

Abstract

The prevailing scholarship on visual arts in India creates a binary between the publics of modern art in institutions and non-institutional spaces, leaving the interrelationship between the two unexplored. It suggests that art in institutions primarily serves the elites, while non-institutional art promotes a democratic public sphere characterized by accessibility and inclusivity for the common people. In this context, by interrogating the dominant narrative, this dissertation explores the relationship between publics of visual arts in modern institutional and non-institutional spaces in post-independence Kerala.

Modern art evolved within the confines of art institutions in colonial India, intertwining with debates on colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism. However, visual arts in Kerala diverged from this trajectory, evolving in a space beyond the confines of formal art institutions. In the post-independence period, this development positioned artworks at the boundary of what is considered art and non-art in a modern sense. Deviating from imagining the audiences solely as connoisseurs of high art within art institutions, artworks situated at this boundary have presumed their audiences consisted of three types: literate Malayalis who engage with art through printed images, strangers who gaze at art in public spaces, and marginalized communities who interact with art through narrative art practices. In these scenarios, the audiences of modern art at the boundary are assumed to be common people. While studying the audiences of visual arts at the boundary, contemporary scholarship tends to normalize the binary between art institutions and non-institutional spaces by emphasizing the latter's proximity to the democratic public sphere.

This study disagrees with the binary assumption and adopts a mixed-method approach, incorporating archival research and ethnography while using a range of case studies. Archival research explores the representation of the female body in print media by examining

illustrations and photographs in Malayalam periodicals. This analysis is guided by the concept of the male gaze in Chapter Two and female nudity in Chapter Three. Furthermore, it locates the representation of the female body in relation to the state, consumer market, and art history, elucidating how these factors contribute to the production of multiple public spheres, ultimately resulting in the formation of gendered publics. The ethnographic study explores the representation of communities in narrative-based artworks in public spaces. Chapter Four analyses the concept of the bilateral movement of narrative installations between art institutions and non-institutional sites. Chapter Five explores the relationship between intimacy and strangeness produced through the narrative wall murals in the urban city of Kochi. Both chapters examine multiple public spheres produced by the narrative artworks that ultimately produced the gallery-viewing publics.

Analysis of publics produced by the case studies reveals that visual arts at the boundary create their publics at an in-between space as connoisseurs of high art adhering to the protocols of modernism. In this context, the dissertation proposes that the concept of the democratic public sphere is not solely defined by its accessibility and inclusivity but rather should be analyzed by considering art itself as an institution, thereby diffusing the binary framework.