

The Return of the *Aura*: Anish Kapoor: The Studio and the World

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According to Rashed Araeen, the well-known contemporary artist and a fierce critic of the contemporary art world, 'the problem with the policies of multiculturalism, or theories of cultural diversity, is that they have failed to address the main issues of art as an individual practice rather than an expression of community as a whole, or of art as an expression of post-colonial subject who in order to come to terms with his or her modernity, must to some extent free him – or herself from the constraints of a specific culture' (Araeen 1999: 233). There is still a lot of sociological truth in the point Rasheed Araeen made 14 years ago. Many contemporary artists, all over the world, have accepted, more or less willingly, to define themselves or to be defined through a logic which continues 'to privilege cultural differences as the basis of artistic difference by the post-colonial artist' (Araeen 1999: 23). However, one should not forget that recognition of this dilemma is neither particularly new nor exclusively determined by the 'West'. It was played out over and over in colonial times. To give just one example, modern Bengali artists and intellectuals were always aware of it and they took very contrasted positions in response to it (Guha Thakurtha 1992). One should not forget exhortations like the one made by Rabindranath Tagore in 1926: 'I strongly urge our artists vehemently to deny their obligation to produce something that can be labelled as Indian art, according to some old world mannerism' (Vidal 2011). Luckily enough such exhortations did not remain completely unheard, even before artists like Rasheed Araeen took the 'historical responsibility' of taking up the torch. But one can't perhaps find any better example of it in recent times than the work and career of Anish Kapoor, the well-known sculptor of Indian origin (Figure 3.1). In his personal case, as in that of a few other 'post-colonial' artists and intellectuals, it no longer makes sense to ask if they successfully managed or not to find their place in 'the historically transforming process of modernity'; it is rather to assess how their work effectively obliges us to revise some of the stereotypes which are still commonly used when any definition of 'modernity' or 'post-modernism' is at stake, whether in the arts or in any other cultural domain.

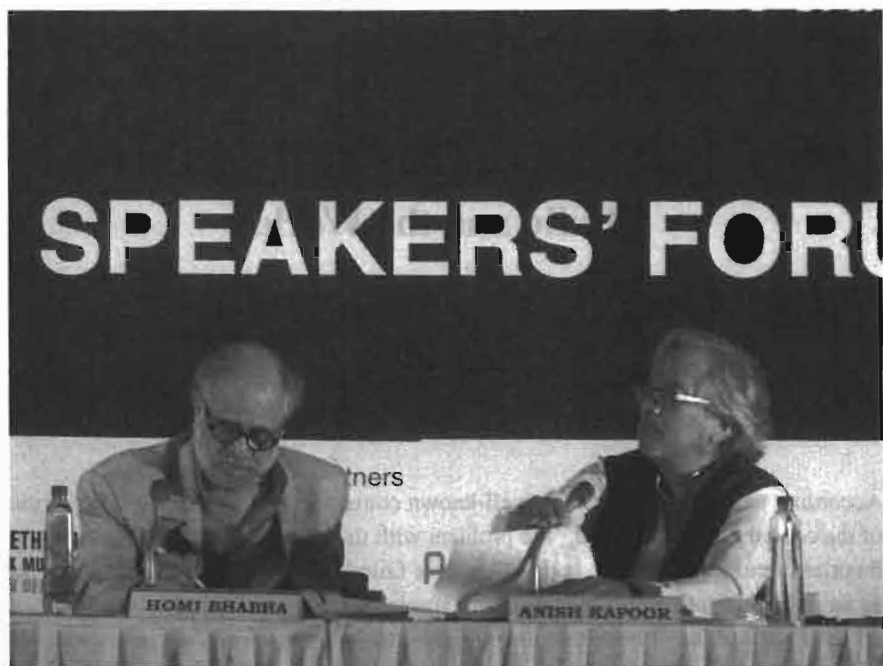


Figure 3.1 Anish Kapoor and Homi Bhabha at the speaker's forum, India Art Summit (20–23 January 2011). Image courtesy of V. P. Balakrishnan.

A game of mirrors

Bourdieu's sociological analysis of art and culture remains to this day one of the most systematic attempts to analyse, scrutinize and deconstruct the mysterious *aura* that surrounds the idea of art (Bourdieu 1965, 1966, 1992). The main focus of his analysis is to demystify the strategies that social actors employ – consciously or not – to present artworks as if they subscribed to a logic in which social determinism and personal interest do not play a part and where universal values and all sorts of idealism prevail.

In many ways Anish Kapoor would seem to embody, perhaps more than any other artist, the perfect archetype of all that Bourdieu is targeting: whether through Kapoor's refusal to be defined by his personal biography, the way he relates to money, or how he deliberately cultivates a universal conception of 'art' and of the 'artist'. There is no aspect of his artistic identity which seems to escape the devastating form of sociological criticism which is at the core of Bourdieu's work and that continues to inspire a huge number of critics of the contemporary art world today. There is, however, a paradox that one cannot fail to notice if one attempts to apply a Bourdieu-like analysis to Anish Kapoor: that is, indeed, the striking parallel

between most of the analysis that Kapoor applies to his own artistic practice and that of Bourdieu's on art, more generally, even if such 'family resemblance' does not preclude them from having otherwise nearly opposite perspectives about the art world and the practice of art.

