

## Interview with Vivan Sundaram

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KB: Your mobile is on silent? I am not going to ask you question , this is going to be more like a chat that we did the other day so you can talk to me like that. I will guide the conversation if at all but I have no set question , we can juts talk

VS: But some lead question you have to

KB: Ya ya like I told you about this , you know, my film is forming still and by the time I will finish the shoot I will get some idea. The film will be quite outside the festival as well , about Delhi , Ecology, Politics, space and stuff like that. I will also like you to say something on that, because it will not have any VO , only artiste's voice and other voices.

So how public do you think is public art and public space in Delhi and we can your vies on that to begin with?

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VS: You know, publics are there, people are curious so that spontaneous thing and you know, whether you specifically say Indian, I mean here in this park in a few days, people are coming , you know, asking question and people are, mohol kuch thoda yahan faraq hai , there is you know, one has found they are aggressive n any way because they are curious, nothing happens in this place so they are kind of appreciative that something is happening and what is it? So I think on one level a general public is always curious and one is surprised hat they ask much more intelligent questions than one would imagine. I mean others would scoff and say isska kya matlab hia , kyon itna karch ho raha hai, jo bhi.

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But you know, others just here and there , you know , yellow balloon and just the kind of reference to how metaphoric it is to heat and sun and global warming, people seem to know these sorts of words , what they are and their implications. So I think some cues are given and people pick them up but for the rest of it because there is no experience of it that way, of viewing it at a more sophisticated level will come from increasing exposure, critiques, discussions in sort of historical context. So art sort of in large the question that even in our institutions even in the National Gallery of Modern Art which is public space as opposed to a private gallery. There is no wish to really bring a public. I am a strong believer that publics don't come by themselves, publics are created.

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And you have to work hard at them . I mean is West institution whether from the school children level to exhibitions there are so many things which are, the institution organizes to get people , it is not that they put the work up and then expect by magic that people will come. So I think a project like this raises this sort of questions. How kind of new innovative art which has no space in our institutions, some private galleries are opening them out to more unusual sorts of work or Devi Art Foundation which also foreground certain kind of radical art and it has moved from a personal collection to a kind of public space but it is still private.

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So I think this public art project in the way also that it locates itself because it is out in the public space in various kind of environment in which artist stimulation to their work have chosen. Then that comes a very interesting question , that in India we also very little experience or example of artist don't have to work in the environment and the minute you bring the word installation art, installation art has to do with a space ,, with context ,with architecture, with local and it is very different from the Devi Art exhibition which is all about objects which is then displayed and beautifully lit but installation art's first proposition is to acknowledge art whether it is in space , time, a room , is it an architectural setting or outside root landscape

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I think this exhibition just on the website scene if you read the histories of many of people from abroad, they have like just the lady next door, Mary Miss she has 30 years of just engaging, she took that commitment that she wasn't going to be gallery artist and there are so many institutions I America which are public spaces which sponsor public art whether it is temporary or permanent and in complex way as she does the artist where she relates to town planners , to architect and they make the inclusion of art as part of the project. We still have a notion that public art means you put a statue on a pedestal or a round about and that's public art or earlier on when you still exist when what ever it is 1% of a building is suppose to be spent on some mural. There were these murals which were done by Satish Gujral and all but they were for just sticking something on the building at that time, that's what people thought public art was or mural art and it came from certain traditions.

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But now there are very different radical ways which we are going to see in the next week ten days. How artists are thinking of much larger sets of issues which are to do very much with making the art work and use the word work as opposed to an object and it can be discursive, it can connect to groups, to politics and the strategies are so varied because the, in the last 20 25 years or may be more in the west 30 35 years and in

India for the last decade, artists have found very very different ways of expressing themselves. I mean let's say in the 90's it was just about a painting and a sculpture and that's all but installation art came, and you've got photography coming in, video coming in so then immediately equations, one with the medium allowed you to explore the theme in very different sorts of ways, you make your art work as a project, you research things if interested. So I think this public art project also allows an artist if they wish to relate to the space that they have, to the context that they are in, bringing up these issues.

