

From Shrine to Plinth: Studying the
Dialectics of Hindu Deities Displayed
in the Museum through Artworks
and their Exhibition

Megha Rajguru

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ABSTRACT

In this practice-based research I am comparing the metaphysics of the Hindu temple and the museum, and studying the role of the Hindu deity in these two contrasting settings through my artworks. By exhibiting them in a multi-sensory, and meditative environment created in the museum building, I invite the visitor to physically engage with my artworks and consciously experience the tensions between the religious and secular identities of the deity.

The collection and display of Hindu deities in museums in the UK from the Enlightenment till the present day convey their anthropological and iconographic significance. The role of the museum has been established as one that educates the public, conserves, displays, and stores artefacts for future generations. Hindus believe in the cyclical nature of time in which creation and destruction are followed by renewed creation. Such a belief contrasts with the practice of conservation and preservation in the museum, within which the natural cycle of artefacts is arrested. Worshippers have a close relationship with their deities. They bathe, anoint, decorate them, and perform rituals that celebrate the survival of the soul over the inevitable cycle of life and death. Hence, the deity's shift from the multi-sensory temple environment into the ocular-centric museum is a reflection of its role as a living embodiment of divinity in the temple and as a visual signifier of culture and history in the museum. However, its true interpretation in the secular context is problematic as the focus is on its material existence which is of secondary importance in its religious context.

The creation and exhibition of a series of interactive ritualistic artworks for the museum visitor is at the core of this thesis. In video, **Ganesh, circa 1900** one of several practice-centred elements of my research, I record and present the dissolution of *Ganesh* in an upturned vitrine. I directly refer to the Hindu ritual of worship and immersion of the deity but use the glass case as a container of the narrative. **Kinetic Shiva** is an interactive installation inviting the visitor to perform a mechanised ritual act of circumambulation in an archetypal sacred space. Through **Tactile Ganesh**, I encourage the audience to touch, feel and explore the form of *Ganesh*, whereas in video **Gods in Storage**, I stage the slow deterioration of an idol in a museum store. I explore the three-way relationship between the physical space (temple and museum), the idol, and the individual (worshipper and museum visitor) through my artworks and their exhibition. I simultaneously reveal the gradual erosion of the deity as a result of these ritualistic interactions.

This research explores the use of multiple senses in experiencing the artworks in their exhibition space, and offers a fresh way of interpreting the Hindu idol. Methods employed in making the work, the ritualistic actions of the audience, and the resulting changes occurring in the artworks, critically address conservation and interpretation of the museum artefact. This research reveals the potential of artistic intervention in museums that explores ways in which generating performance in the audience can open up new ways of constructing meaning and creating narratives for the manifestation of non-material ideologies.

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Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Megha Rajguru

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Research Aims, Methods and Contextual Review

I. Introduction

In this practice-based research I am examining the shift in the meanings of Hindu deities, when they are removed from their original temple setting and acquired by museums to form part of their collections. I am studying their status as sacred and living beings in their religious context, through an exploration of their life from creation and worship, until they decompose. New meanings, generated as an effect of de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation, result in interventions in their natural cycle and extensions of their material life through conservation in the museum. Through the four artworks and their exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth***, I am comparing and presenting tensions between the deities' contrasting status in the two realms: religious and secular. As an artist, I am offering a fresh way of exploring the meanings of Hindu idols. It is the human interaction with the deities: worshipped on one hand and collected for display on the other, in two distinct spaces, that make apparent their contrasting meanings.

I have conceptualised, developed and made four artworks in this research, which disseminate the shift in the meanings of deities, through their exhibition in the museum setting for the museum visitor. My artworks embody my research. They are:

1. Installation ***Kinetic Shiva***;
2. Video ***Ganesh, circa 1900***;
3. Video ***Gods in Storage***;
4. Sculpture ***Tactile Ganesh***.

Their exhibition generates specific human behaviour, which contains ritualistic tendencies. Hence, the interaction between the artworks, the exhibition space and the visitors is an exploratory method, through which the research aims are

tested and the study is disseminated.

This research takes a new approach in examining conservation and its link with ritual: both responding to the material world and reflecting the perception of the nature of time, at the centre of which is the Hindu deity. I am examining the death (natural deterioration) of images that are treated as alive within their temples in the work. Through a material exploration of the religious image, I have attempted to reach the philosophical core of the religion, which is not only apparent in the treatment of the deities, but in people's day-to-day lives, and especially in their rites (such as at birth and death) and rituals. The world itself is perceived as something that contains individual life cycles, which includes all living and non-living matter. Hence, over a period of time all will decompose and renew itself in any form. This concept is imbued in the making of the artworks and in their exhibition. Through rituals, performed by museum visitors in the exhibition, by me in making of artworks (such as *Ganesh* immersion¹) and the resulting changes occurring in the artworks, the shift in the meaning of the deity between religious and secular contexts, is examined and presented. A representation of the non-material aspects of the deity through interaction with the materiality of the artworks in the exhibition space is at the heart of the research.

From Shrine to Plinth, in its investigation of the changing reception of the Hindu deity from its earlier position in the shrine to its subsequently acquired position on the metaphoric plinth, examines the various changes in its identity from being a god, a monstrous 'idol', becoming art and a cultural symbol. Both locations, the shrine and the plinth, strongly suggest projected sentiments of veneration and admiration. The deity's enshrinement in the temple makes it a part of the temple entity and a worshipping tradition whereas its installation on the plinth 'apotheosises'² its endowment with the ultimate position as an object worthy of display to be viewed. It is without hesitation that I have referred to Hindu gods and goddesses as 'idols' in this research, despite the negative connotations of the term during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries amongst collectors

¹ See Chapter 4.

² Museum studies expert Susan Pearce has pointed out that when an (everyday) object enters a collection, it receives its 'collection apotheosis'. Its original function in society provides it with a classificatory identity in the museum and a new name. See Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections* (London: Leicester University Press, 1992), p. 128.

in the United Kingdom³. Idols were associated with idolatory which, from a Christian perspective, was considered primitive. Their new identity as sculptural art redeemed them from their status as mere idols in the twentieth century. This research however, reframes the Hindu deity as the worshipped god and as an idol with transcendental functions in order to test its contrasting status as art and a visual cultural symbol in the museum.

When referring to deities, temples, worshippers, museums and museum visitors, in a generic way, I refer to their collective typical characteristics. Hindu deities encompass gods and goddesses, their various *avatars* or incarnations worshipped by different cults in the Indian sub-continent, tutelary and subordinate gods. Similarly, temple architecture varies from region to region. These range from small makeshift roadside temples to large buildings with apparent complex layouts and highly ornate exteriors. However, the metaphysics of consecrated sacred spaces as homes of the divinities, has remained constant through history and throughout the nation. Whilst the range of museum visitors and public museums across the United Kingdom, are varied, the typical museum visitor is one who brings with him or her, an expectation into the museum space: to view, enjoy and learn from an exhibition. In this thesis, I generically refer to regular visitors to museums when testing object reception and the construction of meaning. When analysing a particular learning process, I focus on specific age groups. Public museums, which contain displays of Hindu deities in the United Kingdom, encompass the archaeological museum, such as the British Museum; the decorative art museum, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum; the religious museum, St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art; the social history museum, such as the Museum of Croydon; and the ethnographic museum, such as the Horniman Museum. Despite their individual characteristics and their specific functions (which will be examined in this chapter), these museums play the role of displaying and safeguarding cultural artefacts for public edification. Hence, when referring to museums generically, I will refer to such roles and their collective identity in society since their establishment in the seventeenth century⁴ in the United

³ See Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 160–163. Also see Anna Somers Cocks, *The Victoria and Albert Museum, the Making of the Collection* (Leicester: Windward, 1980), p. 118. Art historian Partha Mitter has discussed western attitudes towards Hindu gods due to their appearance and idolatory. See Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977).

⁴ The first public museum in the United Kingdom was the Ashmolean Museum. Established in 1683 in Oxford, it is known to be the oldest museum in the world. See J.C Harle and Andrew Toppfield, *Indian Art in the Ashmolean Museum* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum Publications, 1987), p. ix.

Kingdom until contemporary times.

In this chapter I will introduce the research framework, its aims, and methodologies. I will discuss the methods I have employed, and will establish the context of my multi-disciplinary research.

2. The Catalytic Role of my Artworks and their Exhibition

As an artist engaging with the discursive museum space and appropriating it to present parallel interpretations of permanent collections of Hindu deities, my role is that of an interventionist. I am examining the ways in which art can critique museum practices. By exhibiting the artworks in the museum, I have returned the debate to the museum space.

I used the museum as a functional site in the 2008 exhibition *From Shrine to Plinth* at the Croydon Clocktower rather than as a literal space, the latter being an actual location or a singular place⁵. James Meyer refers to artist Joseph Kosuth's definition of a literal site as a unique place and one in which the work's formal outcome is determined by its physical constraints. Miwon Kwon describes the functional site as the shift from the practice of immovable site-specific work towards the use of the site within a discursive realm in the history of site-specific art.

...the site is now structured (inter)textually rather than spatially, and its model is not a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of events and actions *through* spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist. ...This transformation of the site textualizes spaces and spatializes discourses.⁶

The four artworks in this research are visualised and produced for exhibition within the physical and/or conceptual contexts of the deity's display as a museum artefact, not specifically for a provincial social history museum such as the Croydon Museum. The curatorial mechanism, assembly and juxtaposition in the museum gallery or any other potential exhibition space such as an art

⁵ James Meyer, "The Functional Site," *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erica Suderberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p 24.

⁶ Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MAS: The MIT Press, 2004), p. 29.

gallery are determined by their spatial configuration, institutional functions, and characteristics. The interpretive frameworks required for the artworks to communicate this dialectical study are also determined by the nature of the site. For instance, showed within the University of Brighton's gallery setting in 2008, **Ganesh, circa 1900** was exhibited in conjunction with study video **Fragile Object Behind**, and was supported by a statement outlining the research. Hence, the use of appropriate labelling, visual and textual supporting material provided the artwork with its context within the university's research environment. The interpretive method employed has been described by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett as the 'In-Context' method which "entails particular techniques of arrangement and explanation to convey ideas" ⁷. In this thesis I am discussing a curatorial approach which connects and in turn creates a dialogue between the exhibition **From Shrine to Plinth** with the Croydon Clocktower's displayed Hindu shrine. The dissemination of the research occurred in this location, making it an idiographic ⁸ study. The choice of Croydon Clocktower as a suitable venue stemmed from its albeit small, unique collection of personal worshipped deities and accoutrements. Furthermore, I was invited to exhibit my work in the space, specifically due to its interactive nature, as it met the Croydon Clocktower's remit of engaging with the public through art. This was a welcome opportunity to install the exhibition and test my ideas. Future collaborations with other types of museums and art spaces would pose different curatorial, interpretive and collaborative challenges.

Each artwork made in this research functions independently, however, when exhibited in conjunction with each other, they gradually reveal the deity's dialectical meanings. The perception of the cyclical nature of time in the temple as depicted in **Ganesh, circa 1900** is visually contrasted against the slow deterioration of deity in the museum storage alongside other objects. The ritual behaviour generated through **Kinetic Shiva** further highlights the purpose of touching artwork **Tactile Ganesh**. These actions enveloped by the meditative sound of *Om*, emanating from **Ganesh, circa 1900**, create a distinct

⁷ The author refers to ways of exhibiting ethnographic objects in museums. However, they are valid and applicable in the context of this research. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Objects of Ethnography," *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), p. 390.

⁸ I use the term 'idiographic' to describe my methodology of examining the research outcomes through the exhibition at the Croydon Clocktower. The exhibition is an individual case and the outcomes of the research are particular to the case. The research outcomes can, in principle, be applied to other locations. I have borrowed the term from Carole Gray and Julian Malins. See Carole Gray, and Julian Malins, *Visualizing Research: A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design*. (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), p. 73.

environment in which the life and death of deities are explored and experienced.

By exhibiting the artworks in the museum environment in 2008, I positioned my research within the context of the proposition ideologically as well as physically, and generated the dialectics of the deity's meanings to be experienced at first hand. I refer to my methodology as dialectical; in Marxist terms, it is a relation of opposites, a conflict or a tension between two things ⁹. The examination of the contradictions in the religious (temple) and secular (museum) meanings of the deities in the exhibition, created a third setting: a hybrid space that revealed the fragmented identity of the deity.

Moreover, the institutional museum framework and the meanings created through the display of the deity provided evidence of the archived and conserved status of the artefact for the artworks and their reception. Croydon Clocktower's collection of Hindu religious images and objects interprets a worshipper's ritual practice and the items are associated with being personal to an individual belonging to the local community. However, their display conforms to the "normative exhibition convention serving an ideological function" as described by Kwon:

The modern gallery/museum space, for instance, with its stark walls, artificial lighting (no windows), controlled climate, and pristine architectonics, was perceived not solely in terms of basic dimensions and proportion but as an institutional disguise. ¹⁰

Through a critical engagement with issues of the display and conservation of Hindu deities in the museum, my artworks are located conceptually between the temple and museum sites. Hence, the methodologies employed in the stages of visualising, producing the artworks, and exhibiting them, reveal processes of critically engaging with the semiotics of the deity in its secular and religious environments and with a diachronic study of critical museum theory ¹¹. In keeping the deity at centre stage in the study, I depict it as the subject of fragmented identity (ethnographic, art, or cultural icon) and as evidential of its display in the museum for visual consumption. The dialogue between the display conventions and the multi-sensory artworks contains the change in

⁹ See Richard Norman, and Sean Sayers, *Hegel, Marx and Dialectic. A Debate*. (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980).

¹⁰ Kwon, p. 13.

¹¹ I have studied the development of critical museum theory over time: from the museum as a hegemonic institution that perpetuates class and value, to its pedagogical role.

the deity's meanings when it is removed from its shrine and displayed in the museum. Moreover, the role of the artworks is to generate the dialectics and to commence a dialogue between the artefact in the vitrine and the deity in the shrine. They fulfil a non-verbal or poetic method of illuminating original meanings of the deity and exposing their material realities.

One of the key roles of my practice is to appropriate an already existing space to create a new and/or different context. For instance, the reconstruction of a temple sanctum in ***Kinetic Shiva*** at the Croydon Clocktower reframed the deity's identity as a museum artefact to characterise it as a temple god and a living entity. The artworks challenge the depiction of the deity as a preserved ethnographic or art object in the museum and the object as well as the space are re-contextualised. This is done through its de-apotheosis from the metaphoric plinth and enlivening the form itself. Through the sounds of *Om* and the generating of tactile interactions, temple meanings and experiences are brought into the secular space. Furthermore, the space becomes liminal wherein temple rituals encounter museum rituals ¹², secular ideologies co-exist with religious ones, the site itself becomes an installation ¹³ and *the space becomes a practiced place* ¹⁴. Hence, the space is appropriated by me through installing the artworks and further practised and experienced by the visitors.

This inter-disciplinary research draws upon relevant concepts and theories from museology, religious studies, art history, and ethnography in its exploration of the meanings of the deity. The prime concern with the contemporary identity of the artefact in the museum which has been influenced by developments in museology (particularly curation and conservation) in relation with its ongoing life in its temple context is made explicit in the processes of developing, making and exhibiting the artworks. The methodology of critically addressing existing scholarship that has shaped the ways in which Hindu religious objects are displayed and interpreted in museums, as well as examining their ontology through making work, opens up the opportunity for me to explore the material as well as the non-material aspects of the deity. I position myself as a museum

¹² See chapters 2 and 3 for a discussion of temple and museum rituals.

¹³ Erica Suderberg describes installation as a form of art "that takes note of the perimeters and of that space and reconfigures it". See Erica Suderberg, *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 4.

¹⁴ Paraphrased from Michel de Certeau's "The Practice of Everyday Life". The space has been defined as one which occurs as a result of operations that situate it, actualise it, temporalize it and does not have the univocal meanings of a place. Erica Suderberg has borrowed the phrase from the social scientist and applied it to site specific and installation art practices.

visitor questioning the didactic role of the institution in constructing object meanings, and offer a parallel interpretation of the artefact to the audience. Text-based research could question the interpretation of deities, but not reach the museum audience. My art practice, which is a spatial practice, allows for a dialogue with the museum visitor. I have generated an alternative way of experiencing the idol in the secular space through active interaction and with the employment of multiple senses. I remove the distance between the viewer and the viewed, and generate an experiential method of constructing meaning. This method of receiving the work in its exhibition space integrates the content of the dialectical study (the treatment of the deity in the two contexts) and is the outcome of work. It challenges the museum's role of engendering visual scrutiny – an approach that was manifested through making and installing the work.

3. Research Aims

From Shrine to Plinth is a study of the dialectics of the Hindu deity in its two contexts through the materialisation of the prime conflicting phenomenon investigated in this research: *the precedence given to conservation of the material object in the museum and its absence in the temple*. Preservation of the divinity through access is more important than the physical existence of the particular worshipped entity in the temple. The physical presence of the deity is vital; however its ultimate erosion and decomposition through worship is accepted as a reality.

This contrasting ideology results from two distinctly different perceptions towards the concept of time. In the west it is linear, whereas in the Indian culture, specifically within Hinduism, it is cyclical ¹⁵. Hence, if the deity in the museum experiences one lifetime, in the temple it will ultimately mix with the earth and the divinity, which survives, will enter a new form. The museum arrests time, whereas in the temple it is in a constant state of flux.

In this research I have aimed to embody this key difference in the artworks through the processes employed in creating them and to make it apparent through their exhibition. I aim to:

¹⁵ Susan Pearce has referred to the idea of linear time in the Judaeo-Christian tradition as a cause for historic development and chronological study of material as opposed to the cyclic nature of time in other cultures. See Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections*, p. 3.

1. Examine the deity's fragmented identities developed as a result of its transference into the secular realm and rediscover its temple status as a living being through the artworks;
2. Analyse the human treatment of the deity in the two contexts: secular and religious, influenced by their attitudes towards conservation;
3. Present the dialectical arguments embedded within my four artworks in a museum containing a display of Hindu idols;
4. Explore the potential of a multi-sensory setting in generating an experiential method of constructing meaning;
5. Generate conscious ritualistic responses amongst visitors towards the artworks in their exhibition space that contain religious and secular behaviour;
6. Reiterate artistic intervention as an important means of opening up new discourses within the museum.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Methodological Assumptions

The research commenced with the hypothesis that it is the difference in perception of time within the two physical contexts of the deity, compared in this research, which has impacted on its contrasting treatment by two sets of people: the temple communities on the one hand and museum personnel on the other. This was followed by a series of assumptions, which led the research methodology and dictated the research methods. That:

1. The idol is treated as a vital tool for worship or as a vehicle to reach the divinity it represents. The abstract is sought through a tangible form. Often, the form itself is ephemeral (such as deities created for immersion, sand drawings, *yantras* or cosmic diagrams) which is a paradoxical practice;
2. In the museum, it is the historic, aesthetic or symbolic value of the deity, and hence its materiality, which is of prime importance. It is a sign of its culture and an embodiment of knowledge, which makes its physical

presence vital for museums;

3. The temple is a multi-sensory space whereas the museum is primarily visual. Human behaviour in each space is a result of their pre-disposition to experience and respond to the deity in the distinctive settings;
4. Both the temple and museum enshrine objects. Tutelary and sub-ordinate deities in temples are considered to be sacred. Their divinity is preserved in their form through constant ritual activity. Within material culture, these are elevated in status from being commodities into becoming art or cultural icons.

My response towards the first two assumptions at the early stages of the research resulted in the conceptual development of my first video artwork ***Ganesh, circa 1900***. Through a prior and regular witnessing of the Ganesh Festival celebrated in the state of Maharashtra in India, I had a first-hand experience of observing the annual immersion of *Ganesh* in natural bodies of water. This practice is a celebration of the hereafter and a new life. By employing the ethnographer's eye, as it were, I ascertained the ritual as being an enactment of the concept at the centre of which was the worshipped deity itself. Hence the tangible form is simultaneously vital and ephemeral. The museum vitrine contains visual narratives, carefully arranged and presented by the curator. The narrative would be incomplete without the physical presence of the object. Hence, the juxtaposition of the conscious act of decomposing the image of a god, the protective vitrine containing and simultaneously presenting constructivist meanings, cyclical and linear time, provided the basis for the first artwork. The third and fourth research assumptions developed after the completion of ***Ganesh, circa 1900***.

Human behaviours such as performing a ritual, viewing the image with a devotional gaze, protecting the object from touch in the museum and viewing it for the acquisition of knowledge with a curious eye are in themselves actions that arise from the person or people's perception of the object, through their physical and mental presence in the religious or secular space. It is the predisposition of the individual that causes a particular sentiment to be generated towards the deity, which not only constructs the context, but is also, in turn, developed by their mutual contextual association. I am testing the responses of visitors towards

the image of *Shiva* in the ***Kinetic Shiva*** installation by providing cues for performance of rituals.

The purposeful behaviour of the worshipper towards the deity in the temple is a means to keep the potent divine energy, believed to be existent in the image, alive and constant. The enshrinement of the idol in the museum, however, is a means to preserve its physical existence. The material and spiritual paradoxes in this research surfaced through the process of developing the methodological assumptions.

4.2. Research Methods

This research is a comparative study of various viewpoints and practices surrounding the Hindu deity. The first mode of gathering material and evidence for studying the propositions was empirical. I photographed a range of objects in museums that had suffered damage and were either displayed in their condition or restored. I was recording methods of display, use of vitrines, plinths, evidence of numbering, classification, and labelling.



Figure 1.1.

Elephant with lion, Sandstone, Western Deccan, India, circa 5-6th century. From the Kailasa Temple, Ellora. V&A (photo: author)

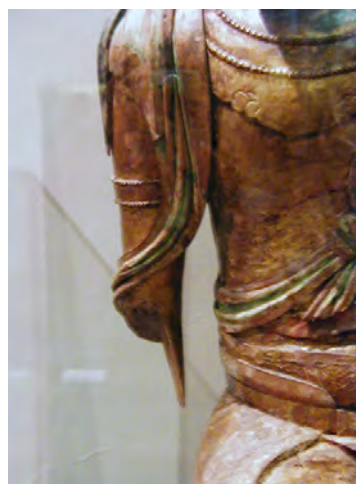


Figure 1.2.

Bodhisattva Guanyin, China, 115-1234, Wood. V&A (photo: author)



Figure I.3.
One of the pair of stucco divinities, China, 6–7th Century AD. British Museum (photo: author)



Figure I.4.
Dipankara Jataka, Gandhara period, 2nd–3rd Century AD. Narrative Buddhist panel, India. British Museum (photo: author)



Figure I.5.
A red dot, marks the coin removed for conservation, British Museum (photo: author)



Figure I.6.
Shiva Nataraja and its accession number St. Mungo Museum of Religious Art and Life (photo: author)

I photographed displays of Hindu gods and goddesses at the Hotung Gallery of World Art, British Museum, the early collections gallery at the Ashmolean Museum, which contains the earliest examples of collected and displayed Hindu deities, the South-East Asian Gallery at the V&A, the James Green Gallery, Brighton and Hove Museum, and the Centenary Gallery at the Horniman Museum. My aim was to observe Hindu deities arranged in the museum space juxtaposed with other objects, often displayed in transit areas of the museum, outside the main galleries



Figure 1.7.

Spotlighted displays, Ashmolean Museum. On the right are: bronze Parvati, a Gandhara Buddha and a temple frieze (photo: author)



Figure 1.8.

Varaha Avatar of Vishnu, 8th century AD, British Museum (photo: author)

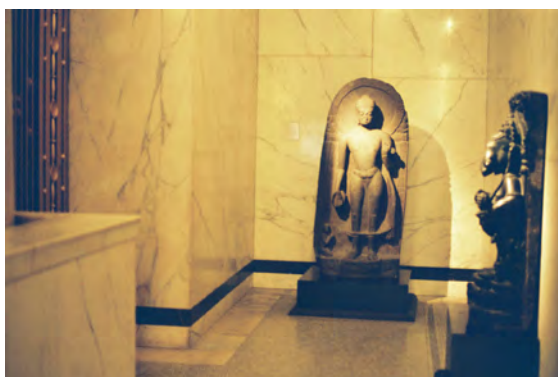


Figure 1.9.

Ganesh, Orissa, eastern India. Ashmolean Museum. Oxford. (photo: author)

Figure 1.10.

Hanuman and Ganesh displayed beside the lift, Level one, British Museum (photo: author)



I recorded through photographing, collecting images and filming in the museum and temple spaces the regular movement of people occurring within them. While filming displays in the museum space, I encountered and recorded activities such as the museum staff protecting displays with plastic sheets prior to an event in the South-East Asia gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum ¹⁶. These functioned as visual evidences of human-object interaction, and ultimately as signs of ‘belief’ within both contexts: the religious and the secular.

As a researching artist, several of my museum encounters were akin to those of museum visitors, as my early aim was to position myself at the receiving end of the knowledge dispensed by the museum. I participated in an object handling session at the British Museum in 2005, but at a later date in 2008 I observed a religious object handling session conducted by a gallery educator at the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow. Through the latter activity, I positioned myself as a critical objective onlooker. The aims of this involvement were to observe the motivation of museum visitors to touch objects with religious associations in the museum of religion and their responses (subjective or objective) in the workshop. It was also an opportunity to discuss with educator Kirsty Hood, the aims of the workshop, her experience of working with visitors in the museum gallery and her personal interest in engaging the audience in discussions through handling objects. Kirsty Hood has planned and conducted similar workshops on a regular basis for several years. Purely from a practitioner’s position, rather than that of a pedagogic researcher ¹⁷, her views and experience provide an insight into the applications of gallery learning methods and are reflective of the St. Mungo Museum’s educational aims ¹⁸. Whilst most museums in the UK offer hands-on object opportunities, the St. Mungo Museum’s handling workshops are focussed on religious objects making it a valuable case study in this research.

An important method of examining the interpretation of idols and the role of the museum in framing deity significations, was through recording text and

16 See studies on DVD: “Fragile God Behind” and “Gods in the Museum” in Appendix III.

17 Such as Eileen Hooper-Greenhill and Theano Moussouri, *Researching Learning in Museums and Galleries 1990-1999*, 2001, Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester. 26 March 2008 < <https://ira.le.ac.uk/handle/2381/19> > Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992). Also see: George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998).

18 This case study, discussed in Chapter 6, has been crucial in testing my sculpture **Tactile Ganesh** in its exhibition space, the museum gallery.

sound: photographing, note-taking, recording audio guides, saving electronic interpretations and studying larger semiotic structures of the museum, such as the art gallery, the life gallery, the ethnographic gallery. Liturgical meanings of deities were researched through art documentaries, such as *Vastu Marabu*¹⁹, which focussed on the intent of the image-maker, the rules of creating images for worship and the cosmic representation through iconography of the deity within the temple. An important source of lived experiences was the 'Hindu Women's Group' in Brighton, who at interviews not only described their worshipping practices and their beliefs, but also their thoughts on working with the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery²⁰. The Hindu Women's group in Brighton is an important example of the ethnographic 'other' (from a museological perspective), invited by the museum to carry out a religious ritual in the secular museum gallery. They are also, from a cultural perspective, a social group in the UK that has installed shrines in their homes and are devotees of gods and goddesses. They are not unique in their belief and practices, but a part of the global worshipping Hindu community. From a museological standpoint, they are representative and hence, symbolic of their context; their status becoming similar to that of ethnographic objects²¹. I interviewed members of the group and recorded their experience of collaborating with the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery²².

