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Dematerialisation and Its Narratives in Indian Art (Post-1990s to Contemporary)

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Abstract

This research critically examines the theoretical construction of the dematerialisation of the art materials in Indian contemporary art. Derived from the writings of Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler in the late 1960s, it is generated within and serves as an intervention into a particular Euro-American context to designate a turn towards conceptual, process-oriented, and ephemeral practices that problematize the commodified status of art within the art market. In India, Dematerialisation is a strategic and possibly inevitable tool for addressing the realities of these complex socio-political contexts, including the continuing impacts of colonialism and Partition, ongoing cycles of communal violence, concerns about gendered identity formations, and ambivalences about our new position in the world after globalisation and digital modernity. It is not merely the outcome of a direct critique of commodification. This study traces an alternative trajectory through studies of artists such as Nasreen Mohamedi, Mrinalini Mukherjee, Rummana Hussain, and Vivan Sundaram, as well as collectives like Raqs Media Collective. It argues that material and immaterial practices are in a synergetic relationship, always navigating and transforming themselves within the Indian cultural landscape. This study argues that Indian art actively remakes and globalises the vocabulary of dematerialisation, moving it "from substance to significance" in profoundly diverse and context-based ways, rather than merely "embracing" it.

Introduction

The discussion of dematerialisation in art is closely associated with Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler's essay "The Dematerialization of Art" (1968). Reflecting on artistic developments



in New York during the 1960s, they noted that many artists were becoming more interested in ideas and creative processes than in the production of a permanent art object (Lippard & Chandler, 1968). This shift is evident in the work of Sol LeWitt (1967), who argued that the concept underlying a work could itself determine its form. Such practices also questioned the growing influence of the art market, where the value of art was increasingly connected to the ownership and exchange of physical objects (Lippard & Chandler, 1968). The Indian context, however, developed under different historical circumstances. For this reason, the framework proposed by Lippard and Chandler cannot be adopted without considering the conditions that shaped artistic practice in India. The experience of colonial rule, the cultural and political challenges that followed Independence, and the continuing engagement with both traditional and modern forms of expression influenced the direction of Indian art in ways that differed from developments in the West (Kapur, 2000).

As a result, conceptual and less object-oriented practices in India emerged from concerns that were rooted in local histories and lived realities rather than from the same conditions that informed Western conceptual art (Kapur, 2000). Recognizing these differences is essential for understanding how dematerialisation functions within Indian modern and contemporary art. For this reason, dematerialisation in India should not be understood simply as a response to the commercial art market or as a movement away from the material object. Instead, artists have often used conceptual and ephemeral forms to engage with issues that emerge from their own social and historical realities (Kapur, 2000). In this study, dematerialisation is examined as a thematic and conceptual approach through which questions of identity, memory, and power are explored.

Practices such as performance, installation, and other conceptual forms provide artists with ways of addressing subjects that are difficult to communicate through conventional object-based media alone. They have been used to reflect on the trauma of communal violence and the precarious position of marginalized communities (Dave-Mukherji, 2014) and the changing nature of experience in an increasingly digital world (Paul, 2015). Seen from this perspective, dematerialisation is not the disappearance of materiality but a shift in the relationship between material, meaning, and lived experience within contemporary artistic practice.



1. Theoretical Foundations and their Limits

Lippard and Chandler's essay *The Dematerialization of Art* (1968) was written at a time when artists were beginning to rethink what an artwork could be. For many of them, the finished object was no longer the most important part of artistic practice. Greater attention was being given to the idea behind the work and to the process through which it came into being (Lippard & Chandler, 1968). In describing this shift, Lippard and Chandler remarked that an artwork might exist as "a Xerox sheet sent through the mail, a telegram, or a photograph" (Lippard & Chandler, 1968, p. 31). The point was not simply that artists were experimenting with unusual media. More importantly, such works questioned long-standing assumptions about originality, permanence, and the value attached to unique art objects. These changes also coincided with growing criticism of the institutions that shaped the production and circulation of art. Artists such as Hans Haacke and Michael Asher examined the role of museums, galleries, and collectors, arguing that these institutions were not neutral spaces but active participants in constructing artistic meaning (Bishop, 2005). Seen in this context, dematerialisation was more than a formal experiment. It also became a way of challenging the systems through which artworks were owned, collected, and assigned economic value (Lippard & Chandler, 1968; Bishop, 2005)

A similar position appears in Sol LeWitt's statement on *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* (1967), where he wrote, "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" (LeWitt, 1967, p. 79). Later scholars, however, have pointed to the limits of this position (Bishop, 2005). For example, Bishop (2005) argues that dematerialisation did not eliminate the artwork's relationship with the market. Performances and other temporary works still required documentation through photographs, videos, or certificates, and these records themselves became collectible objects (Bishop, 2005). Lippard later acknowledged this contradiction, recognizing that attempts to move beyond the market often remained connected to it in unexpected ways (Bishop, 2005; Lippard, 1973). The history of Western conceptual art therefore reflects an ongoing tension between the desire to escape commodification and the realities of the art market.



