

Who Belongs in the New Art History? Exploring Cultural Boundaries in Sutapa Biswas' Performance Artwork *Kali* (1984)

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Abstract: This paper considers the performance artwork *Kali* (1984) by Indian-born artist Sutapa Biswas as an early, postcolonial response to the 'New Art History' at a time when postcolonial theory was not yet taught at university level. By the 1980s, several universities in Britain, among them the University of Leeds, offered degrees in fine art and art history, which employed the New Art History theories of semiotics, psychoanalysis, Marxism and feminism. While these discourses took into account factors which had previously been considered outside the scope of art analysis, they also came under heavy critique for not discussing art which originated beyond Euro-America. Firstly, this paper situates *Kali* within its historical background in the Fine Art degree at Leeds. In light of the work's context, the discussion turns to how the performance employed material and symbolic means (such as the casting of Biswas' tutor, the renowned feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, as the work's main participant) in order to suggest that in a postcolonial world, it was no longer possible to define clear-cut 'insiders' and 'outsiders' of cultural debates; Biswas situated herself *across* feminist, social, postcolonial and 'black' art historical discourses. Secondly, this paper looks at the work's reception and afterlife, critically examining posterior writing by Griselda Pollock in which *Kali* is framed as a 'breakthrough' in feminist discourses. Discussing the value attributed to this work as a 'radical intervention,' this paper uses *Kali* to consider how a work of postcolonial art may be situated both *within* and *beyond* the scope of the New Art History.

Introduction: The Birth and Fragmentation of the New Art History

In the article 'On the Conditions of Artistic Creation' (1974), social art historian T. J. Clark expressed his concern that art history was falling prey to an increasingly commercialized art market. As a result of conforming to capitalist demands and presenting art as a commodity, Clark saw art history as losing its critical power to investigate how art relates to the society which produces it. In order to regain agency, Clark suggested that art historians apply new ways of thinking about art, particularly when considering its relationship with underlying ideologies ("those bodies of beliefs, images, values and techniques of representation by which social classes, in conflict with each other, attempt to 'naturalize' their particular histories." (1974, 562)).

Clark's notion that the power of art rests in its ability to reveal how ideologies work – the means by which 'truths' are produced, the reasons why some are afforded privilege while others are denied

power, the strategies used to construct images of the Self and Other - provided a potent and charged field of inquiry for many academics, artists and critics. His call for the revitalisation of art history into a 'new' discipline which took a critical stance towards modes of production and reception, was taken up in Britain during the 1970s by individuals, collectives and institutions working in fields of semiotics, psychoanalysis, Marxism and feminism. Their collective intervention came to be known by the 1980s as the 'New Art History' (Harris 2001; Rees and Borzello 1986).

Unlike the 'old' art history which concerned itself with style and form, these branches of the New Art History took into account factors which had previously been considered 'outside' the scope of art analysis; for instance, word-image relationship, the role of the subconscious, the social function of art, and the place of women in the history of Western art. For many of Clark's successors, the New Art History therefore offered a regenerative and power-laden discourse through which to salvage the discipline from over-commercialization, and simultaneously to challenge its core political, class and gender assumptions. Commenting on the radical power of the New Art History, the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock wrote in 1988-

The study of cultural production has bled so widely and changed so radically from an object to a discourse and practice orientation that there is a complete breakdown between art historians working still within the normative discipline and those who are contesting the paradigm. We are witnessing a paradigm shift which will rewrite all cultural history. (1988, 17)

Along with the emergence of scholars and practitioners whose work was driven by the principles of the New Art History, also came the establishment of New Art History institutional bases around the United Kingdom. In 1978, the University of Leeds was among the first to introduce the New Art History into its curriculum as a part of its Fine Art degree.¹ This department differentiated itself from other institutions in the late 1970s and 1980s, by advocating an open dedication to the teaching of the New Art History through the combination of fine art and art history/theory courses. According to Pollock, the combination of art practice and critical theory provided a new, safe space in which the ideologies of cultural production could be challenged (1999, 214). For another of Leeds' academics, the social art historian John Tagg, a further idea behind the Fine Art degree, with its triple focus on Marxism-feminism-psychoanalysis, was to produce a productive cross-fertilisation of the three fields in order to allow for greater diversification of art history's 'subjects' (1992, 41).

¹ Another prominent institute which shaped the dissemination and teaching of the New Art History in the 1970s was the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham.

By the mid-1980s, the New Art History had become firmly entrenched in the analysis and teaching of art history and practice in several institutions around the United Kingdom, thus seemingly paving the way to realizing T. J. Clark's call to create a new discourse where "the questions have to be asked, and where they cannot be asked in the old way." (1974, 562). Yet, with the opening up of new spaces in the study of art which allowed for questions such as *What could be defined as art?* and *Who could be considered an artist?*, internal shortcomings became increasingly evident. For instance, for Tagg, the ideal of sustaining dialogue between the discourses of Marxist-feminism-psychoanalysis while conveying the specificities of each discipline, had not been fulfilled in practice. In his final seminar at Leeds in April 1984, he stated –

Perhaps we have seen the formula 'Marxism-feminism-psychoanalysis' too often to wonder at what it presumes... But its repetition has hidden tensions and incompatibilities and too easily implied that different theoretical traditions can be not only reconciled but combined. (1992, 42)

According to Tagg, the increasing control over the department's structure and the creation of a fixed syllabus in the 1980s, had led to the abandonment of the programme's foundational ideals of welcoming divergence. In the combination of Marxism-feminism-psychoanalysis "what strikes me is that it is the hyphens which do all the work", he declared (1992, 42). For Tagg, the hyphens represented the discourses which continued to exist, unaddressed, outside the realm of the New Art History, in spite of its claims to universal relevance in discussions on class, gender and consciousness in art.