A personal interview with the curator of the James Green World Gallery at the Brighton and Hove Museum and Art Gallery, Harriet Hughes, took place in museum storage in the basement of the building²³. The interview focussed on the problems of storage, the methods of classification and cataloguing that assisted the staff in locating objects in the store, and the methods used to preserve objects in storage. This provided information and evidence on museum storage issues, which have been a subject of debate amongst museum professionals. Museums Association Journal articles²⁴, books on museum studies provided most

19 Bala Kailasam, "Vastu Marabu" (DER India, 1992). For a short introduction to 'Vastu Marabu', watch preview on 'YouTube'. 23 March 2009 < <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGn3HvGxR5g> >

20 Interviews with members of the Hindu Women's group were conducted on two occasions, in a temple and in a member's home. Rama Patel's mother-in-law, who is a member of the Elderly Women's Group, and her daughter engaged in the interview and offered their beliefs and opinions. The location of the interview was important, as in the domestic space the discussions were subjective, passionate and the rituals practised were described in greater detail. Rama Patel, and Sunila Chotai, Personal Interview, 21 Dec. 2007

Rama Patel, and Sunila Chotai, Personal Interview, 28 Dec. 2007

21 For a critical study of the exhibition of humans see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Objects of Ethnography," pp. 397-434.

22 See Chapter 2. pp 106-8

23 Harriet Hughes, Personal Interview, 24 October 2007. The discussion led to the development of my video artwork *Gods in Storage*. Refer to Chapter 5.

24 See Ratan Vaswani, "Risky Business," *Museums Journal* 101.3 (2001); Karen Knight, "The

up-to-date debates and discussions on conservation and access issues²⁵. I also researched other world cultures whose representation in museums, through their religious objects, had strong implications on the conservator's approaches towards such objects. People of the First Nations, mainly from British Columbia in Canada, were consulted on conservation matters by conservator Miriam Clavir²⁶. She carried out research on two perspectives: the museum conservator's and those of individuals representing the First Nations. A comparative study of attitudes towards conservation between the Hindu culture and other world cultures offers insights into the similarity of perception towards religious objects and their treatment by their people in this research. Members of the First Nations hold a strong belief in preserving the spiritual integrity of the object as opposed to its physical integrity. Items used within rituals have to be returned to nature as it is believed they should be allowed to complete their natural life cycle²⁷.

This research encompasses the study of the Hindu deity, the image-maker's creative intent, worshipping practices surrounding it, the deity's material culture meanings, its display, interpretation and reception. The texts referred to include seminal works by Ananda Coomaraswamy²⁸, E.B Havell²⁹ and Richard Davis³⁰, on the one hand, Susan Pearce³¹, Chris Arthur³² and Carol Duncan³³ on the other. Art historians Coomaraswamy and Havell took the lead in defining Hindu idols

Meaning of Museums," *Museums Journal* 103. 3 (2003); Simon Cane, "The Case for Conservation," *Museums Journal* 107.4 (2007). Also see V&A Conservation Journal articles: Jonathan Ashley-Smith, "Evaluating the Risk of Rare Events", *V&A Conservation Journal* 54 (2006) 28 Sept. 2007 < http://www.vam.ac.uk/res_cons/conservation/journal/number_54/rare_events/index.html >;

Jonathan Ashley-Smith, "Twenty-First Century Conservation," *V&A Conservation Journal*, 34. (2000). See also: Fiona Candlin, "Don't Touch! Hands Off! Art, Blindness and the Conservation of Expertise." 1 (2004) 25 April 2008 < <http://bod.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/10/1/71> >

25 Carole Milner, "Who Cares? Conservation in a Contemporary Context," *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift.*, ed. Gail Anderson (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1999); Jonathan Ashley-Smith, "The Ethics of Conservation," *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1982); and Paul. C Thistle, "Visible Storage for the Small Museum," *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1994).

26 Miriam Clavir, *Preserving What Is Valued: Museums, Conservation, and First Nations* (Vancouver: UBC Museum of Anthropology, 1997).

27 Clavir, p. 78.

28 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Introduction to the Art of Eastern Asia," *Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey, vol. I. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

29 E.B Havell, *The Ideals of Indian Art*, 1st ed. (London: J. Murray, 1911).

30 Richard Davis, *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe: Worshipping Shiva in Medieval India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) and Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*.

31 Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections*.

32 Chris Arthur, "Exhibiting the Sacred," *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion* ed. Crispin Paine (London: Leicester University Press, 2000).

33 Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Ritual: Inside Public Art Museums*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1995) and Carol Duncan, and Allan Wallach. "The Universal Survey Museum." *Art History*. 3 (1980) pp. 448-69.

as fine art in the early twentieth century. Not only did this establish the art historical discipline and approach to studying Hindu deities, their work has been referenced widely as important sources in the study of Hindu religious images. They illuminated the spiritual characteristics of deities to a western audience that previously perceived them as monstrosities. Richard Davis extends this spiritual quality further and describes Hindu deities as living beings within their temple context.

Susan Pearce's book *Museums, Objects and Collections* has been an important source in the study of epistemology of museums. It has provided an insight into the historic development of the practices of collection, classification and display of objects for the public. Whilst Chris Arthur, in his essay "Exhibiting the Sacred", critically poses a series of questions on the interpretation of religious beliefs through tangible objects, he identifies the problems of interpreting numinous aspects of religion in museums. Carol Duncan on the other hand, proposes the museum as a ritual space. She compares museums with temples and examines how rituals define and develop museum meanings. These comparisons inevitably lead me into questioning the established distinguishing of the secular and religious realms since the Enlightenment ³⁴.

The research methods used are dictated by the comparative nature of this study. They are visual, involve personal interviews with individuals from the two realms, the temple and the museum, employ a case-study approach, and involve the study of existing scholarship for an understanding of the epistemological associations of beliefs and practices. Within a historical context, this research examines the Enlightenment in Europe, which marked the advent of scientific methodologies in studying the world and created the division between the religious and the secular and analyses its impact on current museum practices.

4.3. Research Methodology

An important aspect within this research, which has been a cause and the starting point for the comparative study is my first hand experience of ritualistic temple practices ³⁵ and an understanding of the deep-rooted philosophic beliefs that are

³⁴ See Chapter 2.

³⁵ Visiting and watching rituals ranging from simple (such as bowing to the image of the deity, circumambulation around the shrine) to the elaborate (such as *havans*, fire rituals invoking the divine energy) being performed in temples in central India, mainly in the state of Maharashtra, have provided me an insight into such practices and form a basis for further study carried out in this research.

projected through such acts. Focus on images of gods for worship, the physical worshipping interactions between the deity and human that occur in the temple spaces are simultaneously hands-on and transcendental. Hence, if the museum's role is to exhibit objects which embody knowledge, the one who is viewing the displays to acquire knowledge is also transcending the physical. This ontological similarity also causes a further critical inquiry into the occurrence of the latter, which in theory is a secular act: namely, learning, and requires an analytical study of the differences in the two acts of viewing. This method of approaching the similarities and subsequently the differences is constant in the research methodology I have employed in this research. Not only is this evident within the theoretical domain, it is imbued and projected in my four artworks and in their exhibition, which is the dialectic approach I take in disseminating the research. The contrasting practices and ideologies within the two contexts, temple and museum, are:

1. The deity as a living being – the deity as an inanimate object;
2. Conservation of the abstract divinity – conservation of tangible form;
3. The deity within a multi-sensory environment – the deity in the ocular-centric arena;
4. Religious rituals performed by devotees – secular rituals performed by museum visitors;
5. Belief in the cyclical nature of time – linear perception of time.

The photographic evidences of deterioration and conservation of deities on display in the museum (as outlined earlier) were starting points for further research into the rules followed by temple communities in the preservation of deities. Whilst the signs of use, and the 'age value'³⁶ of objects, provide greater meaning of the object in the museum, the need for a complete image is essential in worship. *Vedic* texts have outlined the methods used for the disposal of deteriorating worshipped images, which are akin to the last rites of the human body. The perception of the deity as a living being becomes strongly apparent through its treatment. I have depicted this concept by enlivening the gods through sound in my video ***Gods in Storage***³⁷. Following this critical comparison between the museum and temple response towards the ageing of the deity, I referred to the opinions of the members of the Hindu Women's Group

36 Pearce, p. 194.
37 See Chapter 5.

in Brighton, who clarified practices of immersing deteriorating gods in a natural water body. A theoretical enquiry into traditional practices and subsequent clarification within their application amongst temple communities emphasise the continuing effect of philosophic beliefs on the people.

The mode of inquiry, starting with the empirical, moved to critical, comparative, and then deductive. Similarly, my observation of tactile interactions between worshippers and the deity occurring in the temple requires a comparative study of the visitor – object interaction that occurs in the museum. These are a combination of spontaneously occurring responses and those designed by the museum staff that enable conscious interaction to take place in the gallery. Observing museum visitors handling religious objects at the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art provided a qualitative insight into what types of objects are most attractive and invite touch. Kirsty Hood, the museum educator described her experiences of working with visitors in a personal interview and explained how experiences and subjective responses played a key role in the museum visitors' interaction with objects. Her methods of analysing such responses were empirical, attained through the experience of interacting with various social groups comprising of a range of ages, races, faiths and genders.

Work by art historians specialising in Hindu religious images have a significant input in this research for an understanding of the iconography of gods and goddesses³⁸ and the semiotics of temples³⁹. Their work is primarily an observation of the manifestation of philosophies and beliefs into what they describe as art and architecture. Deities and their temples are physical realisations of the imagined cosmic energies and their worship is the worshippers' link to the cosmos. This is the theologian's perspective, such as that of Richard Davis⁴⁰, Madhu Khanna⁴¹, Ferdinand Björnstjerna⁴² and Ainslie

38 Such as: Partha Mitter, *Indian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), E.B Havell, *The Art Heritage of India* (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1964), Richard T. Blurton, *Hindu Art*, 2nd ed. (London: British Museum Press, 1994), Balraj Khanna and George Michell, *Human and Divine: 2000 Years of Indian Sculpture* (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2000), and Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997).

39 Refer to the Hindu temple architecture manual: Kapila Vatsayan, ed., *Mayamatam*, vol. I. (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1994). Also see: George Michell, *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to Its Meaning and Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), Andreas Volwahren, *Living Architecture: Indian* (London: Macdonald and Co., 1969).

40 Davis, *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe: Worshipping Shiva in Medieval India*

41 Madhu Khanna, *Yantra, the Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1979).

42 Magnus Fredrik Ferdinand Björnstjerna, *The Theogony of the Hindoos: With Their Systems of Philosophy and Cosmogony* (London: J. Murray, 1844).

Embree ⁴³, which will be examined further in this chapter.

Hence, through a critical and inter-subjective study, similarities, differences and paradoxes in the physical and spiritual realities of the deities have emerged which I have explored through the artworks. These presented a dialectical discourse in the exhibition space.

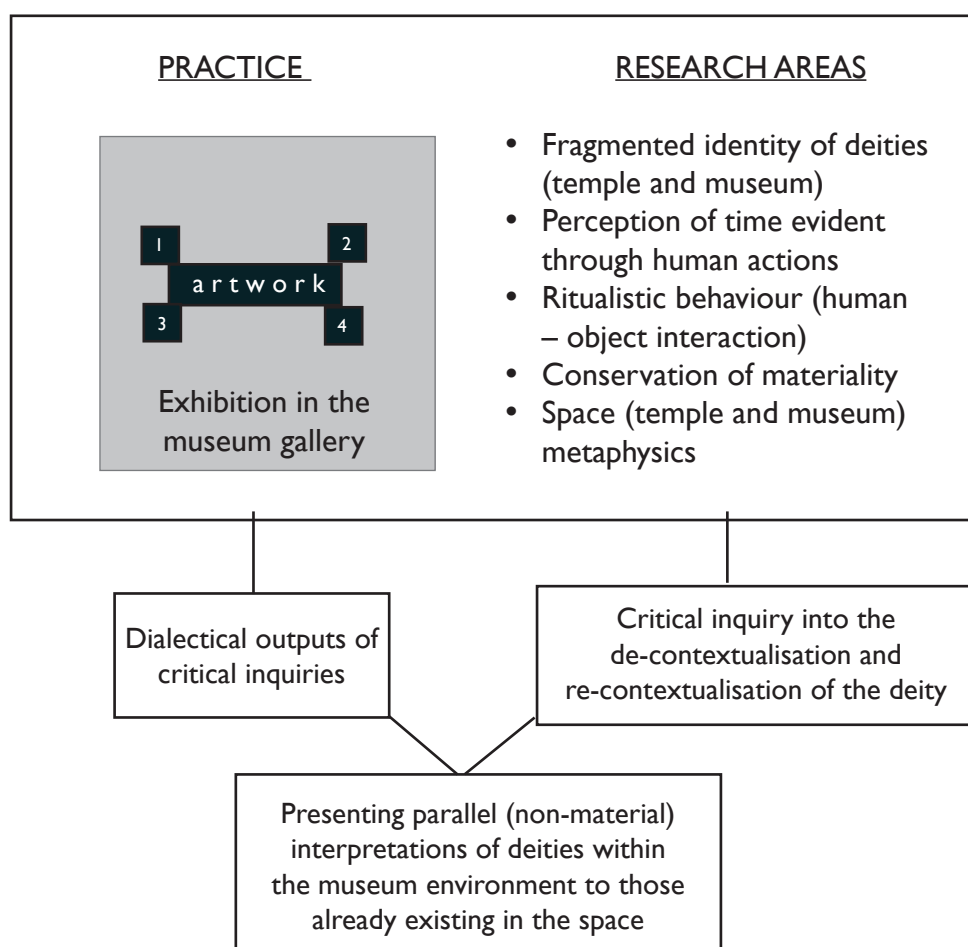
5. Contextual Review

This section of the chapter will identify the context of this research through a combination of a critical review of the existing literature within museum studies, Hindu theology, anthropology and art history, a study of relevant doctoral research, and the examination of public museum intervention art projects. I will examine the meanings of deities and their relationships with worshippers by comparing texts from liturgical, ethnographic, art historical and museological perspectives. I will provide a critical review of relevant doctoral research in the realm of museum intervention or museum site-specific art and will also examine recent collaborations between museums and artists in order to locate this practice-based research.

Below is a diagrammatic representation of this practice-based research, which contains multi-disciplinary critical inquiries. The artworks and their exhibition not only anchor the research, they embody it.

43 Ainslie T. Embree, ed., *The Hindu Tradition* (London: Random House, Inc., 1996).

Figure 1.11. The shape of my research



5.1. Literature Review

I will commence the contextual review with an analysis of the established literary work in the research areas that have been outlined in Figure 1.11.

Religious Studies expert Richard Davis has taken the view that Hindu religious images are “animate beings” and has organised their biographies to narrate the nature of their lives ⁴⁴. It is an anthropomorphic perspective, but is effective in his analysis of the ways in which priests and worshippers enliven the images and their subsequent re-location into new environments as valuable commodities and as art. He introduces his premise in the following way:

⁴⁴ In a review, oriental studies expert Edwin Gerow points out that Davis’s interest in the religious image lies within its religious and social context. The image is a “major player in a complex game where symbolism becomes ‘life.’” See Edwin Gerow, “Lives of Indian Images: Review [Untitled]”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1 (2001) 29 March 2009 < <http://jstor.org/stable/606782> >.

For many centuries, most Hindus have taken it for granted that the religious images they place in temples and home shrines for purposes of worship are alive. They believe these physical objects, visually or symbolically representing particular deities, come to be infused with the presence or life or power of those deities...

...Priests and devotees then maintain the enlivened image as a divine person through ongoing liturgical activity; they must awaken it in the morning, bathe it, dress it, feed it, entertain it, praise it, and eventually put it to bed at night...⁴⁵

Accounts of devotee interactions with deities have been provided by writers from anthropological backgrounds, and these reflect painstaking methods employed to achieve closeness with the gods ⁴⁶. Furthermore, Hindu devotional poetry is laden with sentiments that directly address gods as living beings. Manikkavachakar, a poet, *Shiva* devotee and prime minister to a Pandya King in the eighth century in south India wrote a song, which is sung to awaken *Shiva* at dawn to this day. The first verse addresses *Shiva* thus:

Hail! Being, Source to me of all life's joys! 'Tis dawn;
upon Thy flower-like feet twin wreaths of blooms we lay,
And worship, 'neath the beauteous smile of grace benign
that from Thy sacred face beams on us. Shiva-Lord,
Who dwell'st in Perun-turrai girt with cool rice fields,
where 'mid the fertile soil th' expanding lotus blooms!
Thou on Whose lifted banner is the Bull! Master!
Our mighty Lord! FROM OFF THY COUCH IN GRACE ARISE! ⁴⁷

Darshan, the philosophy and act of a reciprocal gaze towards the deity, is also a signifier of the status of the gods as living beings within Hinduism ⁴⁸. Art historian Vidya Dehejia's account of *darshan* comes closest to invoking life in the deity. She writes:

The deity, in presenting itself for *darshan*, bestows blessings upon worshippers who, by their act of seeing, have made themselves receptive to the transfer of grace. ⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* pp. 6-7. This work was awarded the A.K. Coomaraswamy Prize for the 'Best English work in South-Asian Studies' in 2001.

⁴⁶ C.J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) pp. 57-72, Rolf Killius, *Ritual Music and Hindu Rituals of Kerala* (New Delhi: B.R. Rhythms, 2006). Also see Stephen P. Huyler, *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

⁴⁷ Translated from Sanskrit by G.U. Pope, quoted in Embree, ed. pp. 240-241.

⁴⁸ See: Diana L. Eck, *Darśan*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), Blurton, *Hindu Art*, p. 57, Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, pp. 59-61, and Huyler, *Meeting God*. Also see: Sarah Greenberg, "Living Colour," *Royal Academy of Arts Magazine* 93 (2006) p. 52. Chapter 2 will study the significance of *Darshan* in Hindu worship.

⁴⁹ Dehejia, p. 137. Vidya Dehejia was the curator of the exhibition 'Chola: Sacred Bronzes of Southern India' at the Royal Academy of Arts (11 November 2006-25 February 2007).

The idol becomes the agent in her description and the worshipper becomes the recipient of its action ⁵⁰. Another simple gesture of touching palms to one another and bowing (*namaste*) to a person or a deity, is described by anthropologist C.J. Fuller as a respectful greeting which obliterates the distinction between human and god. He comments:

...as we have seen, exactly the same gesture is made by people to deities, and by both deities and people to each other. This reflects a supremely important fact about Hinduism: unlike Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it postulates no absolute distinction between divine and human beings. ⁵¹

Moreover, he describes sculpted images of gods as anthropomorphic representations of deities ⁵². However, no known author has explicitly described Hindu deities as living beings and established this concept as a starting point in studying their lives, with the exception of Richard Davis ⁵³. His postulate of religious images as living beings extends to the *a priori* concept that they are animated within their non-religious contexts too, a phenomenon that was not foreseen by the makers of the images. Hence, in his 1997 work, he has explored the secular contexts of the deities as part of their biographies. He has adopted this biographic approach from Igor Kopytoff, who proposed that objects are social entities and their “interpretive communities” shape their biographies ⁵⁴.

Theologian Madhu Khanna, however, describes religious images such as *yantras* ⁵⁵ and deities as tools for contemplation, embodiments of cosmic forces and studies their iconographic and metaphysical significance within their worshipped context ⁵⁶. He too examines the methods in which images are infused with divine power by the devotees. His study is more philosophical than that of Davis, who discusses the influences of historical and political shifts upon meanings of religious images. Both these scholarly works have a strong input in this research and are useful sources for the study of established temple practices: the philosophic epistemology and their semiotics.

⁵⁰ Chapter 2 will discuss Bruno Latour’s theory of objects with agency, which comes closer to Dehejia’s description of the deity.

⁵¹ Fuller, p. 3.

⁵² Fuller, p. 58.

⁵³ Daud Ali had described *Lives of Indian Images* as “ground-breaking work” in his book review. See Daud Ali, “Lives of Indian Images: Review [Untitled]”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. 3 (1998), 29 March 2009 < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3107794> >.

⁵⁴ See Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁵⁵ Cosmic diagrams

⁵⁶ Khanna, *Yantra, the Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity*.

The Hindu Tradition, edited by Ainslie Embree, is an anthology of Vedic and Puranic texts, including excerpts from the *Bhagvad Gita*, *Mahabharata*, and *Ramayana*. This work is laden with philosophic meanings that underpin the Hindu *karmic* tradition and dictate worshipping practices. This work offers a theological knowledge of Hinduism through a study of Hindu religious literature. A quote from the *Gita* provides an insight into the incarnations of humans and gods ⁵⁷:

Krishna:

Manifold the renewals of my birth
Have been, Arjuna! And of thy births, too! ⁵⁸

Hence, not only do humans undergo the cycle of life and death, so do the gods. This concept gains poignancy in my video artwork ***Ganesh, circa 1900***. Hindu gods manifest themselves in different physical forms, which since the early twentieth century have been studied by art historians such as Ananda Coomaraswamy ⁵⁹, E.B Havell ⁶⁰, Partha Mitter ⁶¹, Richard Blurton ⁶², Stella Kramrisch ⁶³, Niharranjan Ray ⁶⁴ and Padma Kaimal ⁶⁵. Davis's biographical study of deities however, provides an insight into their secular contexts too, especially in their collected status during colonial times and selected repatriations during post-colonial times. The animation of the deity through conscious and regular worship is a phenomenon that has a conceptual contribution in the making of the two interactive artworks: ***Kinetic Shiva*** and ***Tactile Ganesh***. I too approach Hindu deities as living entities in this research and have studied the rituals that make them alive or are signifiers of this sentiment.

Whilst, Davis, Khanna ⁶⁶, Eck ⁶⁷ and Bjornstjerna ⁶⁸ focus on the ontological significance of objects of worship within their philosophical framework, art historian Richard T. Blurton has surveyed the evolution of Hindu art in his work,

⁵⁷ Lord *Krishna* is addressing *Arjuna* in the verse

⁵⁸ Embree, ed. p. 129.

⁵⁹ Coomaraswamy, "Introduction to the Art of Eastern Asia."

⁶⁰ Havell, *The Ideals of Indian Art*.

⁶¹ Mitter, *Indian Art*.

⁶² Blurton, *Hindu Art*; Richard T. Blurton, "Ganesh in Bloomsbury: Images of the Lord of Beginnings in the British Museum," *Ganesh: The Benevolent*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1995).

⁶³ Stella Kramrisch, *Manifestations of Shiva* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1981).

⁶⁴ Niharranjan Ray, *Idea and Image in Indian Art* (New Delhi: Munshilal Manoharlal Publishers, 1973).

⁶⁵ Padma Kaimal, "Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meaning of an Icon", *The Art Bulletin* 81.3 (1999) 4 Jan. 2008 < <http://hwwilsonweb.com> >.

⁶⁶ Also see Davis, *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe: Worshipping Shiva in Medieval India*.

⁶⁷ Eck, *Darśan*.

⁶⁸ Björnstjerna, *The Theogony of the Hindoos*.

Hindu Art, over a span of thousand years within the geographical expanse of the Indian subcontinent ⁶⁹. Blurton and other art historians such as Mitter ⁷⁰, Michell ⁷¹, Dehejia ⁷² and Ray ⁷³ have examined temple layouts and the iconography of the sculptural and carved images ⁷⁴ they bear. Blurton describes the various *avatars* of deities, their manifestation in forms, and the mythical stories associated with them, which have influenced their iconography. It is through the study of visual art that Blurton examines Hindu worshipping practices. The ethno-photographer Stephen Huyler, however, stays within temple communities to study daily worshipping practices ⁷⁵, observing the diversity of rituals in various regions of India and recording different phases of worship practised through the day in his photographs. He states his desire to be as objective as an ethnographer in his field study in the book *Meeting God: Elements of Indian Devotion*, but continues to express his feelings during a ritual that took place in eastern India in these words:

Despite my resistance at the moment, as the fire flared brightly and the spirit of the Goddess was invoked to enter the tree and be available to the village, I actually felt her presence. I felt a change in the atmosphere: a palpable sense of power vibrating throughout the area surrounding the sacred tree.

...In that one moment I, who had come as an observer had become a participant. ⁷⁶

Hence from being the ethnographer, an observer and an outsider, he has been transformed into becoming the insider, the one who believes and experiences. Huyler's standpoint in the study of Hindu worshipping practice is unlike the objective and empirical observations practised by anthropologists ⁷⁷.

From the Enlightenment (eighteenth century) onwards, study and pursuit of knowledge has been driven and carried out by scientific intent and empirical

⁶⁹ Blurton, *Hindu Art*.

⁷⁰ Mitter, *Indian Art*.

⁷¹ Michell, *The Hindu Temple*.

⁷² Dehejia, *Indian Art*.

⁷³ Ray, *Idea and Image in Indian Art*.

⁷⁴ For Hindu iconography see: A. G. Mitchell, *Hindu Gods and Goddesses* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1982).

⁷⁵ His ethnographic approach is similar to that of C.J. Fuller's. See: Fuller, *Camphor Flame*

⁷⁶ Huyler, p. 17.

⁷⁷ Such as B.V. Shetti, "Aspects of Ganesh Worship in Maharashtra," *Ganesh: The Benevolent*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1995); A. L. Basham, *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); and Madeleine Biardeau, *Hinduism: The Anthropology of a Civilization*, trans. Richard Ince, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 1994).

methodology in Europe. The museum is a by-product of such a system, which classifies, catalogues, creates taxonomies, studies and offers insight into the world through its material signifiers. The British Museum, established in 1753, was an institution for the “scholars and the curious”⁷⁸. Kim Sloan, the curator of the Enlightenment Gallery and editor of the book *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century*, describes the transformation of the scholarly European society from darkness and superstition in the seventeenth century to becoming enlightened in the following century. She quotes Francis Bacon from Hampson’s 1968 book, *The Enlightenment*:

Men have been kept back, as by a kind of enchantment, from progress in the sciences by reverence for antiquity, by the authority of men accounted great in philosophy, and then by general consent.⁷⁹

The display and study of objects in the museum is a practice of removing them from their original contexts for observation. Ethnographer Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes ethnography as the “art of excision”⁸⁰ and writes:

Objects become ethnographic by virtue of being defined, segmented, detached, and carried away by ethnographers. Such objects are ethnographic not because they were found in a Hungarian peasant household, Kwakiutl village, or Rajasthani market rather than in Buckingham Palace or Michaelangelo’s studio, but by the virtue of the manner in which they have been detached, for disciplines make their objects and in the process make themselves.⁸¹

The movement of the Hindu deity as a result of its excision from being “monstrous” to its transformation into sculptural art, cultural symbol or ethnographic object, and social history signifier, is a result of academic disciplinary refinement after the Enlightenment. Art historian Partha Mitter has described early western attitudes towards Hindu religious images and their subsequent treatment as curios or archaeological specimens and their promotion as fine art⁸². In providing a useful insight into the perception of deities, his study has

⁷⁸ Kim Sloan, “Aimed at Universality and Belonging to the Nation: The Enlightenment and the British Museum,” *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Kim Sloan (London: The British Museum Press, 2003) p. 14.

⁷⁹ Kim Sloan, p. 12.

⁸⁰ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, p. 388.

⁸¹ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, p. 387.

⁸² Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*.

also helped me chart the journey and relocation of deities in museums across the UK as a result of taxonomic changes since the seventeenth century. I have compared Mitter's thesis with museums consultant Crispin Paine's essay on the representation of religions in London⁸³. He explains that museums adhere to academic disciplines and hence, tend to interpret those aspects of the religious image, which their respective disciplines focus upon. The Victoria & Albert Museum focuses on art and design and offers limited interpretation of the object's social and historical function, whereas the British Museum is an archaeological museum and emphasises the systems of belief through displayed objects.

I aim to blur these disciplinary boundaries in the exhibition *From Shrine to Plinth* at the Croydon Clocktower by exhibiting artworks which critically extract a certain aspect of each discipline. For instance, my video ***Ganesh, circa 1900*** is a direct conceptual reference to the archaeological practice of dating an object, and simultaneously embodies an anthropological study of a religious ritual. Crispin Paine refers to the Croydon Clocktower Museum's social history function and its method of presenting local individuals' religious beliefs and practices. This is similar to St. Mungo Museum's Religious Life gallery, which also contains a gallery for religious art. Located on the grounds of Glasgow Cathedral and faced by a Victorian Necropolis, the St. Mungo Museum is surrounded by religiosity and displays religious images. The galleries exhibit objects within created altar-like meditative spaces (figure 1.12). A text panel interpreting Hindu goddess (figure 1.13) *Durga* states:

Durga is active female energy, created by the god Shiva to destroy evil.