The situation in India developed along a different trajectory (Kapur, 2000). A commercial gallery system expanded more visibly after the economic liberalisation of the 1990s, making the historical context distinct from that of Western conceptual art (Kapur, 2000). For this reason, the framework proposed by Lippard and Chandler cannot be applied without qualification. As Geeta Kapur (2000) argues, Indian modernity evolved through processes of dissent and negotiation, in which artists continually engaged with both indigenous traditions and the legacy of modernism. Consequently, the movement beyond the art object in India emerged from historical, political, and cultural concerns that cannot be explained solely through the Western narrative of resistance to the art market (Kapur, 2000).

2. Indigenous Ephemerality and Modernist Transitions

The idea of dematerialisation takes on a different significance in the context of Indian art. In Western conceptual art, it is often understood as a response to the commercialization of art and the dominance of the art market (Lippard & Chandler, 1968; Bishop, 2005). In India, however, ideas associated with impermanence have a much longer cultural history. The philosophical concept of *anitya* (impermanence) and many ritual traditions suggest that the meaning of an artwork may lie as much in the act of making as in the finished object itself.

A familiar example is the *kolam* or *rangoli* made every morning outside homes in South India. These intricate patterns are carefully drawn even though they are expected to disappear within a few hours as people walk across them or as they fade with the weather. Their importance lies not in how long they last but in the daily practice of creating them. The act itself expresses ideas of hospitality, renewal, and ritual. A similar understanding is found in the *visarjan* of clay idols during festivals such as Durga Puja and Ganesh Chaturthi. The immersion of the deity is not simply the end of the celebration; it represents the continuing cycle of creation, dissolution, and renewal. Buddhist sand mandalas convey a related idea. After days of patient work, the completed image is deliberately swept away, emphasizing that impermanence is an integral part of life rather than a sign of loss.

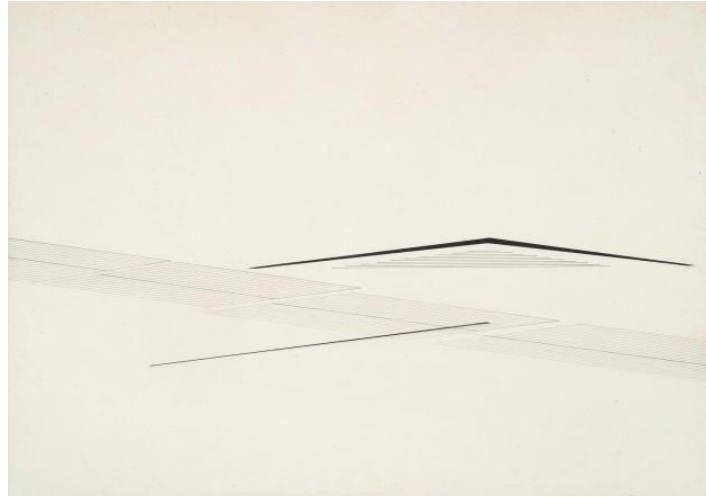


Fig 1: Nasreen Mohamedi, Untitled, ink and graphite on paper, c. 1975.

Although these ritual traditions should not be regarded as direct predecessors of contemporary art, they provide an important cultural framework for understanding how many Indian artists engage with questions of materiality. Nasreen Mohamedi (1937–1990) is one such artist. Her carefully executed ink and graphite drawings are often compared with Minimalism because of their precision and restraint (Khullar, 2015). At the same time, they reflect her engagement with Islamic thought and Sufi philosophy (Khullar, 2015). Khullar (2015) describes Mohamedi's practice as a discipline of attention, highlighting the contemplative nature of her work. The reduction of visual elements in her drawings is therefore less about eliminating materiality than about creating a space for reflection, order, and perception.



Fig 2: Mrinalini Mukherjee, Yakshi, 1984.

