in ‘primitive’ forms of art in the larger scheme of ethnography. This kind of affinity with imagery or art is much less pronounced when it comes to sociology. Schnettler, writing with particular reference to sociology’s encounter with photography, notes that the discipline did not clearly “develop an intimate relationship with photography” (Schnettler 2013: 42). In the same sense, sociology’s relationship with other forms of visuality more generally is also less pronounced compared to earlier phases of social anthropology. It is in this kind of context that any interests in the visual in both sociology and social anthropology have been expelled to the sub-disciplinary domains of visual anthropology and visual sociology. In effect, this expulsion and voluntary exile on the part of those interested in visuality within the two disciplines have kept the mainstreams of both sociology and anthropology ‘cleansed’ of possible pollutants from the ‘subjectivities’ visuality might have engendered in the course of research.
It is in this kind of context, we learn from informal accounts of sociologists and anthropologists in the region about the dismissive gatekeepers ridiculing research proposals on thematic issues on art, cultural politics, performance, folklore, literature, and so on based on the somewhat liminal, reductionist, and unimaginative argument that these are not adequately “sociological” or “anthropological”. Particularly in the conventional academic landscape in South Asia, how many young sociologists and social anthropologists are encouraged to undertake research on cultural expressions, art practices, regimes of visuals, and visuality? In general experience, in the biographies of scholars, there comes a moment of realization of a clear existence of a not-so-discrete hierarchy of research areas and interests and resultant modes of scholarship in the mainstream of anthropology and sociology. Political sociology and studies on social stratification, issues of caste, class, ethnicity, violence, and gender, or for that matter other thematic areas popularized by national-international funding agencies that vary from conflict resolution to conflict transformation, ride roughshod over other areas such as culture in general and visual arts in particular despite a longstanding argument in social sciences on the integral relation of culture and politics.

This predetermined and ill-debated understanding of what sociology and social anthropology ought to be has negatively impacted numerous possibilities for intellectual development in these disciplines in South Asia. That is, this inherent intellectual conservatism of the disciplines has stunted many potentially creative avenues of research. It is in this context we can understand why a more robust and a theoretically nuanced sociology of contemporary art and visual culture has not yet emerged in any degree of seriousness within contemporary sociology. And this state of affairs supports the seeming fear of the visual, coupled with a methodological uncertainty—on how to deal with the uncertainty or seeming instability of the visual and visuality in the relatively certainty-obsessed sociology and social anthropology. This is unfortunate since there has also been a realization through heated debates that sociology as well as anthropology entails poetics, particularly in the ways ethnography is crafted. In fact, as the “writing culture” debate in the 1980s and its aftermath have indicated, anthropologists became “more self-conscious than ever before that they are writers” (Marcus 1986: 162). Here, being writers also meant

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4See Kumar et al. (2018).
carrying a certain self-conscious expression of imagination and creativity in writing within anthropology. In these general circumstances, the ‘literariness’ of what was published in the name of anthropology became much more important than the processes of research itself including fieldwork, which enabled this discursive result. To be more precise, this situation in social anthropology came about due to two interconnected reasons. That is, the clear interest in literary approaches seen generally across human sciences on one hand, and the pronounced interest in literary theory and practice evident in the work of a number of important anthropologists such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas, and others (Clifford 1986: 3). In their own characteristic ways, they have “blurred the boundary separating art from science” (Clifford 1986: 3). But this sense of creativity, imagination, and ‘art’ with regard to writing clearly did not extend to the realm of visuals in anthropology.