Indeed, over the course of the 1980s, these universalizing claims of the New Art History came to be a rich ground of contestation from both external and internal sources. On the external front, the dissemination of key postcolonial texts presented a forefront challenge to the proclaimed universalism, exposing it as the subsequent Euro- and ethno-centric absorption of the 'Other'.² According to cultural critic Stuart Hall, such "centred discourses of the West" (1989, 29) presented a pressing problem for understanding cultural expression in an increasingly multicultural state. In 1989, Hall called on practitioners and scholars of history and cultural production to put "in question (Western culture's) universalist character and its transcendental claims to speak for everyone, while being itself everywhere and nowhere." (1989, 29).

² Influential postcolonial texts of the 1980s which challenged the universality of Western discourses of knowledge included Gayatri Spivak's *Other Worlds* (1987), Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) and, in the United Kingdom, the journal *Third Text* (first published in 1987).

Within Leeds itself, the New Art History gradually began to come under question in the work of art students and self-critical reflections of art historians, including Griselda Pollock and John Tagg. In 1988, Griselda Pollock acknowledged that while the Euro-centricity of feminism had already been noted in other academic disciplines such as anthropology and cultural studies,³ art history still lagged behind in addressing the issue. In her key feminist text, *Vision and Difference, Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (1988), Pollock stressed-

...this work [Feminism] was not only Eurocentric but ethnocentric. The position of Black artists, men and women, past and present, in all the cultural and class diversity of their communities and countries needs to be analysed and documented. Race must be acknowledged as the central focus of all our analyses of societies which were and are not only bourgeois but imperialist, colonizing nations. (1988, 15)

Likewise, in a paper entitled 'Should Art Historians Know Their Place?' written in 1987, Tagg (who, by the time of its publication, was no longer teaching at Leeds) also responded to his own question-

NO: if it means serving, at a less genteel or publicized level, those processes of colonialist discourse through which Western art histories have not only shored up superioristic states of mind and even self-aggrandised states, but have also contributed, through the articulation of racial difference in normative and Eurovocal conceptions of civilisation and culture, to the subjugation of what is thereby constituted as the negative Other and to the fetishizing of the exotic Other as object of Western desire... (1992, 50)

What is of interest for this paper is how this radical self-consciousness came about and was later articulated, particularly by Pollock, given that the New Art History programme at Leeds already claimed to speak for the marginalized figures in artistic production (the working classes and women, for instance) in the 1980s. In this inquiry, the performance artwork known as *Kali* (1984) by Indian-born artist Sutapa Biswas is of special interest. This work was carried out in early 1984 with the participation of Griselda Pollock who was Biswas' tutor at Leeds. It is of importance here both as an artistic expression and a historical source. Consequently, this essay analyses how its meaning was constructed by the artist through visual and performative strategies, as well as by the spectator/art historian (in both cases

³ Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom and Margaret Mills comment on the openness of anthropology to take into account the role of gender in expressive traditions in South Asia since the 1970s, stating "The female aspect of deity is abundantly represented in South Asian traditions and for this reason, among others, the current study of gender issues in South Asian folklore has no trouble, *pace* French feminism, turning up examples of women as gazing and enunciating subjects, not just as gazed upon objects..." (1991, 8). From the position of cultural studies and history, Valerie Amos and Pratibhar Parmar extensively critiqued Western feminism's refusal to account for the lived realities of Third World and black diaspora women (1984).

Griselda Pollock) through retrospective writing. As such, this paper also aims to illuminate the active role of the art historian in selectively situating a work of art within a specific discourse, in order to serve a purpose at a given moment in time. As Lisa Bloom (1999) has noted, while the artwork is often extensively defined in terms of sexual, racial and social meanings, the role of the art historian in imposing personal views is often largely overlooked. In terms of Pollock's own development, this is a highly significant work to explore as she attributed *Kali* the status of a revolutionary 'moment' in her own awareness of postcolonial struggles.

In an essay on Biswas' work, 'Tracing Figures of Presence, Naming Ciphers of Absence. Feminism, Imperialism, and Postmodernity in the Work of Sutapa Biswas' (1999), Pollock expressed that the work of Sutapa Biswas (as a whole) represented a central step in her own contestation of existing disciplines.