Mrinalini Mukherjee (1949–2015) approached these concerns through an entirely different medium. Working with hemp, rope, and other natural fibres, she created sculptures that are physically substantial while also suggesting organic growth, transformation, and ritual presence (Dalmia, 2015). As Yashodhara Dalmia (2015) observes, her works bring together processes of making, decay, and renewal instead of separating them into distinct stages. They show that permanence and impermanence can coexist within the same material form.

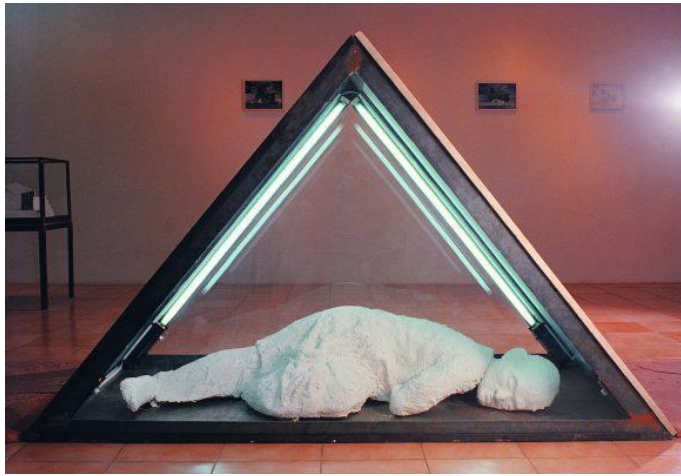


Fig 3: Vivan Sundaram, Memorial, (1993).

Vivan Sundaram (1943–2023) explored related questions through installation and temporary sculptural works. His *Memorial* (1993), created in response to the Bombay riots, brought together found objects, earth, and photographs to commemorate those who lost their lives without relying on the conventions of a permanent monument (Dalmia, 2015). The temporary nature of the installation forms an essential part of its meaning, drawing attention to the fragility of memory and the difficulty of representing collective trauma. As Dalmia (2015) notes, the work continued to exist through photographs and other forms of documentation after the installation itself had disappeared, demonstrating the continuing relationship between material presence and conceptual meaning.

3. Dematerialization and the Critique of Embodiment in the 1990s

The 1990s marked a period of profound change in India (Kapur, 2000). Economic liberalisation reshaped the country's financial landscape, while the rise of majoritarian politics and the communal violence that followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid transformed the social

and political climate. Within this context, many artists found that conventional art objects were no longer sufficient to address the urgency of contemporary experience. Performance and body-based practices became increasingly significant because they allowed artists to respond directly to questions of identity, violence, and political conflict (Sood, 2010).



Fig 4: Rummana Hussain, *Breaking Hands* (1993)

Rummana Hussain (1952–1999) emerged as one of the most important artists working during this period. Her performance *Breaking Hands* (1993), created in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition, involved the slow act of crushing a terracotta pot into dust while seated among broken fragments. The work used destruction as a visual metaphor for a society fractured by communal violence. Hussain's own body, particularly her position as a Muslim woman, became central to the work, transforming personal presence into a site of political testimony. Because the performance existed only for its duration, it survived primarily through photographs and documentation (Dave-Mukherji, 2014). As Parul Dave-Mukherji (2014) argues, Hussain's practice functioned as a surrogate of the fragmented Muslim female subject, expressing the insecurity and vulnerability experienced by minority communities. Her later installation *Home/Nation* (1996), incorporating fragile glass and veils, extended these concerns



by examining how domestic space could itself become exposed to public and political violence (Dave-Mukherji, 2014).

The shift towards process-based practices was also reflected in the growing use of ordinary materials. Instead of relying on traditional artistic media, many artists worked with objects found in everyday life, placing greater emphasis on concept, context, and process than on the production of precious or permanent artworks. Sheela Gowda (b. 1957) is a significant example of this approach. In her 2007 installation using tar drums and human hair, commonplace materials acquire new meanings through their association with labour, the female body, and the informal economies that shape everyday life in India. The work derives its impact not only from its physical presence but also from the sensory and conceptual associations it evokes, including the smell of tar, the delicacy of hair, and the bodily experience of manual labour. In this way, Gowda reconsiders the value of materials that would normally be overlooked and challenges conventional assumptions about what constitutes an artwork.

The emergence of experimental practices was also supported by new institutional spaces. Founded in 1997, the Khoj International Artists' Workshop provided artists with opportunities to experiment beyond the limits of object-based art. As Nancy Adajania (2009) observes, Khoj became a "laboratory of dematerialisation," encouraging collaborative, process-oriented, and interdisciplinary practices that emphasized artistic inquiry over the production of finished objects.

