

CHAPTER FOUR
ART ACTIVISM WITH REFERENCE TO THE VISUAL ARTS PRACTICES
OF ASSAM IN THE POST COLONIAL PERIOD
(A READING WITHIN THE LARGER FRAME OF IDENTITY)

I

The dynamics of identity which has been the central concern of our research with regard to the visual art practices in the post colonial Assam called at one point for an extended probing into a particular area of research, for further understanding of the subject on my part. As I could observe a predominant trait of political reflexivity in the art practices of the artists in Assam while critically analysing in a holistic manner, a need to study if there has been any discourse of art activism or socio-politico-artistic praxis in the paradigm of art became an extended concern to assess the entire dynamics of identity in totality. However, before we proceed for this assessment we have to map the discourse in general in the context of Assam and go for the reflections of art activism within the broader parameter of identity in art.

Considered from an art historical perspective – we are all aware of the fact that in the paradigm of art and culture – aesthetic modernism has been quite often at war with social and economic modernity. Modernity as defined in the sociological and philosophical tradition from Max Weber to Habermas is radically criticized from the position of an aesthetic Nietzscheanism, liberal and Marxist view of progress, German tradition of philosophy of history and its teleology. The philosophy of art from Schiller to Hegel and the enslavement of art and literature in the services of politics, history and pedagogy – all of these are swept away in the name of radically modern imagination. The disparity between aesthetic modernism and political modernity becomes evident when aesthetic modern in context of visual art (rather than other cultural practices) is considered synonymous with obsessive preoccupation towards self-referentiality as a thing-in-itself. As such there are two aspects of reflexivity in modernism – the rejection of naturalistic representation disposing to pure self-sufficient formalism and a more de-constructivist focus on the narrative and representational conventions themselves. Going by modern criteria of art, art becomes modern when it becomes separate from the

cognitive, ethical, political and practical spheres in the modern division of labour (!) The term 'creative' previously referring specifically to God's creation, moved across to characterize the godlike powers of the artist, acquiring connotations of 'originality' on the way, and the latter term no longer merely referred to origins but also to the sense of novelty. The new aesthetics, developing from mid-century, crowned these developments, by sacrificing the arts as the selective reproduction and representation of 'nature' under the canons of 'beauty' and thus giving it a very vital role based on its separation and seclusion. Such modernist paradigm of art led to an elitist high status of art, a rarified enlightened expression based on the distinction of high art culture as refinement of civilizations of educated bourgeoisies and the mass culture the lower unsophisticated culture of mass people.

This problematical social position of the arts – simultaneously autonomous, a specialized product of modern division of labour, while conservatively embedded in the social order through dependence of canons of "good taste" – understandably creates difficulties for the artist. And herein we encounter the two central myths of modern art. Firstly, the artist as autonomous being, heroically exploring the truth of his insight and experience whatever the resulting social ostracism or condemnation to which s/he is subjected. Secondly, the work of art, itself as a product of individual consciousness, independent of social influences and constraints. This high modernist manifestations based on the notions of aestheticism, autonomy of art or the 'art-for-art-sake' dictum that rejects the elements of political, sociological spheres thereby raise severe criticism from the paradigms of Neo-Marxist, Feminist or Sociological theory as too narrow and devoid of conceptual problematization that misunderstood the relationship between work of art and other social and cultural forces cropping out of a deeper misconception of the creative act of a work of art. According to these theories, the act of production of art is not separate from life, but rooted in life, the layers of larger social, religious, economic and other cultural forces and thus mediate concerns of the time and place in which they are created. This view returns art from the separatist realm of pure aesthetics to the everyday acts of social and political praxis, as art is not considered as expressed by the individual in a state of "disinterested" contemplation but as a part of complex, highly woven cultural fabric, social and cultural conditions, from both its production and its reception, historically rooted in cultural practices not transcendental or entirely universal.

Intrinsic values of art are questionable since even the most sophisticated formal analysis is not adequate enough in understanding a work of art in its entirety.

However crucial be the implication of the disparity of aesthetic modernism and political modernity and the war between ‘autonomy of art’ and the anti thesis of it, a parallel development of both the trend in simultaneity is but a undeniable historical fact – a Duchamp face to face with Matisse or Picasso (but even Picasso painted Guernica!), Melarich and Rodchenko vis-à-vis Beckmann, Donald Judd, Carl Andre faced on Noland or a Pollock! Hence in and through the history of modern art we can observe a strand of art which engaged itself in political reflexivity and praxis to address broader socio-political concerns through radical approaches, resistance, and interventional strategies in various ideological/theoretical/conceptual/mediumistic and materialistic levels. After the de-centring and dismantling of modernism and the advent of post modernist world-vision, certain new departures took place. The contemporary art world as such and the art since the decade of seventies and onward has evolved into a quite vocal reflexive agency in an increasingly political and critical manner. Neither the postmodernist proclamation of ‘End of History’ nor the declaration about the ‘Death of The Avant Garde’ have dampened the spirit of radical politics or radicalism in art be it the personal endeavour or radical praxis in the collective sphere. In fact in the international terrain, the art activism in multiple expressions of protest art has been gaining momentum in the last two-three decades through several radical initiatives by different groups and collectives such as the ‘CIRCA: The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army’ (formed in London in fall 2003 when it declared itself to be an army of “rebel clowns” that had mustered its forces to storm the Palace during President George W. Bush’s state visit to the UK), ‘www.Chainworkers.org’ (an Italian webzine on media and mall activism for awareness building and unionization of precarious workers working since 2001), ‘Chto delat? //What is to be done?’(A platform for engaged cultural activism formed by David Riff and Dmitry Vilensky, editors of the newspaper “Chto delat), ‘Critical Art Ensemble’(the anti-war collaborative based at US), ‘The Art of 0100101110101101.ORG’ (a collaborative which burst onto the scene between 1999 and 2000, with concealed identity though the geographic location of the Darko Maver project placed them in Italy . But their roots are as mobile as their cultural references, which range from the American pranksters to the Balcanic avant-garde Neue Slowenische Kunst.), ‘Ic mihrak’ (a post-anarchism oriented cultural intervention group that was founded in Istanbul in 2007

which operates as a collective, non-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian consensus-based semiotic terrorism group working on the immediate and historical political and cultural discourse in Turkey) ‘Peace/Fighters’ the Refusal movements in Israel, ‘The Space Hijackers’ a group of social misfit troublemakers who have been working in London since 1999 and is dedicated to battling the constant encroachment of corporations, institutions, urban planners, and other rogues into the collective shared space, ‘The vacuum cleaner’ an artist and activist collective of one fashioning radical social and ecological change, ‘Center for Tactical Magic Spells & Illusions for Fun & Protest Power Transposition Spell with tactical strategies about how to Subvert Institutional Authority through Graffiti and Other Tactics in 13 Steps’, etc. apart from the radical activists groups of feminist, gay and other social political groups in numerous number all over the world and a number of personal praxis in the individual level. Herein we should remember that the realm of political or the political reflexivity that is taken into account here should not essentially be taken only into the exigencies of the political system of Nation state or any other power structures holding onto the subjugated subjects under its dominion. Neither political is necessarily only about politics of ideologies, party formations or party activism. It is also not necessarily an affair of public alone when considered in the Maya Angelou’s strategies of subjective cultural actions upholding ‘Personal is Political’ as manifested in the radicalism at the subjective individual level. Political is the business of living, its implied internal/external dynamics; it is also a business of interpersonal relationships within a collective discourse deeply embedded into several contexts. In fact any individual cultural text when expressed within a social order dialectically transforms itself into the ideologue, the smallest unit of collective discourses. When the individual text or ideologues are taken into the broader level in their final transformation they become symbolic messages constituting an ideology. Emrah Irzik comments in this regard: “Cultural/ Art activism constitutes one front in the battle over the people’s minds and hearts. In large part, it is a struggle to convey dissident viewpoints, truth claims, and alternative significations to the public by making use of the means to which activists are able to gain access . . .” (“A Proposal for Grounded Cultural Activism: Communication Strategies, Adbusters and Social Changes”, p.137)