When it comes to South Asia, even this realization of sociological or ethnographic texts as carriers of a sense of imagination and creativity exists only in the margins of the mainstream disciplines. It is in the context of this methodological, thematic, and theoretical conservatism of sociology and anthropology in South Asia Perera had wondered, “can’t we re-visit our overdependence on Marx and Foucault as well as an almost pathological obsession with caste, class and now gender in sociology and social anthropology? Is it impossible to find new objects to interrogate which might allow us to rethink our theory as well as the nature of research and knowledge themselves?” (Perera 2014: xxii–xxiii). This conventional background provides us the reasons for “why visual culture and particularly painting, sculpture and installation in our region have not moved beyond art history into areas such as international relations, political science and sociology” (Perera 2014: xx). But this is not an absence peculiar to South Asia alone. It is also global, and is based on the subjectivities art and cultural products in general are supposed to be infected with. Speaking at Ecole Nationale Superieure des Arts Decoratifs in Paris in 1980, Pierre Bourdieu as an established sociologist noted, “sociology and art do not make good bedfellows” (Bourdieu 1995: 139). His explanation for this apparent lack of cohesion between art and sociology suggests that it was “the fault of art and artists” “because the universe of art is a universe of belief, belief in gifts, in the uniqueness of the uncreated creator, and the intrusion of the sociologist, who seeks to understand, explain, account for what he finds, is a source of scandal” (Bourdieu 1995: 139). In other
words, in the field of apparent subjectivities and plains of imagination within which art supposedly operated, it was not possible for art to be reduced to reliable sociological facts. This was the ‘fault’ of art, which made it unreliable for sociology. This is why, in Bourdieu’s opinion, sociologists were affectively keen on expelling artists from the history of art if they were to deal with art (Bourdieu 1995: 139). That is, to remove the sources of seeming instability in analysis.

But Bourdieu also explains this state of affairs as a lapse on the part of sociology as well. One of the most crucial aspects of his explanations suggests, “sociology and its favored instrument, statistics – belittle and crushes, flattens and trivializes artistic creation” (Bourdieu 1995: 139). Though he was speaking with regard to sociology in particular, the way in which art is viewed by social sciences in general is not that different. Even though that perception may not only come from the reductionist analysis offered by statistics, it does come from a narrow understanding of ‘science’ or what might be called scientism.

However, without concerning ourselves too much about the vexed margin and the overestimated strength of the core, we operate with the conviction of exploring manifold intersections in this book, in order to develop an understanding in the intellectual twilight where sources do not become sacred or taboo. In short, we do not ask about the sources of an understanding vis-à-vis disciplinary orthodoxy. Instead, we ask how various disciplines come together to aid in developing an understanding.

It is in this contesting backdrop that this book attempts to stitch together discussions from scholars in sociology, anthropology, art history, and art practice to explore the politics and poetics, structures of interpretative possibilities, and discursive implications of contemporary art in South Asia. By doing so, the book locates artworks and art practices in the intersections of sociology, anthropology, history, biography, and memory in the study of society, politics, and culture. This implies an engagement with works of contemporary art and the multiple contexts of their production, consumption, and their embedded memories informed by various disciplinary sources. The book envisages these intersections to provide a more nuanced premise for discussions on art practices, works of art, life worlds of artists, institutional interventions, curatorial politics and so on. In the scheme of these intersections, as it were, each chapter in the book emphasizes, while deliberating specifics (cases, mediums, artworks, artists, and interpretative messages), the imperative of conversations beyond disciplinary boundaries. Each chapter, in this scheme, is thus in tangential yet
vivid dialogue with others, enriching the understanding of contemporary art as well as the politics of the social formations within which they emerge.

The relevance of this endeavor arises from manifold issues. One, as briefly mentioned above, is about a critical revisiting and reformulating of the disciplinary framework of sociology and social anthropology. This is a much-felt intellectual necessity of our times, but has so far manifested only in terms of exceptions, which are few and far between. Though there is acknowledgement of the imperatives for pushing disciplinary boundaries to engage with art, artists, art-networks, and artistic practices, there is little evidence of this being executed in any concrete sense in the sociology and anthropology of South Asia.