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KB: So in a way this is the first public art project on this scale in India, people must be looking forward to it. It sets respect for this kind of work.

VS: Well I think that most of the artists are hugely excited about it, as I have said I have done some things like this on a very large scale like in Calcutta Victoria Memorial but that is inside a building and in a quasi sort of museum where for three months I had the space so it was a form of public art but I think when you are physically out in the environment outside then you are also sort of have to use different sort of strategies.

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In some way one can slightly say I mean I am taking that position, how can one straddle kind of multiple strategies and yet make it public art and so I would say that one of the kind of first cues I give myself and then to the public is well is to make the work visually, optically exciting, a surprise, obviously write your way, a helium balloon, balloons are used for publicity and advertisement and so they attract. What is it? Or what is this balloon? What message is it giving? And they find that there is no immediate message but just, you know, will attract anybody and then proceeds up sequentially through this kind of field or pond of these ten thousand water bottles which are littered all over the landscape, although not so much, water bottles are picked up and, we will come to that by the waste picker because it is one of the most valuable recyclable objects that are thrown away so it brings you much more money when you pick up a water bottle than picking up any piece of plastic

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So then the kind of very strong visual look is important for public to feel there is no complex theory about it, you know, something that you have to know about art, it just that there are water bottles and the delight of seeing them you know, ten feet by sixty feet, ten thousand of them would surprise and amuse the general public and then they would start asking questions and I think the important thing is that questions will be

asked, people will be confused in many cases, people will like things and I think that is how the whole encounter with the art work in a public space should be generated.

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KB: So now coming to your project, you already touched upon it so the way you described public art and people and politics, how do you talk about your own project? How does it sit in this context?

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VS: Well as I have said, I have been working and my last exhibition was called trash and I have been working with the material which is trash, which is discarded, which is thrown away and with the concept of recycling. Recycling has two aspects to it, one is that there is along history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of art being made what is called from the found object, from some thing that is just discarded and so its status as it exists is nothing and when art picks it up and places it in the gallery and says this is an art work brings in that whole reference. Here in this context I am giving it the very contemporary and social reference about the greater and greater need for recycling as consumption pattern and production, you know, hugely increases.

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Then every body is hugely concerned about the environment, how to be without discarding things, how can they be part of again another level of production and research is done and the objects find a, I mean it forms the material base to transform what is away to become something else. So both in terms of kind of huge social need where mountains and mountains of garbage, million and millions of tons, you know, surround all cities and how they kind of choke them, how they become part of the terapherma, how they become part of the earth and how can this relationship be made both productive and a creative one. It is also our attitude to increasing urban India where unlike the west because of the realization that what you throw away has to be organized and finds various ways to recycle and since we have not culturally introduced that in ourselves, culturally our attitude is to throw it away and it is, you know, for the sweeper to pick it up.

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So you're continuously producing this filth and those every people also complain and hate trash, they don't want to see it because it disturbs them, it's ruining the look of the cities. But if you are looking at the urban environment, it is something that you cannot wish away, you can shew away huge amounts, I am not saying that it is objectively rationalized to throwing of the garbage, collecting and recycling it in the west but it is

almost kind of impossible at one level but this is where you get the informal sectors where people are not paid to clean the cities because of poverty, they go out and start picking them up, that is the waste picker or rag picker and that's what I have been interested in and connected with so with an organization called Chintan and so with the aspect of the social politics with my work and so is there in the background in its own way, the waste picker is included, is apart of my own exhibition, here it is more invisible. I plan to take this object, its called flowtage on a raft in the river and the rag pickers will come and pick them out from the river and it will go back from the recycling unit which is part of the organization.