Going by the intellectual and artistic developments in the last two-three decades especially in the globalised post modern contemporary world we can observe that though the older meaning of activism refers to the theory that the essence of reality

inheres in the act or process, the more contemporary meaning refers to a practice action to achieve political goals. Hence present day cultural/ art activism is closely tied to the idea of practice to the assertion of the legitimacy of an experiential world- whether individual or collective through which dominant ideas and knowledge can be effectively countered or developed into a counter-discourse. In this context Deeptha Achar observes:

Quite often activism is a word associated with left liberal politics. Perhaps rightly so and many track this association to Marx's famous, 'Theses on Feuerbach': The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of the human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice." Nevertheless it is surely a mistake to arrogate activism only to the left. Recent events have shown again and again that it is a weapon deployed by almost the entire spectrum of political grouping. ("Activism and Academics", p.5)

Now when we delve into the realm of modern Indian art to map the interconnection between art and activism within the historical discourse, we can see a predominance of cultural elitism over art activism where the entire process of production, circulation and consumption of art is an elite enterprise as aptly pointed out by Dr Shivaji K Panikkar.

The subsumption of the subjective agent the artist within the Swadeshi movement where the Savarna imagination of the disinterested yogi in artist – craftsman, which is a major way also evoked the myth and nostalgia and a golden cultural past, soon opened into an internationalists capitalists mode of practice and these trajectories went parallel to each other in making a properly capitalist elitist practice of art in India. The Logic and the practical Rationality of the colonizer has never ever left the art world and with this is easy to theorize today that our right and left nationalisms ironically and at the cost of the disadvantages being used to the people of large are subsumed into the very logic of what they are opposed to. It is too well established a fact by now to elaborate here any further that the revivalism/nationalism in their varied ramifications in elite art and culture knowingly or otherwise largely co-opted to the fundamentalist politics and economics policies...a certain other trajectory however thin it may be, does exist, and I suppose it is relevant to remember it here. Any art worth naming as directly addressed and engaged with people's struggle and reality began in Bengal in the early 1940s in the context of the great famine with the works of Somnath Hore, Chittaprosad, Zainul Abedin and similar others in theatres cinema and photography. Significantly this art raised in a powerful new way the terms and the question of the real and realism touchingly while dealing itself

between the double bind of recording function and the question of culture or between taste and ideology. It is not too surprising that Chittoprasad in the late 40s and Hore in the mid 50s disassociate from the Communist party and dabbled with varied modernist linguistic gimmicks (so to say) former verging on a celebratory mode and the later into pessimism and sentimentality based on deprivation tragedy where the gruesome is directly toward the newer and newer forms of expression for the capitalist's consumption. ("Art and Activism in India", p. 3)

In the later phase artists like J Swaminathan and Ramkumar who initially adhered to pro Marxist standing also withdrew from this ideological leaning to cater to more existentialistic/surrealistic/spiritualist kind of rendering within the self absorbed sphere of existential predicament. The figurative-narrative mode of expression at the seventies is also a culturally motivated avant-garde, based on elitist mode of art-historical reflexivity and scholarship as observed by Dr Panikkar. The collective of Indian Radical Painters and sculptors Association formed in the lines of radical political activism was perhaps the first attempt in this regard with a manifesto critically dissecting the entire dynamics of art practices of modern Indian art and an associated nascent desire for the alternative practices. However as we have pointed out in the foregoing in the last two decades since the nineties in the Indian art scene a visible change has been evident with many artists and collectives springing up to work for ideological standing in feminism, gay politics, and many other politically motivated issues of communal and religious violence, the right of deprived children, Adivasis and Dalits etc. The socio-political awareness and the willingness to address issues beyond the autonomous realm of art have given rise to an upsurge of multiple alternative expressions of 'New Media' beyond the conventional visual language in art thereby trying to break free of the dominant and deciding parameters of art market for a free liberal independent praxis. H. A. Anil Kumar observes in this regard:

The shift of visual language from absolutist position of its definition to its definition to relativist structure, is an endorsement of the fact that art has a position beyond being a physically finale product. In fact, it is the activism in relation to art that simultaneously facilitated and structured the meaning of post independence Indian art proper. . . . Activism and art were mutually connected in certain ways. The language of visual representation became a specialist preoccupation in two ways: (a) by being 'away' from the public discourse and (b) hence becoming a specialist language of its own kind. In fact this is wherein the relation between activism and third

culture becomes very relevant.”(“Conceptualizing the space for Activism in Art”, p. 24)

Delving deep into the theoretical formulations and critically probing into the entire dialectics of the art activism in the contemporary paradigm of Indian art he further analyses how within the negotiated spaces of art market, conflicting and contradictory forces of the political act in public domain and personal expression the entire dynamics is still more a kind of vocation rather than the way of life. He also argues that the art activism in contemporary art world is more urban centric with absence of the rural both locationally and thematically which can be a limiting factor along with the manifestations of the ambiguous tongue-in-check activism which is the product of the nexus between art institutions and public art. Kumar further observes:

Representation beyond the conservation is the heart of the activism, perhaps. But the problem with such activism is that it contests absolutist notion of art and in turn becomes another sophisticated premise of absolutism. There is an interesting twist to the story conventional media addressing socio-political issues thematically was a cliché just a while ago, while newer media outside the physically of aesthetic premise is a fashion statement for the theoreticians. Nevertheless, being radical is always an extremist’s position. Anything that the moderate visual representation expresses is held to be soberly radical activism-in-relation to-art demands a better articulation, at least theoretically rather than thematically. (p.26)

There are multiple questions whose answers are yet to be explored with regard to the radical praxis of art activism in the individual and collective level, such as the need for problematization of the intersecting issues of the personal/public (or the personal/historical) and artistic/art-historical, the issue of transcending the barriers of art market and the complexities of art production and circulations in the public domain along with the mapping of the problems and prospects and the dilemmas and all the possibilities of art activism. It is an evolving arena in the paradigm of art and a study of such ideological engagement in the context of regional developments in various pockets of India along with the main art centres is not irrelevant in our course of research about dynamics of identity.

II

ART ACTIVISM IN ASSAM

As we mentioned in our study of the genealogy of modern art in Assam in the Second Chapter, the seventies decade of the twentieth century saw a new departure. It was at the advent of seventies, that a new movement encompassed the art world of Assam with a varied range of experimentation, in creative imaginative order marked with aesthetic sensibilities. Art production and initiatives for art activism (even though in a minimal scale) – both these avenues were charged with an acute enthusiasm to define new parameters for emerging modernist manifestation of regional and cultural specificities. A group of artists, some self-trained and some trained in reputed institutions like Santiniketan came back to Assam with a new consciousness of Indian and Western art, a wide range of exposure and technical sophistication and capabilities. Moreover three significant art organisations came up during the decade with aims and objectives of spreading art awareness, along with the aspiration for preservation and promotion, production and circulation of art in the broader public domain. Their main concern was to develop an atmosphere conducive for art creation and aesthetic and intellectual developments in the paradigm along with taking initiatives to fight the infrastructural limitations. Away from the humdrums of art centres and the associated media glare and appraisal by art literati / glitterati and in dearth of sophisticated structural/infrastructural advancement, genuine art consciousness and vibrating art market for sustainability-- the artist community of Assam had a spectre of problems to grapple with. These art organisations namely ‘Assam Fine Arts and Crafts society’, ‘Gauhati Artists’ Guild’ and ‘Jorhat Fine Arts and Crafts Society’ tried to address these problems and have been since their inception actively engaged in their agendas. They have been engaged in many activities such as organising regular art exhibitions, workshops, opening art schools and galleries, bringing out souvenirs and magazines like the Cihna by Gauhati Artists Guild and such kind of endeavours to spread and enhance art in the broader public domain and cultural realm of Assam, which has been mainly literature-centric in nature with an almost two hundred years of very rich, diverse and vibrant Assamese literature in the modernist sense of the term apart from its rich trends of classical and traditional literature. However, if we critically probe into the activities of these organisations we would observe that they have been mainly concerned with spread of art in the

conventional sense of the term working within the aesthetic parameters of elite modernist art production, circulation and promotion rather than any activity with a definite politically reflexive agenda in some alternative mode of artistic expression apart from the conventional.