It would seem, indeed, that Anish Kapoor openly values and advocates more or less everything that Bourdieu attempts – as far as he is concerned – to critically deconstruct in his analysis of the art world: whether it is the acknowledged ambition to get global recognition, based on his belief in universal aesthetic values; or the explicit search for metaphysical depth in his artistic work, self-acknowledged recourse to illusionism but also, more generally, practically all the opinions that he may be professing as an artist. But one should also recognize, however – whether agreeing or not with his point of view – that even if Anish Kapoor is effectively defending a rather idealistic and universalist conception of art, he certainly not does do it either in an idealistic manner or a sociologically naïve one, as I will show in detail here.

Anish Kapoor would never say, for example, that the social and cultural origins of an artist do not influence his work; but he would argue that one should not take them into account for appreciating artworks. Neither will he deny the importance of money in art; rather he will highlight it in an even cruder manner than Bourdieu, describing in detail how the price of an artwork deeply colours the reception of it. More fundamentally, he will insist on the fact that any good work of art should radiate some sort of 'magical' *aura* in the eyes of the viewer, resting on subtle forms of 'illusionism' and of fetishism; not only that, but he will always be looking for new ways of triggering such 'illusionist' effects. As a matter of fact, he believes that it is precisely in such effects that the very essence of art resides.

What distinguishes fundamentally the analysis of art by an artist like Anish Kapoor and by sociologists is not so much their respective manner of looking at it, but rather how they value what they find in it. While in the case of some artists, such analysis is used in order to understand how someone makes art, in the case of sociologists, very similar insights are used to analyse but also, sometimes, sometimes, to demystify the very process of making it. But this is also why an anthropological perspective may help us to deconstruct such a game of mirrors – more precisely, the sort of 'mirrors' that Anish Kapoor knows so well how to manipulate not only when he is answering art critics, journalists and art historians, but also that he is using as a privileged material in some of his most famous works of art.¹

A question of conceptual authority

There are various ways of approaching the anthropology of art. One may do it in a rather classical manner and try basically to unveil the social and cultural structure of the art world today in a manner reminiscent of the method employed by sociologists

and art historians. One may also share the theoretical ambition of someone like Alfred Gell and propose a 'grand' theory of art (Gell 1998). But what I wish to do here is more simply to follow a methodological injunction that one finds not only among anthropologists, but also in the preface of the catalogue of the last retrospective of Anish Kapoor in London by Homi Bhabha, where he urges his reader to engage with 'the aesthetics and ethnography of an art practice, and also with its conceptual authority' (Kapoor 2009: 27). If I intend to follow such advice here, it is not only because it would be difficult to find another artist whose work and artistic personality is so emblematic of the globalization of the art world today; it is also because if one accepts to seriously engage with Anish Kapoor's 'conceptual authority', one may gain some rather unexpected anthropological insights in the evolution of the art world today: his work personifies – better than in the case of any other artist – a trend that I would be tempted to identify as the return of the *aura* in the contemporary art world.

I will begin by examining how Anish Kapoor defines his identity as an artist. Then I will describe how he defines his activity in the studio. And, finally, I will look at the way he deals with diverse questions related to the reception of his work. By articulating together these three approaches, I hope also to demonstrate that one should look at the globalization of the art world today not only as a form of rhetoric or as the simple consequence of the actual evolution of the art market, but also in terms of how such evolution equally feeds on the concrete sort of creative engagement that artists like Anish Kapoor are putting into their work.

I

Adieu to Psychobiography

Let me recall firstly – even if it is well known by all who follow his work closely – how Anish Kapoor progressively managed to obtain for himself the right for his art not to be defined either by his cultural origins or by his cosmopolitanism as such.²

Not a question of denial

For a start, let us be clear on an important point: Anish Kapoor is not someone who ever tried to deny his cultural roots. He never attempted to hide either his Indian origins (he was born in Bombay in 1954) or the Jewish element in his genealogy: his mother was Jewish and his maternal grandfather was a cantor at the synagogue of Poone. Iraqi by birth, this grandfather had come to live in Bombay in the 1930s because of the increasing antisemitism in Iraq.

Anish Kapoor left India in 1971 when he was 17 years old. He stayed in Israel for two years (1971–3), then came to London, where he pursued an artistic training

at two different art schools: Hornsey College of Art from 1973 to 1977 and Chelsea School of Art from 1978 to 1980. London then became his first place of residence and it has remained so up to the present day. But in spite of this, his work remained strongly associated at the beginning of his career with his Indian origins and with Indian culture. Different facts can attest for this: one may recall, for example, that both the shape, the style and the material of his initial works were understandably associated with India; and that he also used titles for some of them which linked them indirectly to Indian culture. Moreover, Anish Kapoor did not hesitate during the first years of his public life to mention the influence of Indian culture and its visual world on his work, which could then also be associated with the neo-tantrism fashionable among contemporary artists in India. However, the many interviews that he gave show clearly that while he rarely missed the opportunity to declare his pride at being Indian and recognized the influence of such origins at some deeper level, he nevertheless became more and more intolerant with critics who suggested the presence of recognizable Indian elements in his work. One may give a few examples of this attitude from various interviews and catalogues:

In 1979, Kapoor returned to India for a visit after some years' absence. He feels, that in the past, too much has been made of his trip in relation to subsequent developments in his technique and imagery.³

In the late seventies, early eighties, when I first started making work after being an art student and showing it and so on, I was making objects out of colour pigment. They were perhaps, on the face of it, they looked more Indian than some of the things I'm doing now. What was interesting or problematic for me then was that they were referred to as exotic. Now that's the thing that I find difficult, and I've always found difficult. The exotic is a tag that seems to be akin to the touristic. It seems to be something to do with a rather peripheral, unknowledgeable view of something...⁴

Ultimately, Kapoor says he resents classification, especially when he is defined by his Indian origins.