**Triggers on the Terrain of Thought**

A clear realization of the need to make conscious efforts in this direction arose via two occasions of intersecting intellectual interests, crisscrossing disciplines at South Asian University. The first trigger was a talk at the South Asian University in 2013 on ‘Art and the Visual Public Sphere in Pakistan’ by art historian and artist, Iftikhar Dadi. Dadi took the audience and interlocutors on a fascinating visual tour of Pakistan’s public visual landscape via the on-site street paintings by artist Naiza Khan in Karachi, and the proliferation of popular works in the form of posters and postcards carrying the image of deposed Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein. The theme and the talk stimulated the anthropologists in the audience to formulate

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5 In the present scenario, Christopher Pinney and Roma Chatterji are among the exceptional few approaching visuals of aesthetic significance within an anthropological sensibility, among others, who have shown the relevance of arts as areas of investigation transgressing the works of art themselves and venturing into domains of social sciences. These others include Tapati Guha Thakurta, Sumathi Ramaswamy, Geeta Kapoor, Jagath Weerasinghe, Iftikhar Dadi, and Salima Hashmi. Interestingly, prior to ‘field work’ becoming an anthropological fetish, one of the pioneers of Indian sociology/anthropology, Radhakamal Mukherjee wrote the interesting text, *The Culture and Art of India* (Mushiram Manoharlal Publisher) in the broader South Asian context. But Mukherjee’s interests have not been followed-up in the practices of post-independent anthropology and sociology in South Asia.  

6 Lecture organized by the Department of Sociology, South Asian University as part of the ‘Reading South Asia Lecture Series 2013’ on 26 August 2013.  


8 For more information on the discussion on Naiza Khan’s artwork in public space and the Saddam Hussein poster phenomenon, see Dadi (2009).
some questions bridging what appeared to be disciplinary gaps between art history and anthropology. These questions were: why Naiza Khan had opted to venture into the turbulent streets of Karachi away from the safety and comfort of her studio, and how a figure such as Saddam Hussein, historically relatively unknown in Pakistan, had suddenly become so popular, and why his image was at times depicted in a religious context when Hussein was not known to be religiously oriented within the stream of politics he engendered as part of the political agenda of the Ba’ath Party, which he headed? Dadi had pushed open the windows on these questions for which the anthropologists in the audience sought comprehensive answers. In our mind, this seemed to offer the possibilities for a more complete, engaged and nuanced narrative about these artworks, the processes that enabled them as well as the broader contexts of their production and consumption and finally their narrative potential in terms of evolving local politics. The question that emerged in our mind sought to see art more clearly in conjunction with politics, culture, and other social complexities, to say the least, expecting a series of disciplinary departures. Prior to this encounter, in the context of the exhibition titled, Lines of Control, Dadi and Nasar (2012) has reflected on the intersecting biography of the artist, in this case Dadi himself and his works of art. With reference to his two works9 in the exhibition, which Dadi co-curated with Hammad Nasar, he underlines the ‘tangled legacies’ of the artists’, “undisciplined practice that refuse to be contained by institutional or disciplinary protocols and therefore able to provide new insights into our predicaments” (Dadi and Nasar 2012: 20). Some of these issues figure prominently in the discussions in the chapters in this book.

What Dadi and Nasar has described as a thematic in Lines of Control (2012) is evident in reflections on contemporary visual arts in Sri Lanka too. The complex interplay of personal biographies and social and political history, individual and collective memories, cultural and political stimulus comes to the surface in discussions on contemporary visual art in Sri Lanka.10 It is in this context that Weerasinghe, with reference to ‘the art of the 90s’

9 The works are titled Muslims are meat-eaters, they prefer food containing salt. Hindus on the other hand prefer a sweet taste and I at least, have never seen or heard of such wonderful people. For more details, see the essay by Iftikhar Dadi and Hammad Nasar, in the catalog, Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space. New York: Cornell University Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, 2012.

10 For more details on this, see Weerasinghe (2005) and Perera (2016).
identifies two important thematic preoccupations. These are, “works that investigates the self, and the sense of being of individuals who have been victimized and frustrated as a consequence of organized violence” on one hand and “works that investigates the allure as well as the frustrations of the city as an artistic expression” on the other (Weerasinghe 2005: 15–40). One can argue, both these trends are biographical because these themes visually express personal experiences of artists as individuals in society as well as their more general collective experiences as a particular generation (Perera 2016: 212). Art of the 1990s are impregnated with politics, which goes much beyond their aesthetics and materiality with regard to meaning-making. Besides, most of these artists considered themselves ‘political artists’ due to the somewhat obvious political and interventionist agenda of their work (Weerasinghe 2005; Perera 2016). It is this self-conscious engagement with politics that offer a specific identity to the artists of this period, which also marks this genre of art from earlier forms of art-making (Perera 2016: 212). Weerasinghe perceives these individuals as a “new generation of artists equipped with a range of new ideas and concepts of art, themes for artistic investigation and, especially, with an understanding of the idea of the artist as a political individual” (Weerasinghe 2005: 183).