'Durga is active female energy'...the assertive tone and interpretation of meaning as a fact is striking, when the role of the museum is to present belief with a secular approach.

⁸³ Crispin Paine, "Religion in London's Museums" *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religions*, ed. Crispin Paine (London: Leicester University Press, 2000).



Figure 1.12.

Altar-like displays at the St. Mungo Museum (photo: author)



Figure 1.13.

Interpretation of *Durga* displayed at the St. Mungo Museum (photo: author)

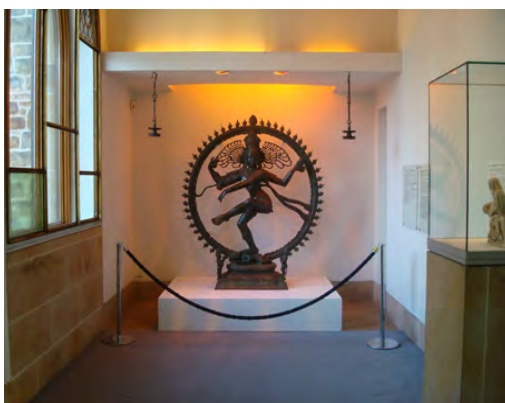


Figure 1.14.

***Shiva Nataraja* in the Religious Art Gallery of the St. Mungo Museum (photo: author)**

My critical observation of the interpretation of *Durga* in the Religious Life gallery, led to an investigation into the non-didactic and almost religious approach in the museum. Such an investigation was vital as I was creating a meditative environment in the exhibition *From Shrine to Plinth* and was depicting Hindu deities as living entities. However, while the St. Mungo Museum rejects ideas of presenting a religious environment through their interpretation, they have created an altar-like space within their *Nataraja* gallery (fig. 1.14). As the artist-curator of my exhibition, I consciously created a spiritual environment in the gallery space in order to reveal the dialectical arguments and to create a liminal space within the museum building ⁸⁴.

An article published in the Museums Association's journal, a month after the opening of the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in May 1993, written by Mark O'Neill, a senior curator at Glasgow Museums, explains the challenges

⁸⁴ For further information on the exhibition design, visit Chapter 7, pp 271..

in curating a museum of religion. Procuring the right to represent religions that essentially belong to those who practise them, was a problem and they had to involve “believers” in order to present their faiths⁸⁵. Mark O’Neill’s words in the article provide an explanation for the tone used by the museum to interpret objects that are regularly worshipped by people within a faith. Simultaneously, a text panel introducing the Religious Life Gallery lays down the museum’s aim at its entrance:

The displays aim to show the separate dignity of each faith, while also demonstrating the human themes which are common to many religions. The objects on display are sacred to believers, and are treated with respect. However this is not a religious place but a museum. We have therefore not tried to reconstruct altars or other settings, but to suggest the meaning of the objects by their symbolic shape of the backgrounds.

The aim is clearly outlined as secular, but the museum has tried to extract the spiritual characteristics of religious images on display. Mark O’Neill describes the exhibition design of the Scottish Gallery, which represents religions in Scotland, and explains:

The objects have been mounted not in reconstructions or on art gallery plinths, but on structures unique to each case.

He continues to describe the Zen garden at the museum entrance and concludes the article thus:

It has a power which goes beyond the aesthetic, and summarises the aim of the museum.

Whilst the aim of the museum is to remain secular (not anti-religious), refrain from favouring a particular religion, and to represent all, it has also aimed to create a spiritual environment through exhibition layout and lighting. The secular – religious divide associated with the museum is inherently problematic for museums of religion as the museum is at the centre of ‘material culture’ and the status quo requires it to display “human history material”⁸⁶. Lecturer of Religious Studies at the University of Wales, Chris Arthur, has outlined the limits

85 Mark O’Neill, “Keeping the Faith,” *Museums Journal*. 93.5 (1993) p. 22.

86 Pearce, p. 3.

of exhibiting sacred concepts through tangible objects in museums. He proclaims that the numinous aspect of religion, its essence or innermost core is usually un-pictureable. The museum, however, represents religions through material signifiers, which are mostly of secondary importance to those who practice it. He quotes Julian Spalding, former Director of Glasgow Museums from the St. Mungo Museum's guidebook and reiterates his own argument:

'although religion has inspired the creation of many beautiful and fascinating objects, by definition it deals with non-material beliefs and values'. And yet the museum is 'limited to those aspects of religion which can be represented by objects'.⁸⁷

This research examines the 'numinosity' of Hinduism, a religion, which can be described as a belief system, rather than an organised religion. Secondly, Hinduism is a term given for a collective identity to a highly varied range of practices across the land, since the birth of the ancient religion in the Indus Valley, until the evolution of beliefs in contemporary India⁸⁸. The numinous aspects of the religion are embedded in the cosmogony and projected through ritualistic meditation and yoga: practices that lead the devotee to reach *Brahman*, 'the One' divine energy believed to be existent in all matter in the universe. The *Bhagvad Gita*, has been a useful source in this research and has provided an insight into the abstract yet profound core of what is called Hinduism⁸⁹.

This argument offers a paradox: the deities seemingly are the focus of worship, but the spiritual aspirant is, through a disciplined practice of *sadhana*, aiming to transcend beyond all materiality to reach the energy, which is simultaneously infinite and all-encompassing. The actual process of *sadhana*, meditative actions and the development of self-awareness, a lengthy process, is laden with meanings and greater signifiers of the religion. Within the vast range of religious practices carried out under the umbrella of Hinduism, the one common goal is the union with *Brahman*⁹⁰. All ritualistic actions performed in the temple, with the focus on the deity, are in one sense considered to be interactive, a key concept, which is incorporated within two of my artworks produced in this research: **Kinetic**

87 Arthur, p. 8.

88 Crispin Paine refers to this in his essay, *Religion in London's Museums*, p. 155. Also see Basham, *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism*.

89 *The Song of God, Bhagvad Gita*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (London: Phoenix House, 1947).

90 Khanna, *Yantra, the Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity*, pp. 107-131.

Shiva and **Tactile Ganesh**. The human is performing conscious actions and the deity is believed to respond to these actions as it has been enlivened to do so. Viewing the image or performing the act of *Darshan* also means that the deity returns the gaze. This research examines the worshipper's ritualistic actions performed in the temple and in the domestic setting, which have been widely studied by ethnographers and scholars of Religious Studies, and compares them with museum rituals. Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach's article "The Universal Survey Museum"⁹¹ and Duncan's *Civilizing Ritual: Inside Public Art Museums*⁹², argue that the museum provides a stage for secular rituals and propose that museum rituals construct museum meanings. Through a comparison of religious and secular rituals, I examine the contrasting treatment of the deity in the temple and museum. Stephen Huyler, Richard Davis and C.J. Fuller have provided accounts of temple traditions and worship, which include the adornment of the deity, followed by ritualistic performance of the *puja*, the physical interaction of touching the feet of the god. However, I am also examining the inevitable erosion of the image of the deity through such worship (which the museum refers to as signs of use) and am presenting the transformation in **Tactile Ganesh**. I examine the material erosion as a visual sign and evidence of the live nature of the image. The religious image is ephemeral, whereas *Brahman*, the goal and the soul of the image, is believed to be eternal. This aspect of the worshippers' treatment of the deity, simultaneously physical and transcendental, contrasts with the importance given to the deity's materiality and hence its conservation in the museum. Thus, it is not only within the practice of museum representation and interpretation of the Hindu deity that this paradox has remained unexplored, its display in the museum's belief system itself creates such a paradox. The inevitable erosion of the image and the accepted ephemeral nature of all beings is also where the numinosity of the religion lies. *From Shrine to Plinth* identifies this aspect of Hinduism, which is evident in the worship of deities and is directly linked with their material significance, but is neither reflected nor discussed in their interpretation within the museum.

Conservator Susan Bradley writes: "the purpose of the museum with regard to the objects in its care is protection by means of security and conservation" whereas "the purpose with regard to the public is curation, which includes study

⁹¹ Duncan, Carol, and Allan Wallach. "The Universal Survey Museum." *Art History*. 3 (1980) pp. 448-69.

⁹² Duncan, *Civilizing Ritual*, pp. 7-20.

of the collection...”⁹³ She points out that the most common cause of damage to objects is their handling by staff, students, and loans to other museums. Her concern here is a strong reflection of an ongoing access and conservation debate between museum educational and curatorial staff on the one hand, and conservators on the other⁹⁴. The two functions of museums; providing access to collections and safeguarding them, have led to a series of solutions such as preventive conservation (of objects on display and in storage) outlined by the Getty Conservation Institute in 1992⁹⁵, strongly recommended by Jonathan Ashley-Smith, former Head of Conservation at the V&A⁹⁶, laying down handling rules for staff and providing a visible storage to the public. Subsequently, Boris Pretzel, materials scientist, pointed out the dangers of storing and displaying objects of a variety of materials within a confined area as they interact with each other and cause gradual deterioration⁹⁷.

Within the comparative study of human-deity interaction in the religious and secular context, it is evident that the worshipper’s approach in the temple is purposeful of keeping the divinity alive, whereas the conservator’s approach is scientific and materials-based. The conservator’s interest in the object, writes Julian Spalding, is not based on meaning but on technical matters. “Their profession”, he elucidates, “requires them to treat all objects with equal respect; to preserve an object, all they have to know is how, when and of what it is made of”⁹⁸. I have not only made the conservator’s approach strongly evident in my video artwork ***Gods in Storage***, I have highlighted the access versus conservation debate, and the gradual deterioration of the objects in storage to its viewer in the exhibition. The desired access for the worshipper in the temple is to the divinity whereas, in the museum it is towards knowledge through objects. In the temple, the interaction is tactile and the environment surrounding the deity and worshipper is multi-sensory. The museum is primarily ocular-centric with regard to accessioned objects and visitors (as conservators regularly touch

93 Susan M. Bradley, “Do Objects Have a Finite Lifetime?,” *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1990) p. 53.

94 See articles by Vaswani, “Risky Business” and Cane. “The Case for Conservation”. Also see Knight. “The Meaning of Museums”.

95 Getty Conservation Institute, “Preventive Conservation,” *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1994).

96 Ashley-Smith, “Twenty-First Century Conservation.”

97 Boris Pretzel, “Materials and Their Interaction with Museum Objects,” *V&A Conservation Journal* 44 (2003) p. 12.

98 Julian Spalding, *The Poetic Museum: Reviving Historic Collections* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 2002) p. 107.

objects to examine them)⁹⁹.

Anthropologists Constance Classen and David Howes, through a study of the history and anthropology of human senses, have examined links between imperialism and ocular museum displays, arguing that:

In western museum settings, artefacts are preeminently objects for the eye. Often, in fact, it is only the most visually-striking artifacts which are put on display.

...Within their cultures of origin, however, visual appearance usually forms only one part – often not the most important part – of an artifact’s sensory significance. The sensory values of an artifact, furthermore do not reside in the artifact alone but in its social use and environmental context. The dynamic web of sensuous and social meaning is broken when an artifact is removed from its cultural setting and inserted within the visual symbol system of the museum.¹⁰⁰

This poignant argument reiterates the problem of representing Hindu religious images in the most adequate and accurate way in the museum.

Furthermore, western aesthetic judgement, as examined by Kant¹⁰¹, which is based upon objective perception and developed through taste, hindered the appreciation of Hindu deities in the west. In this research I am comparing western aesthetic perception with the eastern experience of beauty¹⁰² and identifying the roles of art historians E.B. Havell and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy in changing the opinion of the western audience towards Hindu deities in the early twentieth century. They described them as art objects imbued with sacred sentiment. They spoke to the western audience, which had only a century earlier labelled them as ‘monstrosities’ and ‘idols’. John Ruskin, who believed that natural forms were a source of beauty, described Indian religious sculpture as “non-progressive” and

⁹⁹ Conservators regularly touch objects to examine and restore them. See Elizabeth Pye, “Understanding Objects: The Role of Touch in Conservation,” *The Power of Touch: Handling Objects in Museum and Heritage Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth Pye (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2007), pp. 121-139. Also see Candlin “Don’t Touch! Hands-Off: Art Blindness and the Conservation of Expertise.”

¹⁰⁰ Constance Classen and Davis Howes, “The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artefacts” *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, eds. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth Phillips (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006) p. 200.

¹⁰¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

¹⁰² B.N. Goswamy, “Another Past, Another Context: Exhibiting Indian Art Abroad,” *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Routledge, 1994).

“wrought under foolish admiration”¹⁰³. Coomaraswamy’s essays were directly addressed to western scholarly communities and he explained why the images were not representations of natural forms or humans. The natural object, he wrote, “an end in itself (*svārtha*), is not a symbol, and has no meaning; its appeal is merely sensational and affecting, our reaction being either of pleasure or pain, and not disinterested”¹⁰⁴. In an elaborate footnote, he stated that the *shiva linga*, is created from a natural object: the stone. But the creation of the *linga* is the creation of a symbol, projected upon the natural stone, drawn from nature. He calls this a work of art.

The intent of the creator of religious images, this research argues, is not to create art¹⁰⁵ as such, but a devotional and ritualistic piece. The commoditisation of Hindu deities as treasure and sculptural art with monetary and aesthetic values within the art market and as unique cultural symbols within the museum is a result of this taxonomic shift, which is pointed out by Davis in his study of the biographies of Indian images. Walter Benjamin in his 1939 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” defines an authentic early work of art as something that has a cult value: a unique tradition of ritual, which provides it with an aura¹⁰⁶. Within the western context, all early objects of worship have been transformed into works of art and objects of aesthetic contemplation¹⁰⁷. They are however, still associated with ritual. He explains:

The oldest works of art, as we know, came into being in the service of some ritual – magical at first, then religious. Now it is crucially important that this auric mode of the work of art never becomes completely separated from its ritual function. To put it another way: The ‘one of a kind’ value of the ‘genuine’ work of art has its underpinnings in the ritual in which it had its original, initial utility value.¹⁰⁸

The religious work of art, he asserts, is not *l’art pour l’art* as it contains a social function, and is not “pure” art. This re-definition is strongly applicable to the

¹⁰³ Roger Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, ed. Roger Lipsey, vol. 3. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) p. 56.

¹⁰⁴ Ananda. K. Coomaraswamy, “The Part of Art in Indian Life,” *Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey, vol. 1, Coomaraswamy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 85-86.

¹⁰⁵ Art in the sense of “*l’art pour l’art*” is the work which is not associated with a ritual function.

¹⁰⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J.A. Underwood. (London: Penguin, 2008) p. 11. Italics in the original text.

¹⁰⁷ The transference of deities from their religious context into a secular one, during the Enlightenment, will be discussed in Chapter 2.

¹⁰⁸ Benjamin, pp. 10-11.

continuing biography of the Hindu deity and cannot emphasise more the continuing shifts in its identity.

Hence, the four artworks conceptually developed, made and exhibited in the museum context present the worshipped deities with fragmented identities acquired through a historical change in attitudes and through the changes that have occurred within the institutional museum. I am re-defining the deity as a worshipped god through the artworks; I carry out this task by employing a constructivist and dialectical approach. Existing research within museum studies (which includes conservation), material culture and other academic areas (archaeology, anthropology and art history) studies the Hindu deity as an ethnographic or art object. Archaeologist, Sven Ouzman¹⁰⁹, leading expert on archaeological practice in post-colonial contexts, challenges the social role of the museum, which is affected by its archival and conservation desires. He writes, “many of the peoples whose objects are collected and displayed believe in an encultured world in which the death of people, objects, places and time was and remains expected.” He also proposes three object ‘rights’, which the archaeologist and the archivist must consider: its right to complete its life cycle, its agency (whether it chooses to be the symbol of its culture) and its home. Ouzman has provided a voice for artifacts and has enlivened them by assigning them agency, akin to the Hindu devotee’s action in the temple. From a secular and material culture perspective, this is anthropomorphic and non-scientific and the object, rather than the human, is classed as the agent. In this research I address the latter view and present the Hindu deity as a living being, completing its life cycle, through the four artworks.

5.2. Research Review

Recent doctoral research in the realm of museum intervention art practice or museum site-specific art practice reveals artists’ critical engagement with museological forms of object presentation, dissemination of meanings, and the poetics and politics of the museum space. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, existing research addresses issues of colonial pasts and contemporary realities, the postmodern museum as a site of memory and control, and the collaborative relationship between museums and artists.

¹⁰⁹ Sven Ouzman, “The Beauty of Letting Go: Fragmentary Museums and Archaeologies of Archive,” *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, eds. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth Phillips (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006).

Through making and exhibiting artworks that embody the contradictions of their secular and religious contexts, this research functions as a critique of the museological meanings of Hindu deities. The British Library Index to Theses was useful in locating research that took place between 1995-2010 in the areas of museum studies and artistic practice. Variations of search criteria include museum and art (and/or) practice, museum (and) intervention, museum (and) installation, museum (and) artist, museum (and) religion, and museum studies. These allowed a thorough search of doctoral work carried out in the areas that are relevant to this thesis.

Three related doctoral research projects in the field of museum intervention art and artistic practice that directly address museological issues are: Duncan Mountford (2003)¹¹⁰, Julie Louise Bacon (2006)¹¹¹ and Shirley Chubb (2007)¹¹². I will briefly examine their practice-led approaches, research methods, methodologies, and the range of concerns they have addressed, in order to contextualise my work. Other research projects located in the realm of site-specific installation art by W.A. Shepley (2000)¹¹³, Kristen Kreider (2007)¹¹⁴ and Shih-Yun Lu (2008)¹¹⁵ examine the shift from the practice of studio-based painting into creating installations, material poetics at the crossover between poetry, fine art and spatial practice, and site specificity in contemporary art, respectively. The latter work explores the duplication of physical sites through digital technology and their transmission into physical worlds.

Jane Moore (2001)¹¹⁶ has examined British colonial encounters with Tibet which took place in the first half of the twentieth century, through the Tibetan collection in the Liverpool Museum. She has referred to the objects' passage from their original contexts into the museum as evidence of such encounters. Moore

¹¹⁰ Duncan Mountford, "The Investigation of the Museum as a Site of Control, Memory, and Loss by Expression in Installation and Sculptural Form," Ph.D., The Nottingham Trent University 2003.

¹¹¹ Julie Louise Bacon, "Recollecting the Poetry and Politics of Archival Spaces: An Exploration of Performance and Installation Art in the Museum," Ph.D., University of Ulster, 2006.

¹¹² Shirley Jane Chubb, "Intervention, Location and Cultural Positioning: Working as a Contemporary Artist Curator in British Museums," Ph.D., University of Brighton, 2007.

¹¹³ W.A. Shepley, "Installation Art Practice and the 'Fluctuating Frame'," Ph.D., Manchester Metropolitan University, 2000.

¹¹⁴ K.E. Kreider, "Toward a Material Poetics: Sign, Subject, Site," Ph.D., University College London, 2008.

¹¹⁵ Shih-Yun Lu, "Site Specific Interventions in Contemporary Art," Ph.D., University of Leeds, 2008.

¹¹⁶ J. C. Moore, "Colonial Collection: A Study of the Tibetan collections at Liverpool Museum - Cultural Encounters, Patterns of Acquisition and the Ideology of Display," Ph.D., University of Liverpool, 2001. The study is located in the discipline of Archaeology.

has traced the objects' journey chronologically and has addressed the exploitative nature of colonial collecting in acts of theft and plunder and incriminated by the anthropological practice of containing the 'other' through neat classification ¹¹⁷. Hence, she has questioned 'colonial collecting' and has elucidated the process as one of dominance and control. Moore's methodological approach in placing the museum object at the heart of the enquiry, studying its biography in order to identify its role in the archive through a critical examination of the practices of collecting, shares similarities with my approach of studying the shift in the meanings of the deity due to its displacement from the temple. The object is the focus of my study and I re-visit its journey from the temple into the museum: commencing with colonial collecting, the subsequent taxonomic shift from being perceived as a monstrosity into being displayed as art or an ethnographic object. However, this research explores the redefined role of the deity through a study of its treatment in the two contrasting settings and considers human actions as embodiments of belief and values. This methodological approach is elucidated at the exhibition stage of the research as it further engages the audience to interact with the artworks.

Duncan Mountford's research is empirical: through visualising and making a series of installations and sculptural work, combined with theory, he has defined the museum as an installation. For instance, he describes discovery centres at natural history museums as distinct from the 19th century archive of specimens displayed for scrutiny, but akin to an art installation. The common factor in this comparison of an installation with the museum space is the human experience it engenders: the viewer becomes an active participant. He states that "the viewer and the art inhabit the same space, there is no reading of the art as a set of objects separate from the viewer" ¹¹⁸. The entrance to the installation is a threshold; when crossed, all aspects of the space become factors that contribute to the experience. The artist-researcher created an installation (*Museum One*) in a studio space in the university building. An architectural construction with a series of doorways, the structure suggested movement through the museum in which the museum object was absent. The work stripped the museum of its function and gave it an uncertain status, which he has described as "anxiety" and the dismantling of the structure as the museum's ruin ¹¹⁹. The work examines the notion of the museum as a site of memory, loss and control, which are explored through installations

117 Moore, p. 5.

118 Mountford, p. 6.

119 Mountford, p. 101.

such as *Bunker*, *Muse*, and *The Archive of Lost Knowledge*. *Bunker* is a proposed model for a museum or an archival site. Its exterior suggests its “permanence of intent and possible denial of entry”¹²⁰ and signifies it as a controlling body. The researcher has created a conceptual link between the ruined museum and the museum as a time capsule with the Palace of Green Porcelain (which is in a state of decay) in *The Time Machine* by H.G.Wells. He also refers to Robert Burton’s 1621 book *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which mentions Wollaton Hall. *The Archive of Lost Knowledge* was installed in the Hall as its past is linked with museum history; it contains numerous taxidermy specimens in storage, kept away from sight. The interior was destroyed in a fire and what remains is a frame, which Mountford refers to as evocative of ambition and melancholy. The constructed installation addresses the Hall as a heritage site and presents itself as an accessible structure with an arched entrance. At certain points in the installation, parts of the exterior space (the gallery or outer frame) could be viewed, incorporating the gallery as an integral part of the work. Rooms were created some of which could be entered; some were locked but offered a glimpse of what lay beyond (such as a collection of natural history specimens). *The Archive of Lost Knowledge* was a ruin inside a ruin and the artist exposed the meaning of the site.

Mountford creates liminal spaces through the use of lighting, walls, and enclosures that allow for a heightened experience of the installations which ultimately address the museum’s role: its characteristics as a controlling body and as a time machine. The physical presence of the collected museum object is denied in the work and the museum building takes precedence. It becomes the object of scrutiny. The absence of the collected object is suggested and the museum (like the installation) is depicted as a non-permanent entity. The museum remains the focus of the discourse in all the artworks; it becomes a literal site in *The Archive of Lost Knowledge*. The researcher states that each configuration which includes the design of the installation, the exposing of the structure, the liminal spaces, and its physical location is unique; a change of site would result in a change in the reading of the work.

The methods used by Duncan Mountford in creating the settings convey the processes (installing and dismantling) in exposing the construction techniques as a part of the artwork. His use of liminality to separate the installation from the surrounding space and simultaneously to articulate museum functions and

120 Mountford, p. 102.

meanings is similar to the distinct spaces created in the exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth***. The process of making the artworks: dissolving *Ganesh*, creating layers that signify permanence and ephemeral material and joining the pieces of ***Kinetic Shiva*** for a complete form, embody the dialectics of museological and religious meanings. The decisions made at the stages of visualising the artworks, constructing models and experimenting with materials, producing them, and installing them within a designed exhibition framework, all incorporate the research aims. Mountford's use of liminal spaces to create experiences direct his audience towards the concept of the museum as an installation. The use of liminality in my work not only channels the audience's attention towards the object of study, the deity, but also the series of actions generated by the thresholds (into the gallery and then into the T-shaped sanctum) are ritualistic and repetitive. The visitors become performers and it is through their engagement with the artworks that the dialectical meanings are generated. The movement through the space does not remain purely a method of accessing the space and experiencing it (although it does do those things); it creates a specific behaviour that functions as a tool in interpreting the artwork and the dialectics it conveys. The performance of religious ritual-like acts in the secular space is in itself a crucial aspect of the work. Duncan Mountford has referred to his audience as viewers at several points in this thesis. Whilst he has proclaimed that the art object and the audience are not separated in installation art as they experience it, he describes his audience as recipients and as viewers of the installations' visual signs of construct and temporality. He creates an ambience through the use of lighting to evoke emotions of loss and melancholy in the installations. Hence, the work generates the employment of vision to experience the space and to read the artwork. The use of more than one sense in engaging with the artworks in exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth*** is a distancing from the notion of experience through pure observation, but through a physical engagement with the material environment. This can be described as the lived experience in which individuals become aware of their body in the space and of their physical response to their environment. This physical interaction with the object is linked with ritual and highlights the ephemeral nature of material.

Julie Bacon's doctoral study is an exploration of artists' engagement with non-art museums through employing performance and installation art methodologies. She has studied the work in the field by conducting a survey of textual and visual documentation, by conducting fieldwork in six museums in England and Northern

Ireland, curating an exhibition entitled *The Suicide of Objects* at the Ulster Museum in Belfast and creating six performance works or as she has described them, 'museum actions', in six museums and art galleries. She has examined the ways in which artists use the museum as a site for imagination and action. She has stated: "the artists focus on how ideas, objects and behaviours in the museum relate to concepts, forms, values and movement in public and private spheres at large"¹²¹. She has referred to their actions as challenges to the authority and agency of the museum in political, economic and cultural spheres. Bacon has used the term 'recollecting' to describe the ephemeral nature of artistic interventions that explore notions of absence and presence in the museum (what is displayed and what is not) causing a shift in authority and agency. She has identified the disparity between the two disciplinary standpoints in the understanding of museum intervention art practice: in museology there is insufficient understanding of artistic methods used by contemporary artists, whereas, artistic discourse functions on an ideological level and lacks the knowledge of museum practices and the diversity of debates. She states that museums are grappling with some of the same concerns of political, economic and cultural hegemonies as those explored by artists. Hence, she has employed an interdisciplinary approach in arriving at an understanding of the physical, social and conceptual levels of artist methodologies and museum agendas and expectations. This task is undertaken through examining collaborative projects that have taken place in the context of education programmes, artist residencies, or as a result of artist proposals to museums. The context of her research lies within museum site-specific performance and installation art practice. It is evidence-based and the work chosen by Bacon explore the roles of the curator, ethnographer, the museum tour guide, large scale interventions in the museum building and those that incorporate museum furniture in the work. This research has explored the range of expectations and intentions that artists infuse into such work, which challenge the orthodoxy of subject/object duality. Bacon has pointed out that the uncertainty of the coinciding and collapsing aspects of history, memory and living conditions encourage participation, thus recollecting the museum's hidden subjectivity, temporality and conditions of change¹²².

Through examining critical museum theory and recent museum debates that address curation, conservation, access, education and the changing roles of

¹²¹ Bacon. p. 2.

¹²² See thesis abstract. Available at www.theses.com.

the museum, I have studied the contrasting religious and cultural meanings of the Hindu deity. While my cultural experience and knowledge of the temple deity was a motivating factor in this research, the study of attitudes towards its conservation reflected its treatment in the two environments developed through critical textual and visual analysis. The artworks function on an ideological level, however, recognising current museological debates that influence curatorial and access decisions. Whilst Bacon's work has examined the shifting authoritative roles of the museum and the intervening artist, my research highlights the alternative readings of museum collections that artistic interventions can offer. They function as parallel interpretations, albeit motivated by a subjective intent, they offer the audience a premise for a discourse between the collected object, the artwork and their own reception and reading of the two. Bacon's thesis has examined artists' intentions, however, the experience of the museum visitor, and the process of constructing meaning that occurs in installation and museum intervention art remains unaddressed. This research examines the triad of space, object and subject, its relationship, dynamics, and interaction, which have been explored in the exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth***.