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So it form a kind of loop, the art work also carries and I think most public art work has that kind of feature as opposed to the traditional art work which has an aura which then plays a commodity and is valued, now I won't take any names but there might be some artist whose work which they make out in the public space will immediately be available for sale and go back into the art market but for me installation art and particularly site specific installation is meant to be destroyed. I mean my entire Calcutta project, uska vrisarjan ho gaya tha, I mean it had to be destroyed, it had to be destroyed, there were lots of things which were brought there is nothing which exist which I can say is my any work except its documents, there is a documentary and now a book will come out.

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So I think of the positive intervention into particularly or highly charged market scenario where this obsession for the middle class about the art work, I mean this monetary value where most of this art work, there will be few exception as I mentioned will be discarded and I will in fact make a part of my statement by documenting this flowing down the river so this specialization also moving it from here and floating it down to the extent that is possible as a metaphor, as things, as garbage is thrown into the river. Here the same water bottle which is thrown into the river is going as a poetic boat it is also sending the message I have statistics given to me by Bharti Chakarborty who organizes Chintan and she says in terms of all packaging today be it plastic or others I mean it is 8 times more than the other traditional things the amount of qualities of billions of tons of produced as plastics. It is something you know part of our environment we hate plastic. Plastic production is not really going to stop you can have utopian suggestions that let's get back to glass bottles and let's recycle them and that will happen in small ways.

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But I do not for see once technology moves ahead and you know and is useful no matter how much it is destroying the planet this dialectic and its usefulness and its

attempt to control it and contain it and so in some way by just organizing these bottles making them like this and making a poetic raft in this scale is to say ya you can have such a huge expanse because it is referring to this massive usage and production and now you know every middle class person has to carry their water bottle has to carry it for safe drinking.

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KB: The train is passing by.

VS: Sure I know the train. Am I going on too long?

KB: No no it is okay

VS: TV people say sound byte over and thank you very much! No because I enjoyed talking to you that day and so I know your reference. So you know artist start gassing then they really go on gassing.

KB: You were talking about plastic bottles and so on.

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VS: Ya so you know to come back to this specific project of foregrounding you know on a fairly massive scale because you know out here it doesn't look that big but ten thousand bottles is a large number and more importantly I have given it a form and I think that this form also then the fact that it can be moved and shifted and floated and then once again destroyed is the formlessness which all garbage and trash is about it creates this anarchy this entropy in our environment, is brought by the artiste and given a point of view given a form of it works as an organizing principle then it moves to like what ever stage like in my exhibition I had installation I had video and I had photographs so in this public art project it is removed and destroyed so I think the politics of this art in the context of the art market I would like to say is important message in the art world context and the art world is also is connected to this new rich middle class that art can be made that you know is of huge and considerable value but not monetary value and not enough institutional kind of support for this kind of work is there.

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So there are very few artist who continue to do public work at their with their own means and I believe that the majority of public art if you see historically is institutionally supported and one hopes that this gives a signal to various institutions. Now these are foreign institutions and unfortunately so many radical things are supported not by our state, by the Indian State the local government by the municipality but by the foreign institutions . And how that will change I don't know but I would expect an affluent middle

class growing urban metropolis will say as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have so many attributes. What did Manmohan Singh today release G3 mobile mobility where you have and above that in the Hindu, P Sainath write 16,000 farmers suicide took place and 4,000 in Maharashtra and I think that is very pointedly placed and the editors of Hindu put on top the numbers. I think that these kinds of contradiction as well as relationship to what is new and radical for our urban society, what is our urban experience must become inclusive of what we call having culture.

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KB: Would you like to talk about the million balloons and ..(not comprehensible)

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VS: Ya well the obvious thing is that the two helium balloons which I have designed as an oblong shape rather than a round one obvious looks more like a sun but then it also looks like a traditional balloon and so I got interested in this oblong shape and thought that I always like to put two together to create a kind of slightly mysterious form and much more sculptural form which I think it is doing and then you can think that yes this is wonderful golden yellow and it's wonderful in the evening when the sun sets right sort of behind it and that it could be about global warming because that it has you know the bright yellow sun is about heat and putting these vertical column again made of plastics with abstract form , all back which could be read in a very free willing way which of kind of thing what they are talking.