The opportunity to write about Sutapa Biswas' work is not only the outcome of an intellectual relationship forged in moments of becoming and difference; it is the product of a moment in the history of feminism, post-colonial discourse, and the artistic gesture. This moment has changed how I think and write, indeed has made these practices visible, susceptible to a creative and often critical self-consciousness, which abjures the possibility of remastering the shattered hegemonies challenged in the name of those they excluded. (1999, 213)

Within the 'radicalized consciousness'⁴ which Biswas' work represented for Pollock, the performance was a 'watershed' moment. It stood for a constructed encounter when Biswas' and Pollock's personal relationship as pupil and tutor came face-to-face with the reality of their unequal statuses born of a postcolonial world. Thus, the combined significance afforded to this performance within Biswas' own development at Leeds, Pollock's change of consciousness, and the greater 'awakening' to postcolonial discourses in the New Art History, renders *Kali* a highly valuable "small narrative", to borrow the term from Gilane Tawadros (1989, 145), through which to examine "the broader political and aesthetic project which informs black women's creativity and from which it derives" (1989, 145). By exploring *Kali* as the start of a "small narrative"—one individual work, within the careers of an artist and art historian,

⁴ The expression 'radicalized consciousness' is borrowed from Jurgen Habermas' essay 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project' (1987). Habermas uses it in the context of the Western modernism in the 19th century to describe the desire to break away from historical ties, and produce a new way of conceptualizing the present moment (1987, 3). Here, it is employed in a similar way to signify a seemingly complete break with the past which, in reality, is a recombination of past principles, traditions and ideas to stand for a new cause.

within the legacy of a department, within the development of a discourse – this essay strives to shed light on the individual, aesthetic and political processes behind the ‘opening up’ of the New Art History.

Furthermore, while the central concern of this paper is how the performance lends itself to an interpretation as a ‘postcolonial intervention’ in the New Art History, this essay also asks whether, by assigning it this value, we are perhaps reiterating and legitimating a Western modernist myth. As Tawadros reminds us, “The most significant feature of modernism as an historical category of Western thought and artistic consciousness was its self-characterisation as a period of transition and radical change which found expression through metaphors of the vanguard and the avant-garde” (1989, 124). The myth therefore, as Rosalind Krauss (1985) has also pointed out, is that the modern artist is a lone genius, capable of shattering and surpassing existing traditions in order to overturn our ways of seeing and, in doing so, carving out a space for him or herself outside the dominant discourse. As Krauss cautions, “if the very notion of the avant-garde can be seen as a function of the discourse of originality, the actual practice of the vanguard art tends to reveal that “originality” is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence.” (1985, 157-158) If we are indeed still guilty of seeking out ‘revolutionary moments’ operating from outside a discourse rather than focusing on gradual changes from within, should *Kali* still be assigned importance as a ‘postcolonial intervention’? What are the effects of labelling it as such on our understanding of how the discipline as whole has transformed through multiple, inter-twined efforts? These are among the questions which this paper seeks to tackle by redressing the strategies and reception of this fascinating performance in the wake of the transformation of the New Art History during the 1980s.

An Art Education: Sutapa Biswas and the University of Leeds Faculty of Fine Art

Sutapa Biswas joined the Fine Arts Programme at the University of Leeds in 1981. As a part of this degree, Biswas undertook courses in fine art where she developed her knowledge of painting and multimedia sculpture, as well as art theory and history by attending courses such as Griselda Pollock’s ‘Theories and Institutions.’⁵ Throughout her degree, the young Indian-born artist became increasingly conscious of the Euro-centricity of feminist and social readings of art history taught in the degree. “I want people to research into my culture, as I have been doing into European and Western culture”

⁵ Personal conversation with Sutapa Biswas, April 2013.

(Kureishi 1987, 37) she stated in a retrospective interview, capturing her preoccupation with the absence of non-Western cultures in art history curricula in Britain.

In spite of her critical stance towards the universalizing tendencies of the New Art History, the young artist was also deeply moved by the debates brought up throughout the degree – particularly feminist, social and psychological readings of art.⁶ Additionally, she was often guided in her practice by her tutors who encouraged to experiment with media and concepts and thus move beyond the traditional boundaries of fine art. One of the figures closest to Biswas during this period, Griselda Pollock, has noted –

There can be no doubt that this academic environment – or, rather, this informal and still emergent conversational community, productively located in the art department that was considered marginal and provincial despite its prestigious past professors...influenced the development of Sutapa Biswas away from an immensely skilful and professionally accomplished figurative painting she had been producing as a student. Sutapa Biswas was encouraged toward an ambitious and critical intervention in contemporary art by means of multimedia presentations in the field of dominant representations, both local to Leeds and on a world scale. (1999, 215)

As a part of her experimentation, one of the visual strategies which Biswas developed was the use of ancient, traditional and mythological Indian (predominantly Hindu) iconography in the framework of modern art. While interpretations of her use of Hindu iconography have differed (Tawadros saw it as an “alternative conception of femininity as creative resistance” (1989, 148) while Pollock interpreted it as a means to expose the West’s ignorance of other cultural systems (1999, 217)), there is a general consensus that her use of mythic, religious and traditional figures was a means to raise deeper social, political, aesthetic and personal “metadiscourses” (Appadurai, Korom and Mills 1991, 22). One such metadiscourse which recurs in her work is the traversal of cultural boundaries through visual practices. For Biswas, this was both a productive and problematic terrain. Reflecting upon her practice, the artist stated in 1987-

In most of my work I’ve tried to trace certain elements within my own cultural history...to use ideas of myth and to rework those ideas to signify, in very crude ways, imperialism. To try and make the viewer aware of the fact that a particular cultural history existed and to try and encourage the viewer to question what happened to that culture. How was it inverted? Where does it fit into the present-day existence of, for instance, black people, whether they’re Afro-Caribbean or Asian people living within Britain? (2004, 20)

⁶ Personal conversation with Sutapa Biswas, April 2013.