Shirley Chubb (2007) has examined the collaboration between the artist and regional museums through intervening in four museums in the UK and making work that responds to the respective spaces. She engages "with racial identity by exploring the cultural position of a white artist in response to the legacy of colonial and post-colonial representation in British Museums"¹²³. Her methodology of examining semiotic and postcolonial theory in order to study the shifting modes of presentation, assessment and reception of museum objects is reflected in her exhibitions *Hold, Collections and Reflections, Location and Thinking Path*. Chubb has referred to Susan Pearce's commentary on artefacts as "material equivalents to the grammar of language"¹²⁴, and associated the museum with Barthes' *langue* and the artworks created for and within the space as a visual expression and hence, with *parole*. Furthermore, the communication of the visual language with an audience has been defined as *idiolect*.

Responding to African objects in museum collections, Chubb incorporated the material and techniques used in making the original artefacts and created work for exhibition *Hold*. The resulting forms in which Chubb's work and the

¹²³ Chubb, p. 21.

¹²⁴ Chubb, p. 11.

actual artefact were bonded together created a hybridity that physically and conceptually held the objects. Chubb has borrowed Jules David Prown's words and has described her method as employing artefacts actively as evidence rather than passively as illustrations¹²⁵ in creating new narratives that reconfigure modes of presentation and invite the viewer to complete the work by making the other half of the meaning. In *Collections and Reflections* Chubb investigated the disembodiment of non-western artefacts in collections through their taxonomic association which is at the heart of ethnography and anthropology. She disassociated the artefacts from their objectification and addressed the cognitive universal knowledge generated through 'making' them. The project was collaborative and its educational context (Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia) was explored by the artist with an intention of identifying a contribution to the development of a curatorial policy that involves visual practice-based research in response to collections. The visual methods used in all four exhibitions reflected the combining of the binary roles of the artist and the curator. Chubb has described her methodology as one that extracts, combines and manifests content in unique ways.

Both Mountford and Chubb, have addressed the processes and the role of the viewer in constructing meaning through viewing and experiencing installation and sculptural artworks. Whilst Mountford and Bacon explore the poetics of the museum space and its nature as a temporal space, Chubb associates it with linguistic theory and describes it as a social institution – *langue*, one that resists modifications coming from the single individual. My research examines the changes that have occurred historically in museology as a result of the changing role of the museum in society and the factors that have been regarded as important at various stages such as preservation of the artefact or its access for dissemination of knowledge. Existing research comments on the museum space itself, its display galleries and the poetics and politics of display. I am not only addressing the politics of representation, I am delving into the museum's storage, and examining the decay of the stored object over a period of time.

I have thus scrutinised the fragmented identity of the collected ethnographic or art object – the displaced worshipped deity. I have observed the engagement of the devotees with their deities in the temple and have compared it with their reception in the ocular museum. Existing doctoral research adheres to the use

¹²⁵ Chubb, p. 39.

of the visual sense in reading and interpreting the artwork and has not explored alternative means of experiencing material. My approach towards considering more than one sense in fully disseminating the dialectical meanings of the deity emerges from and reflects the nature of the object's original context. The experience of interacting with the deity in the temple has been introduced on a conceptual and a physical level in the artworks and in their exhibition. This method considers the tools consciously used in constructing meaning (sight, smell, sound and touch) by the audience as a reflection and hence, a generator of creating an awareness of the tools used in the deity's reception in the temple. In functioning as an institutional critique, this approach also offers a parallel interpretation of the object on display.

Existing research in museum intervention art practice has not addressed the crucial museological concern of material conservation; the focus is instead on object interpretation. This research examines the relationship between the dissemination of tacit knowledge in the museum and the value of the physical object and hence, the role of conservation practice in preserving knowledge. The value of the deity in the temple lies in its regular worship (which in museological terms is described as use) and the preservation of its divinity; the lengthening of the life of the physical form is secondary. I have further compared the perception of time: linear in Judaeo-Christian societies with its cyclical nature in Hinduism. Hence, the issues of the interpretation of the artefact and the conservation of the physical object integrate in this study.

5.3. Art Review

The 1980s saw the museum becoming an important site for postmodern artistic practices ¹²⁶. Art historian Jennifer Gonzáles refers to Douglas Crimp's definition of postmodern art as undermining preceding modernist principles of taxonomy, authenticity, originality and aesthetic authority, upon which the museum was based, giving way to the production of art that functions as "institutional critique" ¹²⁷. Elaborating further on the postmodern museum, Gonzáles refers to Julie Marcus's article "Postmodernity and the Museum" through which she echoes anthropologist George Stocking's insistence on the approach of studying the three-dimensional museum space and museum culture, by considering the fourth dimension of time, fifth dimension of power and sixth dimension of

¹²⁶ Maurice Berger, *Fred Wilson* (Baltimore: Centre for Art and Visual Culture, 2001) p. 24.

¹²⁷ Jennifer Gonzáles, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008) p. 67.

ownership¹²⁸. Artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, Fred Wilson and Mark Dion created quasi-museum settings and took on the roles of museum curators by engaging in activities such as classifying, arranging and creating visual displays to formulate institutional critiques. Preceded by the art practice of Hans Haacke and Louise Lawler, which addressed the matrix of power and systems of representation¹²⁹, artists such as Fred Wilson, Sonia Boyce, and Mark Dion locate their practices in the discursive museum site, the former two within the realm of race and identity and latter within ecological conservation.

González refers to Homi Bhabha's "recognisable totalities": a signification of the colonised as the 'other', yet visible and knowable, created in the museum through displays of material, and their interpretive frameworks. She remarks that these "totalities" are partial narratives as they are created under "conditions of subjection for museum audiences offering narratives that make explicit the historical, geographical, or aesthetic ties between viewing subjects and the objects they encounter"¹³⁰. The "totalities" only reveal a part of the story; a phenomenon and an interpretive gap that has inspired museum intervention art practices which address social issues and concerns of the representation of race, class, social histories, gender and the viewing subjects.

Recent art projects carried out in collaboration with museums, the outcomes of which have been exhibited in the museum site, highlight the role of the museum as a commissioner of artists' work for diverse and imaginative interpretation of collections. This approach of the "decolonising institutional framework"¹³¹ is often employed as a means to confront contested or traumatic histories such as the 2007 exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum *Uncomfortable Truths: The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art*. Eleven contemporary artists, who included Fred Wilson, Yinka Shonibare, Tapfuma Gutsa, Michael Paul Britto, and El Anatsui, were invited to 'intervene' in the museum with artworks and address the legacy of the slave trade. The artworks were dispersed throughout the museum's permanent collections. The pamphlet accompanying the exhibition describes it

¹²⁸ See endnotes in González, p. 259.

¹²⁹ Such as Hans Haacke's *Metromobiltan* (1985), and *Viewing Matters* (1996); Louise Lawler's *Objects* (1984), *Zeus and David* (1984). See James Putnam, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001).

¹³⁰ González, pp. 72-73.

¹³¹ Seong Eun Kim, "Ethnographic Collections in the Hands of Contemporary Artists: The Joachim Schmid Collection and Mrs Cook's Kete in the Pitt Rivers Museum" *Proceedings of The World Under One Roof: Past, Present, and Future Approaches to Universality in Ethnographic Museums*. Vienna: International Committee for Museums of Ethnography Conf. 19-24 August 2004. 26 January 2010. <<http://icme.icom.museum>.>

thus:

Displayed throughout the V&A's permanent collection galleries and other public spaces, the interventions create a visual dialogue between historic design objects, many rooted in imperialism, and compelling, emotive examples of recent art and design. These creative expressions form a bridge between the safe and anodyne and the unspeakable and the indescribable.¹³²

Fred Wilson, former museum curator and a contemporary artist critically engages with the museum as a site where ideologies are formulated and presented. His work *Regina Atra* was strategically positioned in the Norfolk House Music Room in close proximity to Yinka Shonibare's work *Sir Foster Cunliffe Playing*. *Regina Atra*, an imitation of the British Royal crown constructed from black diamonds addresses the aesthetics of black and white beauty. Moreover, it functions as an icon of the power structure of the slave trade and as a comment on the exploitation of natural resources by the colonial power¹³³. Flanked by *Regina Atra*, *Sir Foster Cunliffe Playing* stood in the regal setting; attired in period clothing stitched from batik fabric, the work featured the grandson of a wealthy slave trader in Liverpool and embodied the idea of the construction of identity through cultural and trade exchange. The discourse created through a strategic positioning of work made by two artists; one by an artist of Caribbean descent and the other of Nigerian origin, approached the difficult subject of the slave trade by making visible the contemporary voice of the ethnographic 'other' in the museum. The artworks have been described as having "played off the established holdings of the museum, such as its extensive fashion and metalwork collections"¹³⁴. The installation of contemporary artworks in the Norfolk House Music Rooms appropriated the space; a reminder of the eighteenth-century London residence of the Duke of Norfolk, it took on a new context in which historical, political and social critiques were explored. It became a space which brought to the fore the uncomfortable truths of the slave trade in relation to national cultural heritage.

The exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth*** positioned the work in the museum

¹³² *Uncomfortable Truths-The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design*, 20 February-17 June 2007 (London:V&A, 2007) unpaginated.

¹³³ See Michael White, 'Uncomfortable Truths': *The Intervention of the Past at the Victoria and Albert Museum*, 2007, Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past and the Institute of Historical Research, 6 February 2010. <<http://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/exhibitions/art/uncomfortable.html>. >

¹³⁴ Michael White, 'Uncomfortable Truths': *The Intervention of the Past at the Victoria and Albert Museum*.

space ideologically and physically, appropriating it to formulate a critique, and to offer a new interpretation of the site itself, wherein religious meanings of the deity were revealed in relation to the existing museum collection. Made in the studio, the artworks' role of examining the life and death of the deity in its displaced location was manifested upon their display and through the audience's engagement with them. Hence, my method of positioning the work within the museological context rather than by curating existing collections is similar to Yinka Shonibare and Fred Wilson's work in *Uncomfortable Truths*. Both artists are concerned with the representation of race and colonial history. The issue of colour in identity is prevalent in their work, and in the context of colonial pasts. My work is not concerned with colour difference, nor with Indian history. It draws upon specific cultural phenomena and a belief system that have influenced its material culture.



Fig. 1.15.
Norfolk House Music Room
British Galleries, V&A
Room 52, V&A
(photo: courtesy of the V&A)

Fig. 1.16.
Sir Foster Cunliffe Playing
Yinka Shonibare, 2007, V&A
(photo: courtesy of the V&A)



Fig. 1.17.
Regina Atra
Fred Wilson, 2007,
V&A
(photo: courtesy of
the V&A)

The employment of a visual method in critiquing racial pasts is evident in Fred Wilson's work. He continues to engage actively with existing iconic material in making work and juxtaposes it with museum collections through being commissioned to do so. Whilst *Regina Atra* does not draw on the museum space as a literal site, as some of his earlier art projects have, Fred Wilson's work persistently examines how truths are produced. He has critically explored the ways in which narratives are created in the museum through object displays that hide certain truths of the past, of the cultures they represent, and in turn control memory and knowledge. Gonzáles describes his work aptly:

Museums have specific modes of address, and Wilson reminds us that they always construct an imagined subject of that address. His work makes evident how a museum's power lies in its ability to interpellate its audience into this imagined subject position in order to define social membership, legitimate historical narratives, and determine access to cultural knowledge.¹³⁵

In the late 1980s Fred Wilson had developed “a postmodernist criticality and a related resistance to standard ideas of creativity and innovation”¹³⁶ and created work through combining, arranging, and re-appropriating existing objects in the museum. Prior to intervening in the museum space and reinstalling artefacts from the permanent collections in the Maryland Historical Society in 1992, he transformed gallery spaces into “pseudo-museum environments”. In *Rooms with a View: The Struggle Between Culture, Content, and the Context of Art*, he created three environments in three galleries: the first as an art gallery or a “white cube”, the second as a nineteenth century domestic interior and the third as

¹³⁵ Gonzáles, pp. 97-99.

¹³⁶ In his own words. See Berger, p. 24.

an ethnographic gallery. Employing curatorial methods and using contemporary artworks by other artists as his ‘raw material’, Wilson highlighted the “artifice of display styles” in interpreting objects as art, artefacts, or ethnographic objects. The construction of museum-like settings outside the museum space was a precursor to the artist’s later museum intervention work which were commissioned by major historical and art museums in the United States. For instance, the artist was given open access to permanent collections in Maryland Historical Society’s archives for *Mining the Museum*. He uncovered objects that belonged to African and Native American pasts to create juxtapositions that functioned as visual commentaries on the enslavement of Africans and the existence of class structures in historical Maryland. He placed fine silver craftsmanship beside crude iron shackles in *Metalwork*. Objects that belonged to the elite class and slaves were shown beside each other for the first time.

Miwon Kwon describes the commissioning of institutional interventions negatively as “extensions of the museum’s own self-promotional apparatus” a practice through which the artist becomes a “commodity with a purchase on “criticality”¹³⁷. The comment echoes Hal Foster’s stance in the essay “The Artist as Ethnographer?” which regards artist – cultural institution collaborations in developing site-specific work within an institutional setting as importing critique “for purposes of inoculation”¹³⁸. Jennifer Gonzáles argues for artists’ position and role in providing “*détournement*”¹³⁹ (she specifically discusses Fred Wilson’s conceptual approach in her argument; however it applies to other artists working in a similar fashion). She emphasises the uniqueness of each project, the diverse, mobile and “strategic public”¹⁴⁰ institutional critiques can form. Such work produces a specific audience within the broader institutions of art. Museum intervention art commissions such as *Give & Take* in 2001 held on two sites, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Serpentine Gallery, *Recycled Images* and *Mrs Cook’s Kete* at the Pitt Rivers Museum in 2002, and Tim Brennan’s *Museum*

137 Miwon Kwon, “One Place after Another: Notes on Site-Specificity,” *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erica Suderberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) p. 52.

138 Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer?,” *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, eds. George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995) p. 306.

139 Gonzáles, p. 100.

140 Gonzáles, p. 100. The term is borrowed from Frazer Ward. See Frazer Ward, “The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity,” *October* 73, Summer (1995). Ward points to the conventions of art, and the museum (which produces and maintains the conventions of art), as forming a set of relations; ultimately forming the “broader institutions of art”: the museum gallery, the art magazine, art criticism and the academy (Ward, p. 83). Hence, when work is showed within the museum, it is “seen”. Institutional critique is the method of acknowledging this role of the museum, and wresting from it a critical publicity, which generates a specific kind of public.

of Angels, a guided walk at the British Museum in 2003, address themes of museum epistemology: taxonomy of art and artefact, museum narratives of past civilizations, representation of ethnicity and museum display rhetoric.

Give & Take, a collaboration between the Serpentine Gallery and the V&A, was a group show of fifteen artists located on both sites. The work offered visual dialogues between the historical collections at the V&A and the artists' work. German conceptual artist Hans Haacke was given access to the V&A collections for one year prior to the exhibition for his work *Mixed Messages*. He employed visual methods to explore powers of dominance of one race, class, and faith over another in installations throughout the gallery. He juxtaposed a large painting celebrating the opening of the Great Exhibition in 1851, with a sculpture made by a ten-year old Vietnamese boy Viet-Hong Lieu from London in the foreground. A vitrine in the gallery contained dolls with white and black interchangeable limbs creating hybrid ethnicity.



Fig. 1.18.

Mixed Messages
Multi-headed exchange doll
Hans Haacke, 2001, Serpentine
Gallery
(photo: courtesy of the V&A and
the Serpentine Gallery)



Fig. 1.19.

Catherine Long
Marc Quinn, 2000,
V&A
(photo: courtesy of
the V&A and the Ser-
pentine Gallery)

The play with images and use of museum display mechanisms to disseminate mixed messages were encountered throughout the exhibition: from the work at the museum's entrance by Xu Bing through to Marc Quinn's sculptures challenging classical notions of beauty ¹⁴¹. Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska's sound installation *Use Value* was created for the museum's Ceramic Galleries. Audio recordings of the chatter of diners in restaurants, children in the school canteen, sounds of washing-up, a sudden crash of a shattered object, were played in the gallery. In a space designated to observe the craftsmanship and design of the objects the sound installation added a sensory dimension to the gallery. *Use Value* re-connected the objects, to their original social context. The work directly addressed the museum's role in transforming objects from everyday lives into objects worthy of display and viewing



Figures. 1.20. and 1.21.
Use Value
Ceramics Gallery, V&A
Marysia Lewandowska and Neil Cummings, 2001
(photo: courtesy of the V&A and the Serpentine Gallery)

My work is positioned within this conceptual line of inquiry; it interrogates the museum meaning of the deity and re-visits its original reception. From the multi-sensory temple environment in which it is adorned, touched regularly and brought to life through interaction, it moves to a museological context that frames it as art and a cultural sign, an object displayed to be viewed. It brings to the fore and critically addresses the relationship between the deity and its contrasting audiences, the attitudes towards its conservation, which remain unaddressed by the museum, and the museum display rhetoric which preserves its ideological and physical entity in the secular context. This site-specific art

¹⁴¹ For more information on the exhibition refer to Julia Peyton-Jones and Alan Borg, *Give & Take: 1 Exhibition 2 Sites: Serpentine Gallery, London, 30 January-1 April 2001* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2001).

practice of coordinating or reorganising existing forms rather than creating new material forms has been described as “situational aesthetics”¹⁴². It is an apt way of defining museum intervention practices which extract, combine or re-organise existing principles in the institution. Gonzáles describes the processes triggered through such practices:

...such works also decenter the eye, or the “I,” of the spectator who is no longer located in the transcendental role of solitary contemplation vis-à-vis the work of art, but is rather positioned as a culturally situated subject who both constitutes, and is constituted by the work of art.¹⁴³

This research is located within ‘situational aesthetics’. It extracts existing elements from two sites: the museum and the temple, the secular and the religious, makes new connections and creates a premise for a discourse.

The work of Joachim Schmid (2000-02), a collection of postcards of kitsch kittens having tea, photographs of Marilyn Monroe and tourist images such as Venetian gondolas, displayed in vitrines of the Pitt Rivers Museum alongside anthropological artefacts played with taxonomy. A viewer would encounter a postcard featuring a nurse with a refrigerator of pharmaceutical bottles beside primitive surgical instruments and images of diplomats and royal families were juxtaposed with “Ornaments Denoting Personal Status”. The work entitled *The Joachim Schmid Collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum* formed a part of the museum’s *Transformations: The Art of Recycling* exhibition and was described as creating “consonance and dissonance”¹⁴⁴ amongst displays. The artist’s curatorial approach in adhering to museum display and collecting practices to make a comment on the production and recycling of cultural stereotypes through material employs a visual method. Researcher Seong Eun Kim describes the “transformation of the postcard into an object of fascination” as “museumification” or “museological metamorphosis”. Seong Eun Kim adds:

Through the museological metamorphosis, everyday artefacts of cultural others form the basis for anthropological propositions and arguments in the Museum. It is the very context of the Museum that transformed Schmid’s collection

¹⁴² The term was used by Victor Burgin in his 1969 essay “Situational Aesthetics” and later by Michael Asher. Jennifer Gonzáles contextualises the term in her book *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Art*.

¹⁴³ Gonzáles, pp. 8-9.

¹⁴⁴ Kim, p. 4.

of postcards from a mere accumulation to a conceptual artwork. In some measure, his practice of found art bears an analogy to the Museum's curatorial practice, which deploys postcards as such so that they seem devoid of any touch of the artist but his relocation of them does yield new values and meanings.¹⁴⁵



Figures 1.22. and 1.23.
The Joachim Schmid Collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum
Joachim Schmid, 2002, Pitt Rivers Museum
(photo: courtesy of Joachim Schmid)

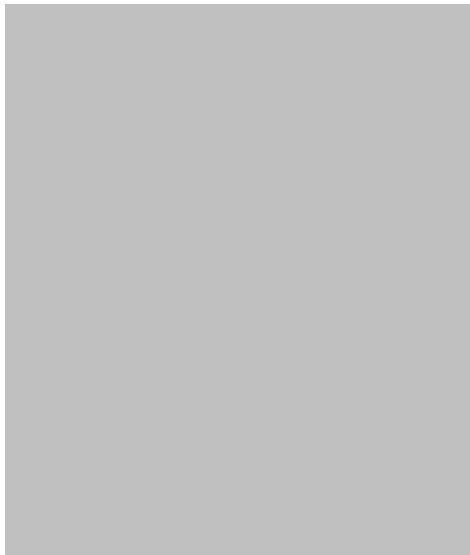


Fig. 1.24.
Mrs Cook's Kete
Christine Hellyar and Maureen
Lander, 2002
Pitt Rivers Museum
(photo: courtesy of Seon Eun Kim)

145 Kim, p. 5.

Mrs Cook's Kete (2002-03) followed Joachim Schmid's display in the Pitt Rivers Museum. A construction of voyager Captain James Cook's wife Elizabeth Cook's personal collection of Maori and Polynesian artefacts, the work was created by Christine Hellyar ¹⁴⁶ and Maureen Lander: artists from New Zealand. They made woven bags, pressed specimens of plants, created botanical drawings and traditional string Maori figures which were exhibited in the museum's taxonomic system of type and function. Some of the fabricated items were placed in vitrines containing permanent displays of objects of domestic activities such as cooking, sewing, cleaning, and dressing. The work was an intervention in museum methods of narrating history through material; it combined fact and fiction, and imitated Pitt Rivers Museum's "modus operandi" ¹⁴⁷ of representing cultures. The work imagined a female voyager's collection, albeit constructed, it was inspired by the Maori basket 'kete' which if it were to be found in Mrs Cook's collection would contain curiosities from the South Pacific islands. The fictional collection has been described by Kim as a response to the "lacunae" in representing ethnographic histories caused by their fragmentation into a range of objects ¹⁴⁸ and the possibilities of revealing unheard or marginalised voices in the museum; hidden as a result of curatorial objectives, desires or biases.

In the same period as *Mrs Cook's Kete*, artist Tim Brennan whose art practice engages with the idea of mapping and tracing time and spaces through a guided walk, intervened in the British Museum. An audience followed the artist on a guided tour through the *Museum of Angels* in 2003. A tour of angels dispersed in different rooms in the museum was accompanied with narratives: the artist read out passages from various texts such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Benjamin Woolley's biography of Dr. John Dee, pointing to other objects, bodies of knowledge and linkages which would lead to the truth of the founding of the British Museum. The guided walk was based on one question "On what bodies of knowledge – on what wings, by what magics – is the British Museum founded?" ¹⁴⁹. Tim Brennan shares an interest in angels with Dr. John Dee a mathematician, occultist and astrologer (1517-1608/9), who connected to the court of Elizabeth I, was deemed disreputable due to conversations with angels and seeking advice from divine spirits. His experiments and research are known to have made seafaring and the British Empire possible. Whilst the artist was cataloguing

¹⁴⁶ Christine Hellyar is of half-Maori descent

¹⁴⁷ Kim, p. 7.

¹⁴⁸ Kim, p. 9.

¹⁴⁹ Steve Pile, "Cultural Geographies in Practice: In the Footsteps of Angels: Tim Brennan's 'Museum of Angels' Guided Walk," *Cultural Geographies* 12 (2005) p. 523.

the Museum's angelic artefacts he came upon some of Dr Dee's magical artefacts such as an obsidian mirror, a quartz sphere and engraved wax discs. Dr. Dee's library too came into Sir Hans Soane's possession and Tim Brennan's performance aimed to connect the Museum's claims to be based on scientific principles with its past link to magic. The work has been described thus:

Angels and winged creatures appear in many different historical and geographical contexts. Yet, in weaving a web of connections between these figures, Brennan shows that these figures have been detached from their historical and geographical contexts – from the bodies of knowledge that brought them into being. Brennan questions the Museum's collection, its reason to be, by repeatedly pointing to those knowledges the museum cannot cope with.¹⁵⁰

This performance piece was site-specific and the role of the audience to follow the artist through a journey formed a crucial part of the work. The commonplace museum practice of the gallery tour was employed to reveal an alternative history of the museum. The use of performance (the artist's as well as the museum visitor's) as a means to construct a narrative is explored in this research, too. Whilst Tim Brennan's walk provided the cues to the audience to observe, listen and explore the space with the artist, I have borrowed the movement patterns of a temple worshipper to generate an exploration of the meaning of the deity. Brennan has critically addressed the museum's past link with magic and its role as a secular institution. In making the work, and with the participation of the audience in the exhibition space, this research blurs the religious-secular divide. Hence, the role of the visitor is not one of a passive recipient of the interpretation or the narrative, but as an active participant.

The methods employed by artists discussed range from curatorial practices, fabricating objects to mimic museum collections, and contemporary practices such as sound installation and performance art. Museum intervention art practice can be located within the contexts of race and identity, post-colonial ideology and power structures and institutional critique, addressing established ideologies such as classical notions of beauty and The Enlightenment practice of classification and taxonomy.

¹⁵⁰ Pile, p. 525.

Located within ‘situational aesthetics’¹⁵¹, this research draws upon the religious meaning of the deity reflected in its creation and treatment by worshippers in order to contrast it with its museological status. The work is located within the practice of museum intervention art; it addresses the very meanings that are formulated through the deity’s transference in the museum; and in the 2008 exhibition, these dialectical meanings explored through the work were manifested. Their installation in distinct liminal environments gave consideration to visitor experience in receiving the work. Joachim Schmid and Fred Wilson’s curatorial interventions mimicked museum displays and caused the audience to look closely to reveal their meaning. Whereas my work brings the experience of consciously moving from one space into another to the fore. The museum gaze in the case of the earlier example is the method (and in itself a critique) through which museum display rhetoric; the creation of museum meanings and museum characteristic as an ocular space are addressed. In my work, I make this characteristic apparent by introducing a different way of experiencing the space, through generating the use of more than one sense in a meditative environment. Derived from the temple site, the multi-sensory experience and visitor behaviour of interacting with the artworks are aspects of the work that highlight the temple experience of the deity in order to contrast it with its visual reception in the museum. *Use Value* by Marysia Lewandowska and Neil Cummings introduced sounds from the artefacts’ original contexts to make their current meanings and their critiquing apparent. Sonia Boyce’s 1995 work *Peep* caused visitors to peep through holes made in tracing paper that lined the insides of vitrines at the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery¹⁵². The very act of peeping to view objects from Guyana, Africa highlighted the gaze towards exotic and made it an illicit act. The triggering of the aural sense and memory to comment on social histories of ceramics and their consequent role as art/craft; the generating of a specific behaviour to highlight the gaze towards the ethnographic ‘other’ in the museum, are methods that incorporate performance and rely on the museum audience to generate meaning. My work formulates meaning in its installation site (through its curation and positioning within the space in relation to each other), and the audience’s experience of being within it and responding to it physically. The similarity with *Use Value* and *Peep* is in the methodology in practice. However, the method of creating liminal spaces within which the artworks (produced in the studio) are experienced and changed (in case of ***Kinetic Shiva*** and ***Tactile***

151 See Gonzáles.

152 Sonia Boyce, *Peep* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1995).

Ganesh) through the use of aural, visual, tactile and olfactory senses to produce dialectical meanings, is an approach that contributes to museum intervention art practice. The actions generated amongst visitors and their physical movement in the space in themselves contain temple rituals, which, in relation to the site of the exhibition, the secular museological context, and its context as art, cause the dialectics to occur.

The artworks do not rely on the museum space to reveal their meanings as they embody the critique; if exhibited in a contemporary art gallery space, they would continue to disseminate the religious-secular dialectical meanings in the secular context. Hence, while the body of work made in this research directly addresses the meanings of Hindu deities produced through their museum display, they do not use the museum as a literal site, one where the work directly responds to space and would lose meaning if dismembered from the location such as in Joachim Schmid's interventions. The 2008 exhibition **From Shrine to Plinth** was curated in response to the Croydon Clocktower and the existing collection of Hindu gods. From viewing Maya's shrine and navigating the digital interactive in the museum to being enveloped by the multi-sensory environment in the exhibition space within which the fragmented identities of deities were unravelled, the dialectics became self-evident. Furthermore, through the change caused in the material state of *Kinetic Siva* and *Tactile Ganesh*, a first hand experience of witnessing the deity in a state of flux was created for the visitor.