Perhaps the first break through in this entire dynamics of art activism came up through the first instance of an alternative mode of artistic expression in the broader collective sphere involving many artists and a huge public in the street art public work titled 'Khoj - 1' held in Jorhat (visual 79). Khoj-1 held at Baruah Chariali in Jorhat on 10th of February, 1999, was a public enactment done in the open air outside the gallery with a 60' X 10' huge canvas where total ten artists from all over Assam worked together. The artists were namely, Noni Borpuzari, Ajit Seal, Saleha Ahmed, Bhrigupati Hazarika, Tapan Changkakoti, Ritamoni Khanikar (Nazira), Late Chandan Baruah, Debajit Sarmah, Tridib Dutta and Niva Devi. This was first ever public art project in Assam. This event was conceptualized by Tridib Dutta and Debajit Sarmah and sponsored by AAKAR with support by Ganadhwani and Nabajyoti Club Jorhat. The main concern of this public art was to protest against violence and bloodshed which Assam had been going through that time because of insurgency, militant extremism and exploitation of the common people in the name of anti-insurgency by the state machinery. This event was followed by several other events as a continuous and inter connected works of public art/protest art in the later part. Khoj-2 held on 2nd & 3rd November, 1999, was a community installation programme held at Jorhat Theatre headed by Dilip Tamuly. Altogether 50 artists from all over Assam contributed their works and another 30 artists participated in the event to make works in keeping with the theme of protest against violence by both insurgent groups and anti-insurgency operations by state machinery. All these works formulated by the antiviolence stance of the protest art contributed in structuring this collaborative installation in the public domain. Along with this installation, a programme of street painting was held at busy street of Jorhat, Garali, where around 2000 metres street surface was painted by 50 artists from all over Assam. Khoj-3 (titled – 'tour with colours') was held from 14th February, 2002 in three consecutive places. The first place to be held was Shrimanta Sankardeva Kalakhetra in Guwahati (first ever large Exhibition of Installations in Assam), the 2nd in Karbi Anglong (Community painting) at the Karbi Youth Festival (visual 80), whereas the 3rd was held in Jorhat with multiple activities like Installation, community painting with school children, Slide show on street etc., all

organised to create public awareness against violence and political turmoil. Another (fourth in sequence) activity was followed in Bokakhat where one public sculpture was produced in collaboration of several artists to put across the socio-political agenda of this entire Khoj chain of public protest art programme. The participants were Jagannath Panda, Deepak Madhukar Sonar, Debajit Sarmah, Tridib Dutta, Siraj Saxena, Rajon Fulari, Pratap Ch. Jena, from Odisa, B. Manjunath Kamath, Mohan Malavya, Kadam A. L. from Pune. These all events had been conceptualized by artist Tridib Dutta with support from Debajit Sarmah, Samiran Bordoloi and several other organizations. It is noteworthy to observe that the first public protest art was held in a suburb town Jorhat rather than Guwahati, the capital and main art centre of Assam. Where art activism in India is generally an urban centric phenomenon, this kind of art activist endeavour in a peripheral pocket is indeed a laudable development.

Another laudable attempt of a “Public Art” endeavour which we could trace happening in a suburb area rather than the capital was the public art of poetry and painting session in all the shops of Biwsanath Chariali, a small town in the district of Tezpur in the year 2003. Conceptualised by artist Shiv Prashad Marar the event was organised for the duration of one and half months with association of several writers, artists and cultural activists like Samudra Kajal Saikia, Rashmi Rekha Bora, Bithika Hazarika, Baidul Hussain and others who formed an organisation called Chitrapat. Samudra Kajal Saikia, a theatre person and art history post graduate from M S University of Baroda wrote an article (“Prasanga Chitrapat”, Sambhar, Asomiya Pratidin, 13 July, 2003) emphasizing the need to organise such public art events and the hurdles that one has to undergo in initiating such endeavour in a public space uninitiated to such alternative mode of activist arts. He also emphasised that though such event may not catch the limelight in the mainstream elite magazines, they are indeed significant in terms of their contribution to stirring of art consciousness in the greater public domain in remote areas.

Apart from such collective public art by these artists from Jorhat such as Tridib Dutta and Debajit Sarmah (who later opened an art gallery called ‘Omkar’ in Jorhat and have been organising few more events like this) or the artist like Shiv Prashad Marar and his organisation ‘Chitrakut’, another collective which came forward for such activity is ‘Desire Machine Collective’ by artist Mriganka Madhukailya and Sonal Jain, about whom I have already discussed in the previous chapter elaborately. As I have already

mentioned – with their curatorial project called Periphery – a media collective, they have tried to initiate an artists’ led alternative art space located on an abandoned ferry (barge) on the river Brahmaputra in Guwahati, Assam. As a pun on the notion of centre/periphery and the subsequent notion of North-East as a peripheral pocket in the nation’s imagination, it seeks to alternate the prevalent modes, predicaments and notions and wills to set the trend in the reverse order. If the trend is that of going away from the periphery to the centre, the so called “mainstream”, it dreams of bringing the centre to the periphery setting a new mode of reversal. As a nomadic space on the ferry - called Chandordinga (visual 81) for hybrid practices, it aims to work as a trans-local initiative which looks at the critical uses of technology for collaborative experiments. The collective intends to call the space a “laboratory”, to promote experimentations in art, ecology, technology, media and science, and thereby create a public domain, for critical reflections. It has strived to bring together people engaged in cross disciplinary practice to create a network space (both physical and virtual) for negotiating the challenge of contemporary cultural production. In this space in the last two, three years there have been some instances of initiation of public protest art in the line of art activism. One of such initiative was an installation performance conceptualised by artist Debananda Ulup. It was the part of the ‘PUBLIC ART’ seminar held by Periphery in collaboration of Lalit Kala Academy, Delhi. The title of the installation - performance was ‘Tears of a River’ (visual 82) which commented on the pollution of the river Brahmaputra. Enacted on 29th May in the sand beach of river Brahmaputra, the artist installed huge paintings of some skeletal fishes surrounding which few theatre artists like Khanin, Uma, Rinjhim and Lalita Umbon performed acts in keeping to the theme. Lalita Umbon, a singer adorned in traditional attire of the Singpo tribal costume sang a song in the indigenous language depicting the sorrows of a polluted river while rest of the performance was done in Assamese. Lalita personified as the river Brahmaputra attired in primitive costume signified the initial phase of the river which came to Assam from upper China via Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh entering the state at the place where the Singpho tribe inhabits. At one point of the performance, the river is attacked by a figure with a grotesque mask adorned in black attire signifying the nihilist forces of modernisation that is pollution – springing out of the waste of the factories and other pollutants. In her attempt to survive she takes refuge in a huge pillar made of plastic and polythene sheets. In the entire act, the performers tried to involve the spectators into the act who were mostly common

people comprising fishermen, travellers in the barge of the Brahmaputra and some member of art community and art lovers. In this public art which continued for 25 minutes, need for preservation of the river and anti-pollution awareness were spread across the common public. Such anti pollution public art was also witnessed in Karbi Anglong performed by KAFACA, the Karbi artists under the leadership of Leonard Bey in 2009.