As she expressed in this statement, her use of Hindu iconography created links between the imperial history, modern art and the struggles of Afro-Asian artists to gain recognition in Britain during the 1980s. Her work from the 1980s which has received most attention is her painting (commenced shortly before the staging of the performance *Kali*) known as *Housewives with Steak-Knives* (1984-85). While the inclusion of Biswas' work in exhibitions on black art after her graduation from Leeds will be discussed at a later point in this paper, at this stage *Housewives with Steak Knives* is an important work to mention as, in it, Biswas first began to employ the Hindu goddess of destruction, Kali. Many of the meanings attributed to the figure of Kali in this work were taken up again and further developed in the performance which bears the deity's name.



Housewives with Steak-Knives

1985

Sutapa Biswas

Medium: Oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil, white tape, collage on paper mounted onto canvas

Dimensions: 2450mm x 2220mm

Installation photograph Tate Britain 2011 by Andy Keates

Courtesy of the artist

In Hinduism, Kali is most often associated with battles, threatening stability and order. Reflecting of the role of Kali in Hindu mythology, David Kinsley has written-

Kali's shocking appearance and unconventional behavior confront one with an alternative to normal society. To mediate on the dark goddess, or to devote oneself to her, is to step out of the everyday world of predictable dharmic order and enter a world of reversals, opposites and contrasts and in doing so to wake up to new possibilities and frames of reference. In her differentness, strangeness, indeed, in her perverseness, Kali is the kind of figure who is capable of shaking one's comforting and naïve assumptions about the world. In doing this, she allows a clearer perception of how things really are. (2003, 35)

Kali appears in *Housewives with Steak Knives* as a fearful spectre, holding her hands high in a gesture of aggression. Strung around her neck are decapitated heads, and in one hand she brandishes the severed head of a conservative member of the British parliament, while in the other, she waves a copy of the renowned Renaissance painting by the female artist Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith and Holofernes* (1625), a work addressed extensively in Pollock's seminars as an example of female agency (Pollock 1999, 217).

Kali's bold presence, occupying a central, dominating position on the canvas, may be read as an assertion of self-empowerment. By drawing upon her personal connection with the deity (one of the areas in India where Kali is most strongly worshiped is in Bengal, Biswas' region of birth (Snyder 2004, 12)), Biswas used Kali as a figure of female agency, challenging both the 'completeness' which Western feminist art history held claim to and asserting her presence.

I try to link every-day events to things that perhaps are not everyday events like the idea of myth, story, heroes and heroines...to say that we are all goddesses, we are all heroines, we are all gods. And our histories can be within our own hands. (Biswas 2004, 20)

Furthermore, the goddess is employed in this painting to reflect the belief that tradition is not static and fixed in the past. Kali's presence suggests that tradition is often used by societies to "explore the limits of their histories, and replay the points of tension in these histories" (Appadurai, Korom and Mills 1991, 22). Given the artist's status as a woman from a former colony at Leeds, the point of tension which Biswas may have alluded to could be the development of her artistic journey within the degree programme from whose discourses she saw herself as inherently absent.

It is important to remember, as Gilane Tawadros reminds us, that the use of Kali in Biswas' work can also be seen as highly ambiguous, lending the deity to multiple readings (1989, 145). For instance, while Kali is generally believed to be an independent goddess, she also appears in Hindu texts as the embodiment of the wrath and anger of *other* gods who call upon her presence in times of battle.

Henceforth, her presence in Biswas' work also suggests an assault originating from *within* a given discourse. Given artist's background, the discourses from which her challenge stems are the feminist, social, postmodern and postcolonial conversations in which she partook during her university years. It is this latter reading of Kali which is of particular interest when analysing the strategies and iconography used in the lesser-known performance *Kali*. Produced for a small audience of insiders to the Leeds community, this performance set out to address Biswas' simultaneous presence and absence from the New Art History project.

Kali

The performance artwork *Kali* was staged in front of a mere handful of people in 1985: the two performers Sutapa Biswas and Isabelle Tracy, Griselda Pollock, a small number of spectators⁷ (one of whom is named by Biswas as fellow-artist Jennifer Comrie), and the film-maker (thanks to whose project, the work has survived to the present in the form of a video recording). The performance begins with the preparation process: Sutapa Biswas and fellow-art student Isabelle Tracy wrap their bodies in black nylon and paint their faces to resemble Hindu deities. Clad in their self-made costumes, they proceed along the corridors to Biswas' own studio where *Housewives with Steaknives*, still in its early stages, rests against the wall. The room has been previously cleared of furniture and equipment except for a chair and a mirror.

Upon entering the studio, the two performers continue their preparation: a tableau with pinned-up images of the Festival of Saraswati, a celebration of the Hindu goddess of art and education, is placed as a backdrop to the event and two hand-made puppets are laid to rest in the corner of the room. Subsequently, Griselda Pollock is beckoned into the room. Up until this moment, she has remained outside the door, uninformed about what the performance comprises and of the fact that she will be made both subject and object of the work.