I think we have to resist being pigeonholed. I'm not interested in being an Indian artist. I don't need that as a peg to hang on.⁵

One may add that Anish Kapoor adopted exactly the same attitude concerning his Jewishness. While he never tried to deny such influence in his biography – and while he sometimes also used Jewish symbols and titles in some of his works – he became equally careful not to let critics attempt to define his work through the Jewish elements of his identity.

Cosmopolitanism: Yes; but don't make too much of it, please

Most commentators have learnt their lesson, and they know that insistent reference to his cultural roots may now not be the best way of introducing the work of Anish Kapoor – especially so if they do not want to be immediately contradicted by him. So a safer strategy, adopted by most of his critics in order to discuss his artistic identity, has become to insist on his 'cosmopolitanism', knowing, in particular, that he left India at a very young age and that he has often confessed to the difficulty he has in feeling at home, either in India, England, or anywhere else:

My own particular story, even when I was growing up, was always one of being slightly outside. There are not that many Jews in India, and there were none at all at my school. I always felt slightly outside the main social framework.⁶

I found it very disorientating, very difficult ... but I think that's an old story, being in a foreign place where one has to reevaluate one's sense of belonging. It took me twenty years to have that sense in London.⁷

One may effectively point to various passages where he seems to define himself through his cosmopolitanism. So one is not surprised to find that an 'authorized' commentator like Homi Bhabha did not hesitate to put a strong emphasis on this aspect of Anish Kapoor's life, insisting, for example, on the cosmopolitanism of the city where the two of them were born and on their shared experience as cosmopolitan artists or intellectuals:

We grew up, Anish Kapoor and I in a great cosmopolitan city ... Those of us with post-colonial diasporic presents and God-only-knows-what-and-where-futures are tired of being subjected to the authenticating claims of authenticity.⁸

But in spite of his friendship with Homi Bhabha, Anish Kapoor does not necessarily appear to be more at ease when he is 'pigeonholed' nowadays as a cosmopolitan artist than when he was defined previously through his cultural origins. This is not only because – in spite of the striking diversity of the cultural references that he is mobilizing in his work – he does not like to be identified with some cheap version of the 'post-modern' artist selecting at will cultural bits here and there. It is just not how he conceives his work:

Madame Butterfly-like, from which one can – it comes back to the conversation about the exotics – from which one can extract those bits that are attractive, and have them reside in a resident culture, then it's cheap and trivial.⁹

And not too much of a Freudian explanation, either, please

When one looks at the work of Anish Kapoor, it is difficult to ignore the obvious sexual connotations of some of his best-known works.¹⁰ So, one may be tempted, rather than discussing his work in terms of his cultural background, to interpret it by reference to more intimate dimensions of his personal biography. Such an interpretation may also appear to get some legitimacy from the fact that Anish Kapoor – who for years underwent psychoanalysis – is never afraid of pointing out the sexual connotations of his art or referring jokingly to them in his interviews:

Sculptor Anish Kapoor invites Simon Hattenstone to his studio to talk size, price tags and whether his art is really about vaginas ... *'My art is upside down and inside out. I've always said that. You might be quoting me there, hahahaha'*. (*Guardian*, 23 September 2006)

But here again, Anish Kapoor likes to emphasize the fact that it is not because his works may have sexual connotations that one should feel allowed to relate them in any way to his intimate history, his sexuality, or even to his own gender.

Basically, what he contests is the very idea that the identity of an artist should be used for defining the meaning of his art. And so, it is the very nature of the relationship between the artist and his work that he systematically attempts to deconstruct when he comments on his artistic activity. Of course, one may simply regard such a personal stance as a form of denegation. But, as I suggested above, if one wishes to approach the work of an artist from an anthropological point of view, it does not make any more sense to ignore his 'conceptual authority' (to use once more the felicitous formula of Homi Bhabha) than it does to ignore the religious beliefs of people when studying their rituals.

II

The studio as a liminal place

In spite of recent advances in the analysis of rituals, the seminal work by Arnold Van Gennep on 'rites de passage' has lost nothing of its anthropological relevance. The core of it – as is well known – is to have analytically distinguished three successive stages for characterizing one of the most important families of rituals in all societies, which he identifies as 'rites of passages'. The preliminary step that one may find in all these rituals is defined by a symbolic dissociation with one's previous identity and with any previous cultural or institutional forms of integration. Then comes a liminal stage of life which may last up to a few days, a few months or a few years, and which is characterized by the fact that one remains at the margins of established norms and institutions. Finally, a post-liminal stage is defined by a process of reintegration under a new guise and a new identity within the social world.

Now, one may be wary of the insidious tendency of anthropologists to find a 'ritual' dimension to every aspect of social life. But in the particular case of Anish Kapoor – as in the case of a few other artists – it is difficult not to feel tempted to establish an obvious parallel with the sort of ternary logic that Van Gennep identifies in the structure of many rituals. As a matter of fact, I have already dealt – even if a little too succinctly – with the first of these three stages when I showed how Anish Kapoor managed to dissociate his work as an artist from his previous identity. So let me now consider his activity in the studio and demonstrate why it makes sense to use the anthropological notion of 'liminal space' to characterize more precisely the role that his studio occupies in the genesis of his work.

