

## Reflective Essay

In the spring 2015 term, I had the opportunity to intern as a gallery guide at the Hirshhorn Museum, the Smithsonian Institutions' space for modern and contemporary art. Guides fully conceive and present their own thematic talks and tours, developing a fluency in select works and then advancing a thesis about them. At the center of my tour was a sculptural work by Anish Kapoor, *At the Hub of Things*. I gravitated to the sculpture because it is viscerally striking; the hollow semi-sphere is rendered in a deep blue pigment that evokes a seductive "sense of staring into bottomless depths."<sup>1</sup> The abstract sculpture compelled me to consider the "void" (the hollowness of "bottomless depths"). This motif is expressed in "Śūnyatā," the Asian concept that emptiness, the "void," has a presence. At the same time, it undoubtedly invokes the modernist tradition of painting "voids" in Western modernist canon. I sought to explore this cultural convergence further. How does *At the Hub of Things* bring together ancient Eastern theology with modern Western art movements to philosophize on the "void"?

To receive academic credit for my internship, I extended my study of Kapoor's work to an in-depth art critical analysis. The essay emerged organically from an initial captivation with the art piece, and developed rhizomatically as the sculpture was the "hub" of interdisciplinary scholarship in art history, Hindu culture, and postcolonial theory. The research, in particular, never ceased to be stimulating because it spanned and intersected material from public institutions (museums) to academia. Thus, I was stimulated not only by a fascination with the sculpture itself but also the sense that my research was never too ivory-tower. Through the process, I have learned that material objects genuinely have the power to affect our paradigms of understanding the (world?).

To begin, I became familiarized with the artist Anish Kapoor's oeuvre of work. I found books and catalogues from his past exhibitions in the Hirshhorn's library and the University of Maryland's Art Library. By looking at images of his work, I traced the recurring motifs that allowed me to contextualize the visual elements (shape, scale, color) of the specific sculpture I was studying. I further used these catalogues to develop a broad literacy in the *curatorial* conversation on Kapoor. I then turned to an examination of the work of my interest, *At the Hub of Things*. Here, I relied more on the Hirshhorn's resources, since *At the Hub* is part of the Smithsonian's permanent collection. I spoke to the curators and conservators who had studied the sculpture, providing me insight into the material of the pigment and the history of its acquisition. Most significantly, I learned that *At the Hub of Things* was read as a reference to a Hindu goddess; in fact, it had been lent to the Smithsonian's museum of Asian Art, the Freer and Sackler Gallery, as the opening work of an exhibit titled, "Devi: The Great Goddess," a female deity from

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<sup>1</sup> Cotter, Holland. "She's Ur-Mother, Warrior, Lover: Isn't She Divine?" *The New York Times* (NY, NY), Jul.25, 1999.

India. Although Kapoor is indeed Indian-born, he works predominantly in Britain and his sculptures are conventionally examined through a Eurocentric lens. This was the first time I had seen Kapoor's work included in an exhibition of Tantric theology and art.

At this point, I began to delve into a more critical reading of secondary source materials by art historians and critics. Through the guidance of a librarian (Mr. Tim Hackman) and my own experience, I was already versed in finding peer-reviewed journal articles through Research Port. I looked into scholarly databases, such as Art and Architecture Complete, and journals, such as the Journal of Material Culture and the Journal of Visual Art Practice. However, since Kapoor is a rather contemporary artist, the academic conversation surrounding his art seemed to lack both breadth and depth. I sought assistance from another librarian, who illuminated to me that critical conversations extend beyond what can be found in online journals. She advised me to look at sources in the works cited of the articles I had been reading, and she further taught me to use the library catalogue to find books and anthologies that included chapters, or even excerpts, on Kapoor. From there, Interlibrary Loan became instrumental to my research process. Through ILL, I encountered one source that informed the argument of my essay: Thomas McEvilley's "Anish Kapoor: The Darkness Inside a Stone," which is perhaps the most balanced analysis of Kapoor's work from both a Hindu and a Modernist lens. However, McEvilley tends to keep these frameworks separate, discussing one and then shifting to the other, rather than interpolating them.

It wasn't until I met with my adviser, Professor Yui Suzuki, that I began to draw a more complicated connection between the Hindu and Modernist references in *At the Hub*. Professor Suzuki referred me to an interview with the postcolonial art historian Partha Mitter, titled "A Virtual Cosmopolis," which was published in *The Art Bulletin*. The interview led me to other scholarship by Mitter, including an article about Kapoor, and introduced another layer to my thesis. In the convergence of East and West in Kapoor's sculpture, it is subverting a power structure that necessarily bisects them and privileges the West. From there, I extended my research beyond the artwork itself, such that I was eventually able to place the sculpture in an argument about the history of imperialism in art history and the theory/ praxis of art-viewing. Dr. Suzuki also helped me to realize that although I had done extensive textual research, the other fundamental aspect of an art critical essay is *images*. She pointed me to ARTstor, a digital resource of high-quality images that is accessible through the library system. In my final essay, I drew visual comparisons between *At the Hub of Things* and both ancient depictions of Kali and Abstract Expressionist paintings. As I was constructing my essay, I became literate in using both theory/ history (such as Mitter) and images as evidence to advance an argument.

Throughout this process, I was reinvigorated in my passion for academia. I found that producing a scholarly essay is a constantly expanding and interweaving endeavor. Gilles Deleuze defines it as

“rhizomatic,” resembling a “stem of a plant that sends out roots and shoots as it spreads.”<sup>2</sup> I used countless resources through the library in order to interweave different “roots and shoots” to bring forth my own new contribution to the critical conversation on Anish Kapoor.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://davecormier.com/edblog/2011/11/05/rhizomatic-learning-why-learn/>