At the time, I felt privileged and trusted to be invited to witness, so I thought, a performance Sutapa Biswas was preparing in order to explore her double vision.(...)When I arrived to watch the performance, I was kept inexplicably waiting in the corridor while preparations continued

⁷ There is a slight contradiction between accounts. While Pollock writes that the performance was attended by a small group of Indian art students, Biswas recounted the performance was staged only in front of Comrie and, possibly, one more spectator. Personal conversation with Sutapa Biswas, April 2013.

inside the room. At last I was ushered in to find myself not a spectator at the margins but part of the spectacle. (1999, 218)

With an air of uncertainty, Pollock allows herself to be seated on a chair in the centre of the designated performance space. From the moment she sits upon the chair, Biswas carries out a series of acts which undermine her authority as an art historian and sever their link as student and teacher. To begin, Biswas hoods Pollock and limits her vision by leaving her with only two eye holes through which to follow the action around her. Through this act of masking, she not only deprives her tutor of her social identity, but also denies her the power to respond with facial expressions. Thus, Pollock's emotions – whether they were fear, apprehension, or tension - remain forcefully omitted from the performance.

In a further step to dismantle normal hierarchies and relations, the lights are switched off. With the onset of darkness, the music of the South African Bahumathi Theatre Company – a vocal group whose anti-apartheid music had been played at a concert in Leeds the previous year⁸ – fills the darkened space. Presumably, Pollock is intended to recognize the vocalists' origins having lived in South Africa during her childhood. Yet, if this familiarity is at all present, it is not intended to generate a sense of comfort or security. As song after song is played, no end to the darkness in sight, every movement and rustle emanating from the performers' nylon outfits arouses expectation and unease. Then, in an abrupt interruption, the room is lit.

Giving no time for adaption to the light and thus disorienting her participant, Biswas bends over and, moving in an ever-faster circular motion, paints a circle around the chair. The painted outline is reminiscent of a mandala which in Hindu and Buddhist traditions is a circular form with a central point. In the spiritual sense, it represents organization in the universe. However, the notion of the mandala has also been employed in political terms to refer to geo-political entities with a form of central government (Dellios 2003). Applying this latter understanding of a mandala leads to a two-fold interpretation of Biswas' action. On the one hand, the painting of the circle may be read a gesture of barring off Pollock and restricting the realm in which she may be active. On the other hand, the creation of a mandala-like form may represent an acknowledgment of Pollock's presence as a guiding force in the young artist's development. As she, Pollock's presence may be considered a central and highly-desired feature in the performance.

⁸ Personal conversation with Sutapa Biswa, April 2013.



Sutapa Biswas traces a circle around Griselda Pollock

Kali

1984

Sutapa Biswas

Medium: Video

Dimensions: Variable

Photo: © Tate, London [2014]

Physically separated from the performers, Pollock is subsequently distanced even further through the use of language. Biswas plays a pre-recorded monologue in her mother tongue, Bengali, recounting her thoughts on postcolonial relations. Not knowing the language, Pollock is denied the meaning of this recital. It is the successive step in a gradual deprivation of senses and knowledge as Biswas reverses the authority between herself and her tutor: the renowned art historian, who normally relies on sensual experiences in order to generate interpretations and exercise power, is now put in a position where neither full vision nor comprehension are possible. By dispossessing Pollock of her ability to perceive properly and move freely, Biswas dictates the terms of her experience. The professor is now

forced to perceive from a constrained position, much reminiscent of, on the one hand, the conditions imposed upon native peoples during colonial times; denied voice and agency. On the other hand, it also echoes the power relations of a classroom environment where the tutor, through the presentation of selective discourses, arguments and examples, directs the students' vision. Thus, in controlling Pollock's range of perception, Biswas symbolically reverses the direction of both colonial legacies and the power of knowledge executed through the New Art History.

In spite of all the restraints, one source of vision does exist for Pollock. Leaning against the wall is a mirror which offers a view of the activity taking place in Pollock's blind spots behind and around the chair. For Pollock, this mirror is a means of attaining knowledge and insight, yet it is also the source for further anxiety and fragmentation. The mirror reflects not only the external world but also her own image: silenced, masked, and faceless. According to Trinh Minh-ha, "In the dual relation of subject to subject or subject to object, the mirror is the symbol of an unaltered vision of things. It reveals to me my double, my ghost, my perfections as well as my flaws. (...)In this encounter of I with I, the power of identification is often such that reality and appearance merge while the tool itself becomes invisible" (1989, 27). The Self which Pollock encounters in the mirror no longer conforms to her self-image as a figure of authority and knowledge. Instead, she sees herself in a fragmented state; divorced from her known identity and integrated as an object into the narrative of Biswas' performance. As Biswas goes on to create a mystic and fearful scenario through the use of ritual-like acts, music and dance, Pollock remains both bodily present amidst the action and, simultaneously, a detached spectator, watching the events through the mirror. This sensation of what can only be described as 'dislocated helplessness', is brought to its peak in the final scene, when the performance escalates into a conflict which plays out in the space around the Pollock's chair.