In making a series of artworks and their juxtaposition in a specifically created environment, I have constructed a setting for their reception and have created a meta-narrative within the museum. Whilst the work does not aim to re-arrange existing displays of Hindu deities in museums, it re-appropriates them to illuminate their temple meanings. A curatorial approach such as the one employed by Fred Wilson in *Mining the Museum* through which existing collections are re-arranged to highlight the critique, would have caused limitations in the exploration of the key elements of time and change that are crucial in this research. The process of making the artworks: the creating and dissolving, the renewal of form, the layering of the object to depict temporality of form, resonate the metaphysical meanings of deities and highlight their hermetic and preserved status in the museum. In creating a micro-cosmic space; separate from the museum, within which the preserved deity can be witnessed as a living entity, the work functions as an artistic intervention. By not engaging with the collections

directly in which the objects function as raw material, this work further contrasts the dialectics of the ocular-centric museum and the multi-sensory temple environment, an approach that is unique to museum intervention art practice.

6. Structure of the Exegesis

The written component of this research is structured to introduce, review and examine each artwork and through this process present the fragmented identity of deities. The following chapters are divided into five areas of research, which coincide with my four artworks and their exhibition: 1) the epistemology of religious and secular domains, 2) religious and secular rituals, 3) cyclical and linear time, 4) conservation, 5) material and spiritual characteristics of tangible objects. The five areas of critical and comparative study are interlinked and are therefore cross-referenced throughout the thesis. Conceptually they are intertwined in my artworks.

Chapter Two studies the historiography of the Enlightenment and the division between the 'Religious' and 'Secular'. It defines them as 'belief systems' and examines the transference of the deity from a religious realm into a secular system. Through studying temple and museum buildings and the treatment of deities in the two contexts, it focuses on the various identities acquired by them: from being gods into becoming sculptural art.

In Chapter Three I will examine the nature of religious and secular rituals through a study of their physical enactments, the cues that trigger such behaviour, their conscious and sub-conscious nature and liminality within spaces that causes ritualistic behaviour. The focus of this chapter is on my artwork ***Kinetic Shiva***, which generates ritual amongst museum visitors in its exhibition context. This artwork is a comparative study of religious and secular rituals.

I will continue the study of rituals in Chapter Four, but will reveal their latent meanings through video artwork ***Ganesh, circa 1900***. I will focus on a particular ritual practised in the central region of India: the annual immersion of *Ganesh*. A celebration of the phenomenon of life – death – rebirth and its continuum, this ritual reveals the Hindu perception of time. This chapter and Chapter Five examine the methods used to conserve objects in the museum and reveal the precedence given to the preservation of divinity in the temple over

material conservation. Chapter Five delves into the museum storage and analyses access and conservation concerns of the museum as explored through the second video artwork **Gods in Storage**. This chapter refers back to the creative intent of the maker of images for worship and contrasts it with its newly-acquired home in museum storage. It examines preventive conservation and the current challenges faced by the museum conservator.

In Chapter Six I will take the access and conservation issue to a next level and will critically examine visitor interaction with museum objects. I will assess the museum visitor's response towards the allowance of touch through my sculpture **Tactile Ganesh**. I will compare these with human and deity interactions that occur in the temple. This chapter also examines the history, attitudes and use of touch as a means to acquire knowledge in the primarily ocular museum. I will study the material and spiritual (or transcendental) characteristics of the deity infused by humans in the two contexts in this chapter.

Chapter 7 is a journey through the exhibition of my four artworks **From Shrine to Plinth** at the Croydon Clocktower Museum. I will review the exhibition's conceptual development, design, and function. In this chapter I will provide an assessment of visitor feedback and will reveal the instrumentality of the exhibition in disseminating this research.



Chapter 2

Religious and Secular Belief Systems: *a comparative study*

Chapter Summary

This chapter functions as a preface to the subsequent chapters through which I will examine the role of my four artworks and their exhibition within the critical study of the fragmented identities of Hindu deities. In this chapter I will establish the ideological context of my artworks by comparing and contrasting two 'belief systems': the religious and the secular, with the Hindu deity as the focal point of the study. Through making imaginary visits to typical temples and museums, I will compare their buildings and their metaphysical significance. I will study the human–idol interaction occurring within such locations through a comparison of the effects a temple and a museum have on the reception of the deity. Furthermore, I will elucidate these interactions as signifiers of the status of the Hindu deity as a living entity in its shrine.

I will also investigate the deity's shift in purpose from temple to museum and consider the effects on meaning and interpretation resulting from the various developments in museum and art history. I will examine the intangible or spiritual characteristics of deities in their temples and will scrutinise their interpretation within material culture.

I. Introduction

The gradual establishment of the early-modern museum and its evolution into the post-modern museum have been based upon secular ideology and intent ¹. The practices of collecting and accumulating prior to these periods were carried out in Greek and Roman temples and Christian churches ². The transformation from a theologically-driven to a scientific mode of collection and display of ‘*naturalia*’ and ‘*artificialia*’ ³ in Europe by the eighteenth century ⁴, marked the advent of classification and taxonomy. The view shared by scholars was that the primary value of antiquities lay in “their capacity to demonstrate ‘new’ scientific principles and their practical application” ⁵. The British Museum in the early nineteenth century became the product of this epistemological approach to objects. Luke Syson, curator at the British Museum describes the scientific principles as “systems of thought and belief” ⁶. The development of narratives, discourses, the search for reality and truth through objects, both natural and artificial, formed a system of thought. Susan Pearce has reiterated this as being based upon ‘belief’ within which, “objective reality existed and that human beings as essential individuals shared in it and could therefore appreciate it” ⁷. The understanding of the world through objects and their status as “human history material” ⁸ presents the museum as central to material culture.

The collection and display of Hindu idols in museums across the United Kingdom, indicates their categorisation within the described ‘secular belief system’. Their

¹ The ‘early-modern’ period in museum history encompassed the Renaissance collections and the ‘cabinets of curiosities’ from the 1450s till the 1700s, the ‘classic-modern’ was the 18th, 19th and the early 20th centuries and the post-modern being the late-20th and early 21st century. Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections* (London: Leicester University Press, 1992) p. 50.

² These were primarily silver and gold offerings to the gods in Greek temples, gifts and booty in Roman temples, relics and sacred objects in the Christian church. The offerings to gods would not leave the temple premises and would be protected from theft. See Krzysztof Pomian, “The Collection: Between the Visible and the Invisible,” *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 163-168.

³ Susan Pearce has pointed out that the role of the eighteenth century museum was to help man understand himself and the world. The museum, as a result contained *naturalia* and *artificialia*. *Naturalia* consisted of three areas: *regno animali* (animals), *regno vegetabili* (vegetation), and *regno minerali* (minerals). *Artificialia* consisted of original fine art and all forms of applied arts. See Pearce, p. 99.

⁴ See Pearce, pp. 91–97. for a detailed analysis of collecting and displaying. For further discussion on the evolution of the museum based on scientific interests, see Kim Sloan, *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century* (London: The British Museum Press, 2003).

⁵ Luke Syson, “The Ordering of the Artificial World: Collecting, Classification and Progress,” *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Kim Sloan (London: The British Museum Press, 2003) p. 110.

⁶ Syson, p. 110.

⁷ Pearce, p. 2.

⁸ Pearce, p. 3.

curation is reflective of the archaeological approach at the British Museum, the decorative art approach at the Victoria and Albert Museum, social historical approach at the Croydon Museum and at the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery⁹, and the religious approach at the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow¹⁰.

Within their religious context, the function of Hindu deities is to manifest the abstract powers ever present in the universe as a result of their ritual establishment carried out by worshippers. These powers exist in various forms, a few examples include creation, fertility, death, love and the five elements of air, water, fire, ether and earth. The worshippers of the deities have always treated them as living beings and have created domestic shrines and temples to house them, infuse and invoke their divine powers through regular devotional activity and to maintain their divine existence in their day-to-day lives¹¹.

It is apparent within this research that the gaze of the museum visitor and the temple devotee towards a Hindu deity differs as a result of its physical and ideological context, but it is also the subject's predisposition, which is defined and developed within either or none of the belief systems, that causes him or her to respond towards images of Hindu gods and goddesses.

2. Idols as Gods

This section of the chapter examines the spiritual characteristics of Hindu deities instilled at the stage of creation, continued into their installation in the temple and throughout their worshipped lives.

Within Hinduism, the numerous deities worshipped by people daily, have emerged and evolved from a range of simple to complex beliefs since 2500 BC. All ideas manifest into images encompass one subject that has always been of interest to

⁹ The constructed Hindu shrine at the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery is exhibited in the James Green Gallery of World Art, which in itself is a classifier of the idols as art. It is however a representation of the worshipping practices of the Hindu community in Brighton. The rituals performed in the museum gallery by the Hindu Women's Group are described later in this chapter.

¹⁰ Crispin Paine, a museums and heritage consultant, has analysed the academic disciplines of 'archaeology', 'art history', 'social history', 'anthropology', and 'science', which are reflected by museums even today and scrutinises the handling of the subject of 'religion' in museums in Greater London. This research however, extends the study to examples throughout the UK. Crispin Paine, "Religion in London's Museums", *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religions*, ed. Crispin Paine (London: Leicester University Press, 2000) pp. 151-170.

¹¹ Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) pp. 6-7.

mankind: cosmogony.

It is believed that *Brahma*, the creator of the Universe is the Almighty. The *Vedas* (four books) recognise only one god, *Brahma*, initially making Hinduism a monotheistic religion. He is the creator, the preserver and the destroyer. Approximately 1500 years later, these three roles were characterised into three distinct deities: *Brahma* (the creator), *Vishnu* (the preserver) and *Shiva* (the destroyer) ¹². Some images of the three are narrative and representational and depict them as human or superhuman, whereas some are symbolic. The belief that gods and the spiritual energy in the cosmos are “eternal” ¹³, they can take any shape or form - as ‘*avatars*’ or reincarnations, transformed Hinduism from being monotheistic to polytheistic ¹⁴. Art historian Richard Blurton describes the concept of incarnation and states that, “because the divine is indefinable, any one thing can be viewed as the temporal residence, body or symbol of the deity, just as well as anything else.” ¹⁵ Richard Davis ¹⁶ further describes this concept in the following words:

Siva could inhabit all sorts of things. Not only would Siva enter into a beautiful bronze image and stolid stone lingas, but also into circular diagrams, cloth paintings, fires, water in consecrated pots, special books on their stands and various other “supports”.

¹⁷



Figure 2.1.

Rice-paste drawing and flowers invoking the goddess *Kali* in West Bengal (Photo: courtesy of Ajit Mookerjee)

¹² Magnus Fredrik Ferdinand Björnstjerna, *The Theogony of the Hindoos: With Their Systems of Philosophy and Cosmogony* (London: J. Murray, 1844) See also J.L Brockington, *The Sacred Thread: Hinduism in Its Continuity and Diversity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981).

¹³ Richard T. Blurton, *Hindu Art*, 2nd ed. (London: British Museum Press, 1994) p. 9.

¹⁴ Björnstjerna provides a detailed account of the evolution of the Hindu belief system. Vidya Dehejia, art historian and curator of Indian art at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. describes the polytheistic nature of Hinduism as one which encompasses the concept of the deity with infinite facets and characteristics. See Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997) pp. 137-138.

¹⁵ Blurton, p. 9.

¹⁶ Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Yale University

¹⁷ Davis, p. 21. This is possible through correct ritual.

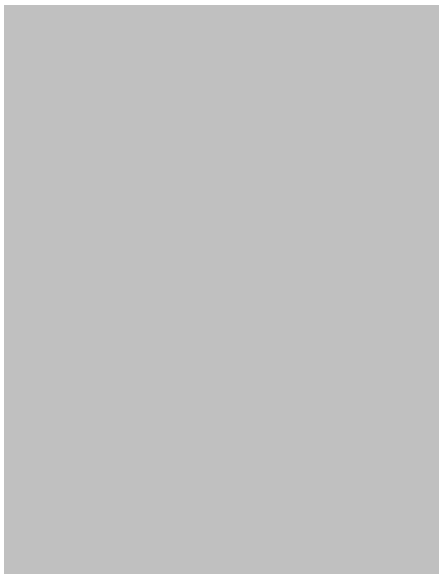


Figure 2.2.

A farmer's wife painting the exterior walls of her house to invoke the goddess of prosperity, *Lakshmi* (Photo: courtesy of Stephen Huyler)

This belief not only dictates ritual practices and suggests the inter-changeability of images used for worship in Hindu temples and domestic shrines, it also significantly reduces the epistemological significance of the Hindu idol within social and religious history. Ephemeral elements become divine and the deity is one of the many objects of worship.

A deity representing the principle of destruction also embodies the principle of creation. This, states Björnstjerna, “is one of the fundamental ideas of the *Brahmin* (*Vedic*) doctrine, and is frequently expressed in their sacred books in a very sublime manner.”¹⁸ He has quoted the following verse from the *Vedic* cosmogony:

Numberless are the revolutions in the world, the creations,
destructions, and re-creations. He, the almighty brings them
forth, as it were, in sport; lets death follow life, and life death.

¹⁹

Hence *Shiva*, the god of destruction is also regarded as the initiator of creation. The three concepts - creation, preservation, and destruction have been visually manifested into idols or icons and worshipped. *Shiva*'s human form is an androgynous image, elegant and graceful, and his aniconic form is either a *linga*: the phallus or a *linga* and *yoni*: the phallus and vagina ²⁰ (figure 2.3). Another of his forms depicts *Shiva* as half-male and half-female (figure 2.4), and as a dancer (*Nataraja* ²¹). The balance of the figure denotes a balance in the universe.

¹⁸ Björnstjerna, p. 55.

¹⁹ Björnstjerna, p. 55.

²⁰ Partha Mitter, *Indian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 38.

²¹ The dancing *Shiva* is called *Nataraja* (*Nat* - dance, *Raja* - ruler). An example in bronze is on permanent display at the Hotung Gallery of World Art at the British Museum and at the St.



Figure 2.3.

**The Shiva Linga
(photo: anonymous)**

Figure 2.4.

**Ardhanarishvara, the half-male,
half-female depiction of Shiva
in a Rajasthani painting (Photo:
courtesy of the British Museum)**

Nataraja dances to the very end of time as the universe disintegrates into a destructive fire before being reborn. Hindu gods and goddesses are not only representations of the cosmos; they are believed to embody it. Their worship signifies a worship of the cosmos and the energy that has created, and preserves, the universe. Theology dominates the making of the idols, which is expressed through precise visual symbols²². Art historian Ananda Commaraswamy has compared the depiction of time in western art with Indian art. While the former depicts a moment in time, he points out, the latter represents a “continuous condition (not eternal)”²³. I am explicitly depicting this cyclical characteristic of life in my artwork **Ganesh, circa 1900**. *Nataraja* is an example of a form that depicts the continuum of life and the cyclical nature of time through the circular aura surrounding the image. The drum he holds in one of his four hands, beats at each part of the life cycle, whereas his open right hand is a gesture of blessing

Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow, Scotland.

²² Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “Introduction to the Art of Eastern Asia,” *Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey, vol. 1. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) p. 112. Visual symbols that are consistently present within the range of worshipped images are: the third eye on the forehead symbolises wisdom and is the ‘all seeing eye’, the multiple hands represent superhuman qualities, shape of the *Shiva linga* is a conjunction of *Shiva* and *Shakti* (male and female creative energy), and *Vishnu* is often depicted with a crown, which reflects his regal qualities.

²³ Coomaraswamy, pp. 115-116.

everyone. He balances on one foot and crushes the demon of ignorance whereas his other raised foot signifies freedom. His wide hips represent his feminine characteristic associated with creation and the ring of fire outlining him is the fire of destruction and simultaneous rebirth ²⁴.

2.1. Creation of Divine Images

Art historian Richard Blurton raises an important question, which offers a rhetorical insight into the discussion of the idol as an art object and its interpretation in the museum in the latter sections of this chapter: “how does the artist show the divine in concrete form, when there is no known form from which to model?” ²⁵

All of me is on fire;
 My voice, my body, my hands
 I tremble with the need to express
 Like a woman I create out of myself
 The energy pours out through the chisel
 The emerging form is the child
 To who I give birth.
 The imprint of my inner being
 My child, and yet my mother too
 The energy of the space and earth
 In this artifice, do you see nature?
 Do you hear and feel the mother the way I do?
 With whom shall I celebrate this knowledge?
 Where shall my child be nurtured henceforth?
 - *Vastu Marabu (Translation from Tamil)* ²⁶

The rhythmic sounds of the iron chisel interspersed with the crackling fire sharpening it, accompany the verse in the 1992 documentary film, *Vastu Marabu*, as the sculptors work at creating *Vishnu* out of a single piece of stone. The sculptor creates the idol based on accurate measurements as prescribed in *Shilpa Shastra*, the book explaining the science of sculpting Hindu images (*moorti* ²⁷). Within this sculptural tradition, the forms of the deities are never copied from

²⁴ The iconography of *Nataraja* has been explained at the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art. The information with the image is printed on an acetate sheet, which can be held up against *Nataraja* for a comparable diagrammatic exploration of the meanings of the visual symbols. For a literary explanation, see E.B. Havell's essay “The Dance of Shiva” in *The Art Heritage of India* (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1964) pp. 27-30.

²⁵ Blurton, p. 9.

²⁶ Tamil poem recited in documentary film: *Bala Kailasam*, “Vastu Marabu,” (India: DER, 1992). It provides a detailed account of the temple sculptural tradition. The temple construction, and proportions of the idol are specified in *Shilpa Shastra*, the handbook for the sculpting of images of gods. The temple and the idol are regarded as an entity.

²⁷ Form. ‘*Moorat*’ means image and ‘*moorti*’ is the form that embodies the image. Blurton, p. 235.

nature, nor are they created as symbols of beauty²⁸. They can be described as beautiful, but the creative intent is not purely aesthetic. Richard Davis states that iconographic texts advocate that the images of gods to be created as beautiful, and the devotional poets praised their beauty through their verses. Aesthetic concerns, however, explains Davis, “were secondary to other criteria: iconographic correctness, completeness, ritual animation and divine presence²⁹”. For a wooden deity, from the very selection of a tree to the artisan chosen for its creation, a series of purification rituals are practised. Upon creation, the priest recites mantras to identify the deity that inhabits the wooden or bronze figure. Davis states that “there is never a time when the image exists as an unconsecrated object; its very coming into being is within ritual”³⁰.

‘Spiritual contemplation’ is the principle used by the creator of Hindu gods and goddesses, which refrains from the realistic depiction of the human being unlike Greek artists for whom the human body was perceived as ideal and inspirational³¹. Multiple arms, and heads are visual depictions of various divine aspects and powers of gods. Whereas the *Shiva linga*, a plain stone substitution is a potent anthropomorphic image of the “formless god”³². Coomaraswamy has quoted the procedures to be followed by the sculptor of divine images from the *Sukranitisara*, a Sanskrit text defining the methods of sculpting deities:

The imager (*pratima-karaka*) should prepare the images that are to be used in temples by means of the visual formulae (*dhyana*) that are proper to angels (*svardhya-devata*) whose are the images to be made. It is for the successful attainment of visual formulation (*dhyana-yoga*) that the lineaments (*laksana*) of images are recorded (*smrta*), so that the mortal imager may be expert in visual formulation (*dhyana-rata*) for it is thus and in no other way, least of all (*va khalu*) with a model before his eyes (*pratyaksha*) that he can accomplish his task.³³

Both the *Shilpa Shastra* and *Vedas* provide a framework and are used as manuals to create the divine image. The sculptor can apply his imagination and self-expression in creating idols for worship and “the spirit or soul of the sculptor is

28 George Michell, *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to Its Meaning and Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) p. 61.

29 Davis, pp. 22-23.

30 Davis, p. 35.

31 Havell, pp. 20-21.

32 Havell, p. 21.

33 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “The Part of Art in Indian Life,” *Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey, vol. 1. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) pp. 84-85.

commemorated through the work”³⁴. Whilst he serves society and the temple, he creates with his mind, body and soul. Representative or realistic images are, however, denounced primarily due to their likeness to worldly themes. Coomaraswamy explains that the creator of the image should “empty his mind of all other content, and proceed to work directly from an inwardly known image; and similarly in the case where the form is not evoked by the craftsman individually, but is handed down from generation to generation in the collective consciousness of the craft³⁵”. He continues to make an important comparison between the image of the deity (*moorti*) and *yantra* (cosmic diagram)³⁶. As the “developed and anthropomorphic”³⁷ image of the deity is not a copy or resemblance of the worldly elements, it is as abstract as the *yantra*, both of which are used to focus the divine energy for worship and meditation.

2.2. Darshan: Communion with God

Following the creation of the image and its installation in the temple sanctum, the artisan or sculptor draws the outline of the three eyes (the third eye is on the forehead) and then carves the apertures, followed by the application of an unguent on the eyes. This ceremony is called ‘*netronmilana*’, (*netra* – eyes, *milana* – meeting or union) after which the divine energy is infused into the image through ceremonious acts.

The fabricated image is a body (*vigraha*) or embodiment (*murti*). Divinity in the form of a soul (*atman*), animating spirit (*jiva*), life breath (*prana*), consciousness (*cetana*), or divine energy (*sakti*) must enter this body to bring it to life, to infuse it with divine presence, just as a soul must enter a human body to instill life into it.³⁸

The viewing of this ceremony or taking ‘*darshan*’ is highly auspicious for the worshipper, as he not only sees the god, the god returns his gaze³⁹. On a daily basis, the sight of the deity or eye-contact made with the god is often the

34 Michell, p. 61

35 Coomaraswamy, “The Part of Art in Indian Life,” p. 88.

36 *Yantras* are worshipping tools and aids in meditative discipline. They are diagrammatic amalgamations of three principles: the form, the function, and power. An example of a simple *Yantra* is an equilateral triangle, which is a depiction of the three co-ordinated Aspects of the One (*Brahman*): Will (*iccha*), Knowledge (*Jnana*) and Action (*kriya*). When the triangle sits on a base, it is symbolic of the male principle, and when it stands on its apex it suggests the female energy. When the two triangles intersect, it forms a symbolic six-petalled lotus, which is a depiction of creation. Havell has provided this description in his essay “The Evolution of the Divine Ideal”. See, Havell, p. 16. (Each deity has an associated *Yantra*.)

37 Coomaraswamy, “The Part of Art in Indian Life,” p. 88.

38 Davis, p. 34.

39 Diana L. Eck, *Darśan*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

purpose of visiting the temple ⁴⁰. The meeting of the worshipper's eyes and the god or goddess's eyes is a private communion between the two and is marked as the culmination of the visit to the temple ⁴¹. Sarah Greenberg, editor of the Royal Academy magazine, travelled to Tamil Nadu in search of Chola bronzes ⁴² in-situ and has described the auspicious moment of 'darshan' in the following words:

Crowds of schoolchildren have congregated here for twilight *puja* (worship) at the shrine of the elephant god, Ganesh, who removes obstacles and blesses study. They are here to make darshan (eye contact) with the sculpture of the god: in their fervent gaze they transmit energy to him and he transfers it back to them as grace. ⁴³

Thus, deities are treated as living beings. The god and goddess are bathed with milk, ghee ⁴⁴, coconut water and sandalwood water. They are showered with flowers, adorned with jewels and garlands, lamps are lit to serenade the idols with, and food is offered. The worshippers sing devotional songs, chant mantras and evoke the sacred within the idol and within themselves. This physical engagement with the deity is unique to Hinduism. Often, gods in households are put to bed at night in their shrines and awakened in the morning with prayers ⁴⁵.

Members of the family take 'darshan' of the deity before commencing activities for the day. Some household shrines can be found in nooks and corners of the house, cupboards, courtyards, and gardens or in small elaborate temples created within the house (figures 2.5, 2.6, and 2.7).

All consecrated images in the Hindu tradition have the same significance, whether housed in an elaborate room or in a small box. The image doesn't matter. What matters is what it represents. The

⁴⁰ Blurton, p. 237. The ritual significance of 'darshan' and its meaning within the temple will continue to be referred to in this thesis as it is an important act of the human-idol interaction. It projects feelings of appreciation, admiration, devotion, observation, transcendence and wonder.

⁴¹ Blurton, p. 57. Ananda Coomaraswamy has compared the meeting of the eyes with a religious icon to the Indian rhetoric of love, which commences with sight - either by viewing a picture or by viewing eye-to-eye. He continues to describe the communion with the god as insightful. If a worshipper is to 'see' the all-viewing immanent *Brahma* (the god of creation), his eye must be introverted. See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Meeting of Eyes," *Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey, vol. 1. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) p. 233.

⁴² The Royal Academy of Arts hosted the exhibition *Chola: Sacred Bronzes of Southern India*, 11 November 2006-25 February 2007. The most significant and skilfully crafted bronzes of gods and goddesses were made in south India between, 985-1018 AD. The tradition of making these in the lost wax method is still alive in Tamil Nadu.

⁴³ Sarah Greenberg, "Living Colour," *Royal Academy of Arts Magazine* 93. (2006) p. 52.

⁴⁴ Clarified butter.

⁴⁵ Balraj Khanna and George Michell, *Human and Divine: 2000 Years of Indian Sculpture* (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2000) p. 6.

individual or family occupies the house, devotees who revere their god. The deities occupy a smaller space within the context of the house, creating a home within a home. But, they essentially create centres of exaggerated activity, thereby elevating their small physical stature to a greater, even prodigious end.⁴⁶



Figure 2.5.

**Devotee praying at her household shrine
(photo: courtesy of Stephen Huyler)**

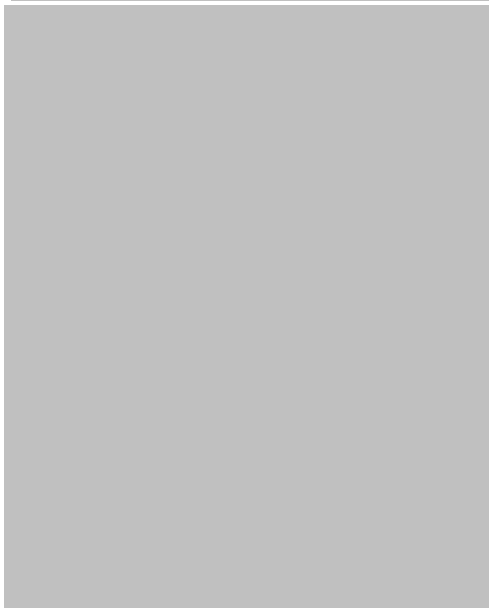


Figure 2.6.

**A domestic shrine
(photo: courtesy of Stephen Huyler)**



Figure 2.7.

**Krishna image on a tree at a pilgrim centre in Vrindavan
(photo: courtesy of Ajit Mookerjee)**

The deity is essentially a part of the family. The act of daily worship or *puja* is a ritual that is common amongst Hindus of all sects. Rituals performed in a temple

⁴⁶ Avni Patel, "Gods in the Cupboard, Hindu Shrines at Home," *Things magazine* 17-18. (2004) p. 148. Avni Patel is a London-based artist and graphic designer. She is a Hindu and has described her observations and experiences during her visits to families who have residing deities in their houses.

involve hand gestures while chanting mantras, yogic postures, movement within the temple and being aware of the mind and body in the presence of the deity and ultimately the cosmos. Those who perform rituals in a *Shiva* temple are conscious and purposeful in their act⁴⁷. They are an important part of the world they constitute: one that has a continuous cycle of life and death, one that has the presence of *Shiva* and within which the soul has to liberate itself. Bathing before entering the temple, reciting hymns, symbolic hand gestures (figure 2.8) are the ways in which a devotee prepares himself and focuses the powers of the god into the facing the deity “to draw himself into contact with the divine”.⁴⁸



Figure 2.8.