... the conquests for an artist, in the end, are not out there in the world; they are all there in the studio.

Whether they are artists or not, most of the people who are living a diasporic life must accommodate the divide between their place of birth or ancestry and the place(s) where they spend most of their time. This is not necessarily easy and in spite of all his fame and success, Anish Kapoor never pretended it was easier for him than for any one else:

You know, I have lived in the UK for nearly forty years; I am a foreigner there; and I grew up in India; and, in some ways, I am a foreigner there; so, that's the way it is for me, that is slightly uncomfortable.¹¹

However, he insists equally on the fact that for an artist like him, the significant divide has never been that between India and England or the 'East' and the 'West':

I don't think that's true at all. Because there are good artists and bad artists, or not-so-good artists. This kind of East-West stuff is rubbish. I mean, for me, being an Indian artist is not important.¹²

The only divide which matters for him has nothing to do, indeed, with cultural or geographical borders; it is rather the one between his studio and the world. And this is true, in his particular case, not only in terms of artistic practice but also in terms of the definition of self. The question then is to know what the institution of the studio represents for him.

The studio has come to be generally seen since the Renaissance in Europe as one of the places for excellence where artists deal fundamentally with the creative dimension of their art and really express themselves. And one may certainly find some echo of this conception in the clear importance that Anish Kapoor gives to it as the unique *locus* of his creative work. There is, however, a twist in his conception of the studio: what defines it for him is not only the fact that it is associated with the

place where art is 'created'; but more fundamentally, in his own words, the fact that creativity may occur only because the studio is also the place where one gets rid of one's cultural identity and social status:

The studio remains the meditative home of the work; all the other stuff of the world, success, etc., in reality get in the way of the studio. One must keep the freedom of going in the studio and to behave as a hero, as a victim, as a child. One must keep this ability to wander and to wonder.¹³

In other words, the studio precisely corresponds – in anthropological terms – to the definition of a 'liminal' place where one is supposed to temporarily stop being defined by one's social identity; so let us see a bit more precisely how such 'process' may effectively occur.

The shifting identities of Anish Kapoor as a creator

There are at least three ideas of 'self' which are creeping back regularly when Anish Kapoor is asked to define himself: the first one is linked to his psychobiography; but this is also the one – as we have seen before – that he is keen to leave behind. Another definition of self is the one that he acknowledges himself as an unavoidable obligation to assume 'in the world': that is the public façade of the 'cultural hero', more or less obliged to display on demand the sense of his vocation, the meaning of his art or the precise nature of his 'creative' self. But when he comes back to his studio, a very different 'self' takes over: that is a much more hesitant and anxious part of himself – Anish Kapoor explains – because he rarely knows clearly what he is really aiming at while he is working in his studio. But according to him, it is precisely the freedom to maintain this fragile state of mind in the studio, somewhere in between a more intimate identity and a more public one, that allows him to exist as an artist and to act as a creator:

I am a real believer in the studio; shows are great, but that is not where the real problems are ... So the only place where one may really be fragile is in the studio; and I think that it is vital for artists to be fragile, to not say 'I know' but to do exactly the opposite, to say 'I don't know'. ... We spend most of our time, acting through what we know, but this sense of 'I am really not knowing what I am going to do; I will do it anyway...' ¹⁴

The question then is to better understand what he is doing when he is not simply presenting himself as an 'artist', outside 'in the world', and when he is effectively processing his art as a creator in this 'liminal' place that his studio represents.

Getting rid of explicit meanings in his art

When Anish Kapoor mentions the studio, it is first of all to insist on the fact that it is the place where he can get rid of his cultural baggage and where, more fundamentally, no predefined meaning should be admitted. As he explains beautifully: 'In fact, I feel very passionately that I do not have anything to say as an artist, that the moment I do have something to say, the game is lost, the space is closed up.'¹⁵ But what he is doing there more precisely is better summarized in the following passage:

To challenge myself. To make art that I've not made before. As I was trying to say earlier, the modern world has a huge range of formal possibilities, whether one's talking about spaces to show in, or materials to work with. I'm ambitious to try and occupy if you like as much of that territory as I can allow myself to. So what I see this as is, it's me battling against my own limitations. The image that I've conjured here of Picasso liberating himself in order to be able to go to a fractured world or a whole world is one, is a battle that he fought with himself. At least that's the way I see it. And I think there is something about opening one's heart to the possibilities that one doesn't even truly or readily know are there – emotional possibilities as much as anything else.¹⁶

But the fact that Anish Kapoor considers that he has nothing to say in particular as an artist within the space of the studio does not mean that new meanings cannot emerge from his works, once outside of it and back in the world:

I really feel that I have nothing to say as an artist, I don't have an agenda, I don't want particularly to say anything, but what I do feel is that the real work of an artist happens in the practice in a studio; and from that practice things emerge that are worth saying.¹⁷

Come to the studio and do my thing. What one does in the studio in fact is to pose a series of problems to oneself. You can come in and say yes I have this funny notion that I want to make a big blob of goeey mass of ... dimensions, of certain dimensions, that has a certain effect. And then I've got to look for, having made it I've got to look for some deeper meaning, for some reason for this thing to be in the world. There's enough stuff in the world ...¹⁸