Griselda Pollock sits with hood next to a mirror

Kali

1984

Sutapa Biswas

Medium: Video

Dimensions: Variable

Photo: © Tate, London [2014]

The two puppets previously stored in the corner of the room serve as the medium for carrying out a battle between Kali, played by Biswas, and the demon god Ravana, played by Tracey. Ravana, a protagonist in the epic *Ramayana*, is known in India as the much-feared king of demons and a symbol of malice. However, he is also known as an avid scholar and master of scripts and texts, a skill which he uses to carry out evil. In light of Biswas' critical approach towards the teaching of art history, it is possible to suggest a reading of this battle as a challenge to the 'universal knowledge' propagated by the New Art History which Biswas saw as essentially detrimental to the understanding of other cultural traditions. By taking on the role of Kali and defeating Ravana, Biswas enacts a victory over the 'evil'

bestowed by the limited scope of the New Art History discourses. In her final gesture, she slays Ravana, and proceeds to paint circles around the fallen bodies of Tracey and her puppet, thus symbolically isolating and restricting their influence. Furthermore, she paints a swastika on Tracey's back, thus marking her with the ultimate symbol of split cultural meanings. In India, the swastika is a symbol of wealth and prosperity, for the West it remains an ominous sign of hatred and discrimination. This split meaning draws attention to the crucial fact that the final battle is more ambiguous than a simple struggle to defeat an evil, West-centred form of knowledge.



Kali and Ravana in battle

Kali

1984

Sutapa Biswas

Medium: Video

Dimensions: Variable

Photo: © Tate, London [2014]

A closer inspection of the puppets reveals a complexity in the finale. The puppets are made from found materials which Biswas and Tracey previously collected from practitioners' studios at Leeds. Apart from their function as avatars of Kali and Ravana, the puppets are an explicit reference to Pop Art (a genre which glorified everyday commodities through art) and Assemblage Art (a practice of creating collages, sculptures and performances using found objects), both genres which had reached the height of their success in Europe and the USA during the 1960s and 1970s. Both these styles had been addressed in Biswas' studies at Leeds, as a result of which the young artist had developed a particular fascination for Robert Rauschenberg's assemblage sculptures, Claes Oldenburg's performances ('happenings') using found objects and Joan Miro's puppets which he designed in reaction to the Spanish Civil War (Roth 1995, 36-37). In *Kali*, Biswas drew inspiration from the works of these artists in order to make her own puppet-enacted battle scene.⁹ As such, her puppets suggest a strong indebtedness to Euro-American modernist practices. Although this interpretation seemingly contradicts the reading of the mythical battle scene between the Hindu deity and demon as an assault on West-centred discourse, this paper suggests that this ambiguity is an integral part of the work. As Tawadros emphasizes, the work of Sutapa Biswas often deals with dismantling binary opposites and bringing to light overlooked connections and inter-dependencies (1989, 144). In light of this, the strategies employed in *Kali* lend it to a reading as a nuanced amalgamation of non-Western aesthetics and Western cultural discourses as taught in the New Art History; it is the product of a postcolonial discourse which acknowledges the central rootedness of former-colonial subjects within the centre where, according to Stuart Hall (2000), they act as sources of productive difference. To draw on John Tagg's expression once again, *Kali* exemplified the dynamic discourses taking place "in the hyphens" of postcolonial-feminist art.

The reception and re-inscription of *Kali*

Griselda Pollock's essay 'Tracing Figures of Presence, Naming Ciphers of Absence. Feminism, Imperialism, and Postmodernity in the Work of Sutapa Biswas' (1999) is one of the very few writings which mention the existence of *Kali* to date.¹⁰ Moreover, it is the only writing (to the best of my

⁹ Personal conversation with Sutapa Biswas, April 2013.

¹⁰ Another essay which mentions *Kali* by drawing upon Pollock's essay is Moira Roth's 'Reading Between the Lines: The Imprinted Spaces of Sutapa Biswas' (1995).

knowledge) which recounts Pollock's personal recollections and sentiments as a participant. As such, it is both a work of critical analysis and a primary documentation of experiences. According to performance theorist Amelia Jones (1997), for those who will never be able to see a performance live, documentation is an essential aspect of the work itself, allowing the viewer to become a part of the privileged performance space. Philip Auslander (2003) has extended this argument to say that viewing/reading documentation becomes a performative act in itself; the viewer participates in the work retrospectively by empathizing with the primary experience conveyed through the documentation. As a primary account, Pollock's essay thus plays a key role in re-enacting the work from the eyes of the viewer/participant. As such, it is of interest for this study on *Kali* for two reasons; firstly, how it frames *Kali* within the growing need for postcolonial interventions in the New Art History disciplines and, secondly, the status it affords to the performance as a 'radical intervention,' overturning previous ways of seeing the role of non-Western artists in modern art.

As mentioned previously, *Kali* employed the encounter between pupil and tutor as a creative strategy to raise a complex metadiscourse around Biswas' own situatedness in postcolonial and New Art History debates. However, in Pollock's account, what is interesting is that Biswas is seen as taking on the role of the colonized while Pollock saw herself as being attributed the status of the colonizer, forced to live out the experience of colonization through the eyes of the Other.