A hand gesture through which the devotee invokes life into the deity in the *pranaprathista* ceremony (image: courtesy of Madhu Khanna)

Ritual behaviour is immanent in worshippers’ interaction with their deities. This also extends to the museum space wherein visitors’ response towards idols and other artefacts, can have a formalised regular pattern or a ritualistic tendency as a result of their curation and interpretation⁴⁹. Later in this chapter, I will examine the ‘museum and temple effect’ that cause Hindu idols to be perceived as gods, and as objects worthy of attentive viewing.

3. Temple and Museum Building

This section compares temple and museum spaces, which are designed to house objects (deities in this context) and facilitate rituals or regular behaviour amongst devotees and visitors for enlightenment (spiritual and educational).

Within the Indian worshipping tradition, it is widely believed that the soil or the land itself is the “residence of the divinity, especially in its feminine

⁴⁷ This forms the basis of one of my four artworks, *Kinetic Shiva* and is discussed in Chapter 3.

⁴⁸ Michell, p. 63.

⁴⁹ Refer to Chapter 3 for examples of museum rituals.

manifestation”⁵⁰. Hence, the idea that deities reside in the very landscape has initiated the construction of temples and shrines in a variety of topographic sites, such as: riverbanks, mountain summits and near springs⁵¹. It is believed that temples are consecrated places where gods and goddesses choose to appear to be experienced by worshippers. Various terms in Sanskrit assigned to temples convey their presence in the sacred space: “a seat or platform of God (*prasada*), a house of God (*devagriham*), a residence of God (*devalaya*) or a waiting and abiding place (*mandiram*)”⁵².



Figure 2.9.

A Vishnu temple from Tamil Nadu depicted in a painting shows Vishnu residing in the central area (*garbhagriha*). (image: courtesy of the British Museum)

The comparison between museums and temples, not only due to their classic temple-like façades, but also because of their early definition as ‘*musaeums*’, makes their comparison to Hindu temples, important and valid. The ‘*musaeum*’ was “consecrated to the nine muses, goddesses of poetry, music and the liberal arts”⁵³. The sacred connection here is crucial as the gazes of the worshipper and the ‘*musaeum*’ visitor; both encompass admiration and a degree of spiritual transcendence (through goddesses that represent the arts in the latter case). The usage of the term ‘consecrate’, to suggest the dedication of space for a certain belief-led practice to occur within it, has strong links with the sacred. Hence, in classical Alexandria, ‘*musaeums*’ were spaces where quasi-religious sentiments existed. Not only did the scientific and empirical methods of study

⁵⁰ Blurton, p. 40.

⁵¹ Michell, p. 68.

⁵² Michell, p. 62.

⁵³ Pearce, p. 93.

take a stronghold in the eighteenth century, they separated the religious from the secular. The distinction of the 'scientific' from the 'religious' or the 'lived' worlds⁵⁴ causes the deity to be perceived as either a religious object or art and the very purpose of its existence changes. However distinct the 'religious' and the 'scientific' or the 'secular' may appear, Brian Durrans, Deputy Keeper of the Department of Ethnography at the British Museum, questions the limits of secular and religious domains in social practices across cultures and elucidates:

The socially constructed boundary between sacred and secular is routinely transgressed in practice (however sharply defined it may be in ideology), so to switch focus from what people think to what they do is to question religion as a discrete and sovereign domain.⁵⁵

The practice of touching the feet of one's elders is similar to bowing and touching the feet of the deity, both of which are commonly practised rituals in India. It is difficult to distinguish the religious from the secular in this case, but there is a strong binding factor of 'belief', which expresses respect and translates into an external behavioural expression. Another example of the blurring of boundaries between the secular and the sacred was the act of consecration of kings in the Indian subcontinent. They would be anointed, adorned, priests would chant mantras and the king would be enthroned. This is similar to the consecration of the deity in the temple. If the king gained godly powers, the idol acquired sovereign powers. Davis describes the "lords and owners of the temple"⁵⁶ as being rulers of kingdoms in certain cases.

3.1. Temple Layout

The temple and museum spaces generate and facilitate ritualistic behaviour through their layout and construction and through the arrangement of 'objects' within them⁵⁷. Worshippers in temples and visitors in museums move through the constructed space to view the deity in the former case, and objects in general

⁵⁴ Bernadette Lynch, "The Amendable Object: Working with Diaspora Communities through a Psychoanalysis of Touch," *Touch in Museums: Policy and Practice in Object Handling*, ed. Fiona Candlin (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2008) p. 261. Lynch is a museum studies writer and consultant. Her essay points out the difference between the scientific and visual museum, to the multi-sensory worlds some of the museum visitors or the diaspora communities belong to. She proposes the use of collections to help people who have suffered emotionally through being in exile.

⁵⁵ Brian Durrans, "(Not) Religion in Museums," *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion*, ed. Crispin Paine (London: Leicester University Press, 2000) p. 63.

⁵⁶ Davis, p. 7. See also, Michell, p. 63.

⁵⁷ See Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Ritual: Inside Public Art Museums*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1995).

in the latter.

Architects, sculptors and craftsmen construct the Hindu temple, which is carefully designed to facilitate the union between god and man. The Hindu temple evolved from being a simple shrine to one which had a complex plan and elevation. The temple exteriors are ornately carved and sculpted to represent the “entire panorama of the life of nature”⁵⁸: male and female figures, flora, fauna, mythical gods and goddesses, divine and semi-divine beings. Whereas the innermost cell, literally known as the “womb chamber” or the ‘*garbhagriha*’, evoking the mother’s womb is a dark mysterious chamber where one feels the presence of the deity, explains Hindu theology and art expert, Madhu Khanna. He describes the *garbhagriha* in the following words:

It lies hidden among the folds of the massive outer walls, reached through a series of ceremonial halls and stairways, whose walls and ceilings are covered with paintings or lined with icons installed in niches. These halls lead gradually up from ground-level, the mundane, to the highest regions of the spiritual, opening finally on to the dark, relatively small *Garbhagriha*, where an image or emblem of the temple’s tutelary deity resides. The *garbhagriha* represents the culmination of the individual’s search and is the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. It lies directly beneath the temple’s spire.⁵⁹ (Fig 2.10)

⁵⁸ Madhu Khanna, *Yantra, the Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1979) p. 43.

⁵⁹ Khanna, p. 143. I installed my artwork, *Kinetic Shiva* in a dimly lit womb-like chamber evoking the *garbhagriha*. See Chapter 3.

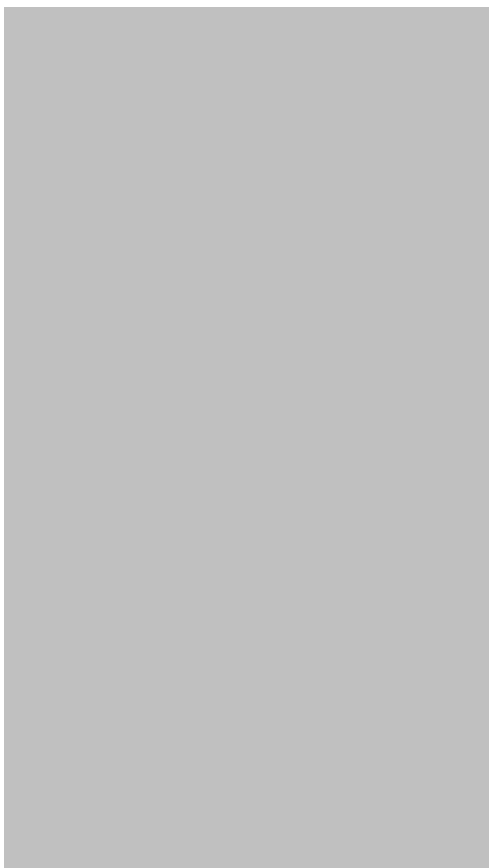


Figure 2.10.

Plan and elevation of a temple in south India.

The plan is like a *yantra* (cosmic diagram). The central region situated below the spire is the *garbhagriha* (photo: courtesy of Madhu Khanna)

Within Hinduism, devotion is focussed on the deity in the *garbhagriha*, but acts of worship extend to the entire temple complex. The divinity believed to be residing in the sanctuary is also believed to be present within the structure of the temple ⁶⁰. The architectural and sculptural elements of the temple illustrate stories of divinity in the space for the worshipper to prepare her/himself for the communion with the deity. Ceremonies and rituals hold an important place in the act of direct worship of the deity.

3.2. Museum Metaphysics

In their 1980 essay “The Universal Survey Museum”, Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach compared the museum’s function of making visible the idea of the state with that of ancient ceremonial monuments. Paintings, statuettes and reliefs in churches, palaces or temples form an integral part of the structure, physically as well as ideologically; they articulate its meanings and functions, and dictate the ceremonial rituals practised in the space. Duncan and Wallach described the museum as an “architectural phenomenon that selects and arranges works of

⁶⁰ Michell, p. 62.

art within a sequence of spaces”⁶¹, functioning as an “iconographic programme”, akin to a ceremonial monument. The visitors to the museum move through, what the authors define as a “programmed experience” and perform the ritual of an ideal citizen. They described it as an internalizing of values and beliefs that are written in the architectural script. The evolution of public museums in Europe in the eighteenth-century from royal and princely art collections⁶², witnessed their continuing authoritative doctrine, illuminated by their inheritance of ceremonial royal functions, and the arrangement of collections. The fall of the monarchy in eighteenth-century France and the declaration of the Louvre as a public museum meant that whilst the collection belonged to the state, the identity of the new institution as a powerful symbol of the state and as a custodian of the art collections, gave it a redefined ceremonious function. The grand galleries and their collections continued to represent the magnificence of the state and attracted foreign visitors and local dignitaries. Even though parts of the museum were open to public by the nineteenth century, Duncan and Wallach critically pointed out that “they retained their character as royal reception halls”⁶³.

“The Universal Survey Museum” and Duncan’s work *Civilizing Rituals* do not approach museum buildings as neutral spaces – separate entities from the collections; rather as an ensemble, or “complex entities in which the art and architecture are parts of a larger whole”⁶⁴. I have used the term ‘museum metaphysics’ in my exploration of the the experience of the museum space, through the study of its architecture and the display of its collections. Duncan and Wallach have compared the museum to ceremonial buildings and in *Civilizing Rituals* Duncan has referred to Goethe’s account of feeling spiritually uplifted upon entering the Dresden Gallery⁶⁵. In my comparison of the museum building with the temple, I am examining the intangible or the spiritual meanings of the spaces, which are explored in the exhibition **From Shrine to Plinth**. The liminal quality associated with the museum and the temple is the construction of a distinct space, separate from mundane everyday spaces. I am examining the physical factors that influence the experience of being in the museum. Grand museum buildings such as those of the Ashmolean, the National Gallery

⁶¹ Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” *Art History* 3 (1980) p. 450.

⁶² Reference has been made to the Dresden Gallery, the Viennese Royal Collection and the Uffizi. The evolution of the Louvre as a public museum from a royal gallery in the Louvre Palace has been the focus of the study of European museums.

⁶³ Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” p. 453.

⁶⁴ Duncan, *Civilizing Ritual: Inside Public Art Museums*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1995) p. 1.

⁶⁵ Duncan, Carol. *Civilizing Ritual: Inside Public Art Museums*. pp. 14-15.

and the British Museum ⁶⁶ were built in Neo-Classical and Greek revival styles ⁶⁷.



Figure 2.11.

**The façade of the
British Museum
Lithograph, 1851
(image: courtesy of
Tim Knox)**



Figure 2.12.

**The façade of the National
Gallery, London
(photo: courtesy of the Saatchi
Gallery)**



Figure 2.13.

**Ashmolean Museum
façade, Oxford
(photo: courtesy of the
Ashmolean Museum)**

⁶⁶ For an account of the design and construction of the British Library see, Tim Knox, "The King's Library and Its Architectural Genesis," *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Kim Sloan (London: The British Museum Press, 2003) pp. 46-57.

⁶⁷ The Victoria and Albert Museum, however, is an example of a grand Victorian building constructed between 1856 and 1865. It contains large corridors and rooms that facilitate chronological and topical exhibitions. For more information on the museum and its collections, refer to: Anna Somers Cocks, *The Victoria and Albert Museum, the Making of the Collection* (Leicester: Windward, 1980).

Tim Knox, head curator of the National Trust has described the designing stages of the extension to Montagu House, the initial British Museum building in Bloomsbury, that housed early collections. It highlights the intention of designing a building that resembled a Greek temple.

In 1820 Smirke was instructed to draw up plans for extensions to the old buildings, proposing to the Treasury, in February 1821, two parallel wings projecting from the back of the Montagu House, the first stage of the Greek Revivalist design that was eventually intended to encompass the entire Museum, rebuilding it as a great rectangular quadrangle fronted by a huge portico flanked by colonnades.⁶⁸

In addition to this, the two large halls that contained an upper gallery, had balustrades that bore wings of Hermes, the messenger of the Gods and the framing of bookcases between the windows and the gallery were designed to resemble 'aedicules' or 'temple-fronts'⁶⁹.



Figure 2.14.

**Design of frame for the bookcase.
Produced by Architect Robert Smirke's office,
1825. From the Public Record Office
(courtesy of Tim Knox)**

Carol Duncan too, has compared the façade of museum buildings built between the eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries to those of Greek or Roman

⁶⁸ Knox, p. 47.
⁶⁹ Knox, p. 52.

temples. The ideology that objective knowledge reigned supreme during the Enlightenment and the resulting dichotomy of religious and secular beliefs meant that the museum as a purveyor of knowledge became the community's official preserver of culture. The influence of temple façades in museum buildings suggests that the interest was not religious, but secular, expressing balance in form and potent with architectural beauty, and exuded authority and control. Duncan continues to compare the interiors to religious buildings in the text that examines the museum space as a setting for rituals.

These same monumental forms, however also brought with them the spaces of public rituals - corridors scaled for processions, halls implying large, communal gatherings, and interior sanctuaries designed for awesome and potent effigies.⁷⁰



Figure 2.15.

Hotung Gallery at the British Museum
An illustration of the display of Hindu deities carved out of stone (photo: author)

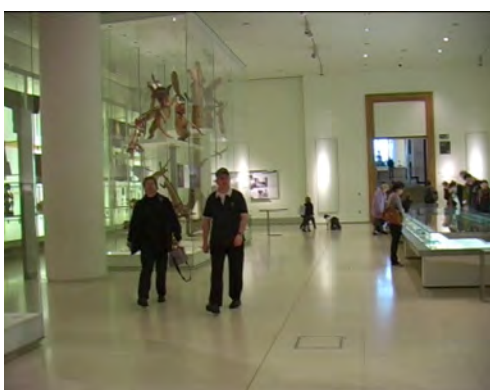


Figure 2.16.

Wide walkway through the African Gallery, British Museum
(photo: author)

Monumental museums' obvious resemblance to temples gives them grandeur and authoritative presence. Duncan describes their various parts: the grand staircase, the positioning of sculptures, the rotundas, and grand doorways as necessary prologues to entering the space where the art is displayed. She quotes British MP

⁷⁰ Duncan, *Civilizing Ritual: Inside Public Art Museums*, p. 10.

William Ewart to elucidate the notion:

Do you not think that in a splendid gallery ... all the adjacent and circumjacent parts of that building should ... have a regard for the arts, ... with fountains, statues, and other objects of interest calculated to prepare [visitors'] minds before entering the building, and lead them the better to appreciate the works of art which they would afterwards see? ⁷¹

As a crucial part of the iconographic programme, monumental features functioned as triumphal displays in The Louvre in Napoleonic France, in the form of arches decorated with trophies ⁷²; the changing ceiling decorations further represented changing powers in the state: from the depiction of Louis XV as Protector of the Arts to France in the Guise of Minerva Protecting the Arts following the downfall of monarchy ⁷³. The paintings on the museum's ceilings and their interpretation changed with the changing political power: from the rule of the monarch to France as a Republican state. The arrangement of collections in the museum created a setting for a narrative, which fulfilled the museum's political agenda of displaying national spirit. Duncan and Wallach lead the reader through the main routes in the museum; through corridors, over the bridges connecting wings of the museum and through galleries, in which Greek, Roman and Italian art from a variety of periods and styles, as well as Egyptian antiquities, culminate into galleries that depict French art. They describe this iconographic programme as a dramatization of the triumph of the French Civilization.

In Duncan's 1995 work *Civilizing Rituals*, the museum visitor performs a slightly different set of rituals; they are no longer enactments of citizenship, the viewer is a contemplative civilized individual, engaging with the art in the museum; an activity which is removed from the routines of mundane daily life. Hence, the museum building, the collections and the narratives form a setting in which the visitors are conforming to the museum's ideological agendas and performing secular rituals (this will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3).

The pedagogical role of the contemporary public museum gives it a curatorial and an interpretive responsibility to provide a knowledgeable visual narrative to

⁷¹ Duncan, *Civilizing Ritual: Inside Public Art Museums*, p. 11. Excerpt from an 1853 Select Committee Report on the National Gallery in the House of Commons.

⁷² Duncan and Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," p. 449.

⁷³ For a more detailed account see Duncan and Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," pp. 460-461.

museum visitors through the display of collections in a chronological, typological, geographical, or any other classificatory format that would construct and disseminate meaning. Pearce calls the organising of an exhibition installation — the arrangement of objects in space “exhibition morphology”⁷⁴. Goethe’s concept of the term ‘morphology’ refers to it as “a general science of possible forms, covering not just forms in nature, but forms in art...”⁷⁵. It is used in architecture as ‘architectural morphology’ or ‘configurational studies’ and relates to the limits geometry can place on forms and shapes of buildings and their plans. In linguistics, it refers to the syntax of language, and in the context of museums, it is reflective of spatial syntax: the interior museum space and the organisation of the exhibits or installations. A morphological analysis of an exhibition would therefore include the study of the configuration of the space, in relation to the arrangement of objects, and the effect these have on visibility and movement of people⁷⁶. Research in patterns of visitor movement within a spatial structure, or “spatially guided movement” has provided an understanding on exhibits that are visited more than others, to improve upon and achieve an effective “construction of a hierarchy of messages” in exhibitions⁷⁷. Hence, one of the factors that influences audience attention, and their movement in space (which can be choreographed) is the arrangement of the exhibits. Below is an illustration of a movement pattern highlighted by the unshaded area; the most viewed exhibits are marked A, the least viewed, C; making it possible to create an exhibition design for the most effective dissemination of information⁷⁸.



Figure 2.17.

**Visitor movement
and exhibition design
(figure: courtesy of
Susan Pearce)**

David Dean, an exhibition design expert and manager has devised methodologies

⁷⁴ Pearce, p. 136.

⁷⁵ See J.P. Steadman, *Architectural Morphology* (London: Pion Limited, 1983) p. i.

⁷⁶ See Jean D. Wineman and John Peponis, “Constructing Spatial Meaning: Spatial Affordances in Museum Design,” *Environment and Behaviour*. 42 (2010) pp 86-109.

⁷⁷ Wineman and Peponis. p. 88.

⁷⁸ This exhibition morphology has been studied at the Ontario Museum and at the Bartlett School of Architecture and Planning, London University. Pearce, p. 137.

interpretation, display of collections in the museum, worshipping accoutrements in the temple) are comparable.

3.3. Ritualistic Movement and Sacred Geometry

The approach in the layout and overall design of the temple interiors could be described as being more directed. There is a certain amount of freedom for worshippers to move in the temple complex for a personal experience of the sacred space. It is, however, important to describe the widely practised ritualistic movements of devotees in an archetypal temple as these rituals strongly reflect 'numinous' aspects of the religion⁸². The position of the deity is fixed and the ultimate aim of the worshipper is to achieve oneness with the divine power it is believed to embody. The space within the temple is created for the worshipper to go through a journey of spiritual consciousness as s/he walks towards the *garbhagriha*; it is a progression towards enlightenment.



Figure 2.19.

Painting depicting the Jagannath Temple, Puri, east India. It depicts the plan, elevation and section. It shows the *garbhagriha* and sacred locations in the landscape (image: courtesy of the British Museum)

Coomaraswamy has described this journey as becoming an "embryo" and simultaneously being "reborn from the sacred enclosure as from a womb"⁸³.

The rituals performed within the temple and the movement of the priest and

⁸² Chris Arthur has defined the 'numinous' as the "real innermost core" or the essence of the sacred, which challenges its easy expression. See Chris Arthur, "Exhibiting the Sacred," *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion* ed. Crispin Paine (London: Leicester University Press, 2000) p. 7. Chris Arthur has borrowed the term from Rudolf Otto's book, *Das Heilige* (1979), the English translation is called *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto was the founder of the first general museum of world religions.

⁸³ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "An Indian Temple: The Kandarya Mahadeo," *Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey, vol. I. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) p. 4.

the worshippers are of prime importance. There is a direct path from the entrance of the temple to the sanctuary where the deity resides, followed by the circumambulation (*pradakshina*), a circular movement in the clockwise direction around the deity ⁸⁴ (figure 2.20.). This circumambulatory path runs around the *garbhagriha* ⁸⁵. The performer of the ritual engages her/himself through movement in meditation, and concentrates on the energy at the centre of the temple. The movement in the temple depicts the cosmos as a whole and man as a part of this larger system. Some temples have the ambulatory paths built within them, with niches that depict the various aspects of the divine.

I navigated the visitors' movement towards the centre of the re-created sanctum through a narrow corridor in my artwork *Kinetic Shiva* in its exhibition *From Shrine to Plinth*. The visitors then performed mechanised *pradakshina* in the dark enclosure ⁸⁶.



Figure 2.20.

**Circumambulatory path
around the sanctum
(courtesy of George
Michell)**

Figure 2.21.

**Outer radiation of energy
from the centre of the
sanctum (courtesy of
George Michell)**

In Hindu temple architecture, a square is the perfect shape for the ground plan. The energy radiates from the centre outwards in four (and all eight) directions (figure 2.21). The worshipper moves from the bright outer section towards the

⁸⁴ The practice of circumambulation belongs to the ancient symbolism of sun-worship. E.B Havell, *The Ideals of Indian Art*, 2nd ed. (Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1972) p. 69.

⁸⁵ See Blurton, pp. 70-73.

⁸⁶ *Kinetic Shiva*, an installation and a performance artwork was an important part of the exhibition *From Shrine to Plinth*. I have provided a detailed account and diagrams depicting the movement of visitors towards the constructed sanctum in Chapter 3, pp. 134-140.

dark inner sanctum. The plain interior of the *garbhagriha* is designed to evoke the feeling of nothingness but is also potent with energy. The spiritual aspirant leaves all worldly cares and enters the ornate temple halls and corridors. S/he⁸⁷ then moves towards the dark womb to be reborn in the presence of the deity who is the focal point of the temple. This progression denotes a movement towards peace and simplicity from the turmoil of outer worldly chaos. Ornate forms of the gods, stories of divinity and nature adorn the entrance to the temple and the passage towards the *garbhagriha*. Khanna has explained that the traditional architectural manuals⁸⁸ direct that the ground plan of the temple should be designed on a simple graph called the *Vastu-Purusha Mandala*. (*Vastu* - bodily existence or site, *Purusha* - Supreme Principle or the source of the cosmos, *Mandala* - closed polygonal figure) The diagram is a representation of the cosmos within a closed polygonal figure. Khanna describes the *Vastu-Purusha Mandala* as a “square of squares” and states:

The ritual diagram is an ‘ideogram’, while the temple is a materialization of the concepts it embodies.⁸⁹

Blurton states that the *mandala* is a cosmic diagram with the deity at the centre and the temple as a three-dimensional *mandala* illustrating the universe⁹⁰. The simple *Vastu-Purusha Mandala* is a construction of 64 (8 × 8) or 81 (9 × 9) squares. The central zone - the nucleus of the structure, consists of 4 or 9 squares and is dedicated to the principal deity, *Brahma*, the creator. Khanna points out that complex examples comprise of up to 1,024 squares. He explains the structure:

When the *mandala* is used architecturally its central zone locates the temple’s womb chamber. Around the nucleus, 12 squares are designated as seats of divinities, with specific reference to the 8 directions of space. These are surrounded by another 32 divinities associated with celestial bodies (28 lunar and 4 that preside over solsticial and equinoctial points).

⁹¹

There is a hierarchical structure in the temple. The deity at the centre has

⁸⁷ As the majority of the Hindu religious literature has been written by male authors the spiritual aspirant is referred to as a man. I am providing a non-conformist alternative of a female devotee who too is pursuing a spiritual goal. I continue to refer to museum visitors as female and male by using the pronoun ‘s/he’.

⁸⁸ Such as Acharya, P. K. *Mansara* (London, 1933-34). Also see: Kapila Vatsayan, ed., *Mayamatam*, vol. I (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts 1994).

⁸⁹ Khanna p. 144.

⁹⁰ Blurton, p. 47.

⁹¹ Khanna, p. 144.

precedence and is considered to be the most powerful of all, which decreases as one moves away from the centre. The primary deity is flanked by his consort, then by his mount or vehicle which is an animal. Subsidiary deities stand guard in eight directions, with the nine planetary gods, saints, folk deities and plants that are associated with the deity - in that order.



Figure 2.22.

Vastu-Purusha Mandala.
The principal deity
resides at the centre.
Other deities are
located in the outer
borders.
(courtesy of Madhu
Khanna)

Accurate calculations and structures used to create the temple as an illustration of the cosmos makes the temple and the god one inseparable unit. The numbers 108 and 360 are of importance in marking the proportions of the *mandala*. Kak presents associations of the geometry to nature and artefacts in the following words in his attempt at tracing back the history of temple architecture and its evolution:

The number 108 represents the distance from the earth to the sun and the moon, in sun and moon diameters, respectively. The diameter of the sun is also 108 times the diameter of the earth, but that fact is not likely to have been known to the *Vedic rishis*. The number of dance poses (*karanas*) given in the *Natya Shastra* (the art of dance) is also 108, as is the number of beads in a rosary (*japamala*). The number 360 is the number of days in the civil year.⁹²

Hence, the creation of the god in its physical form and the temple as a space for worship are created as three-dimensional representations of the cosmos. The temple is, argues art historian Pramod Chandra, to be perceived “as an image of the microcosm, the immanent and transcendent body of God, and not merely a

⁹² S. Kak, *Space and Cosmogony in the Hindu Temple*. *Vaastu Kaushal: International Symposium on Science and Technology in Ancient Indian Monuments*. (2002) 16 July 2007 < <http://subhashkak.voiceofdharma.com/articles/time2.htm>. >

house of God. As such, it carries the same meaning as the enshrined image and is equally holy and worthy of worship”⁹³. The temple is an essential part of the belief system. Sounds and smells add to the beauty and geometry to assist the transcending human to divinity. The sound produced as devotees ring the brass bell at the temple entrance resonates throughout the space. I have evoked this experience in my artwork *Kinetic Shiva* by mechanically triggering the sound of the temple bell upon the entrance of the worshipper in the created T-shaped sanctum. The chanting of mantras, the intense smell of flowers, incense and sandalwood are complemented by quiet areas within the temple⁹⁴. Whilst the prayers are offered four times a day, the temple is a space where a person can sit in contemplation and meditation or speak to fellow devotees at any time of the day.

3.4. The Post-Modern Museum

The role of the temple and the deity is one and the same – to facilitate meditation. The role of the post-modern museum, however, is complex and goes beyond education. Conservation expert, Carol Milner⁹⁵ while writing about the importance of conserving collections in museums in the United Kingdom, also remarks on the recent role of museums in society. This has dictated the changes that have taken place in museum buildings. She states:

Our museums are a part of the growing leisure industry. In the United Kingdom, especially since the advent of weekend opening in 1995, they are in competition with leisure centres, theme parks, shopping malls and sports complexes. They have to compete for their markets when competition is increasingly fierce. The buzz words at all levels for museums in the United Kingdom are: access, information technology, entertainment, education, enjoyment.⁹⁶

Public museums such as the British Museum and the V&A in London attract a large number of visitors each year. Museum plans include meeting points, information centres, cafes, cloakrooms, gardens and the museum shop in addition

⁹³ Pramod Chandra, “The Sculpture and Architecture of Northern India,” *The Arts of India*, ed. Basil Gray (Oxford: Phaidon Press Limited, 1981) p. 46.