Not your romantic image of the sculptor

What Anish Kapoor is doing in his studio has not much to do, in reality, with the conventional image of a Rodin fighting with his material and leaving the imprint of his craft – preferably also of his genius – on the work itself. While nobody ever contested the fact that Anish Kapoor's works are really his own and are conceived by him, this does not mean that he necessarily plays the most important role in fabricating them. Like many other artists today – especially sculptors – most of the artwork is left, as a matter of fact, to assistants or to specialized firms; and even if

some part of the studio is more exclusively used by Anish Kapoor for conceiving his work, it looks rather like a workshop, even a small factory:¹⁹

Let's talk practicalities for a moment. You said that you're a terrible carver – indeed you do very little at all – so what makes you a sculptor? Is it an instinctive three-dimensional urge? I think I understand something about space. I think the job of a, so to speak, sculptor is spatial as much as it is to do with form. The idea that an artist has to make everything themselves is...

*It lingers there doesn't it?*²⁰

Well it lingers, it's certainly not true, it's certainly not necessary, and I doubt that it's ever been true, frankly. The problem with stone carving is that it takes months and months and months, and I have a very dedicated, wonderful team of young fellows who do a lot of the preparatory work for me. Roughing out a stone is just damned hard work.

But finishing it off you'll do?

Well I'll do some of it, where it's necessary.²¹

What characterizes the work of Anish Kapoor, however, is not only the fact that it does not clearly bear the imprint of its creator; it is more fundamentally the fact that the whole process of art-making is systematically obliterated in the final product. Of course, Anish Kapoor is not the only artist to process art in this way. But the quality of finish of some of his sculptures is such that they have a particular aesthetic poignancy. It is no coincidence that the title of one of his well-known sculptures is called *swayambhu* – the Sanskrit for 'self-made' or 'non-created' (neither naturally or artificially). And it is no coincidence either if Anish Kapoor often insists on the fact that his art will acquire new meaning in the world, largely independently of himself.

III

The alchemy of reception

To comment or to be commented upon

It should be clear by now that Anish Kapoor does not particularly valorize the material dimension of art, nor does he consider that an artist should necessarily 'express' himself through his work:

Yes, mm, I feel that one of the great currents in the contemporary experience of art is that it seems to come out of the experience of the author. That is to say whether we're talking about the surrealist experience or any inclination to expression – all of that is, dwells so to speak in the author. It seems to me that there's another route in which the

artist looks for a content that is on the face of it abstract, but at a deeper level symbolic, and that that content is necessarily philosophical and religious. I think it's attempting to dig away at – without wanting to sound too pompous – at the great mystery of being. And that, while it has a route through my psychobiography, isn't based in it.²²

If there is any positive association between a work of art and the name of a particular artist, it is not really because he made it but rather because of the mythology associated with the most famous artists:

Let's just underline this by saying that artists don't make objects. Artists make mythologies. That when you buy a work or go and see a work by Picasso, because it's a very obvious example, what you look at is the mythological context in which Picasso worked. It's as if one's almost looking beyond the image, beyond the work as displayed, at this incredible man's ability to make art in so varied a series of ways, and declare life as a creative endeavour from beginning to end. What a great thing to do.²³

Of course one may find that such conception is a bit too close to the most common marketing strategy in the commercial world which consists in valorizing any commercial brand by associating it with *ad hoc* 'mythologies' rather than focusing on the 'product' itself. But it is equally worth considering in more detail how such a mythology may be built in this particular case.

A particularly telling comment from this point of view was made by Anish Kapoor when he divided his artistic career into two periods: before he was asked to represent the United Kingdom at the Biennale of Venice in 1990, he explains how he was the one who had to explain the meaning of his art. But after Venice, it was the job of his commentators to describe and interpret it. He was no longer so burdened with having to make sense of his work: others would take most of the responsibility for it, even if – unlike Beckett or Picasso – he would not hesitate to make it known loudly when he disagreed with his commentators:

Up to then, it was like if I was telling people what it was about. And suddenly [after his biennale in Venice], in Venice, people were telling me what it was about. It was astonishing, surprising, an amazing moment of change.²⁴

The transubstantiation of art

Even if most artists do not feel constrained nowadays to proclaim as loudly as before the purity of their artistic vocation, not many of them are as much at ease as Salvador Dali²⁵ in discussing in detail their relationship with money. Anish Kapoor, however, deals with this question in the same way that he deals with other aspects of his art: he will acknowledge without hesitation the fact that money plays a crucial role – a rather positive one from his point of view – both for art generally, and in his own

art, in particular. But he will nevertheless ferociously despise the very idea that 'art' could be determined or defined by the art market:

Money is part of the mythology of art. Money and art have lived together for centuries ... I don't feel that I have to apologize for that money.²⁶

Money is a mythological tool in the functioning of an object ... it brings a emotional quality to the work which gives it a different value ... I think that this value is alchemical ... it literally performs a change in the object.

Of course, one may be tempted, once more, to interpret such a comment as a form of ideological denial. But there again, it would not lead us very far in understanding Anish Kapoor's own perspective about his artistic vocation.