As there are few such sporadic instances of protest art which can be regarded as art activist endeavour in the collective level, there are certain individual instances also which can be considered in this context. The installation called “Against Holocaust and Terrorism” (visual 83) by Rajkumar Majindar is worth mentioning here as this was installed as a immediate reaction against the serial bomb blast in 30th October 2008 in Assam where there were simultaneous bomb blast in three places namely Guwahati, Bongaigaon and Rangiya. Installed in the Dighalipukhuri paar, the bank of the ancient pond in the heart of Guwahati city, Rajkumar Majindar erected three huge door frames all burned in fire in front of which in the open space few children were asked to draw with chalk the floor of the bank whatever they like with their own imagination, while people gathered there to protest against the brutal killing of hundreds of people in the blast at a rally summoned by the civil society of Guwahati. Exactly after one year of the bomb blast which has been referred as Black Friday in Assam, another artist namely Dadul Chaliha enacted another installation in the same place to commemorate the hoary incident and protest against the ruthless violence (visual 84). The installation was enacted with earthen lamp and paper flowers to put across the message of resistance against violence by using materials which were bio degradable. Of course, there have been other instances of such installation work against violence and insurgency prior to these instances. In fact the first installation to be enacted in Assam in 1991 which started as a pioneering trend was by Dilip Tamuly entitled “Mastiskar Kona” (visual 85) or cerebral corner. Tamuly as such explores within the expressionistic mode of representation working out at the formal level a unique fusion of primitivistic evocation and abstract expression. Political reflexivity that he displayed in his symbolic reaction to the social political regression and break down of Assam through his installations done in 1991 and 1999 refer to his social concerns which are a parallel rendering to his expressionistic mode of representation. In fact the hybrid quality, intertextuality and the polyvalent multiplicity in the semeiotic level make this new form of expression of post-modernistic vocabulary a far more

powerful means of political mediation. It was a horrifying incident in 1991, which marked an unique case of human rights violation in Assam that provoked Tamuly to enact his first installation “Mastiskar Kona”. In this incident the government armed forces had brutally tortured and killed seven youths by tying them together to a motor tyre suspecting them to be members of a terrorist outfit (who later turned out to be innocent villagers). Tamuly depicts this incident by using several readily available objects like a used tyre, the signifier of the incident, on to which is tied a terracotta swan, the Vahana of Goddess Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge and learning. The terracotta statue of the goddess wrapped in polythene is placed under a mosquito net evoking a sense of acute suffocation. In the corner of the exhibition space stands a horrified figure of a raped woman with her mute gaze evoking a shuddering sensation in the spectator. The message scattered across each apocalyptic motif marked the bold protest and the powerful allegory of the violent schism and ennui that the artist stages up. Later on Tamuly did few more installations collaborating with theatre person Rabijita Gogoi. Entitled “Gatha the text” (visual 86) the series of performance installation where the entire socio-political dynamics right from economic laggardness to political instability to militant extremism inflicting the state were rendered in layered suggestions. In fact the artist has been continuously operating in this genre of art with a highly emotive symbolic reflexivity over the decades among which the site specific installation called ‘Morixalir Adharsila’ or ‘Foundation stone of cemetery’ is noteworthy. This was the first installation enacted among the three which had been rendered in protest against the brutal death by bomb blast in the 30th October in 2008 (I have already discussed about the other two done by Rajkumar Majinder and Dadul Chaliha) on the very next day in the cemetery of Vasistha Ashram area. Rendered poignantly with an earthen pot signifying the ritualistic urn used for the rites in funerals, several multicoloured threads and a stone found in the nearby forest area of the cemetery area, this work ‘foundation stone of a cemetery’ became the metaphorical representation of the state. Tamuly also directed a performance in keeping to the subject of the installation, executed by his students of the Govt. College of art and craft where he is a faculty member. Along with Dilip Tamuly, Noni Borpujari another senior artist also did few installations addressing the issue of violence though his works are mostly done in painting.

These are few sporadic instances of art activist endeavours in collective and individual level done in the new media expressions which addressed the socio-political

issues in a politically reflexive mode encompassing the broader public arena. These were the works which were taken out of the 'sacred' premise of the art galleries to cater and involve the lay common people outside the limited circuit of art literati to engage their uninitiated 'gaze' into the realm of art. In most of these works there was an active public participation giving it a genuine public art/protest art form of expression. Herein a question arises with regard to the individual /personal engagement of the artists who are politically reflexive in their endeavours. Are they equally relevant in the given context of art activism? Can their endeavours be also regarded as art activist praxis in their own term? To seek the answers to these questions we can resort to Elizam Escobar's viewpoint.

The political is found in the least likely places, covered by multiple layers of ideological counterfeiting and acculturation. Our daily lives, our dreams, love, death, and even our bodies are all spheres of "invisible" yet intense political and human dramas that take place behind the "visible" political struggle. For it is from the inside that we must decide our real needs, both material and spiritual. Art of liberation springs from this perspective, recognizing the power of the imagination's struggle. Throughout history, the imagination's struggle against prohibitions based on fear and ignorance has been one of the leading political processes that push forward the liberation of the human spirit by recognizing and creating new territories of freedom. ("Art of Liberation: A Vision of Freedom" p. 246)

As the seat of individual reflection of the collective lived-experiences, any individual cultural text when expressed within a social order dialectically transforms itself into a Jamesonian ideologue, the smallest unit of collective discourse. When the text or ideologue is taken into broader level in their final transformation they act up as symbolic message – the messages which carry specific historical realities and psychical truths within the existential contexts. They become the symbolic messages about the space-time to which they are embedded into. It is in this context that the dictum 'Personal is Political', the famous phrase coined during the sixties and seventies decades can be referred to substantiate the point. As Areti Leopoulou and Theodore Markoglou have stated:

"A well-known phrase, and a concept that has been consolidated over the decades in multiple ways, conceptions and experiences. Besides, the everyday and the political are communicating vessels. Each individual

person alone constitutes the condition for the establishment of a community, a group. Agamben suggests that we disconnect the will of a community from the condition of ‘belonging’ and turn our attention to the face “that is neither particular, nor universal, but whatever. [...] communicate only in the empty space of the example, without being tied by any common property, by any identity.”¹ Apparently the choice of the term is declarative and directly illuminates the core of the concept: The person – and not the individual – “is the only location of community, the only possible city.”² With particular respect for the domain of art and artistic production, the inseparable relationship between artistic creation and politics is also confirmed. Every form of visual art’s practice contributes either to the reproduction of the common mind – in this sense it is political – or to its interpretation and criticism. And therefore every form of art has an aesthetic and thus a political dimension.”³ (p. 115,116)

Political reflexivity as mediation through individual cultural actions or praxis is expressed by different approaches. When taken into the context of visual art manifested in the conventional mode of expression such as painting or sculpture, one can see three distinct attitudes on the part of the artists. The one is the realistic approach, where the language applied may be photorealistic, expressionistic, figurative, narrative or naturalistic, to put forward the message in a direct transparent manner, which is often loud and verbal. At times it can end up being mere propaganda. The artistic representation of the Bengal Famine or the Tebhaga Movement under the pro-Marxist stance may fall into this genre. Of course the subtle poetic sublimations reached through such process can be witnessed in the deeply evocative and humane expressions of the artists like Somenath Hore. The second visible tactic is the auto-referential or transcendental approach evident in the non-figurative abstractions where mere artistic components like colour, forms, texture of formal elements are of utmost significance, thereby denouncing any reference to other elements or outer realities. But the attempt to turn art back onto itself from the disruptive encounter with real may also be a strategy in itself. Any human endeavour to escape the exigencies of social, moral and other outer realities and thereby withdraw from the political, may itself be a political act, like that of the artist J. Swaminathan or Ramkumar.

The final approach is that of operating within the dynamics of symbolism, the metaphorical and allegorical. Moreover the general creative functions of cultural texts have always been to assimilate a mythical function, elements imbibed from traditional narratives, to denote/suggest in an allegorical content something in a more subtle way about socio-political and historic realities. The allegory is sustained not only in the

contents but also in the modes and changes of such mode of presentation against specific historical contents, becomes a unique mode of signification, a historical statement. This approach has been the most applied one, as for example what is witnessed in the international cultural movement of Political Cinema, the Magic Realism in literature of Latin America or in the allegorical representations of artists like Satish Gujral, A Ramachandran, Jogen Chaudhury, Arpita Singh and many others and here in the case of the artists from Assam whose textual analysis would be the main concern of this chapter. As Geeta Kapur in the Royal Academy Catalogue “The Contemporary Indian Art” maintains that Political art in our times has few options outside the allegorical, used self-consciously and with requisite freedom and flexivity, it should be able to handle quite complex ideological positions.