⁹⁴ Sarah Greenberg describes the atmosphere within Tamil temples in the Winter 2006 edition of the Royal Academy Magazine. Sarah Greenberg, “Living Colour.”

⁹⁵ Head of Conservation and Collection Care at the Museums & Galleries Commission in London

⁹⁶ Carole Milner, “Who Cares? Conservation in a Contemporary Context,” *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1999).

to exhibitions. This is due to the pressing need to cater to a public that comprises of all age groups, nationalities, cultural associations, classes and religions; and to provide a good visitor experience. Hence, extensions to existing buildings have been created as more objects have been acquired and the more areas have been created for community events and activities. The exhibition of the collection and the needs of the public influence the layout of the museum.

In its worshipped context, the idol and the temple are designed as an entity. One cannot exist without the other. In its museum context, it is acquired to form a part of the collection, its display is determined by the curatorial intent and the gaze it receives changes from one seeking *darshan* to an observing, curious regard or one of awe.

4. The Museum and Temple Effect

The two contexts, temple and museum, generate specific ways of looking and behaving. In this section I will compare the effect of context on the perceptions of Hindu deities.

Svetlana Alpers, Professor of history of art, has described the “museum effect” as a “way of seeing”⁹⁷. When an object is removed from its original context and placed in a museum setting, it is inevitably transformed into a work of art and receives enhanced attention. Its isolation from its original location and its reframing in the museum, along with other natural or craft objects, endows it with a heightened visual quality. The museum’s institutional role in engendering enhanced viewing, makes even the most mundane of objects worthy of being scrutinised; a reception similar to that of a crafted object. She continues:

The exhibiting of the material culture of other peoples, in particular what used to be called “primitive” art, it is the museum effect – the tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus to transform it into art like our own – that has been the subject of heated debate.⁹⁸

Duncan F. Cameron, a Canadian museologist, elucidates this museum

⁹⁷ Svetlana Alpers, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) pp. 25-32.

⁹⁸ Alpers, *The Museum as a Way of Seeing*, pp. 26-27.

phenomenon by stating that the “very nature of the object changes when it enters a museum”⁹⁹. It takes on a new quality, which will be different to when it is in a shop or a street or a temple, when it is acquired by a museum.

Once it is in a museum, we make our judgement in the knowledge, if not awe, of the fact that the experts have already said “This is good,” or “This is important,” or “This is real”. The object has been enshrined.¹⁰⁰

The ‘way of seeing’ that museums can encourage is further described by Alpers as one which allows viewers to use their empirical judgement: a combination of “a distance, with a sense of human affinity and common capacities”¹⁰¹. Richard Davis has compared the two ways of seeing with the deity as the focus of his study: Alpers’ “museum effect” and the “temple effect”. The worship of the deity in the temple goes beyond admiration and adoration of its physical form to a transcendental devotion of its all-encompassing nature¹⁰². It is a means to the achievement of a meditative state. Davis describes museum rituals performed in the ‘Sculpture of India Exhibition’ at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC in the following words:

In the hushed atmosphere of the National Gallery, museum goers were implicitly urged to animate the images of Siva and Parvati from Tiruvengadu and their fellow icons not through rituals of installation and feeding, but through visual and interpretive attentiveness.¹⁰³

The museum goer’s attentive gaze as described by Alpers (and referred to by Davis) is enhanced as a result of the object’s exhibition value and induced by the “museum effect”. Davis argues that the suggestion that there is only one kind of attentive looking is inaccurate. He explains that audiences in the South Indian *Shiva* temples looked at the *Shiva* image attentively but a visual experience was not their prime aim. Through conscious performance of rituals, maintaining temple etiquette and enlivening the divinity, the gaze of the worshipper is

⁹⁹ Duncan F. Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004) p. 70.

¹⁰⁰ Cameron, p. 70.

¹⁰¹ Alpers, *The Museum as a Way of Seeing*, p. 32.

¹⁰² Davis, pp. 27-29. The deity is believed to be a manifestation of the cosmic energy made with divine intent for the purpose of regular worship and correct ritual. It is brought to life once installed in the temple sanctum and is believed to be potent with energy, that is transferred by the worshipper into himself through meditation.

¹⁰³ Davis, p. 25.

focussed onto the “transvalued icon”¹⁰⁴. The two contrasting purposes of viewing the deity are evident in the ***Kinetic Shiva*** experience. Installed within a created liminal space in the museum gallery, *Shiva* not only invites attentive viewing aimed at constructing meaning; this experience is intervened by temple rituals facilitated in the space. The entire experience embodies and compares the two ways of perceiving the deity and blurs the distinction between them.

The physical form of the gods and goddesses such as *Vishnu* holding a conch, bearing a lotus navel and with a human appearance is paradoxical to his ethereal status as the transcendental absolute (this is how his worshippers would perceive him). The manifestation of the divine in *avatars*, however, is important. Davis explains: “this allows humans a way to visualise and approach a divinity who might otherwise remain incomprehensible and inaccessible”¹⁰⁵. He describes this theological phenomenon as being simultaneously transcendent and immanent. The deity created by human but inhabited by a god, according to the worshipper, is the means to attaining meditative bliss. This is achieved through the initiatives taken by her/him - such as practising rituals in the sacred space. Hence, the temple facilitates the devotee’s personal contact with the deity. Davis explains further:

In worship it was not only an object of visual interest, but also the recipient of physical services appropriate to the divine, lordly personage inhabiting it. And through the notion of God’s simultaneous transcendence and immanence, Hindu theology and devotional poetry directed the worshippers’ attention through the translucence of the icon into a broader (and paradoxical) apprehension of God’s totality. The temple effect engendered its own way of seeing.¹⁰⁶

The paradox here lies in the physical manifestation of transcendental qualities through a physical form. The worshipper addresses the divine energy, through the tangible form – hence making it simultaneously spiritual and material. The feeling contained within this act of seeing in the temple and of the sculptor creating the deity, is *bhakti* or devotion. The term *bhakti* originates from the verb *bhaj* meaning “to apportion, to share”¹⁰⁷. It strongly suggests the shared relationship between the deity and the devotee. Havell has stated that the loss of *bhakti* results in

¹⁰⁴ Davis, p. 50.

¹⁰⁵ Davis, p. 29.

¹⁰⁶ Davis, p. 50.

¹⁰⁷ Davis, p. 38.

the commercialisation of the idol - from being a spiritual entity, it becomes a commodity ¹⁰⁸. He takes this further to elucidate the subjective attitude of *bhakti* and wrote that the deity revealed himself to the one who viewed him with devotion.

Throughout all the Vedic period the *devas* ¹⁰⁹ came down and sat at the feast, though they were only seen by spiritual vision, and did not reveal themselves as vulgar. And with art it is always so. We may lavish untold wealth in filling museums and galleries with the masterpieces of the world; but to the gaping crowd the *devas*, though present, always remain unseen. ¹¹⁰

‘The museum effect’ not only changes the idol into being an art object, it offers its viewers a framework within which it is studied as an archaeological, ethnographic and socio-cultural specimen. The museum and temple effects further reinstate the deity-human-space interactions that occur in the two belief systems: the secular and the religious.

5. Hindu rituals in Museums and the Exhibition of Living Traditions

Certain rituals in museums ¹¹¹ have been conscious religious acts performed by the Hindu community for museum visitors. They go beyond verbal and pictorial interpretations in the museum galleries. In recent years, museums have invited local communities to perform religious rituals in the museum space for a range of reasons. In this section of the chapter I will examine these reasons and will review them by referring to the voice of a participant of a ritual carried out in a museum in the United Kingdom.

The interpretive framework for ethnographic objects such as the chosen gallery (world collection, religious objects, antiquity), the labelling, the audio guide and printed literature are sometimes added by a new, much more active layer of interpretation: the exhibited performance or a “staged authenticity” ¹¹². Barbara

¹⁰⁸ Havell, p. 113.

¹⁰⁹ *Deva* – god. *Devi* – goddess.

¹¹⁰ Havell, p. 15.

¹¹¹ See Chapter 3 for examples of museum rituals, pp. 138-141.

¹¹² Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Objects of Ethnography,” *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) p. 408.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has defined ethnography as the art of the excerpt:

Not only inanimate artefacts but also humans are detachable, fragmentable, and replicable in a variety of material. ¹¹³

People too become “museumified” ¹¹⁴ as specimens of culture, when removed from their context and viewed within the museum environment within certain interpretive frameworks. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes the performative nature of live specimens in zoos, theatres, living ethnographic displays, circuses, dramatic monologue and scholarly lectures creating a spectacle. The staging of rituals, folklore, festivals and an enactment of culture by its people within the museum environment create a multi-sensory environment according to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, whereas the Europeans have appropriated one sense to one traditional western art form. One looks at painting and sculpture, listens to music. Musicians do not dance, and the one sense is used to focus and sustain attention.

All distractions must be eliminated – no talking, rustling of paper, eating, flashing of cameras. Absolute silence governs the etiquette of symphony halls and museums. Aural and ocular epiphanies in this mode require pristine environments in which the object of contemplation is set for riveting attention...

...When reclassified as “primitive art” and exhibited as painting and sculpture, as singular objects for visual apprehension, ethnographic artefacts are elevated, for in the hierarchy of material manifestations, the fine arts reign supreme. To the degree that objects are identified with their makers, the cultures represented by works of art also ride in the hierarchy. ¹¹⁵

Hence, the object on display and its people become ambassadors of their culture in the public museum. The “living museum” ¹¹⁶, states Karp, needs a special kind of professional interpretation as the performer is both, the exhibited and the interpreter of his or her own culture. The very fact that persons present themselves in the museum arena objectifies them. The performance of a religious ritual in the museum has the following main functions: demonstration, inclusion

¹¹³ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, p. 397.

¹¹⁴ Ivan Karp, “Festivals,” *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) p. 285.

¹¹⁵ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, p. 416.

¹¹⁶ Karp, p. 280.

of local communities in the democratic museum and religious segregation of the wider community.



Figure 2.23.

Hindu Shrine at the James Green Gallery, Brighton Museum and Art Gallery (photo: author)

In 2002, the curators of the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery invited the local Hindu Women's Group to create a shrine for their collection of Hindu idols housed in the museum store. The curator purchased an antique wooden shrine for the James Green Gallery of World Art and the Hindu Elders' Group crafted elaborate jewellery and costumes to adorn the deities ¹¹⁷ (figure 2.23). The local temple priest, Jayantilal Pandit, performed the *pranapratishta* ceremony. Rama Patel described it in the following words:

When we install a God in any temple or shrine, we give it its seat. We perform the ritual and put the spirit into it. It has to be worshipped everyday. But, that cannot be done in a museum. We worshipped the deities in the museum for the day of the installation only and then had to say our goodbyes. They have to be left spirit-less as they are mere statues when in a museum. That is the difference between this place, this temple and the shrine in the museum. In the museum, the idols are meant for people to look at.

This temple has the spirit of the God because we evoke it. We worship it everyday, we light lamps and pray. In a museum we cannot do that. There are no ghee lamps or real flowers. We did light lamps on the day of the installation. The museum was recently refurbished and the creation of the

¹¹⁷ I interviewed the founder of the Hindu Women's Group Rama Patel in December 2007 at the Swaminarayan Temple, Brighton and subsequently at her residence in Hove. She described the religious ceremony and the festivities that followed.

shrine was one of the first events. At that time the reception area at the Brighton Museum was empty and we decorated the place with sarees and we had food, we had rangoli ¹¹⁸, dancing, bhajans ¹¹⁹.



Figure 2.25.
Person viewing the shrine at the festival (photo: Rama Patel)

Figure 2.24.
Ceremony conducted by the priest in the James Green Gallery (photo: courtesy Rama Patel)

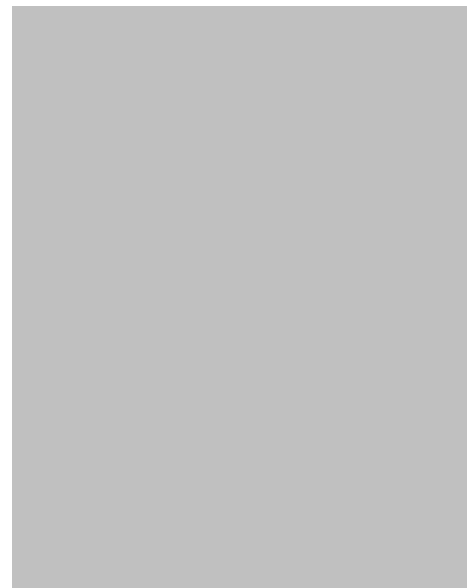


Figure 2.26.
Performances in the Brighton Museum in 2002 (photo: Rama Patel)

The divine energy was evoked, the deities were worshipped and the ceremony was concluded with the *visarjana* ritual; the priest chanted mantras and used appropriate hand gestures and performed the act of a ritual leave-taking from the deities ¹²⁰. A similar ceremony was performed in 2007 after the shrine was removed for conservation and reinstalled in a vitrine at the Brighton Museum

¹¹⁸ *Rangoli*- decorative patterns made on the ground using coloured powder, flower petals and rice

¹¹⁹ *Bhajans*- songs of devotion and praise

¹²⁰ Khanna has described *visarjana* as the last phase of ritual. See Khanna, *Yantra, the Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity*, p. 106.

and Art Gallery. Visitors were welcome, museum staff were present and the traditional ceremony included the lighting of the sacred fire, use of rice and flowers to shower the deities in the museum gallery. The lamps are now replaced with light bulbs, and plastic flowers have replaced fresh flowers. The adornments have been retained and a poster adjoining the shrine describes the ceremony carried out by the priest for the museum visitors.

The British Museum hosted a similar ‘living culture’ event on a large scale in the early autumn of 2007 ¹²¹. A six metre image of Goddess *Durga* made from straw, clay and paint was created by a craftsman from Bengal in the museum’s Great Court. Flanked by *Ganesh* and *Saraswati*, the goddess of knowledge, *Durga* displayed her ten arms and her weapons given to her by the other gods.



Figure 2.27.

***Durga* eye opening ceremony, Great Court, British Museum (photo: BBC documentary, ‘Beyond Bloomsbury’)**

Figure 2.28.

Bengali drummers, Great Court, British Museum (photo: BBC documentary, ‘Beyond Bloomsbury’)

Traditional Bengali drummers were invited to perform (figure 2.28), the local Bengali community dressed in traditional garments and adornments, and the museum crowds gathered to view the spectacle as the master craftsman carried out the auspicious eye-opening ceremony in the museum courtyard. The construction of *Durga* was watched and the painting of the pupil in her

¹²¹ Broadcast on BBC 2. Anthony Holland, “Beyond Bloomsbury,” (UK: BBC 2, 2007).

eyes brought her to life in front of an audience (figure 2.27). She was then paraded through the streets of Bloomsbury followed by the Bengali crowds, the drummers and taken to a separate venue to be worshipped as a part of the four-day festival. The devotees performed *pujas*. She was carried in a procession to the Thames at Putney in London on the final day of the festival and immersed in the river (figure 2.31). The devotees in India believe that she will return to her abode in the Himalayas through the river waters, as this ceremony is usually performed on the banks of the Ganges. The entire process from creation to immersion is highly auspicious for the Bengalis and is the focus of the ten-day *Durga puja* festival celebrated in Bengal. Performed and presented in the museum's forecourt, the festival had a strong presence in the tradition of the exhibition of living cultures in the museum space.



Figure 2.29.

***Durga* outside the British Museum before the procession. (photo: BBC documentary, 'Beyond Bloomsbury')**

Figure 2.30.

Food and flower offerings to *Durga* and her escorts before immersion (photo: BBC documentary, 'Beyond Bloomsbury')



Figure 2.31.

Immersed *Durga* in the Thames. (photo: BBC documentary, 'Beyond Bloomsbury')

The staging of a religious ceremony in the museum space clearly exemplifies the changing role of ordinary citizens into performers and actors. The Hindu women and the priest in Brighton and the London Bengali community were transformed into actors and performed symbolic ceremonies in the museum space. The drummers and craftsmen demonstrated their art form in the museum

for the public to view. The 'objects' in the 'living museum' are the people and their performances, states Karp ¹²². Hence, the idol's exhibition and interpretation is brought to a point wherein people provide it with a meaningful framework and context.

6. The Hindu Idol within Material Culture

In this section I will examine the identity and social life of the Hindu deity within material culture after its transference from the religious system into a secular one.

The de-contextualisation and subsequent re-contextualisation of the Hindu idol from the temple into the museum marks its classification, specifically with reference to the collections it is a part of, and generally within material culture. Fred Myers, an anthropologist, refers to James Clifford's work ¹²³ and identifies the "cultural machinery" ¹²⁴ through which non-western objects are collected. They fall into two main categories: (scientific) cultural artefacts and (aesthetic) works of art. He explains further and says that this system assigns non-western objects values, places them within contexts they are henceforth associated with, and circulate within them. They move between "art" (connoisseurship, art museum, and art market) and "culture" (history and folklore, the ethnographic museum, material culture and craft) ¹²⁵. He quotes Clifford:

Things of cultural or historical value may be promoted to the status of fine art...from ethnographic 'culture' to 'fine art'. ¹²⁶

The movement of worshipped Hindu idols from their original contexts into the western regimes of value have a significant effect on their continuing biographies that are highly important in this research. The re-appropriation of idols into commodities, treasures and art have a significant impact on their reception and hence, their handling. Myers explains that as 'art' they are redemptive of monetary values, rich with symbolic meanings and sacredness, as 'commodities'

¹²² Karp, p. 280.

¹²³ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

¹²⁴ Fred R. Myers, ed., *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2001) p. 10.

¹²⁵ Myers, p. 10

¹²⁶ Myers, p. 10.

and ‘treasures’ they can be exchanged or traded within markets, they become prized collectibles and are laden with exchange value.

It is essential to analyse the meanings of worshipped idols within material culture to ascertain their meanings within museums. The interest of material culture researchers is in the culture that is associated with the material, writes Simon Knell. He quotes Schlereth’s reference ¹²⁷ to Brooke Hindle’s ¹²⁸ thought: “It is the spatial and analytical understanding offered by artefacts, not the things themselves, that is the historian’s goal. He has to see through the objects to the historical meaning to which they relate” ¹²⁹. The museum’s centrality to material culture is undeniable. The exhibition of material is a tacit method of presenting knowledge, of representing the context that has been aptly described by Knell in the following words:

The key attribute of the object, giving it both intellectual and poetic possibilities is a relationship to the external world, to an original context. The gathering of an object is an act of gathering a piece of that context. Note the object is not surrounded by ‘context’ but a part of it. ¹³⁰

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes the exhibition of an ethnographic object as an exhibition of the fragment and as the art of excision. The very act of excision through acquiring a worshipped idol by the museum makes it vulnerable to classification for “scientific purposes” ¹³¹ that is deemed important for exhibition. It is removed from the art market and is raised in the hierarchy of values from being a commodity to art. In turn, the museum increases its value simply by exhibiting it, as it then transforms it into cultural capital ¹³². The value assigned to Hindu deities in museums has been a result of gradual changes in attitudes towards them in their secular realm.

¹²⁷ Quoted from T. J. Schlereth, *Material Culture Studies in America*. (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1985).

¹²⁸ Brooke Hindle was an eminent Historian of Technology in the United States in the late 20th century.

¹²⁹ Simon J. Knell, “Museums, Reality and the Material World,” *Museums in the Material World*, ed. Simon J. Knell, 1st ed. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007) p. 9.

¹³⁰ Knell, p. 9.

¹³¹ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, p. 393.

¹³² Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Reflections,” *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, ed. Fred R. Myers (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2001) p. 264.

7. Western Attitudes towards Hindu Gods and Goddesses

This section of the chapter will trace the change in the perception of the Hindu deity from a primitive object into becoming 'art' in Europe in the early twentieth century.

7.1. Early Western Attitudes

There was a deep-rooted aesthetic obstacle to the appreciation of representational Indian art and the images appeared primitive to the public until the nineteenth century in Europe ¹³³. Early travellers (between the periods of mid-thirteenth century and the end of seventeenth century) to far and distant lands such as the Indian sub-continent, comprised of a very small number of wealthy and adventurous men who disseminated information and undoubtedly their subjective opinions about Hindu gods upon their return to their countries ¹³⁴. They formed early notions of Indian religious images, which were stereotyped through literature and the graphic medium ¹³⁵. They were described as demons and monsters by the Greeks, who had also constructed a universe of mythical and fantastical beings, some of which were multiple armed ¹³⁶. They rationalised their fears towards other alien religions by depicting them as products of monstrous races that lived in the east. Partha Mitter, Indian art historian and post-colonial writer, compares these impressions to the Indian gods and has provided the definition of the term 'monster' as it appears in the Oxford English Dictionary as something that is unnatural. Mitter explains further:

To the Greeks therefore this would be the very opposite of their idea of a universe of rational beings and ideas. This view of monsters influenced nineteenth-century criticisms of Indian gods as being monstrous. In the last century, when classical ideals of order and rationality were especially favoured by art critics, Indian gods with their many arms were regarded as monstrous because they defied all idea of

¹³³ Cocks, p. 118.

¹³⁴ Marco Polo, Venetian traveller was the first known European to mention Hindu gods. He travelled in Asia between 1271 and 1295. See: Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977) p. 3.

¹³⁵ Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, p. 2.

¹³⁶ Most images of Hindu gods and goddesses depict them with multiple arms and heads. One such example is *Vishnu* with four arms. He carries a conch, a lotus, a club and the discus (the latter two are his weapons). In some cases he is depicted with four heads, each representing a facet of his personality.

rationality.¹³⁷

An added reason was that the Christian church taught that pagan religions were invented by devils. Mitter has pointed out that change in the perception of Hindu gods as being monstrous occurred by the seventeenth century: they were considered to have profound secret 'behind their irrational exterior'¹³⁸. He elaborates by examining the parallel ideologies that were prevalent and impacted upon the perception of worshipped images: Aristotlean ideologies in the Christian Church referred to religious images as didactic that represented a higher spiritual thought and functioned as a method of teaching religion to the illiterate. They were not supposed to take these images seriously. Alongside this ideology was a Neoplatonic tradition, that it was the recognition of beauty that formed the link between the mortal world and the divine, but which, also had an inherent danger: beautiful, sensible and recognisable beings could be taken for god-like men. Hence, a negative approach towards irrational images, which steered one's imagination away from realistic representation and stimulated one's mind to seek spiritual meaning, was employed. This was reflected in the humanist, Pietro della Valle's attitude towards Indian gods which were expressed in letters he wrote to a friend during his travels in the years 1657-63:

One there was which had many Arms on a side, and many Faces and this they...call'd *Brachma*, one of their chief false Deities. Another had the head of an Elephant and was call'd *Ganescio*...Some of the Idolets sat upon Sundry Animals, as Tygers and the like, and even upon Rats; of which things the foolish and ignorant Indians relate ridiculous stories. But I doubt not that, under the veil of these fables, their ancient Sages (most parsimonious of the Sciences, as all Barbarians ever were) have hid from the vulgar many secrets, either of Natural or Moral Philosophy, and perhaps also of History... and I hold for certain that all these so monstrous figures have secretly some more rational significations, though expressed in this uncouth manner.¹³⁹

An understanding of the iconography of Hindu religious images and their connection with the philosophic traditions only emerged with the scientific study of objects and their cultures in the mid-seventeenth century by travellers and antiquarians. The fact that religious doctrines dictated the creation of images

¹³⁷ Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, pp. 7-8.

¹³⁸ Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, p. 29.

¹³⁹ Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, p. 29.

was beginning to be realised. The study of “alien” cultures encompassed an identification of similarity with the writer’s home culture and how world cultures differed from one another ¹⁴⁰. The correct visual representation of Hindu gods in Europe occurred as a result of the drawings and paintings made by Orientalists who travelled in India such as the artist brothers Thomas and William Daniell and draughtsman William Hodges in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. There was, however, still a general view amongst those engaged in the arts and crafts in Britain that artists in India were ignorant of anatomy and perspective. Sir George Birdwood, a nineteenth century designer who became a champion of Indian decorative arts ¹⁴¹, wrote in the official handbook to the Indian section at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1910 that:

The monstrous shapes of the Puranic deities are unsuitable for the higher forms of artistic representation; and this is why sculpture and painting are unknown as fine arts in India... Nowhere does their figure sculpture show the inspiration of true art. They seem to have no feeling for it... How completely their figure-sculpture fails in true art is seen at once when they attempt to produce it on a natural or heroic scale; and it is only because their ivory and stone figures of men and animals are on a minute scale that they excite admiration. ¹⁴²

John Ruskin was horrified by the “exotic iconography of Indian sacred art and the idolizing instinct within Hinduism” ¹⁴³. In contrast, William Morris, a prominent figure of the arts and crafts movement in England, admired Indian art. He expressed his views in a lecture he gave at the Trades Guild of Learning in 1877 on (as Mitter describes them) lesser or decorative arts and quotes:

Now if the objection be made that these arts have been handmaids of luxury, of tyranny, and of superstition, I must needs to say that it is true in a sense; they have been so used, as many other excellent things have been. But it is also true that, among other nations, their most vigorous and free times have been the very blossoming-times of art. ¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, p. 48.

¹⁴¹ Indian decorative arts included jewellery, embroidery, household furniture, enamels, metal and damascened works and arms. See Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, pp. 236-238.

¹⁴² Quoted in E.B. Havell, *The Ideals of Indian Art*, 1st ed. (London: J. Murray, 1911) p. xvii.

¹⁴³ Roger Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, Coomaraswamy, ed. Roger Lipsey, vol. 3. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) p. 56.

¹⁴⁴ Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, p. 249.

Morris had faith in the arts. Mitter explains that he favoured craftsmen, their achievements and stated that these were the hopes of a society ¹⁴⁵. He presented a small bronze Hanuman, the monkey god, to the V&A Museum in 1869. Anna Somers Cocks reveals that it was the “first important piece of sculpture in the collection but was neither acknowledged nor admired at the time” ¹⁴⁶. Attitudes towards Hindu deities were still unfavourable in nineteenth-century Britain.

7.2. Collectors of Hindu ‘Idols’

A review of early collecting practices focussed on Hindu deities offers an insight into collectors’ intent and their attitude towards the images during colonial times. It also traces the journey of idols into museums.

Eighteenth and nineteenth-century British collectors of Hindu religious images in the Indian sub-continent were few in number. They primarily consisted of Christian missionaries who acquired them through their conversions of Hindus ¹⁴⁷, writers such as James Forbes who collected them as souvenirs and antiquities ¹⁴⁸, senior government officials such as Lord Clive ¹⁴⁹ and military men such as Charles Stuart, who was also called “Hindoo Stuart” due to his involvement with the Indian community and his anti-Christian sentiments ¹⁵⁰. Stuart collected a large number of Indian images from a range of historical periods and styles. Davis points out that these were considered to be of “high artistic merit” and have been recognised as the largest collection of Indian objects assembled by one collector. Stuart exhibited these in his home in Calcutta in a museum-like space. Some items from his collections were built into his tomb after he died, but a large number was transported to England in 1830 and sold at a Christie’s auction. A couple of individual collectors purchased a few pieces, but one of the bidders was Augustus Wollaston Franks, the Keeper of British Antiquities at the British Museum ¹⁵¹. He purchased them for the museum and the collection is now on display at the Hotung Gallery of World Art. This account provided by Richard Davis gives an insight into the commoditisation of Hindu idols from their status as curios and their subsequent promotion as cultural artefacts since acquired by

¹⁴⁵ Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, p. 250.

¹⁴⁶ Cocks, p. 118.

¹⁴⁷ Davis, p. 160.