In a somewhat different way, the biographies as well as the artworks of women artists in Pakistan as described by Salima Hashmi (2002) further elaborate the narrative possibilities in the broader reading of politics in Pakistan. The history of women who received a training in art in the 1940s would indicate that this training was expected to “enhance the natural proclivities of women” that would make them better ‘home decorators’ and “nurture the finer sensibilities expected of mothers, wives and daughters” (Hashmi 2002: 7). It was in this context that the Department of Fine Arts at Punjab University was exclusively reserved for women. They were not expected to be independent and professional artists in this situation, but art teachers at best. And it took a considerable time for what was begun as safe educational conduit for women to transform into a “vehicle for communication and expression in the public domain, and paved the way for personal and cultural insurrections” (Hashmi 2002: 7). In other words, a biographical exploration of women in art in the 1940s and 1950s would clearly place in context the realities of gender relations in Pakistan as well as women’s position in these relationships. But between the late 1970s and late 1980s, women had not only become fully-fledged artists, but their work also creatively took on the challenges put up by martial law as evident in their personal biographies and work produced (Hashmi 2002: 91–144).
The focus on biography of artists as well as art’s relationships with the broader world is crucial if art is to inform sociology. But it is also necessary to broaden this focus as well. As Bourdieu has noted, “the sociology of cultural products must take as its object the whole set of relationships (objective ones and also those effected in the form of interaction) between the artist and other artists, and beyond them, the whole set of agents engaged in the production of work, or, at least, of the social value of the work (critics, gallery directors, patrons etc)”\textsuperscript{11} (Bourdieu 1995: 141). For him, sociology of works of art needs to take the entire field of cultural production into account as well as the relationship between this field and the field of consumers. In other words, art would make sense in sociology if it can weave a narrative that would span beyond the limited frame of an artwork and embrace larger political and social situations within which they are created. This is what he means when he notes, “the social determinism of which the work of art bears the traces, are exerted partly through the producer’s \textit{habitus}” (Bourdieu 1995: 141). Habitus, in this sense, extends from the artists’ personal circumstances to their location in society at a specific temporal moment. So despite Bourdieu’s suspicion of art as sociological facts in the way they are generally considered, what he outlines as ‘sociology of works of art’ (as outlined above) is an invitation to ensure that art becomes more legible and more reliable in sociological terms. That is, instead of looking at art and sociology in the conventional sense, which does not allow for a dialogue, he hints at a path, which might usher in art to the centrality of sociological readings of society, politics, and culture.

But contemporary art everywhere, and as evident in South Asia as well, throws up a number of hurdles in communication and representation, which can be challenging to the discourse of meaning they are supposed to generate. As Ali has noted with regard to contemporary Pakistani art, visiting a gallery itself could be intimidating to a normal person, while “new media art forms like assemblage, performance, video and installation” could add to the complexity of viewing and comprehending (Ali 2011). Unlike much of pre-abstract modernist art or even pre-modern forms of art in South Asia like religious art, contemporary works such as installations can be “ephemeral, site-specific arrangements of objects that you can walk around, into and through to experience their message” Ali 2011: 7). But precisely due to the complexity of arrangement and their

\textsuperscript{11} Emphasis in the original.
vast deviation from what is considered art generally, the meanings embedded in these could easily be lost. This becomes a significant issue if this kind of art is meant to go beyond aesthetics and the market into the realms of politics and social transformation. In other words, they can alienate viewers (Ali 2011: 7). Though Ali has described this seeming disconnect between contemporary art and ordinary people with regard to Pakistan, the situation is much the same in India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka with regard to the same kind of work. How does one deal with this rupture in representation when art at one level is not only supposed to make meaning but also transmit such meanings?