While considering political reflexivity as a means of mediating ones immediate historical realities by an artist in the post colonial third world peripheral region, one has to keep in mind the constant jugglery, the artist/intellectual/mediator has to play to balance the local, national and international within the tensed discourse of these intermingled triads. The enveloping forces are not moral, aesthetic or ontological, but more historical, to which one is subjected – not only a single history, but a plethora of multiple histories. In this entangled existential setting of pushing and pulling in contradictory directions we have on one hand the enticing dazzlement with sensuous mode of exuberant living or art making out there in West – the ‘Other’ countered by the multicultural matrix both inside and outside one’s world’ constrained by the umbilical cord binding us to tradition and nostalgia urging an identity quest- both as a third world entity, or in our case the marginal periphery, within the national mainstream, in this vast enlarged theatre of political contradictions, the complex task of the artist/cultural activist scripting a major re-thinking of history/historical experiences through political reflexivity and cultural actions may actually amount to a process of igniting a transgressive energy.

It is indeed interesting to discover that the initiation to the modernist baptism in the context of visual art in Assam began in a critically reflexive gesture of political self-consciousness, a gesture that was realistic, direct and quite transparent yet powerful. The reference here is directed to the painting “Opium Den” (1926) by Muktanath Bordoloi about which we already mentioned twice. At a first glance it reminds one of Van Gogh’s ‘Potato Eaters’, though the resemblance is only in the facile compositional pattern. If Van Gogh’s ‘Potato Eaters’ is an enactment of a sacred ceremony of eating/living one’s hard

earned bread and a humble celebration of life within its constraints and limitations, the Opium Den of Muktanath is an epitaphic rendering of decaying life, a premonition of death. On the part of the artist it is a bold portrayal of the colonial exploitation and suffering from a pro-Marxist stand, positioned in support of the exploited proletariat.

Since our main area of focus is the post colonial period in Assam we would take up few artists from this phase only though this particular mention of Muktanath Bordoloi was to put across the fact that there has been a tradition of politically reflexive narration/stance since the very inception of modernist trend of art in Assam which has evolved into quite a predominant trait of the entire dynamics. Now before going into the reading of the few representative artistic praxis we can briefly discuss the art historical changes in the lingual/formal/ conceptual formulations in the art scene in India. With reference to the paradigmatic shift in cultural and socio-political fields, a consideration of artistic expressions in the last three decades in the mainstream national scenario would help herein. The currents of purist revivalism, interventional progressivism and the unique form of eclecticism flowing within the paradigm of modern Indian Art were further enhanced by an emerging neo-narrative-figurative trend during the seventies. It was a parallel development to the western art- a tactical opposition to the orthodoxy of formalist abstraction in art. This neo-realism opened up artistic rendering from purist reductionism to the acceptance of a wide range of concerns – socio-political and cultural – with a self-conscious use of various art historical references. Moreover an argument for indigenism to establish creative relationship with one's natural and cultural environment inspired artists to renew interest in one's own locale. By the 1980s a whole spectrum of values and idioms were dictating Indian contemporary art. Parallel to the wave of artists engaged in a systematic dialogue with international post modern art and thought there existed many who were deeply involved in sources of inspiration where such issues were of lesser relevance to their artistic journey. A diverse-historical foundation was seen to be swelling up, where intense subjectivity and a discreet precise objectivity, these contrary spheres conjured up the double helixed complex of artistic manifestations. By the late nineteen eighties and nineties a new eclectic style, the visual correspondence to Western art practices and even a negation of the notion of indigenism at some point comes up into an inbuilt tendency of neo-realism. By the nineties, international assimilation and a unique universal foundation with post modernist approach in idiom and medium unfolding a set of significant trajectories with regard to new experimentation, avant-garde

innovations and rationale, a new expression of political/cultural, social/personal dialectical dynamics within the artistic paradigm has been evident. The artists of the three consecutive decades of seventies to nineties in their distinctive modern and post modern stylistic idioms and mediums have tried to evoke the fabric of symbolic and metaphorical mode of significance to weave up a spectre of allegorical interpretations of the disruptive encounters of these realities. Here are few artists of Assam who can be seen as representative in the context of reflexive praxis through their definite allegorical interpretations and symbolic mediation as protest art in a subtle suggestive manner.

Benu Mishra is one of these artists who construct a set of narratives marked by an acute sense of political consciousness and critical reflexivity. In such figurative – narrative constructs it is the form that dominates the colour. “Death” (visual 87) one of such significant renderings is a layered visual narrative filled with a multiplicity of tensions pervading the social climate. The two figures masquerading as angels evoke a hidden mute violence and fraudulence, and the one exiting a sense of escapism. The deified woman/humanized deity add an element of surrealism/magic realism. A glimmer of Michelangelo’s “Pieta” (Mother Mary holding the dead Jesus) peeks through. The visual experience transforms itself into an allegory of death not only of the physical but of the metaphysical as well. Compositionally and conceptually his latest painting “Cityscape” seems to be a sequel. The message here is clear and direct – it speaks in volumes of the terror and aggressive nihilism of the present urban times. The metaphorical suggestivity takes a subversive strategy. The essence of an urban vista is expressed mystically in a naturalistic setting. He infuses minimalist approach with a surrealistic expression. In “The News” the sole protagonist reads a newspaper standing on a skull. The background is vague, as if the figure on the skull is hanging in a void, emphasizing the vacuum. The newspaper tinged with patches of yellow is the signifier of the decaying times. Though the central protagonist has an iconic presence in the visual rendering, it is in fact Death, which has the gripping iconic presence in the guise of the skull. Taken together they form a trilogy depicting three facets of death. “Last Supper” another significant work re-appropriates the Christian mythology to a modern myth. In this allegory of the modern times, the villain masquerades as the saviour. With his folkloric imagination, the artist has subverted the role of Jesus who forms a band of apostles with crooks and swindlers. Here a parallel can be drawn with Kishen Khanna’s “Last Supper” where both the Jesus plays the game of deceiving. While Kishen Khanna’s

Jesus plays the game for love, Benu Mishra's the game for lust. If Kishen advocates humanism in direct terms, Benu Mishra says it in a circuitous and subtle way.

If Mishra's *Death* is an expressionistic rendering of the death of human values, the distorted dead figures of Shobha Brahma are provocative metaphors of violence. Here the body is rendered as the text, the political anatomy, a site for artistic intervention. Brahma, the Bodo tribal artist reacts furiously in his work – "Event" (1989) when his political reflexivity is directed in protest against the autocratic forces of the nation, whereby the subjects are subjected to inhuman torture. It was in the year 1989, when the armed forces of Indian Government had raped the entire women folk in a village called Bhumka during one of their search operations to flush out insurgents. In the upper register of the horizontally divided picture plane of the painting the artist has depicted two reclining female figures in a distorted posture and a huge military boot in the corner signifying autocratic power. The lower plane captures a crowd of crouched figures with their heads bowed, all frozen in terror and shame, trapped within an all-enveloping spider web. The figure of a military person often becomes a signifier of the autocratic power of State in Shobha's representations. In his "Target" (1999) the target of the gaze of the State, executed through the military General is the docile innocent female figure- the metaphor of the helpless common mass, caught unawares by the sinister gaze. In the background, a nude male figure who points a revolver at the sky is about to plunge into a river. The narratology weaves up a symbolic battle of the target and its 'other', in a subtle way. This is a commentary on the dynamics of power politics, where the State becomes the 'other' against the targeted common man epitomized in the body of the female figure. It is again the body of the iconic female figure as the signifier of the 'land', hawking crushed, putrefying figures in the painting "Woman with Basket" (visual 88) evoke a repulsive parody of those sensuous female bodies proffering baskets of fruits and flowers (Read Paul Gauguin and others) that caters to the voyeuristic gaze. Signified as the symbolical site for the personified 'land' presenting this horrific bizarre offering of a basket overflowing with pile of crushed human figures, skull, a bull and beasts the spectator evolving a satirical repulsive parody of those sensuous female figures with fruits and flower (Especially reminiscent of Gauguin's *Women of Tahiti* holding the tray of fruits), this headless female body in "Woman With The Basket" (1981) in its fine subversive expression of the conventional image is representative of several other deformed and distorted human figures in the artistic imagination of Shobha Brahma. His

recurrent motif, the headless limbless figures, often tied and arched in pain and terror, render body as the text, the political anatomy, the politicized site for artistic intervention. The ashen-black headless androgynous body (either the breast or the male organ is distorted) with the severed limbs in “Release” (visual 89) carved out against the blood red background is another allegory of human existential predicament in the cataclysmic circumstances.