The performativity of art

A natural stone or a sculpture does not cease to exist if no one is looking at it. But this is precisely what makes the difference between them and most of Anish Kapoor's artworks. Because an illusion may only function if there is someone to be deluded, a work of art deliberately made to stimulate the reactions of beholders needs them in order to exist as a work of art:

In a sense, this idea about something partial is also there in the relationship between the viewer and the work. The work doesn't exist without the viewer, without somebody looking at it. To a large extent, all work is incomplete. It's completed by the person who is looking at it. That relationship is what makes it whole. All of creation is set about by the relation of Shiva and Parvati – how does it go? It's all like that.

There's something immanent in the work but the circle is only completed by the viewer. Now that's a very different position from a work let us say with a subject matter, where the work itself, so to speak, has a complete circle of meaning and counterpoint.²⁷

This continuous process of redefinition is at the core of what Anish Kapoor defines as the 'alchemy' of art, to use a term that he frequently invokes. From his point of view, making a work of art does not require only the sort the 'creativity' conventionally attributed to all good artists; it requires also some equivalent of the know-how of the 'illusionist' whose experience consists not only in learning how to master his tricks, but also, more decisively, how to anticipate his viewers' reactions and how all sorts of details of the environment will influence their impressions. Once a work of art is exhibited, its performativity will depend exclusively on the effect that it may produce on the viewer. And even if he cannot fully determine the impact of an artwork upon the latter one, the anticipation of this encounter plays a crucial role in the way Anish Kapoor conceives his work. This appears particularly clearly when he explains the reasons why he likes to work with concave mirrors:

Because mirrors are concave, they have a certain focus that does something to your body ... It plays on the way you approach it. It is almost as if the art is performative; like a film, like a play; it manipulates, if you wish, the way you stand at a certain place and look in a certain way ... All these objects go with a certain sensation of vertigo.²⁸

The acquisition of new meanings

If Anish Kapoor does not consider that any meaning is co-substantial with the materiality of the artwork or with the very process of creating it, this does not mean that it cannot be 'added' to it. And, as with any other topic, he does not hesitate to explain quite frankly how this might be done. So, one of the most effective ways of doing so, according to him, is a crafty use of the performative power associated with suggestive titles that one may give to artworks:

But you can't invest it, you can't invest it with a meaning after you've made it.

Oh I think those processes are very complex. One can find a way to do precisely that. Naming is one of those ways. Context is another of those ways.²⁹

Perhaps the best illustration of this is the curiously powerful effect of one of his best-known sculptures, where the spectacle of a simple bump in the middle of a white wall acquires deep new connotations when one reads the work's title: 'When I was pregnant'.

Another way, however, of giving more profound connotations to his work is to play expertly with all sorts of cultural references, a technique often used in twentieth-century art.³⁰ It is not necessary here to mention the rather dreaded label of post-modernism; but one cannot fail to notice Anish Kapoor's expert use of all sorts of mythological and religious connotations in his works – whether Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Islamic or whatever. It is, however, at some 'deeper' level – by playing with shape, light, colour or with materials – that Anish Kapoor truly attempts, as he explains himself, to attain some sort of archetypal meaning in his art.

A deeper level of signification

From his first sculptures where he played with coloured powders to more recent works, there is perhaps no other contemporary artist who has put such emphasis on colour in their work. As he proved again and again, whether at the Tate Modern with *Marsyas* (2,003) or at the Grand Palais more recently with the *Leviathan* (2,012), it is the way he combines colours with scale which really makes some of his best-known pieces stand apart from other contemporary sculpture:

I have always felt that colour has a way to meaning, that form has a propensity for

meaning and that both in a certain way are part of a certain language of the abstract. The forms that I make have a sort of human recall; I don't hope that it is an early human record, a primordial human record; it is what I am after; and colour, of course, does that incredibly well.³¹

By playing with colour and scale, Anish Kapoor attempts to elicit emotive responses which go beyond any discursive meaning and which may attain some deeper level of resonance, among the viewers of his works:

Red is a colour I've felt very strongly about. Maybe red is a very Indian colour, maybe it's one of those things that I grew up with and recognise at some other level. Of course it's the colour of the interior of our bodies. In a way it's inside out, red.³²

The artist as an illusionist

It is not only the colour, however, that one notices immediately in the sculptures of Anish Kapoor. Most of them are remarkable as well for the exceptional quality of their material: whether it is stone, powder colours, mirrors, textiles or anything else, the same desire for perfection is clearly visible. Anish Kapoor, who certainly manages to get serious funding for creating his art, is also spending it lavishly to obtain exactly the sort of making that he wants. Such a preoccupation may appear, however, slightly contradictory with the fact that he often stresses his apparent indifference for the materiality of his sculptures. So, one may ask why he would not satisfy himself simply with the use of any readily available material, like so many artists have done throughout the twentieth century. To answer this question is to arrive at a last dimension – perhaps also the most fundamental one – in his conception of his work: that is, the very fact that he considers his own artworks, but also more generally all artistic activity, as a form of illusionism: 'I believe very strongly that it is not something as a real object.'³³

The reason, for example, that he is giving for using mirrors of unequalled quality in his works has little to do with the rather striking beauty of their surface, noticed by anyone who looks at them; but rather, according to him, because this is the only way he could find to obtain the sort of illusion that he is aiming at, to give to the viewers the illusion of being confronted not so much with a material sculpture as with some uncanny reflection of the world itself. One can give another example of this by referring to another of his famous sculptures which consists of an enormous stone in the shape of a menhir with an empty volume, in the shape of a cube, carefully carved in its centre. The main point of this work, according to the artist, is to direct the attention of the viewer to this dark cavity while the stone itself serves only to frame the void.