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I am not a great believer in talking about environmental disaster and environmental doom but obviously the way that so much of environment is getting destroyed so in a informal or metaphoric way these are all, some of them look like burned twigs or and architectural form , some animal, some there some dolls or toys like that so they kind of like stalic tiles drip from these things an din some way counterpoise the more attractive and poetic look of the water bottle is just exploiting mainly the pink topses, as pink polka dots you know in this field, you know just a visual counterpoint

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KB: Just a thought which came to my mind, you must have talked about it , there is this thing about recyclability of plastics, it gives you a feeling that there you can go on and on so there is no problem with plastic use.

VS: I know most environmentalists and Bharti Chakraborty was planning to have a text along with it but it didn't work visually. There is no doubt that plastic has all this ways of, it pollutes the environment and we must caution ourselves about it and I think that in

what ever way one can do to kind of use less plastic is kind of important but I suppose in some way I am trying to say if some thing is so much a part of one's environment that you cannot wish it away, you cannot bomb plastic factory that one of the aspects I as I said earlier is in terms of increasing production of plastics is where the plastic gets recycled is in a small way contains , as technological developments come, I mean these are converted into fleas, into thermal wool or whether it is jackets or I don't know what are it's other purposes, which one would imagine are for other heating purposes and constructing building particularly where people are living in cold climate and most of it exported to china and china makes it the cheap jackets, how it affects the skin, one doesn't know but certainly it's a fact that technology is forced to work on te whole recycling industry.

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It's one way which I mean will attempt to cope with the situation but I mean I am not some person who says I will not touch a plastic bottle I will never have something which , you know, has plastic, I think one has to go on saying it but one has to live with it , at least you know what you will do and you know, by foregrounding it not initially as something I will take a lot of plastic and what do I do , do I cut it up which is what is done in the recycling which is going to cut in to 8 mm chip so they are being destroyed to recycle. Or do I say ban water bottles and have slogans. For me I am interested in making the viewer enter the zone of plastic, almost in a way to say a poetic and visual measure foe being attracted to look at it and I think I have seen it in website that a group which uses to make these bottles to make a buildings, they make walls out of it and it is pretty strong and they reinforce it with cement or plaster or something, they have whole walls and I think the have installation quality which I think they are working on.

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So I think these are all small metaphors which artist do and they keep a generative thing for all people, you know , who work on the margins and they will rarely enter the mainstream.

KB: yes his whole politics of recycling which some of us are aware of it so how od you talk to the consumers and the products , like the coke cans from US, they wills ay the material is recyclable and indeed that is true but all the coke can will go down to Tamil Nadu for recycling.

VS: Ya as I said this will go on simultaneously, the more pressure is put on this thing to recycle and they find that it is cheaper then they will obviously go into that direction and find more and more innovative ways to recycle and of course there is a to of R and D being done in that direction so you can announce it to your public that you are also



responsible for this environmental disaster you are creating at such a rapid rate that our grand children will hardly get to see so much of what the planet earth, you know, use to be even 50 years ago or 70 years ago.

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So you know I think it is a continuous conscious awareness producing information that now million and millions of people are involved with, which I think 20 or 30 year ago would be environmentalist freaks would be talking about it , as I aid people in this area here said, yes we know what global warming is and sort of what every basic level that the planet is being destroyed by mankind , by technologies. So I think art could put these various question and should have the courage to you know I mean I could be wrong but as I said working on something which we opposed like at the end of the statement we demand that Delhi must produce more drinking water and you open it from the tap and say it is good as bottle water. I mean why can't we work towards that? So in showing that this is in excess you are pointing that why all this is you know,being produced and lots of people are making money, every day a new company comes producing bottled water.