Noni Borpujari’s compositions based on the exploration of the subject matter- the “Scarecrow” a series done in the eighties and a cluster of human figures bearing marks of physical trauma in the “Gazes”, “The Wounded Dream of a Woman”, look agonized, sad, alienated and bare under specific socio-political and psychological situation. The highly political “Bandage” series (1983-84,) metaphorically represent the turmoil and suffering projected on to the figures wrapped in bandages directing their gaze on to the spectators. The “Death” series (1993) is also a simultaneous rendering, evoking at times a transcendental element though substrated within the socio-political setting. In his “Away from Eden” the group of human figures wrapped from head to toes holding a dead body fly away to the left of the canvas. Surreal in its idiomatic expression, the painting is a lamentation about the tormented lives (the lamp in one hand, a suggestion of the invisible inferno?) outcast from ‘Eden’- the allegory of peaceful life. Noni’s sharp, powerful political satire and critical reflexive gestures are quite significant. Rendered in photorealistic language, sometimes reminiscent of Bikash Bhattacharjee’s “Red Straw” (visual 90) depicts the politician protagonist sitting on a red chair sucking at a coconut with a straw. The sucked liquid however is not coconut water, but a red fluid signifying blood. An unsophisticated, comparatively cheaper and most common street fruit, the coconut, becomes the symbol of his subjugated object of relishing, his greed, lust and corrupt power, targeted at the common man whom he exploits and robs of life by draining out all his resources. The “Red Hungry Chair” (a parallel to Shyamal Dutta Ray’s “Chair”?) is again the site of vested power politics, the seat of temptation and corruption evident in our politics, suggested thereby in the allegory of the woman (?) holding an apple. In “Anti Gravity” series the bureaucratic figure floating against the gravity emblemized the hollowness and shallow persona of the class devoid of “gravity” and depth envisaged through humane commitment to service and welfare of the people. The floating figure depicted herein is not a metaphor of the ecstatic “lightness of being” in Milan Kundera’s sense of expression but rather a pun played on the literal

contemplation of the notion of “gravity” through a visual representation. Noni has been continuing his dynamics of artistic symbolism exposing his political reflexivity quite constantly. In his recent exhibition held in the Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai, (29th March to 4th April, 2001), in all the twenty-five works displayed, he has relentlessly explored the restless political scenario of Assam. In his own words, “I have a sensitive mind, it cannot remain untouched by the burning issues that it confronts all around” (Amar Asom, an Assamese daily, 2nd April 2001).

Munindra Narayan Bhattacharjee’s artistic schema generates stark political satire drawing unto the social milieu through Marxist-Socialist positioning (visual 91). As in the case of Noni, we infer that the political significance of the paintings is on the interpretative level, not of any directional mode. Munin’s representations are a kind of empirical criticism in a more condensed allegorisation, and though not subversive are quite provocative. Unlike Noni’s innate poetic lyricism of the works in spite of the politically provocative nature, Munin’s eclectic vision expose through subtle playfulness, pun humour and irony. For instance, the painting ‘Untitled’ (1981) According to the artist the narrative of the text itself is suggestive of the intended text and hence there is no need to title it. An androgynous cow/bull with an udder as well as a moustache having five pairs of eyes is putting on a garb adorned with military medals and stars. Instead of letting her newly born calf that is looking expectantly at her suckle, she is feeding a group of greedy cats depriving the real heir, the deserving and needy of the milk. The state is personified here in the androgynous animal figure, with an inherent autocratic character expressed in the garb it is putting on. The calf represents the common mass that is the real owner of the nation’s wealth and resources but has been deprived of their rights while the privileged few invested with power and strength are enjoying an unrightfully privileged share. The painting “The Followers” (1987,) is a stark political commentary on the leaders of the nation and the so-called followers of Gandhian ideology. They are an unorganised, lethargic, non-committed flock of “goats” without any vision or a sense of direction. In the picture frame the monumental pair of Gandhiji’s feet, juxtaposed with the Indian tricolour is surrounded by a few directionless goats, one of them is sitting clumsily, while a few others are looking hither and thither. It is a final commentary on the present state of the nation as whole where political tyrants and power mongers have taken over the docile “goat” who is not ideologically powerful enough to lead the nation. A sinister looking cat with lustful eyes and sharp teeth is a recurrent motif of Munin’s

political oeuvre, which allegorises the powerful, privileged, corrupt and autocratic class of the nation. At one point (1987) this motif overshadows and envelopes the tricolour, the symbolic presence of the nation on which the future of the nation, the children lovingly lean, since they have not noticed the sinister and grotesque face of the nation. Yet at another point the cluster of cats representative of that class, lazily occupies the entire space in the wheel chair, a metaphor of the nation in a crippled, handicapped form, and the lack of development and progress marked by a vehicle which cannot keep pace with the advanced technocratic vehicle of the modern age. In the painting “Untitled” (1987) the woman figure representing a common lower class protagonist is holding a child with a tricolour in its hand. The allegory appears to be the evocation of a saviour who would be born to lead the nation to prosperity and progress in a form reminiscent of Hindu mythological figure Krishna (The blue child reminiscent of Blue Krishna) who was incarnated to kill Kamsa, the evil autocrat to establish a just republic. The background projecting this mother figure with the blue child has a chadar (the upper garment worn by Assamese women) on which the figure of Durga the Devi Shakti who killed the demon Mahisasura is manifested. The metaphor of nation as a mother figure with immanent female power and the people symbolized as the warrior child (male!) is a common mythic-romantic motif that Munin picks up from our traditional belief system along with the assimilated elements from popular calendar art where often Mother nations holds on her lap the child, the personified subjects of the nation. Apart from these series representing somewhat a similar social milieu, where the narratology at times amounts to a conceptual or literary rendering, the painting “My Parents” (1987, about which I have elaborated upon in the previous chapter) is much subtler and suggestive in its narratology. It also pervades through and emanates beyond the more facile propagandist approach to delve deeply into political reflexivity in one’s own social system. Particularly in its dominant atrocious form (The father figure holding a gun and putting his feet on the body of a dead tiger which he had hunted) juxtaposed against the docile woman figure suggesting the dominated ‘other’, simultaneously also focus the spotlight on the tension of tradition and modernity, or to be precise pseudo-modernity which manifests itself in external aspects of shallow exhibitionism and vainglory. It is also a principal comment on the Dumontesque ‘hybrid’ modernity that a region like Assam reveals and sets forth. Shuffling between the realms of sadomasochistic desires and obsessive sexual phantasmagoria and sharp political perceptiveness Munin’s artistic oeuvre is thus a

rendering of ephemeral and the sublime, kitsch and object d' art, which evolves spirally with these two intertwining strands. His political perceptiveness translates into a series of politically reflexive artworks marked by humour, satire and a symbolically suggestive narration. Working within such symbolical narration, the artist puts across his conceptual and ideological stance through various recurrent symbols, metaphors and signifiers. For instance, the cat with a macabre smile, sharp protruding teeth and two bright burning eyes is a recurrent motif, at times reminiscent of K G Subramanian. Sometimes, it is the symbolic representation of the exploitative nation- state overwhelms the tricolour and at others, it springs up as the metaphorical signifier of the vulgar luxury and exhibitionism of the high elitist class of the society. The nation-state sometimes also emerges in the guise of a Wheelchair, with the intended suggestion about its fractured and uneven growth and progress. At times the Nation-State masquerades as the tyrannical autocrat. As we have seen in the foregoing if the herd of goats following Gandhi in a procession is a sharp comment on the rotten state of hypocritical political theatre of the nation and its devastating effects on the lower strata of the society, the androgynous animal figure is the 'State' allegorized that autocratically privileges the 'fat cats' depriving the rightful heir. The state and the people are also seen through the iconography of Krishna and Yashoda, a take on from representation in the popular calendar art as we have already mentioned.