What happens, having made this object, if I put it next to another object? How does that change its reason for being in the world, its effect on the body? One of the phenomena

that I've worked with over many years is darkness. Darkness is an idea that we all know about, in a way an idea about the absence of light. Very simple. What interests me however is the sense of the darkness that we carry within us, the darkness that's akin to one of the principal subjects of the sublime – terror. A work will only have that deep resonance that I try to indicate is there if the kind of darkness that I can generate, let's say in a block of stone with a cavity in it that's very dark, if the resonance that's in that stone is something that is resident in you already. That's to say that you are completing that circle, but perhaps without knowingly you're completing that circle. It's not a verbal connection, but a bodily one. That's why sculpture occupies the same space as your body.³⁴

Anish Kapoor is then more interested in the idea of creating some specific illusory effect in his sculptures than to highlight the quality of their 'thingness' as such:

What are your limitations as a sculptor?

Oh they're manifold. I don't know. I don't know. Do you know, much of the work that I've made over many years now proposes the idea that for every form there is a kind, there is a kind of counterpoint in non-form. One of the things that I see myself battling with now is not the non-form, because in a way I feel I've done some of that, but the form. So what happens when there's form and no non-form? Where can I go with that? That's a battle I need to investigate, fight, whatever.³⁵

At this point, however, it may be time to leave Anish Kapoor to his own artistic 'fight' and to conclude by reassessing briefly his conception of art from an anthropological perspective.

The return of the *aura*

Hans Belting has claimed that with the evolution of contemporary art, we have arrived at a final point which can be legitimately defined as 'the end of art', at least in the traditional form as understood in Europe from the Renaissance onward (Belting 1,984). And there is little doubt, indeed, that art history has been marked in the twentieth century by the radical attempts made by various 'avant-gardes' to deconstruct the artistic practices and most of the accepted ideas and expectations upon which the idea of art had developed and had been appreciated previously.

Meanwhile, during the same period, most art historians have been equally busy deconstructing most of the common notions and perceptions upon which the very idea of art history had been founded at least from the European Renaissance: the idea of art as fundamentally distinct from skilled craftsmanship; the cult of the artistic genius as an individual which outplays the restrictions imposed by his time and culture; or the common idea that 'great art' is recognizable by the fact that it is able to 'speak' to anyone as well as to 'move' everyone. At a more fundamental

level, also, what most art historians and anthropologists have questioned is the very idea that any notion of aesthetic may be given any sort of universal relevance. And if one puts aside a few well-known exceptions (Aby Warburg, for example³⁶), the vocation of art history has mostly become to provide the sort of socio-cultural and historical background analysis, which is supposed to give a better informed or deeper understanding of art.

One should not conclude, of course, that the conventional conception of art and aesthetics has not survived. As a matter of fact it has flourished more than ever, as one can see from the sort of gloss used for attracting the crowds to the retrospectives dedicated to the best-known artists. Similarly, the ferocity of some of the debates surrounding contemporary art demonstrates clearly enough that older conceptions of art and aesthetics are far from being dead. As a matter of fact, any attempt to analyse the sociological realities of artistic taste show the profound chasm which exists between 'popular', 'conventional' or 'classic' tastes and more 'elitist' or 'avant-garde' ones. What is fascinating, however, in the case of Anish Kapoor and his art, is precisely how he manages to eschew such sociological and well-entrenched divides.

As we have seen, neither his works nor his conception of art are of the sort that one could simply define by placing him among the many artists who have busied themselves in deconstructing a more conventional conception of art and of aesthetics. Yet neither can one suspect him of simply following a more conventional conception of art and ignoring what has been going on in the evolution of the contemporary art world.

When one examines carefully not only how Anish Kapoor conceives and interprets his work, but also how it is received, it appears clearly that what he manages to do – often quite successfully – is to find new ways acceptable both for the elite of the art world and for the general public to restore a rather conventional conception of art and to promote it with great enthusiasm and without any sort of ironical twist or any form of second degree interpretation; he is endorsing very explicitly his ambition to make an art which has an 'universal' appeal and which mythologizes, once more, the status of the artist on the public scene. And he proclaims openly his right to use any means to get such recognition: whether it is the scale of some of his works, the fascination linked to their price, the quality of the materials used or the sort of symbolism associated with them.

By restoring a rather classical conception of art where artworks are fundamentally defined once more by the *aura* they may possess in the eyes of the beholder, Anish Kapoor defies those who, following in the steps of Walter Benjamin or Theodor Adorno, believe that such traditional conception of art has nowadays become definitely obsolete. Finding powerful allies in the general public and with wealthy patrons like Lakshmi Mittal or with intellectual luminaries and celebrated writers like Homi Bhabha or Salman Rushdie, the recognition of Kapoor's work demonstrates clearly that the importance of *aura* in art does not refer only to a popular and nostalgic conception of art and of its history.