The centre, British imperialism, was to be put on discomforted display, and made to figure as part of the created ritual contesting its postcolonial hegemony. Obligated to sit in the centre of a circle, hooded, though I could just see through the slits at eye level, I was made to function as an icon of imperialism around which Sutapa Biswas' enactments of resistance would be performed. (1999, 218)

Moreover, Pollock presents performance as a turning point, a moment of realization, when she as an art historian came to terms with postcolonial inequalities –

Because I was participant yet target, forced to hear and struggle to see meanings that silenced me, and to which I must react, an emotional register was activated to lend its intensities to the structural relations of colonialization, which was the topic of the performance. (1999, 219)

On the one hand, we may read this as a simple primary account, recalling Pollock's own impressions of the event. Yet, given the fact that this essay was compiled approximately sixteen years after the work took place, it is worthwhile to consider it is a carefully-crafted response to critiques of the New Art History which had come about during the 1980s and 1990s. Between the staging of *Kali* in 1984 and the time when 'Figures of Presence' was published in 1999, feminism alone had come under

numerous attacks from postcolonial and Black writers, calling into question its Euro- and ethno-centricity. Artists and theorists such as Trinh T. Minh-ha, among others, critiqued feminists for writing the Other's experience in their own image (what Trinh terms "playing God" (1989, 30)).

...no matter how novel her work may appear to be, the woman who writes about herself/others from the standpoint of the one-who-knows deliberately/involuntarily carries on the conventions of the Priest God scheme. Omniscient and omnipresent, she is everywhere and understands everything at the same time; she follows her own or her characters' outer expression and inner conscience simultaneously; she sees the present, past, and future of all events; and, above all, she has the power to dissolve the opacity of life. Eager to create a meaningful world and/or to unveil her ignored/censored deeper self, she adopts a series of strategies liable to ensure the transparency of form through which content, intelligibly constructed, can travel unhindered. (1989, 30)

In light of such cautionary critiques, Pollock's essay may be seen as an attempt to redress not only the artwork (as a product of Black feminism), but also the role of the art historian herself as a subject, object and critic of the work. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's call to differentiate different forms of female experience, Pollock openly embraces the limited scope of her own knowledge and her partial vision through this essay.

Sutapa Biswas' presence in the course, however, was itself a factor in the evolution of the Leeds project. It was she who defined the absences in these seemingly radical discourses deriving from Marxism and feminism. It was she who named the imperialism that still structured analyses speaking in undifferentiated terms of class and gender, never knowing the issues of race and colonialism. It was her critique that forced us all to acknowledge the Eurocentric limits of the discourses within which we, the staff, practiced. (1999, 215)

In addition to admitting to the limited scope of the New Art History, Pollock's essay also serves to affirm her support for the causes of Black and third world female artists. Therefore, perhaps it is a result of her wish to convey her solidarity with these artists' cause, that leads Pollock to embrace a reading of herself as a symbol of imperialism in this work. As this essay has demonstrated, while *Kali* allows for such an interpretation, its treatment of the femininity-power-knowledge triad is also highly complex and ambiguous. To elaborate on one example where the figure of Pollock in this performance may be read in a different way, Rachel McDermot and Jeffrey J. Kripal note that the deity Kali has transcended its Hindu-specific meaning in the 20th century (2003, 2). McDermot and Kripal remind us that the goddess was extensively appropriated by Western feminist movements during the 1970s as she

also became a Western ‘sign’¹¹ for female power and radical femininity. Given Pollock’s status as a forefront proponent of feminist discourses in art history, the use of Kali in Biswas’ performance also lends itself to an alternative reading; namely, that Biswas’ visual language and personal development was indebted both to her background as an Indian artist and to her education under the New Art History in Leeds through which she grasped the radical potentials of feminist art and subsequently developed her own critical stance. Indeed, in one of her most well-known battles, Kali becomes so frenzied in her own anger that she walks over the body of her husband, Siva, who has lain in her path in an effort to end her rage. In a similar way, the figure of Griselda Pollock is also made central to the battle which the performance *Kali* enacts. On the one hand, she represents a mentor and supporter of the young artist. On the other hand, she is the object of anger and frustration towards the selective nature of the New Art History which the performance articulates. While Biswas appears to confront the very source of her artistic language, she thus also speaks from a position deeply embedded and reliant on the New Art History.

Therefore, while Pollock’s essay serves an important function in illuminating frustrations towards the New Art History, it also underplays the influence it had on Biswas’ art. As well-intentioned as Pollock’s interpretation of herself as symbol of imperialism may have been, this interpretation ultimately overlooks an alternative, equally important reading of this work as homage to Pollock’s own work. In line with this argument, Gilane Tawadros has argued that in order to gain equal rights and recognition for Black artists working in Britain, it does not suffice simply to insert them into history as individual moments of radical intervention. In order to grant these artists equal power as their Euro-American counter-parts, their individual histories must be acknowledged and accepted – even if these histories show that the artists were as much indebted to Western practices as they were to Black discourses.