Simantajyoti Baruah's complex narrative constructs are stylistically reminiscent of Baroda figurative-narrative trend developed into intermingled components of personal and social concerns. A polyvalent vision-structures of miniature traditions with aerial perspective, architectural divisions of space and lack of fixed linear perspective explored through usage of bright colours and a warm luminous palette, an urge to fuse traditional style with modern notion and a figure- the alter ego of artistic subjective persona, monumental and hovering in the corner of the picture plane inspecting the entire unfolded narratology like the director of grand narrative of a theatrical episode viewing the entire setting from an aerial perspective- all these manifested features may enable us to draw parallel to figurative-narrative representation of the artist Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh. "Golden Banana" (1993) – a polyvalent vision with the multiple suggestions and layers of overlapping meaning exposes the prime metaphor of the narratology in the form of a Golden Banana, an allusion to the model of modernization, the process of urbanization, the drainage of rural resources and destruction of rural serenity and green environment by the aggressive overpowering of capitalism. The rural women handing over their bananas

to the gripping hungry hands of a figure sitting on the truck signified as the technocratic 'vehicle' of modernity, loaded with piles of bananas is connected to the theatrical scene where the conspiracy-conversation of the bureaucratic figure and the politician takes place within the settings of the cityscape. The drama unfolded in at the interior scene is the actual controller of the entire narratology of the picture frame. A huge green tree, a metaphorical form of the rural economy, with its polyvalent vision of several compartmentalized fragmented shots of economic engagements- ploughing, fishing, weaving (a typical scenario of rural Assam) is taken onto the engulfing grip of the truck, the overpowering urban aggressive forces disrupting and displacing the rural serenity. The splitting of modernity revealed through the allegorical content "Hansadhwani" (1994) reveals the artist-persona's fear and terror of witnessing the sight of a drowning ship juxtaposed against the urban cityscape with people meandering in their self-engrossed alienated marooned selves. The artist's political reflexivity is most intense in its expression in a complex allegory of a "Pitcher Plant" (1997, visual 92) the carnivorous plant sucking up human beings. The conferencing figures with their pitcher plant like head sitting in the upper plain, the military figures dumping bodies in the deep pitcher and a monumental figure tied and tortured – an allegory of the secret killings taking place in Assam in the name of counter-terrorists operations (The Secret Killings). It is a stark picture of the state of Assam, the tied figure signifying a turmoil trodden land, the military and conspiring figures evoking the autocratic power of the state and the fallen bodies, the common mass traumatized. Simanta operates within the dynamics of the symbolical the metaphorical and the allegorical, with of the profound of the political consciousness. But this is not to say that his oeuvre is limited to the political alone but spans other physical and metaphysical dimensions as well. A pocket contains the Hoysala Horse, Mahisasura figure a city map with a game plan which amidst which Gandhi smiles from a country magazines (The Portrait of a Pocket), a contemporary on the prevalent terrorism. In such symbolic dialects he goes to assimilates a mythic function by imbedding elements from tradition and traditional narratives, icons and lores to express in an allegorical form, the political and historical. The allegory is sustained not only in the contents but also in the modes and changes of such expressions. Most of the time, subversion becomes his strategy while tradition forms the background; onto which are unfolded the vast theatres of the modern day socio-political contradictions. At the lingual level, he synthesizes the traditional with the modern and the conceptual level; playing up

the strategy of subversion he creates new myths, new lores by appropriation and re – appropriation of tradition. In the process at times the artist updates the aesthetic sensibility of traditional art incorporating contemporary motifs and setting them in a timeless landscape of methodology. Taking the route of the artist experimenting in this sphere of the likes of Tyeb Mehta, Ghulam Sheikh, etc. to Atul Dodiya, Simanata weaves up a blended sense of black humour, pun, irony and fantasy, playfulness, and at times mockery and mimicry. He goes on to capture a world fast degenerating and disintegrating (The invisible where the icon of the nation recedes to the background of a fragmented concave space). Re-discovering and interpreting Gandhi continues to allude diverse meanings from Sudhir Kakkar’s division into his sexuality to his Munnabhai’s renewed version of ‘Gandhigiri’. In Kaliya Kursi and Krishna enticed by the serpent women Krishna flirts and frolics amidst the center stage. Here taking inspirations from the ‘remake’ of Goya’s encircling by Jack and Donos Chapman in ‘Great Deads Against The dead, 1994, Simanta takes on the Pahari painting by Sajnu (The Subjugation of Naga Kaliya, circa 1810) to create a new myth about our time. Does everyone not roam about carrying a dead body on his shoulder one’s own? In the Urban State the haute fashion shoe plays up the drama. Giant steps starred ascending and descending, doors closed and open, spaces conglomerated and camouflaged. Figuration – Narration – Allusion and Diffusion. Bright colours and a warmth luminous palate. He began his lyricism and poetic realism and slowly over the ages gone into the idioms beyond the tradition of the modernism. Simanyajyoti’s pro-Marxist ideology of ‘art for life’ is strongly exposed when he says: “There is a strong need for making art anti-autonomous and imitating life. Otherwise it would end up becoming a device for power plays by a few privileged elitists, the so-called aestheticians of high cultured society” (Cihna, 1984, p. 29)

There are many other artists like Prabin Kumar Nath (visual 93) and Maneswar Brahma (visual 94) which works are saga of the contemporary violence and turbulence in the state. Prabin’s recurrent motif of the nail and veiled figures wrapped in mute breathless agony and theory existence within the frame of a nihilistic chaos translates into some fine renderings of series like ‘Painspread’ and ‘redtime’, ‘Today’ and many more renderings. Maneswar Brahma, the Bodo artist who himself is a victim of militant terrorism escaping death by 23 bullets in his body weaves up an entire narration of violence and terror in the unfolding space of red filled with the recurrent motif of bullets and pyramid made of corpses. Prandeep Kalita (visual 95) is another young artist who

also tries to mediate the existential realities with politically reflexive cultural text. Prandeep unfolds a grand drama, some theatrical stance without adhering to any melodramatic excess in his paintings, to capture man/mankind with the “Absurd” predicament in the present-world-politik. The gestures, (of people running in huge assembly towards the Unknown, of a scream in freeze pierced by a bullet, of distorted figures reclining to death), the compositions with compartmentalised space, and the colour schemata of the monochromatic ice-blue expansion enhance this vast theatre of contradictions, void, anarchy, futility, terror, turmoil, violence, mute suffering and furore into which the mankind seems to be entrapped. These renderings of enlarged spectacle of drama/enactment by the artist, is reminiscent of the Kafkasque sense of Angst in a broader collective level at times. The root to this angst lies in the lived-experiences of the artist in the terror-stricken days of his locale, which finally is universalised in the contexts of unrest and chaos in the present day world. Transcendence of the locale and the contextual to the broader universal realm however requires a definite experiential/existential process of critical reflexivity complemented by a holistic approach to the issue of concern. From the perspective of contemporary cultural condition of being in betwixt and between of reality/simulacra, modern/post-modern, locale/universal, colonial/post-colonial, in a revised hierarchies of space/systems/categories, this act of transcendence becomes more complex, contradictory, ironical yet dynamic.