If contemporary art is to inform the craft of sociology, then, in addition to taking into consideration the broader contexts of its production and consumption as suggested by Bourdieu, it will also be necessary to take into account the meanings embedded in a given artwork. And these meanings must be able to create a discourse; they cannot be imprisoned within an artwork, which would always need the mediation of its creator to decipher its meanings. This is why the biography and the habitus of an artist as well as the larger context in which it is located are of significant importance. Such a broad canvass would allow much more nuanced space for these meanings to manifest. Of course, one can argue, this is what art history already does to some extent. But if sociology or anthropology looks at art in this manner, the canvass that might unfold becomes much larger, and its analytic possibilities get further entrenched as social and political analysis inherent in these disciplines naturally flows into art. This kind of privileging of art and their creators however is not a matter of equalizing the agency of artists with regard to their work and their location in society and within discourse. It is in such a context that Preziosi and Farago argue for the re-consideration of the transformative power of artists when they suggest, “the agency assigned to the artist could vary according to who is speaking, to whom and to what purpose” (2012: 28). That is, the political power available to the artists considered in the reflections by Dadi, Weerasinghe, and Hashmi in Pakistan and Sri Lanka would be very different to yet others whose voices are less audible and their work less visible. However, it is conceivable that art as well as other forms of culture and forms of formal knowledge “has a crucial role to play in the realm of politics, in the domain of discourse and within the vistas of our conscience” (Perera 2014: xx). If so, they also can have a legitimate presence in the discourses of social sciences beyond art history. In this sense, what Dadi and Hashmi have described for Pakistan and Weerasinghe for
Sri Lanka are clear examples of the discursive potential of contemporary art in the region, which ideally should be of interest to sociology and anthropology in their intellectual pursuits in reading society.

The second trigger is a conversation with art historian Parul Dave Mukherji (one of the contributors to this book) on the intersections of sociology, art, and art history. One of the themes that emerged quite clearly in this conversation was the manner in which some contemporary visual artists have resorted to what has been termed an ‘ethnographic turn’ in art practice. As initially outlined in his important essay, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer?’ (1995), what Hal Foster referred to by the term ‘ethnographic turn’ in contemporary art were the intriguing similarities with anthropology in general and ethnographic research more specifically that was evident in selected post-1990s art practices. That is, such similarities manifested in the way artists as well as curators utilized research and theorization and the ways in which they dealt with cultural differences and politics of representation in their artistic endeavors.

More specifically, as Rutten et al. have pointed out, Lan Tuazon, Nikki S. Lee, Bill Viola, Francesco Clemente, Jimmy Durham, Susan Hiller, and other such artists share with anthropologists a concerted interest in the ‘politics of representation’ (Rutten et al. 2013: 459). Similarly, the main aim of the 2003 conference titled ‘Fieldworks’ organized at the Tate Modern was to provide a space for artists and anthropologists to reflect “on their respective uses of fieldwork and to explore possible convergences” (Rutten et al. 2013: 459). In the same vein, in 2012, two exhibitions held in Paris brought the convergences between art and anthropology, enhancing the artists’ focus (Rutten et al. 2013: 459). The exhibition, ‘Masters of Chaos’ dealt specifically with “anthropological artefacts” in the context of new artworks (Rutten et al. 2013: 460). Comparatively, the exhibition, ‘La Triennale’ was based on the theme, “intense proximity” and attempted to “unlearn the notion that ethnography is necessarily ‘bad’” (Rutten et al. 2013: 459).

What became apparent to us was that the more dominant of these conversations had taken place within contemporary art, and to a much lesser extent in anthropology or sociology. In South Asia, these conversations had not touched sociology and anthropology at all, while a number of artists

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12 See Pathak (2016). In the larger context, there has been a realization about the ethnographic turn in art practice and sharedness of what is typically called fieldwork in anthropology; see Schneider and Wright (2010).