As a matter of fact, it is principally in the work of essayists like Walter Benjamin, the Frankfurt School and their successors that such a notion is supposed to remain forever the hallmark of an extinct era. But while the use of this notion may have taken a more restrictive meaning in the work of Benjamin and a few others after him, one may argue, more generally, that it has never disappeared, in reality, either in the 'world of art' or elsewhere, because of the advent of new techniques of mechanical reproduction like photography or the phonogram at the end of the nineteenth century.³⁷ Sociologists of art as diverse as Natalie Heinnich (1,984) and Bruno Latour or Antoine Hennion (1,997) have summarily but rightly insisted on the fact that such new modes of reproduction helped to 'sacralize' works of art rather than desacralize them. One should not be too surprised, then, if the very notion of *aura* and the whole conception idealist conception of art traditionally associated with it has come back with a vengeance to haunt the very centre of the contemporary art world. This does not mean, however, that one should be, once more, sociologically naïve and believe, for example, that it happened only because of the prevailing historical and sociological conditions or because of any form of technological 'advances' as such.

Alfred Gell was certainly right to stress the methodological importance of recognizing any form of 'art' as a 'technology' by itself, from an anthropological perspective. But one should not forget either that, in doing so, he was simply recalling a well-known fact that few 'artists' may afford to ignore. The real challenge, however – both for artists and for anthropologists – is rather to grasp what this often disconcerting 'technology' is more specifically about. And one may perhaps acknowledge that Anish Kapoor is one of these artists who has managed to find some sort of answer to this question in our time, even if it is not the only one. This is why it is worth, I believe, not only considering his work, but also what he has to say about it – even if when listening to his words, one may be rather tempted, in his case, to evoke the legendary *metis* of the ancient Greeks rather than any post-modern notion of *métissage* or *hybridity*.

Notes

1. Hundreds of articles and dozens of books and catalogues have been dedicated to Anish Kapoor. He has never ceased also to give interviews to art critics, curators and journalists throughout his career. I have used here the most representative of them.
2. For a fuller analysis of this specific aspect of Anish Kapoor's personality, see also Vidal (2009).
3. *The Tate Gallery 1982–84: Illustrated Catalogue of Acquisitions* (1986).

4. 'Transcript of the John Tusa Interview with the sculptor Anish Kapoor' (2006).
5. 'Entretien avec Farah Nayeri' (2008).
6. 'Anish Kapoor: Smooth operator', *Independent* (2003).
7. 'Anish Kapoor', *Guardian* (2006).
8. 'Bhabha, H. K., 'Elusive Objects: Anish Kapoor Fissionary Art' (2009: 25, 27).
9. 'Transcript of the John Tusa Interview with the sculptor Anish Kapoor' (2006). 'Entretien avec Farah Nayeri', *Bloomberg News* (2008).
10. For example, he stated: 'I have always been interested in involuted form, which is often vaginal, female. It would be dishonest not to recognise that it's blatantly sexual. You can't be coy about it' (Wullshlager 2012).
11. 'Entretien avec Anish Kapoor' (2011).
12. 'Anish Kapoor by Ameena Meer' (1990).
13. 'Entretien avec Anish Kapoor' (2011).
14. *Idem*.
15. 'BBC Radio 3 Entretien avec Anish Kapoor par Joan Bakewell' (2001).
16. *Idem*.
17. 'Transcript of the John Tusa Interview with the sculptor Anish Kapoor' (2003).
18. *Idem*.
19. 'We must have had one hundred people involved in the making of this' 'Entretien avec Anish Kapoor' (2011).
20. 'Transcript of the John Tusa Interview with the sculptor, Anish Kapoor' (2003).
21. *Idem*.
22. *Idem*.
23. *Idem*.
24. *Idem*.
25. Dali never seemed to hide his apparent attraction to money, even if he could also be generous. This may also explain why the unflattering nickname of 'Salvador Dali-Avida Dollars' given to him by André Breton remained attached to him (Descharnes 1987: 36).
26. 'Entretien avec Anish Kapoor' (2011).
27. *Idem*.
28. 'Transcript of the John Tusa Interview with the sculptor Anish Kapoor' (2003). 'Entretien avec Farah Nayeri' (2008).
29. 'Transcript of the John Tusa Interview with the sculptor Anish Kapoor' (2003).
30. The work of Cy Twombly illustrates perfectly this tendency in contemporary art.
31. 'Entretien avec Anish Kapoor' (2011).
32. 'Transcript of the John Tusa Interview with the sculptor Anish Kapoor' (2003). 'Entretien avec Farah Nayeri' (2008).
33. 'Entretien avec Anish Kapoor, Monumenta' (2011).
34. 'Transcript of the John Tusa Interview with the sculptor Anish Kapoor' (2003).
35. *Idem*.

36. While Warburg had been one of the first art historians to promote a rigorous methodology for interpreting artworks in their historical and sociological contexts, his way of analysing the everlasting appeal of some of them was going well beyond such interpretations (on this topic, see for example Didi-Huberman 2002).
37. For a rather confusing definition of the notion of *aura*, one may always look at the often contradictory use that Benjamin himself made of this notion; and how the interpretation of his thinking on this topic became some sort of small cottage industry – a fact widely acknowledged, even by his most ardent interpreters. One may find, for example, on the first page of an edited volume entirely dedicated to his work the following exergue: ‘More books on Benjamin and still the pile grows ... Benjamin prose breeds commentary like vaccine in a lab’ (Cole 1998: 8). For an admittedly more restrictive definition of ‘aura’, one may look however at Benjamin’s famous essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1935–6); or examine how this notion is used (rather than ‘defined’) by most of his commentators: aura is then generally identified as ‘the power and authority that a unique or original work of art possessed by virtue of its authenticity, and which disappears, for Benjamin, as the actual object of the work of art becomes a reproducible entity, as in a photograph or a film, for example’ (Steinberg 1996: 95).

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