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So I think these questions can be raised like I am trying to answer them and others should answer them but that does not mean that I for my art work cannot use them, that's the risk I take which then brings up for discussion.

KB: So one last question so how political can an artist get and should get and how politics and art related. It's a large question. I have asked many artist this question and they have different views, some say they should not be political because it can get didactic and they say art and politics should be separated and all.

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VS: No I mean this question should be right through you know for different times historically for centuries is when you have a civil society you have a democracy and as far back as democracy goes in this planet then it introduces the word politics. So of course in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it has acquired a much more strident tones it has been connected with revolutions and so art and politics at certain historical moments come much closer and there is unity of the seemingly opposite positions and so much energy produces tremendously interesting and exciting art . I think there are movement when there is a mass political union whether it is in Russia when the Soviet union was formed or in Mexico, in different ways in China, so, in India in the 40's the PWA movement, the fact that the communist had a majority of creative people in all department, part of

IPTA, part of the kind progressive writer's and artist's union. Then of course as the situation changes

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So even in my own practice , I call myself child of may 68 , I was a student in England and that's when the student's revolution too late and the utopian things that we can create a revolution and that we can smash capitalism and oppose imperialism and bring the system down. And this produced a very volatile kind of energy, consciousness which in some way which kind of I carry some aspects of it , even radical anarchism, you know conscious attitude to critiquing the notion of consumer art's society as a consumer . So you now I have dealt with what is topical, what politically some events take place, as topical conscious artist in some ways I try to make a statement in that topical sense, it could shift to a moment where nothing to do with me and visiting Poland and going to Auschwitz and I do a series of drawings about a historical moment. So my drawings have been very open and inclusive and where I have strongly articulated and that political and this is a feminist position as well of how the personal can also be political and I think that today's people who are into ecology , now that becomes a new political zone for certain class of political people, ecology would be considered apolitical. It's kind of a social movement.

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But now increasingly the more hard lined Marxist sort of position talks only about class struggle and other issues are not really political. So I think that definition of art and politics , I think also how politics has opened its own sphere of naming or defining itself, even the communist party is forced to redefine itself, many of it's own agenda's in relationship to the political context and so artist obviously will move much more freely and openly and I am a strong believer in that , that the personality that you are, that the history that you have, you should , one should not be afraid to exclude certain things because it does not fit into a certain sense of what ideological position is and it could seem to seem that how can you be personal , how can you be autobiographical yet say you are a political artist, because political artist to do with social issues , political event, analyses of society with ever frame o system or ideology you have.

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But I think that in today' time and if you move around you will see that lot of very different kind of artist move laterally across and the positions themselves and not that singular earlier way that this is a political agenda and this seems to some expressions of the time that we live in, I mean all times have contradiction but today's speed , time we live in many different spheres simultaneously. And they are bound to affect our makeup, they are bound to affect the way we produce art and finally the relations hip what we call

art to politics which is constantly in the production of it , redefining itself. Earlier on you had something refined and you thought you are producing art related to a definition.

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And I think over this period of 30 years of making art when I became politicized in may 68, I constantly questioning my relationship to the institutional political to that I , one is with as well as the art practice. And I think an artist also makes a political statement while not making art but in organizing, in being part of the social group that makes statement and in my specific case I am one of the founding member of Sahmat which played a key role in opposing and fighting what is he enemy of modern secularism in India and that is right wing Hindu fundamentalism. So I have , then there is the artiste as curator , the artiste as organizer then I can be , you now , my make up , my personality also gets constituted by the position, public position I take .I don't necessarily produce that art work but in open sense artist that I am then this also in loose sense becomes art work. The many projects I have done with Sahmat like public art projects lie in Mangolpuri or with rickshaw Walla or art on the move where we too art through the streets of Delhi on hand pushed carts . so I did not make a work but I curated it , it was my concept and I curated it so what an artist is and wish to be can have many features but we tend to thin this is the art object and that is the artist and it gets defined.

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B: Okay!