

Preface: Productive failure, cruising and affirmative criticality

When this book was in its nascent stages, I would say to anyone who asked about its content that it was concerned with writing transnational South Asian art histories and visual cultures. Even though I used 'transnational' in favour of 'diaspora' – which British sociologist Paul Gilroy notes assumes an 'obsession with origins, purity and invariant sameness' – what I found was that most would presume that my book was organized around genealogy anyway.¹ They could not imagine I would be discussing the artworks of Cy Twombly or Kehinde Wiley (as I do in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively); or a public art memorial commemorating the death of Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes in London and Adrian Margaret Smith Piper's work on the slain African American Trayvon Martin (both of which I explore in Chapter 7). This response, of course, seems unsurprising from a non-academic, but I was taken aback that art historians, too, were not able to conceive of my project outside of bloodlines.

When I began to introduce the book as a 'productive failure' *before* indicating that I was 'writing transnational South Asian art histories', the responses were quite different. I do not mean to imply that I managed to get art historians to think I would explore the aforementioned artists' works and visual cultural material, but I did pique these scholars' imaginations. I got them to think that my book project was perhaps not only about genealogy. 'Failure' in 'productive failure' is strategic and could be characterized as a 'queer failure' as articulated by queer theorist and gender studies scholar Jack Halberstam in his important book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011).² While I fail to uphold a strictly genealogical approach to writing transnational South Asian art histories – which I am indicating most people assumed the book to be exploring – I succeed in writing more radical ones.

At the same time, there is a history of how the word 'failure' and its variants have been mobilized in relation to 'non-Western' art histories with which I have to contend. To explain, consider this disclaimer that *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter provides to readers of his review of a 2015 Guggenheim Museum exhibition of abstract paintings by V. S. (Vasudeo Santu) Gaitonde

(1924–2001). He asked readers to keep in mind the following paradox when they visit:

Many Western abstract painters in the early 20th century – Albers, Kandinsky, Mondrian – were deeply influenced by Asian art and philosophy, though no one dismissed them as Orientalists. Their cosmopolitanism was a point in their favor, and proof of Modernism's wide embrace. By contrast, if Asian artists showed signs of absorbing Western models, their work was disdained as derivative, inauthentic and evidence that Western Modernism was the only true one, the source that supplied the world.³

That Cotter has to point out the above to readers of *The New York Times* – who we could assume are largely well informed – illustrates what is at stake when I use 'failure', which is a synonym for Cotter's usage of 'inauthentic' and 'derivative'.

I would argue, though, that the contemporary art world does not have a problem legitimizing art histories dealing with the transnational or the non-West, but the discipline of art history still seems to lean towards only doing so through a multiculturalist approach that homogenizes difference. So, the fear should not be that the histories I write will be reinscribed as inauthentic by mobilizing the word 'failure'. Rather, by not invoking 'failure' the histories I write will be construed as authentic but in only the most reductive manner. To be clear, I see no problem in this book being categorized under the label of South Asian art history – or a variant of it – in a library, but I hope that my writing will help expand what artworks could fall under the label 'South Asian art history'. Therefore, 'productive failure' as a concept signals that the art histories I write have broad ramifications for how we might write transnational South Asian art histories both *with* and *beyond* genealogy.

Art historian Simon Ofield-Kerr's theorization of 'cruising' as a mode of research is one way through which I more effectively accomplish this goal. Drawing on Roland Barthes, he writes that cruising is a 'productive not reductive process' and that it 'has an inbuilt potential for diversion, irregular connections and disorderly encounters'.⁴ In short, cruising refers to being open to *not* finding what you are looking for and being open to 'something you never knew you wanted, or even knew existed'.⁵ Cruising could refer to surfing on the internet but it also can refer to looking for sex. Given the focus on issues of sexuality in this monograph as well as descriptions of my own walks in urban space (as in Chapter 5), the erotic element embedded within the genealogy of the term is something I do not wish to abstract in my usage of the concept here. I do not wish to cloak my desires as an art historian for my objects of study, either.

