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| Group 1890 |
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| Group 1890 was a short-lived, but highly influential collective of Indian artists formed in 1962. It was composed of twelve members — Jeram Patel as secretary, Raghav Kaneria, M. Reddeppa Naidu, Ambadas, Rajesh Mehra, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, Himmat Shah, S. G. Nikam, Eric Hubert Bowen, Jyoti Bhatt, Balkrishna Patel, and J. Swaminathan (the spokesperson and ideologue of the collective). The name of the group was taken from the house number of the private residence in which members had their first meeting. The collective had their first and last show in 1963 in New Delhi, inaugurated by then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The catalogue essay, ‘Surrounded by Infinity,’ was written by Octovio Paz, who was then the Mexican ambassador to India. The aesthetic impact made by Group 1890 in their ‘primitivist’ use of materials and surfaces was soon co-opted by the indigenist art of the Madras/Cholamandal school and the so-called ‘Neo-tantric’ painters. Since the artworks of Group 1890 have, for the most part, not been preserved or documented, it is on the level of the Group’s ideology that they have been recognised as historically significant; paradoxically, in the words of Octovio Paz, their ideology consists of ‘the deliberate absence of any ideological meaning.’ |
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Since the artworks of Group 1890 have, for the most part, not been preserved or documented, it is on the level of the Group’s ideology that they have been recognised as historically significant; paradoxically, in the words of Octovio Paz, their ideology consists of ‘the deliberate absence of any ideological meaning.’  Image: Members.jpg  Figure Members of Group 1890 (top row, from left to right) Jyoti Bhatt, Himmat Shah, Jeram Patel (middle row, from left to right) Raghav Kaneria (behind a shell), Rajesh Mehra, J. Swaminathan, (bottom row, from left to right) S. G. Nikam, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Ambadas, Balkrishna Patel, (Eric Bowen and M. Reddeppa Naidu absent), 1963. From the catalogue of Group 1890. Photograph by Kishor Parekh. (Image Courtesy: Contemporary Art in Baroda, Gulammohammed Sheikh (Ed.), Tulika, New Delhi, 1997.)  url: http://www.artindiamag.com/quarter03\_03\_12/images/profile05\_03\_03\_12.jpg  Certain parallels have been traced between the aesthetic of the collective and that of European artists (Spanish and Italian, in particular) like Antoni Tapies, Lucio Fontana, and Alberto Burri. The disinclination of the collective towards the American art of 1960s in the context of Cold War politics took shape in the writings of Swaminathan during Clement Greenberg’s visit to India in 1967. The group, however, was informally disbanded after its first exhibition since many of its members went abroad, while Swaminathan and remaining artists were preoccupied with their individual pursuits.  In spite of the absence of any ideological positioning, the manifesto of Group 1890 is well known for its polemic position. Published in the exhibition catalogue, it was mainly drafted by Swaminathan as an extension of the discussion the group members had over the preceding year. The manifesto explicitly valorised the idealised and mystified subjectivity of the artist over the material manifestation of the artwork, with an aim to retrieve the alleged originality of what they called ‘creative ac’ — an untranslatable ‘experience in itself’ of the artist-creator ‘bearing no relation to the work of art’ (Swaminathan n.p.). This position can be seen as a strategy to de-fetishise the artwork, and as a critique of the practices of the earlier collective, the Bombay Progressive Group, whose consciously created signature style made paintings successful commodities.  Image: View.jpg  Figure Jawaharlal Nehru viewing Raghav Kaneria’s work with J. Swaminathan and S. Harshavardhan at the Group 1890 exhibition, Lalit Kala Akademi, October 20, 1963.  Source url: http://www.artindiamag.com/quarter03\_03\_12/images/profile04\_03\_03\_12.jpg  The ideological valourisation of the artist’s subjectivity (paradoxically in the name of undoing all ideology) made the group’s political and aesthetic agenda short-lived as well as highly alienating, as it overlooked the material and collective reality of the artwork and the social practices surrounding it. Though they suggested ‘creative expression is not the search for, but the unfolding of personality’ (Swaminathan n.p.), their notion of the creative process was also conceived of as an autonomous process, which surpassed the will and volition of the artist. This feature is often thought to mark the unique position occupied by the Group 1890, positioning them within and against the discursive matrix of modernism and its heroic humanism. In their words, ‘Art for us is not born out of a preoccupation with the human condition. We do not sing of man, nor are we his messiahs, the function of art is not to interpret and annotate, comprehend and guide. Such attitudenising may be seen as heroic in an age where man, caught up in the mesh of his own civilisation, hungers for vindication’ (n.p.). Such a neutralisation of modernist heroic vanguardism (which was then monopolised in the Indian context by the American Abstract Expressionism of the 1960s) characteristically made the group an inverse image of Dadaism in terms of the nihilism shared by both. It is from this morbid reading of the present that the Group 1890 optimistically put forward a new art which would be ‘neither conformity to reality nor a flight from it, [but a] reality itself, a whole new world of experience, the threshold for the passage into the state of freedom’ (n.p.). Notwithstanding the implied puritanism of such an understanding (which necessitated the exclusion of the indigenist-Pop painter Bhupen Khakhar from the collective for his use of kitsch and pastiche), it is this concluding statement of the manifesto that prompts a consideration of the group’s cynical appropriation of history and human agency. |
| Further reading:  (Brown)  (Kapur)  (Sheikh)  (Gulammohammed Sheikh)  (Swaminathan) |
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