The contemporary post modernist strategies of cultural/ art activism operate in manifold manifestations and multiple expressions both in the collective sphere as well as in the individual ‘Personal as Political’ praxis. One of such strategy has been defined as ‘Culture Jamming’, a popular interventional tool on the part of the activist operations, image manipulation and production. As stated by Emrah Irzik:

Culture jamming as a tactic of political subversion and cultural protest arrives with an admittedly attractive shot at a solution to the woes of activist access to channels of communication. Instead of trying to build an alternative from scratch, why not capitalize on the ubiquity of corporate messages, ads, and media by finding a way to use them against themselves? To this end, culture jammers focus on activities such as altering billboards, parodying advertisements, and spoofing websites. The technique of adbusting, for example, involves modifying a commercial advertisement or creating a fake one that mimics the look and feel of the original to proclaim a message that criticizes or mocks the targeted

company. An example is the adubusted version of an “Absolute Vodka” ad, where the caption is replaced to read “Absolute Impotence,” and the image of the vodka bottle is modified to resemble a failing erection. The new “subvertisement” aims to “uncool” the pricey and hip beverage by revealing an undesirable fact of alcohol consumption that was previously hidden. Another example is the infamous fake WTO website run by an activist collective called “The Yes Men” at gatt.org, which mimics the official WTO site and runs stories with titles such as “WTO Announces Formalized Slavery Market for Africa.” The Yes Men have also appeared on TV and spoken at conferences upon request by reporters and institutions unaware of the fact that gatt.org is a hoax. (“A Proposal for Grounded Cultural Activism: Communication Strategies, Adbusters and Social Changes”, p. 138)

In the context of Assam such strategy of culture Jamming is now slowly becoming popular as an emerging activist tactics with the artists like Rajkumar Majinder, thereby employing it in a post modernist lingual experimentations of intended pun and playfulness (visual 96-97). In my previous chapter I have already discussed few artworks of the artist like the “Assam Boil” where the logo of Assam Oil Division of Indian Oil Limited has been subverted or the “Assam Ghayal” where Star cement Company’s advertisement with the punch line “Mumbai jao Debojit se milo” is subverted into by the image of the reversed aeroplane coming towards Assam from Mumbai. Another artist Kishore Kumar Das whose politically reflexive works like www.Assam.com (visual 98), “Hanuman and Me” and many other works (visual 99) with pop cultural expressions and parody-pastiche chutnification draw much attention (about whom too I have discussed in my previous chapter) also employs such strategy by using popular signs, logos, icons to put forward his activist interventional stance. Many contemporary young budding artists’ leaning towards such attempts of art activism in the individual and collective level seem to be a positive departure in this context in the entire art discourse in Assam. In fact the political reflexivity which has been evident in the art works of these artists is substrated onto the ground realities of the world where they live, confront and mediate through their symbolic praxis of artistic expression. The function of such neo-realism that they subscribes to is, as Frederic Jameson says, to resist the powers of reification in consumer society and to re-invent that category of totality which is systematically undermined by existential fragmentation in all levels of life. It is true that this politically reflexive genre of artists from Assam reveals a world of whose lineaments are strife and violence, alienation and dread, degradation and degeneration. It

is peopled by images of frozen fury and spectral alarms irremediably estranged from their own selves and from everyone else around metaphors of muted despair. It is also true that the context terrain of Assam the making / unmaking of art will have to operate within his own parameters stretched between historical/art historical context and retrieve astronomy of art (including the paradoxes of the ironies and unfolds). But it would not be fair to lemmatized to the artists and club them into another stereotypes. Because the world they capture is not only a vision of the locale but can be that of anywhere in the globe. Their artistic vision is a critique of that time, which is not necessarily only 'theirs'. In fact, their artistic meditation is about the de-humanization process of the present day world in which we all find ourselves enmeshed.

The "nightmare of history" that these artists have been mediating through their endless fabrication of allegories leaves one to wonder if that is the ultimate artistic realm left to explore in the infinite vista of possibilities that art offers. "No." firmly maintains Utpal Baruah the artist whose earlier oeuvre would weave up the pictorial world with lonely human figures cut and stitched in the bosoms, a skeletal bony moon waning in the horizon or a caged bird in suffocated fluttering, and who would now suddenly transfer into the realm of abstraction, into the poetic lyricism of a series of landscape- mysterious, enchanting, unfolding the undulations of the natural rhythm. "Life is not only about death, angst and sufferings. Look at the beautiful lush greenery, the enthralling hills on the bank of river Brahmaputra . . ." said the artist when he spoke to me about his art and about life as such. "But yes," he confessed "however hard I try not to, I end up painting that red scar on the hill. Hence it is worth mentioning herein that even the artists who belong to the genre of abstractionist representation (the very thin stream of non figurative narrative trend comprising only a few) too cannot escape the urge to weave a text of symbolic reflexivity even if in a subtle and suggestive manner as in the works of Shobhakar Laskar whose series 'Burning City' unfolding an unending vista of red, black and smoky white patches capture the mute silence of destruction, death and despair.

A holistic overview of the art paradigm however leads us to the observation that the dynamics of art activism within the broader concerns of identity has yet to take on a larger much expansive discourse as it is in a nascent stage in the region and still to get the much needed momentum. Except few sporadic instances there has not been any collective venture in the line of Indian Radical Painter's and Sculptor's association in the pan Indian scenario or any politically reflexive interventions co-relating and utilizing the

technocratic developments as seen in the western counterpart. (Of course the pan Indian scenario is also comparatively not so proactive in this context as its counterpart in the west) One or two collective instance once in a while perhaps would not suffice the functional requirement for the greater agency in political praxis/ public protest art or any manifestation of art activism. Moreover we have to keep in mind that any kind of public art may not be amounted to protest art or art activism in the true sense of the term. An instance worth mentioning in this context is an overwhelming phenomenon of the Wall painting of the Guwahati city by all the artists, members of different art organizations and school children in 2007 where all the public walls of the city were adored with painting. At the first glance it might look as phenomenal public art in the light of the famous 'Bombay Wall Project' done by the NGOs and the slum dwellers against the illegal encroachment and eviction in the recent time, but as aided and conceptualized by the ministry of development of Guwahati city of the Government of Assam, the event cannot be categorized as art activism per se. Many a times art activist endeavour as seen in the inauguration function of artist Shiv Prashad Marar where Adivasi Tea tribe community people were called to perform traditional Jhumur dance in the State art Gallery premise in Guwahati in 2005, fails to go beyond the limitation of a mere promotional activity as seen in touristic venture rather than taking up a rigorous anti establishment stance in identitarian politics. There is one more important criterion that has to be fulfilled if art activism as such should evolve as an overwhelming functional and effective phenomenon in this part which can act as the counter discourse to the anti-progressive, anti-liberal authoritative and fascist forces of the society. As noted by Emrah Irzik again:

Departing from a critique of Lasn's position, I propose that cultural activism would be—and in various successful tactics, already is—much more productive when grounded in concrete struggles carried out by organized, visible subjects against a specific target rather than in a fragmented manner and against amorphous targets such as the “consumer society.” Cultural activism works best as an integral part of a coherent whole, that is a mass social movement, and not as a substitution for it. (p. 139)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The article by Martha Rosler “Well, is the Personal Political?” (Feminism Art Theory: An Anthology 1968-2000. Ed. Hilary Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), is a typical example, in which she claims that a personal act can be considered political when the

collective action of a society depends on personal, everyday individual issues, when we take the uniqueness of the individual into account and when we realize that the right to control our lives and actions also entails a right to control the progress of society.

2. According to Giorgio Agamben, see Giorgos Tzirtzilakis, “Society as a person, territory as an existence”, *Going Public '05. Communities & Territories*, Larisa Centre for Contemporary Art, Futura 2005, p.129.

3. Chantal Mouffe provides a complete and clear interpretation, which is in full harmony with the logic of the exhibition: see interview with Chantal Mouffe, “Every form of art has a political dimension” (trans. Alexandros Kioupkiolis), p. 115-116.