4. The Digital and the Material

The emergence of digital technologies has changed the way dematerialisation is understood in contemporary art (Paul, 2015). Unlike painting or sculpture, digital artworks are made from code, pixels, and data rather than a single physical object. A digital work can be copied, transferred, and displayed across different devices without losing its original form, making it appear almost immaterial. This apparent immateriality, however, tells only part of the story. Every digital image, video, or interactive installation depends on an extensive material network that includes servers, data centres, fibre-optic cables, storage systems, and large amounts of

electrical power (Paul, 2015). In other words, digital art does not eliminate materiality; it simply relocates it. The growing dependence on digital infrastructures also raises questions about energy consumption, environmental costs, and the labour required to sustain global technological networks. As a result, debates surrounding dematerialisation have shifted beyond the artwork itself to include the physical systems that make digital culture possible.



Fig 5: The Great Bare Mat & Constellation (projection still), 2012
Raqs Media Collective

Since the early 1990s, Raqs Media Collective has played an important role in expanding the possibilities of conceptual and media-based art in India. Working across video, installation, digital platforms, archives, and web-based projects, the collective treats ideas as the starting point of artistic practice rather than the production of a fixed object. They describe their works as "thought objects"—projects that remain open to revision and may take different forms across media and contexts (Raqs Media Collective, 2009). This approach allows Raqs to move between art, philosophy, history, and politics, using digital technologies not simply as tools but as ways of questioning systems of knowledge, power, and global capitalism (Raqs Media Collective, 2009).



Fig 6: Shilpa Gupta, Someone Else - A library of 100 books written anonymously or under pseudonyms, 2011

Questions of identity and surveillance occupy a central place in Shilpa Gupta's artistic practice. In *Someone Else* (2011–2012), she assembled hundreds of pseudonyms adopted by writers across different historical periods, inviting viewers to think about identity as something that is constantly negotiated rather than permanently fixed (Adajania, 2010). The project avoids presenting authorship as stable or singular, suggesting instead that names and identities are shaped by changing social and political circumstances. A similar concern informs *Threat* (2008–2009). Here, Gupta uses interactive digital installations to expose the often unseen structures of surveillance and censorship. Instead of representing these systems symbolically, the work encourages viewers to experience their presence directly within the gallery space (Adajania, 2010).

The growth of digital art has also introduced new questions about ownership and value. Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs), which rely on blockchain technology, attach a unique certificate of ownership to digital files that can otherwise be copied without limit. This development represents a significant shift in the relationship between digital art and the market. Early conceptual practices often challenged conventional ideas of ownership by reducing the importance of the physical object (Lippard & Chandler, 1968). NFTs, by contrast, reintroduce exclusivity and exchange value into digital works through technological means. The history of dematerialisation therefore continues to evolve, revealing an ongoing negotiation between artistic experimentation and the commercial structures that seek to assign value to it.



Conclusion

The passage of dematerialisation through the terrains of Indian art, however, is a narrative not one of passive reception alone but one of active critical transformation. The Lippard-Chandler model of social context (Lippard & Chandler, 1968) has been recast, hybridized, and indigenized to fit the specific social requirements in India. Indian artists have shown that dematerialisation is not one endpoint but a pliable toolkit. For Mohamedi, it was a way to spiritual rigor and metaphysical clarity. For Hussain, it was a literal and embodied way to create shape around the marginalized body's trauma. For Sundaram and Gowda, the style was a means to immortalize as it was critique with the evocative power of the ephemeral and the mundane. For Raqs and Gupta, it's a way to critique global digital flows and the fungibility of identity.

The Indian context suggests that materiality and immateriality should not be understood as opposing categories. Rather, they exist in a mutually dependent relationship. An idea often requires a material form to be communicated, just as a performance depends on the presence of the body, and even digital images rely on extensive physical infrastructures to exist. Instead of attempting to resolve this tension, many Indian artists have worked within it, using the interaction between the material and the immaterial as a productive space for artistic inquiry.

This perspective also broadens the discussion of dematerialisation beyond the framework established in Euro-American conceptual art. Indian contemporary art demonstrates that movement away from the art object does not emerge from a single historical condition or ideological position. It may be shaped by spiritual beliefs, political realities, cultural practices, or the changing conditions of digital life. Seen in this way, dematerialisation is not simply the disappearance of the object. Rather, it represents a shift in how meaning is produced through the relationship between materials, ideas, memory, and lived experience. The contribution of Indian contemporary art therefore lies in showing that materiality remains central even when the physical object no longer occupies the primary place within artistic practice.

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