London-based artist Anish Kapoor's *Svayambh* (2007) provides insight – even if unwittingly – for *doing* (art) history, too. Weighing approximately 7

tons, the work consists of a large block of red paint, wax and Vaseline, set on a plinth that imperceptibly and noiselessly moves over a track system set above the floor.⁶ The Musée des Beaux-Arts in Nantes, France, and Haus der Kunst in Munich, Germany, co-presented the work in 2007 (Figures P.1 and P.3). The work was also in Kapoor's survey exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2009 (cover image and Figure P.2). The passageways through which



Anish Kapoor, *Svayambh*, 2007. Wax and oil-based paint, dimensions variable.
Installation view: Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes, 2007.

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Anish Kapoor, *Svayambh*, 2007. Wax and oil-based paint, dimensions variable.
Installation view: Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2009.

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P.3 Anish Kapoor, *Svayambh*, 2007. Wax and oil-based paint, dimensions variable. Installation view: Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2007.

the block traverses in these buildings would mould or carve its final shape. In Nantes and Munich, the work might conjure up Nazi trains of deportation. The former is the city from which many Jewish people were taken on trains to the death camps and the latter's Haus der Kunst is the first monumental propaganda building of the Third Reich.⁷ However, as art historian Karen Lang writes in the context of her experience viewing the work in Munich, '*Svayambh* quickly departs from expected meaning ... as a physical object, *Svayambh* brings to expression the Haus der Kunst's history of violence. As a perceptual object ... it initiates more intimate and associative connotations: trains of thought.'⁸

One of the 'associative connotations' or 'trains of thought' the work brings up for me is that the physical door frames of the buildings in which Kapoor's work are installed shape the block of viscous material in much the same way conceptual frames which art historians use – such as form, authorship and subject matter – construct histories of art. Of course, as *Svayambh* moves across the galleries, chunks of red Vaseline ooze out onto both the door frames and contiguous walls: the building is not left untouched. In a similar way,

paying attention to – rather than attempting to foreclose – the slippage between the frames I use and the evidence I attempt to shape into histories of art is of vital importance. Each chapter begins with a fairly conventional mode of organizing artworks – as well as visual culture in later chapters – but that which I attempt to shape inevitably demands a slight shift in my framing device or evidence. For example, in Chapter 5 I use space and site as frames to better articulate the lesbian, bisexual and trans* collective Sphere's public artwork in Manchester, England. In the end, though, writing *with* the work ultimately took me in directions that I had not anticipated – everything from including my own walks through the spaces of the city as well as queer club flyers and marketing materials as integral to the writing of a queer feminist transnational South Asian art history. Just as Kapoor's work makes both the object and subjective experience of the viewer uncertain, I attempt both to make the objects under investigation and the art historian and his frame of reference remain somewhat precarious, unresolved and entangled though not indistinct.

Feminist postcolonial literary scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1987 said: 'It is the questions that we ask that produce the field of inquiry and not some body of materials which determines what questions need to be posed to it.'⁹ I agree with this but I would update it to suggest that the 'field of inquiry' is one that is negotiated between the 'questions that we ask' and the materials we think are – but may not end up being – appropriate for answering them. Put another way, I argue that critics and historians should implicitly configure the artwork as a subject, which materializes as a subject-in-making with, and through, their personal investments – and sited engagement – rather than as an object to be explained. Lang implies as much in her essay on Kapoor's *Svayambh*. She writes that the work 'so straightforwardly referential at first view' in the end is anything but that; it 'depends on the presence of a beholder to set it in motion.'¹⁰ Kapoor's works instantiate my call for critics and art historians – special kinds of beholders – to acknowledge the role they play in creating meaning. I discuss my investments in more detail in the Introduction and in Chapter 2, I explore the fraught nature of authorship as a frame through the lens of the art criticism of Anish Kapoor's work.

This notion of a subject-in-making is embedded in the genealogy of the title of *Svayambh*. The word *svayambh* is an adaptation of the Sanskrit word *svayambhuv*, which roughly translates into 'self-generated' in contradistinction to *rupa*, which refers to a human-made form.¹¹ Indeed, Kapoor's sculptures often appear as if they materialize without human artifice – that they had always been there – but of course, they have been laboriously fabricated. *Svayambh* engenders a space for the viewer in which this paradox is felt and where subject and object, nature and artifice and thinking and feeling are all blurred. This space is generative and generous, allowing for multiple

meanings, and thereby underscoring that meaning-making and the writing of art histories can be nothing but provisional.