Thus, the space of black women’s creativity does not designate the impossibility of mapping the black female subject within history and lived experience...Rather, the work of these artists attests to the importance of charting individual and personal subjectivity within the material

¹¹ The description of Kali as a ‘sign’ is based upon Elizabeth Cowie’s (1978) notion of a woman as a ‘sign’: a constructed way of representing women. Cowie suggests that the perceived value of women is actively produced (for instance, as the passive presence, lacking of agency and voice) rather than inherently present. Cowie proposes a radical revision of what the sign ‘woman’ signifies in visual culture in order to overturn the representation of women as lesser. The reference to Kali as a ‘sign’ here therefore refers to as a visual trope underpinned by radically different meanings from the passive female – she is active, aggressive, and with the power to destroy and create.

structures of history and politics. In this context, the architectural framework or the physical environment which circumscribes the contours of the black subject is imbued with resonances of past experience and contemporary reality. (Tawadros 1989, 149)

Seeing a work of modern art by a non-Western artist as rooted in multiple fields does not detract from the work. In fact, acknowledging its ability to traverse cultural and discourse boundaries is cause to bestow even greater value upon the work, by acknowledging its sophisticated ability to borrow and reuse multiple traditions. Biswas' performance stands at this juncture in the 'opening up' of the New Art History. As this essay has strived to show, it spoke from a nuanced position *within* both postcolonial and feminist discourses.

Conclusion: Kali's Legacy and After-life in *A Thin Black Line* (1985)

It is important not to forget that even though that *Housewives with Steak Knives* (1985) and *Kali* (1984) were completed before the artist had contacts to the British 'black arts movement',¹² the message and visual strategies developed in these pieces coincided strongly with the 'Black agenda' of the 1970s and 1980s. Rasheed Araeen (1978) defined this agenda in his 'Black Manifesto' as the struggle to secure recognition for Afro-Asian diaspora artists working in the West and to gain recognition for these artists' visual strategies and multivalent discourses.

After Biswas graduated from Leeds, *Kali* was publicly screened for the first and only time (to date) as a part of the exhibition *A Thin Black Line* (1985) at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London.¹³ In the words of curator Lubaina Himid, this exhibition presented

...the work of a number of black women artists who see themselves as having to operate at the edges of the white, male-dominated mainstream. Some of the artists address this issue specifically while others use metaphor and their personal heritage to explore their experience. (1985)

This exhibition set out to complicate and diversify the Black art discourses of the time, acknowledging that "blackness" refers to a plurality of experiences which differed not only according to cultural background, but also gender. Furthermore, the display was also designed to prompt diverse

¹² Personal conversation with Sutapa Biswas, April 2013.

¹³ Although it was not mentioned in the catalogue, *Kali* was screened at the symposium around the exhibition— whereas Biswas' now better known works *Housewives with Steak Knives*, *The Only Good Indian* and *Tracing a History What Ever Happened to Cricket?* were hung on display.

understandings of female agency, recognizing, as Valerie Amos and Pratibhar Parmar (1984) had argued earlier, that the West-centred model of feminism did not always account for the different experiences and lived realities of non-Western women.

Kali's complex use of Hindu iconography and references to modern Western art rendered it an intriguing and controversial addition to this exhibition. Screened in one of the discussions during the exhibition, the work aroused unease and discontent in some of the spectators (particularly as a result of its use of the swastika).¹⁴

Although *Kali* was not screened as a part of the 2011/12 re-installation of *Thin Black Line(s)* at the Tate, what is evident from this contemporary revival is that the works displayed in 1985 continue to be regarded as moments of radical intervention. Himid writes in the catalogue of the 2011/12 exhibition-

...*The Thin Black Line* at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in (1985) marked the arrival on the British art scene of a radical generation of young Black and Asian women artists. They challenged their collective invisibility in the art world and engaged with the social, cultural, political and aesthetic issues of the time. (2011, 6)

Himid's statement testifies to the continued search and demand for radical postcolonial interventions – particularly in the work of Black female art. Similarly, Jonathan Harris (2001) has argued that the label of art or historical discourse as 'radical' undeniably carries power and agency. However, as this essay has strived to show, it also detracts attention away from the complex sources and origins which works such as *Kali* drew upon in their making. Speaking of Third World literature, Anne McClintock reminds us,

If a theoretical tendency to envisage "Third World" literature as progressing from "protest literature," to "resistance literature," to "national literature" has been criticized as rehearsing the Enlightenment trope of sequential, "linear" progress, the term "post-colonialism" is questionable for the same reason. Metaphorically poised on the border between old and new, end and beginning, the term heralds the end of a world era, but within the same trope of linear progress that animated that era. (1992, 85)

Kali visualized an investigation into the very nature being a subject *within* and *beyond* the scope of the New Art History- a discipline which up until the 1980s had claimed to be universally applicable to all art. As such, it is a key example illuminating the turn towards multicultural or cross-cultural

¹⁴ Personal conversation with Sutapa Biswas, April 2013.

performance art, a highly popular genre at present through which artists often act as insiders of multiple cultural debates. By analysing this work's form and content, comparing the artist's strategies with the key retrospective writing about the work, this essay has argued that a more nuanced understanding of cross-cultural and postcolonial art needs to be developed in order not to fall back every time onto the catchphrase of 'radical intervention.' With the shortcomings of the New Art History laid bare, there remains much scope and potential to find ways of interpreting and analysing art across cultural and discourse boundaries.

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