The argument, of course, is that this is tantamount to saying that an artwork can mean anything and everything and there are no standards through which to filter it. However, the default model in which the historian or critic constructing histories of art remains largely invisible has the unfortunate, if largely unconscious, effect of producing narratives that claim 'objective' truth value but in fact are shaped by the writer's myriad concerns, investments and desires. Those interested in having a dialogue with art, I would argue, need to make their personal investments and the methods of their engagement more explicit – the nature of our dialogue is imbricated with the histories we write with and through art. To do so is to engage in the practice of what art historian Marsha Meskimmon describes as 'affirmative criticality', where aesthetics and ethics meet.¹² She writes that in contradistinction to negative critique – which attempts 'to analyse and interpret things as they are or have been (present, past)' – affirmative criticality as a mode or praxis 'engage[s] actively with the constitution of the future'.¹³ A practice-led project in the form of curating I describe in Chapter 6 attempts to imagine and bring into being an incipient, more ethical future. Indeed, the second half of the book, especially, begins to move towards making my own entanglements more palpable and explicit with the histories of art I write as well as the visual culture with which I engage. At the same time, 'the constitution of the future' with which affirmative criticality is concerned could also involve a reconstitution of the past. In Chapter 3, for instance, I re-imagine post-Second World War abstraction.

Affirmative criticality and productive failure, in fact, are well paired as broad conceptual frameworks that articulate my approach to writing art history. Affirmative criticality does not translate into a less critical mode of engagement in the same way productive failure does not minimize the importance of genealogy in writing transnational South Asian art histories. Rather both demand a slight adjustment to the way we practice art history and thereby produce the possibility of a more ethical and responsible writing with and through art. Moreover, cruising as an overarching method is how I try to accomplish this goal. In the end, my approach is to aim to write art histories as slippery, subjective and entangled with each other and me.

Notes

- 1 Also, one of my case studies deals with the production and consumption of art in the subcontinent, which the term 'diaspora' tends to exclude. For the Gilroy quotation, see Brent Hayes Edwards, 'The Uses of Diaspora', *Social Text* 19, no. 1 66 (20 March 2001): 63, doi:10.1215/01642472-19-1_66-45. It is not my goal here to set up a Manichean debate between 'diaspora' and 'transnational',

though. In fact, the genealogy of the latter is already deeply intertwined with that of the former. For instance, British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall has theorized 'diaspora' in a manner that addresses the implications of fixed origins and destinations that Gilroy references. He defines 'diaspora experience' as determined not through 'return' and 'not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of "identity" which lives with and through, not despite, difference'. See Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 235.

- 2 Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 3 Holland Cotter, 'V. S. Gaitonde Retrospective at the Guggenheim', *The New York Times*, 1 January 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/01/02/arts/design/v-s-gaitonde-retrospective-at-the-guggenheim.html.
- 4 Simon Ofield-Kerr, 'Cruising the Archive', *Journal of Visual Culture* 4, no. 3 (1 December 2005): 357, doi:10.1177/1470412905058353.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 These details are from the website of Aerotrope, the company in charge of the structural design of this and many of Kapoor's monumental works. See <http://aerotrope.com/what-we-do/art/svayambh-anish-kapoor-france-germany-uk.html>.
- 7 On 18 July 1937 Adolf Hitler opened the 'House of German Art' (renamed 'Haus der Kunst' in 1946 to 'denazify' the historically troubled building) as the first 'Great German Art Exhibition' and a day later the vilified show *Degenerate Art* was opened in the rooms of the then Archeological Institute in Munich. See 'Haus Der Kunst – FAQs', *Haus der Kunst* accessed 26 July 2016, www.hausderkunst.de/en/research/history/faqs/. Information on Nantes culled from the following: Julia Weiner, 'Interview: Anish Kapoor Is the Biggest Name in Art', *Jewish Chronicle Online*, 24 September 2009, www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/interview-anish-kapoor-biggest-name-art.
- 8 Karen Lang, 'Anish Kapoor's *Svayambh*', *X-Tra: Contemporary Art Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 60–3. Online version consulted was unpaginated: <http://x-traonline.org/article/anish-kapoors-svayambh/>.
- 9 Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 31. As paraphrased by Rogoff from a discussion after a lecture given by Gaytri Chakravorty Spivak at Harvard University's Center for Literary and Cultural Studies in 1987.
- 10 Lang, 'Anish Kapoor's *Svayambh*'.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Marsha Meskimmon, *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 91.
- 13 Ibid.