¹⁴⁸ Forbes installed his collection in a sculpture garden in his estate in England upon return to recreate an Indian environment. Davis, p. 163.

¹⁴⁹ Mildred Archer, Christopher Rowell and Robert Skelton, *Treasures from India: The Clive Collection at Powis Castle* (London: Herbert Press Ltd and The National Trust, 1987).

¹⁵⁰ Davis, pp. 163-164.

¹⁵¹ Davis, p. 165.

the museum. They were not collected as objects of art during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

7.3. From ‘Monstrosity’ to ‘Finest Sculptural Art’

Indian idols became acceptable as art in the first half of the twentieth century. Writers such as E.B. Havell, Director of the Calcutta School of Art (1884-1892)¹⁵² and art historian, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, Research Fellow at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1932-1947)¹⁵³, contributed towards the taxonomic change of Hindu gods and goddesses from ‘monsters’ to art in England. Havell strongly opposed the view of his predecessors and applied the ‘spiritual’ category to Indian art and to the aesthetic questions posed at the time by his contemporaries. For instance, he described the Indian representation of the female form as ideal to Indian society and unlike the physical beauty depicted through the female nude in western painting. Mitter critiques Havell’s viewpoint in the following words:

He was rejecting the classical canon of beauty here but he possessed no alternative convention to replace it with. The assertion of spiritual quality of the female figures in Indian art was a clear reflection of his failure to consider them as physically and aesthetically pleasing types.¹⁵⁴

It is important to emphasise that the deities were not created as art during the Vedic period. If they were at all created to be aesthetic, it was within the ideology of the Indian aesthetic that they were designed and made.

Both Coomaraswamy and Havell tried to convince their western audience of the idols’ validity as art by approaching them from the western aesthetic and anthropological perspective. The latter approach secularised them and brought them within the realm of religious art with greater significance than mere objects of beauty, hence rich with meaning and symbolism. Havell openly stated that his intent was not to study Indian art and its ideals from an Orientalist perspective, but to “obtain a direct insight into the artist’s meaning without relying on modern archaeological conclusions”¹⁵⁵. He wrote:

¹⁵² Lipsey, p. 61.

¹⁵³ Roger Lipsey, “Editor’s Note,” *Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) p. 5.

¹⁵⁴ Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, p. 276.

¹⁵⁵ Havell, p. xiii.

Indian art is easily intelligible to those who will read it in the light of Indian religion and philosophy, which inspired both the artists and the people to whom the art was addressed. But, like all other art, it must be seen in its local environment, and in the atmosphere of the thought which created it. Nothing can be more misleading than to judge it by the isolated and generally inferior specimens which are seen in European museums, very few of which have, until recently, considered Indian sculpture and paintings as worthy of serious study by Western artists.¹⁵⁶

Coomaraswamy's essays and lectures were committed to reflect the Indian approach to art, to throw light on the art-historical and critical study of aesthetics and technical treatise and to accept that Indian art was primarily religious¹⁵⁷. Simultaneously, E.B. Havell tried to educate the British public of the ideals of Indian art. He refers to the Indian definition of art to justify the irrational statements made by his contemporaries:

Beauty, says the Indian philosopher is subjective not objective. It is not inherent in form or matter; it belongs only to the spirit and can only be apprehended by spiritual vision. There is no beauty in a tree, or a flower, or in man or woman as such. All are perfectly fitted to fulfil their part in the cosmos; yet the beauty does not lie in the fitness itself, but in the divine idea, which is impressed upon those human minds, which are tuned to receive it. The more perfectly our minds are tuned to this divine harmony, the more clearly do we perceive the beauty, and the more capable we become, as artists, of revealing it to the others¹⁵⁸.

Havell described Indian religious images as transcendental, beautiful and symbolic. He compared the Indian notions of beauty to the western approach towards its understanding and appreciation and wrote that the former was materialist whereas the latter is philosophical. The western academic art-teaching, he wrote, is based on the ideology that beauty is inherent in matter or form¹⁵⁹.

156 Havell, pp. 57-58.

157 Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, p. 73.

158 Havell, pp. 23-24.

159 Havell, p. 22-23.

8. Aesthetic Perception

This section of the chapter examines the causality of the western approach towards Hindu deities as art, by examining western aesthetic perception and comparing it with the Indian experience of beauty.

The Indian notion of the appreciation of beauty can be described as a subjective experience. It is in the delight that is felt when beauty is seen or tasted, which is “transcendental”, “indivisible”, “self-manifested” and like a “flash of lightning” wrote Coomaraswamy in his essay “The Part of Art in Indian Life”¹⁶⁰. When the worshipper in the multi-sensory temple space views the deity and achieves a communion with it through ritual, he journeys from a sub-conscious to a conscious meditative state of mind. The deity is not perceived solely as an aesthetic object, even though it is adorned with fabrics, jewels and flowers. The act of decorating and worshipping contains the element of epiphany. We have already discussed that the aesthetic intent when sculpting the idols is secondary for the creator. Its perception by the worshipper too is through the devotional gaze: it is subjective and transcendental. When the idol is re-contextualised as art within the western aesthetic, the beholder’s perception is one of objective scrutiny and the aesthetic judgement is evoked through taste.

8.1. Western Aesthetic Perception

Immanuel Kant’s critique of aesthetic judgement refers to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure experienced upon viewing an object as subjective, as one that forms the basis for a separate faculty of discrimination (rather than a cognitive one), designates nothing in the object (the viewed) and does not contribute to knowledge. This aesthetic theory proposes that the aesthetic quality of an object is that which is perceived by, and in reference to the subject (the beholder), rather than to the object. The feeling of immediate pleasure is a subjective response towards the object, and is independent of all interest. If an object is described as beautiful, it is not about the object’s character, nor its position in the aesthetic analysis as such; it is an illumination of the viewer’s response towards it.

Kant refers to two types of values or ‘interests’: one of sense, which is agreeable and gratifies our senses, and the other of morality, or ‘good’¹⁶¹. The good

¹⁶⁰ Coomaraswamy, “The Part of Art in Indian Life,” p. 93.

¹⁶¹ Salim Kemal, *Kant’s Aesthetic Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press,

according to Kant, “includes moral worth, instrumental worth” ¹⁶². He states that an ‘interest’ in the object is a moral understanding and appreciation of its existence in the world. The response does not remain one of pure pleasure that appeals to the senses, independent of the awareness of object’s representation and existence, but becomes one where a reflective judgement is applied. Hence, the apprehension of form with imagination, reflection and understanding is defined as an “aesthetic judgement” by Kant. It is when the form of the object, without its representation or concept and without the sensation derived from it, but purely through the empirical employment of judgement, provides a feeling of pleasure, it is called “beautiful”. The faculty of judging it by means of such pleasure is called “taste” ¹⁶³.

If the object were to be perceived as aesthetic through the employment of judgement, it is through the development of taste that this would be possible. Pierre Bourdieu distinguishes this from ‘the popular aesthetic’ which refers to a sensuous response towards a work of art; for example in theatre “the desire to enter into the game, identifying with the characters’ joys and sufferings, worrying about their fate, espousing their hopes and ideals, living their life, is based on a form of *investment*, a sort of deliberate ‘naivety’, ingenuousness, good natured credulity...” ¹⁶⁴.

In the context of this research Kant’s aesthetic theory explains how the appreciation of the Hindu idol as a work of art in the nineteenth-century museum involved the development of taste and understanding of form over its function. The appreciation of an autonomous object of art requires a detached, distanced approach, according to this aesthetic theory. The preference of form over function allows the aesthete to transcend subjective feelings of pleasure or displeasure derived from a work of art and focus one’s attention on its subliminal qualities.

Bourdieu has critically stated that the aesthetic disposition is a historical construct and has been developed and “endlessly re-produced” ¹⁶⁵ by education. The appreciation and recognition of the form of an object socially defined as

1997) p. 35.

162 Kemal, p. 35.

163 Kant, p. 30.

164 Pierre Bourdieu, “The Aristocracy of Culture,” *Museums in the Material World*, ed. Simon J. Knell (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007) p. 195.

165 Bourdieu, p. 191

art, over its function, is a result of social and historical norms and the beholder's conforming with such norms. It is his artistic training that makes possible such a perception. He has critically stated that this idealised 'pure' perception constitutes the artistic field and is the result of its proclamation and systemization of the principles of aesthetic legitimacy ¹⁶⁶.

Bourdieu has discussed the nature of the reception of an object created by an artist who has applied his artistic effort in his creation. He states that an aesthete would perceive it as an aesthetic object, even if it was not produced with an aesthetic intention by the artist. This holds true in the museum, where, he points out, the aesthetic disposition becomes institutional. The display of a range of artefacts with disparate functions in the museum (Bourdieu provides examples: crucifix and fetish, Pieta and still life) demand an appreciation of form over function. The range of artefacts offer a study of their style and technique, which although diverse, are present in each of them. These result in a neutralization of their function and thus they are perceived aesthetically. He has argued that objects that were treated as collectors' curios, historic artefacts and ethnographic objects have achieved the status of art and attract the aesthetic gaze. He points out:

...artistic contemplation now has to include a degree of erudition which is liable to damage the illusion of immediate illumination that is an essential element of pure pleasure ¹⁶⁷.

Objects that are socially defined as art, such as Hindu idols were between the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, have been approached with an aesthetic disposition as a result of their status as 'worked-upon' ¹⁶⁸ objects, as opposed to a recognition of their function. Their validation as sculptural art by art historians Coomaraswamy and Havell reveals that their scholarship was influenced by the Kantian aesthetic theory, which places an emphasis on the beholder's appreciation of the object through the process of applying their judgement. Bourdieu has referred to Erwin Panofsky's approach and stated that if the work of art "demands to be perceived aesthetically" ¹⁶⁹, then how can one disregard the conclusion that "it is the aesthetic intention that makes a work

¹⁶⁶ Bourdieu, p. 192.

¹⁶⁷ Bourdieu, p. 193.

¹⁶⁸ Bourdieu, p. 192.

¹⁶⁹ Quoted from Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955)

of art”¹⁷⁰. Saussure’s semiotic position, however, that the signified (the mental concept) and the signifier (the material aspect) are inseparable, puts forth the argument that it is the aesthetic point of view which creates an aesthetic object.

Hence, the argument whether it is the maker or the beholder of the object that endows the object with an aesthetic quality, calls for a comparison with the intent of the Indian sculptor following the established tradition, iconographic correctness and ritual establishment, to make an image for epiphany and worship, rather than as an art object, considering its reception by the worshipper. It is undeniable that deities are made within an aesthetic system; however, it is the Indian aesthetic that will be discussed in the following section.

The display conventions employed in the exhibition of Hindu deities in art galleries, clearly reveal their status as art objects. They demand to be received aesthetically within the visual artistic realm. Richard Davis has described an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. called ‘Sculpture of India’ held in 1985. The Hindu god *Shiva* and his wife *Parvati* were exhibited on plinths in a controlled environment. They were bare: without the garments, jewels and flowers they would normally be adorned with and stood under spotlights for viewing. He wrote:

Following normal installation practice, the National Gallery displayed this religious icon from another culture as a self-contained aesthetic object meant to be appreciated for the beauty of its essential sculptural form. The atmosphere was hushed; no extraneous noise (except the unavoidable rustlings and whispers of the visitors) was allowed to detract from the visual experience of the museum goer. Nearby was a label that provided some minimal identifying information: the place and date of the fabrication, its physical dimensions, and the iconographic form of the Hindu deity it represented.¹⁷¹

Similarly, in 2006 the Royal Academy of Arts, London hosted a major exhibition of Chola bronzes, made in south India between ninth and thirteenth centuries. The bronze deities were described as the “finest works of Indian sculptural art”¹⁷², they were spotlighted and displayed freestanding in the Sackler Galleries. Michael

¹⁷⁰ Bourdieu, pp. 191-192.

¹⁷¹ Davis, p. 17.

¹⁷² *Chola: Sacred Bronzes of Southern India*, 2006, Royal Academy of Arts 13 Sept. 2007 <<http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibitions/chola/>>

Wood, historian and broadcaster, travelled to south India and has provided an evocative account of the temples nestled in thick vegetation of Tamil Nadu at sunset, the evening *puja* or ritual ceremony amidst the fragrance of incense and jasmine, the sound of drums in the air and the glow of the bronze *Shiva* and *Parvati* against the flame of the fire. He describes the experience as sensuous and states that these images should not be viewed as works of art, but as images of worship: “viewing them in a gallery as museum exhibits, it is hard to imagine them in context, amid the sights, sounds and smells of South India”¹⁷³.

Kant’s theory and Bourdieu’s critique provide an explanation for the interpretation of Hindu idols within the museum setting as art objects worthy of aesthetic appreciation. Their roles as gods and as objects of epiphany in their multi-sensory temple environment are superseded by the pre-disposition of visual admiration. In the exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth*** I aimed to create a multi-sensory environment, whereby my artworks would encourage my audience to re-consider the meaning of idols within a museum.

8.2. Indian Experience of Beauty

The Indian appreciation of beauty is purely subjective and sensuous: a response which is alluded to as barbaric by Kant. It is an aesthetic¹⁷⁴ activity, but is not based on the empirical methods of judgement. The immediate feeling of delight received from viewing an object is generated by the inherent quality within it that is called *rasa*. The art historian B.N. Goswamy, has provided the literal meaning of the word: “sap or juice, extract, fluid”¹⁷⁵. It is the essence, the finest part of something. He elaborates: “*rasa* denotes taste, flavour, relish, but also a state of heightened delight that can be experienced only by the spirit”¹⁷⁶. The perception of a work of art and the subsequent experience of delight are similar to tasting a flavour. The subject is the *rasika* and the object is the *rasvanta*. There are nine *rasas* or “emotional conditions” that can be experienced through a work of art and are listed by Goswamy:

The erotic (*shringara*), the comic (*hasya*), the pathetic

¹⁷³ Michael Wood, “Heaven Sent,” *Royal Academy of Arts Magazine* 93 (2006) p. 47.

¹⁷⁴ Coomaraswamy has likened the aesthetic to the material. Aisthesis is sensation and matter what can be sensed. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956) p. 46.

¹⁷⁵ B.N. Goswamy, “Another Past, Another Context: Exhibiting Indian Art Abroad,” *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 71. Also see Dehejia, pp. 11-22.

¹⁷⁶ Goswamy, p. 71.

(*karuna*), the furious (*raudra*), the heroic (*vira*), the terrible (*bhayanaka*), the odious (*bibhatsa*), the marvelous (*adbhuta*) and the quiescent (*shanta*)¹⁷⁷

Hence *rasa* is an experience that is derived from the object. It is a subjective perception of the form, it is cultural, not inherent within the object itself, but is extracted by the viewer or listener. Goswamy explains that each *rasa* evokes a *bhava*, which is a feeling or a mood. Hence, the erotic corresponds with love and the comic with playfulness. The artist or creator suggests a *bhava* in his work and it is the reception of the *bhava*, which is the *rasa* (see figures 2.32, 2.33). *Bhava* can also be described as an idea. Art historian Ray defines it thus:

Derived from the root *bhu*, to be, *bhava* is literally 'being' and 'becoming', of something which has a life of its own and is in a process of change.¹⁷⁸



Figure 2.32.

The loving couple *Shiva* and *Parvati*, Konark Temple in Orissa
The image is an expression of unison (photo: courtesy of Niharranjan Ray)

Figure 2.33.

The four headed *Shiva*. This image is a depiction of his personalities as the incarnate terror, an ascetic, and as the feminine power. The fourth is the pathetic *bhava*. Elephanta, rock-cut temples, Maharashtra.
(photo: courtesy of Richard Blurton)

¹⁷⁷ Goswamy, p. 71.

¹⁷⁸ Niharranjan Ray, *Idea and Image in Indian Art* (New Delhi: Munshilal Manoharlal Publishers, 1973) p. 3.



Figure 2.34.

The four headed *Shiva* in the form of a *linga* at a temple in Rajasthan (photo: courtesy of Stephen Huyler)

Goswamy proceeds to introduce *bhakti* or devotion as the tenth *rasa*, and *bhava* with specific reference to Hindu deities. Hence, the intent of the maker, to create an object of *bhakti*, corresponds to the gaze it receives. The object is created for worship and not for the aesthetic experience in its temple.

9. Idols as Agents

This section critically examines the ideologies within material culture that discuss human-object relationships and compares them to the treatment of Hindu images by their worshippers as live beings.

Humans allocate meaning to objects (the deities in this thesis) and they are converted into “things” from being “gods”. The assigning of a godly status to an object has been critically described as ‘anthropomorphism’ within which the object has influenced its meaning. They are perceived and treated as agents. Christopher Steiner, art historian and museum studies expert, criticises this anthropological approach ¹⁷⁹ and says that object have been assigned with too much “power” ¹⁸⁰. He reiterates that this has diminished the significance and importance of human agency, which instills objects with meaning, value and significance, an approach similar to that of Kopytoff, who explored ways in which people constructed meanings in objects ¹⁸¹. Steiner quotes from Mitchell’s essay: “images are not powerless, but they are certainly a lot weaker than we think”

¹⁷⁹ Steiner refers to Janet Hoskin’s 1988 study of shamanic ritual objects, which have been assigned with anthropomorphic powers.

¹⁸⁰ Christopher Steiner, “Rights of Passage: On the Liminal Identity of Art in the Border Zone,” *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, ed. Fred R. Myers (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2001) p. 210.

¹⁸¹ Steiner refers to the 1986 essay by Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹⁸². It is the society that shapes them. This approach towards material culture corresponds with Daniel Miller's "objectification" wherein objects make cultural values and meanings visible to subjects. The values exist within society and it is the separation of objects from their subjects, that surfaces and makes the symbolism of objects apparent. The following text written by Miller and quoted by Fred Myers describes objectification:

Awareness of the self is predicted on the awareness of the 'other' and it is the process of creation and acknowledgement of the other which is the key to the achievement of self-awareness. ¹⁸³

Miller defines material culture in relation to its "artificiality", man-made, and "intentionality", objects that are created with an intention ¹⁸⁴. The separating of humans from their material counterpart is strongly opposed by social scientist, Bruno Latour. He removes the object-subject dichotomy and introduces the ANT (Actor Network Theory), which is conceptually somewhat closer to the Hindu worshippers' relationship with their deities. Latour argues that objects too are agents. He states that, the reason why objects were not given a chance to play any role was because sociologists assumed that the only actors and agencies were human ¹⁸⁵. He writes that objects are interwoven or entangled with the lives of people and gives examples such as a lock 'closes' a room and kettles 'boil' water. He opposes the use of the term 'material culture' as it suggests the formation of a homogeneous layer of objects, distinct from humans. He questions sociological methods of empiricism and scientific study, and critiques them in the following words:

Why not say that in religion what counts are the beings that make people act, just as every believer has always insisted? What would be more empirical, perhaps more scientific, more respectful, and much more economical than the invention of two impossible non-existing sites: the mind of the believer and the social reality hidden behind illusions propped up by even more illusions. Besides what is so scientific in the notion of 'belief'? ¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² Steiner, p. 211. The quote is from W.J.T. Mitchell's 1977 essay, "What do pictures really want?"

¹⁸³ Steiner, p. 211.

¹⁸⁴ Daniel Miller, "Artefacts and the Meaning of Things," *Museums in the Material World*, ed. Simon J. Knell (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007) p. 168.

¹⁸⁵ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) p. 71.

¹⁸⁶ Latour, p. 235.

These words contradict the scientific approach employed within the Enlightenment and conjoin what were considered separate entities: humans and their material signifiers. This ideology provides a new insight into the understanding of object-human relationships. The idols within Hinduism are not treated as mere objects, but as objects of divinity – alive and potent with energy. They are not perceived as inanimate and sub-human. The philosophy that all material contains elements that are part of the universe – and hence all material is ‘one’ converges the social science approach proposed by Latour and the centuries-old practice existent in the temples. It blurs the line between the two belief systems. Hence, in my artwork ***Kinetic Shiva***, the reflection of *Shiva* and the performer in the mirrors refers to the unity within the diversity of the universe ¹⁸⁷.

10. Conclusion

The treatment of a Hindu deity is reflective of the belief system, religious or secular, it is associated with, perceived within and physically present in, at a particular stage within its biography. This chapter has reviewed its identity as an object of devotion, starting from its creation and continuing until it completes an entire life cycle as a worshipped god (from creation to dissolution). The intention of the maker and the subsequent treatment received from its worshippers all fulfill the ultimate aim of making a physical form that has transcendental qualities reflective of divine power. It is a singular entity and yet its power can be sought and found within a multiple range of images, ultimately making the deity’s physical presence a tool to reach divinity.

The physical and ideological re-contextualisation of the deity into a secular system, transfers it from being bought or sold (a commodity), something valued as treasure or antiquity, or a unique artistic and cultural object within the public museum, where it is preserved to be viewed. The idol moves from a multi-sensory environment to single sense system: a visual one ¹⁸⁸. The experience of the deity within its temple setting for the worshipper becomes a distant, objective and aesthetic perception for the museum visitor.

The shift from one belief system to another, gives Hindu deities fragmented

¹⁸⁷ See Chapter 3, pp 140-1.

¹⁸⁸ Chapter 7 examines the instrumentality of the senses within worship and the history and evolution of the ocular-centric museum.

identities. This is caused by individuals and is also reflective in their behaviour towards them in the spaces they are physically housed in, temple or museum. Hence, the deity-human-space relationships are caused by, and also the result of, the transference of the deity between the religious and the secular.

The next chapter introduces the performance piece, an installation housing the kinetic artwork, ***Kinetic Shiva***. It will examine religious and secular rituals practised by individuals in temples and museums, respectively. It will test and assess the difference between the two through the artwork.



Chapter 3

Kinetic Shiva and Ritual

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I will introduce my installation work ***Kinetic Shiva*** which generates ritualistic behaviour amongst visitors in its exhibition space. I will review its conceptual development and construction as a liminal space in the museum building and will examine the role of the cues provided to visitors to perform religious and secular rituals.

I will also compare religious and secular rituals carried out by worshippers in temples and visitors to the museum respectively, by examining their consciously designed juxtaposition in the ***Kinetic Shiva*** installation.

Through reviewing the kinetic image *Nataraja* (the dancing *Shiva*), and the Kinetic Art movement of the twentieth century in Europe, I will establish the context of my own work within art practice.

I. Introduction

In search of Thee, I found myself
 - Bengal boatman's song ¹

Shiva is the figure that represents the universe in its four dimensions. He, as *Nataraja*, his most widely recognised form, is believed to have set the universe in motion through dance ². He dances the dance of furious bliss (*ananda-tandava*)³: a dance of death within his cosmic play of creation, preservation and destruction. This metonym of dance for the cyclical nature of time is embodied in the balance of the posture, its iconography and rhythm in the visual form of the *Nataraja* himself. The human body within the universe and the experience of cyclical nature of time (as believed by the Hindus) is at the centre of all ritual practices within the religion. Mookerjee describes ritual thus:

Ritual is a means or a way towards spiritual identity, towards a state in which we can realise our oneness with the universe.⁴

The focus is on the spirit within oneself with the awareness of the universe. Mookerjee continues by saying:

The unity underlying the diversity of the world is to be discovered in our relationship with all life, manifest and non-manifest.⁵

Every small or large being, living or non-living, is significant as each is a part of the larger whole. Each has its own purpose and role to play. Ritual is the means to achieve unity of the spiritual self with the energy that is existent in all matter. Hence, rituals enable a person to become aware of the space around her/him. As a performer, s/he 'acts' out the ritual. It is almost theatrical in that s/he becomes aware of her/his gestures, movement in space and the words s/he utters. The temple is a ritual space. The deity that resides in it is the object of worship as it

¹ Ajit Mookerjee, *Ritual Art of India* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985) p. 21. Mookerjee is an art historian, whose expertise lies in Indian religious art forms.

² Partha Mitter, *Indian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 33. Partha Mitter is an art historian.

³ Padma Kaimal, "Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meaning of an Icon", *The Art Bulletin* 3 (1999) Jan. 2008 < http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results/results_single_fulltext.html > p. 391.

Padma Kaimal a historian and an expert on Indian art.

⁴ Mookerjee, p. 9.

⁵ Mookerjee, p. 9.

represents the one energy in the cosmos.

Hence, the word 'ritual' has strong associations with belief, religion and magic. Its use in the context of the museum, which is regarded as a secular and educational institution, may seem somewhat antithetical. There have been discussions and a certain degree of ideological debate through scholarship between experts in museum studies and anthropologists after the publication of Carol Duncan's seminal work *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. As discussed in the previous chapter, she has referred to the art and architecture of art museums⁶ as an entity and an ensemble:

I propose to treat this ensemble like a script or score – or better, a dramatic field. That is, I see the totality of the museum as a stage setting that prompts visitors to enact a performance of some kind, whether or not actual visitors would describe it as such (and whether or not they are prepared to do so). From this perspective, art museums appear as environments structured around specific ritual scenarios.⁷

Carol Duncan's view is that rituals are "central to museum meanings" and that "its meanings as a museum are structured through its rituals" some of which resemble those performed in traditional ceremonial monuments such as palaces, temples, or churches. Whereas, Mary Bouquet and Nuno Porto propose that ritual in the museum has derived from religion. The important visitor's agency brings that practice with it and makes the museum a ritual site⁸. The common factor in both these theories is that rituals are practised in the museum even if the visitor may or may not be conscious of his performance of 'a ritual' and its purpose. The architecture of the museum, the sequence of displayed objects and the individual's behaviour within the space are factors that create the museum experience. Jemima Fraser's *Museums, Drama, Ritual and Power: A Theory of the Museum Experience* investigates the power of the individual to use displays in the museum as a resource for learning. Fraser states that the museum creates a stage for the individual to perform a set of rituals, a concept that draws upon Duncan's. She explains that even secular spaces generate ritualistic behaviour and critically

⁶ Duncan clarifies that 'Art Museums' encompass art galleries and museums in her book as the distinction between the two does not exist in the United States.

⁷ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Ritual: Inside Public Art Museums*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1995) pp. 1-2.

⁸ Mary Bouquet and Nuno Porto, eds., *Science, Magic and Religion: The Ritual Processes of Museum Magic* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006). Bouquet and Porto are social and cultural anthropologists.

refers to the distinction that was made between secular and religious behaviour until the twentieth century:

A distinction between the religious and secular emphasises the separateness of the activities – dealing with meaning making on the one hand, from those dealing with the mundane and practical on the other, but because it was a distraction from practical business it needed to be confined to certain places and times.⁹

Ritual space need not be a religious space, but it is one in which performance is enacted according to rules understood by the participants and which enhance the experience.¹⁰

Duncan points out that the museum's resemblance to older ceremonial structures goes beyond its architecture; it too is a setting for rituals. In Chapter 2, I have discussed the creation of an "iconographic programme" in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century museum, which led the visitor through the space. Hence, s/he was performing a ritual that conformed to the political and ideological agenda presented in the museum through the arrangement of the collections.

Duncan's work focusses on the museum's role in the context of western societies. Whilst it does not study the representation and re-defining of non-western civilizations in western museums through their displays, she has aptly pointed out a link between the construction of national identity in relation to "primitive" societies¹¹. In "The Universal Survey Museum", she commented: "In today's European and American museums, exhibitions of Oriental, African, Pre-Columbian and Native American art functions as permanent triumphal processions, testifying to Western supremacy and world domination"¹².

The continuing belief that the museum is the appropriate space for the appreciation of art presents itself as a distinct space that engenders observation and contemplation, expecting the audience to observe certain behavioural decorum. Furthermore, the museum's role in safeguarding its collections is reflected in rules such as 'do not touch' or 'do not sit or step on plinth' (figure 3.1) that have been formed and practised as a result of a set value system within

⁹ See unpublished thesis: Jemima Fraser, "Museums, Drama, Ritual and Power: A Theory of the Museum Experience," Ph.D. University of Leicester, 2004, p. 65.

¹⁰ Fraser, p. 66.

¹¹ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, pp. 3-4.

¹² Duncan, *The Universal Survey Museum*, p. 449.

the museum.



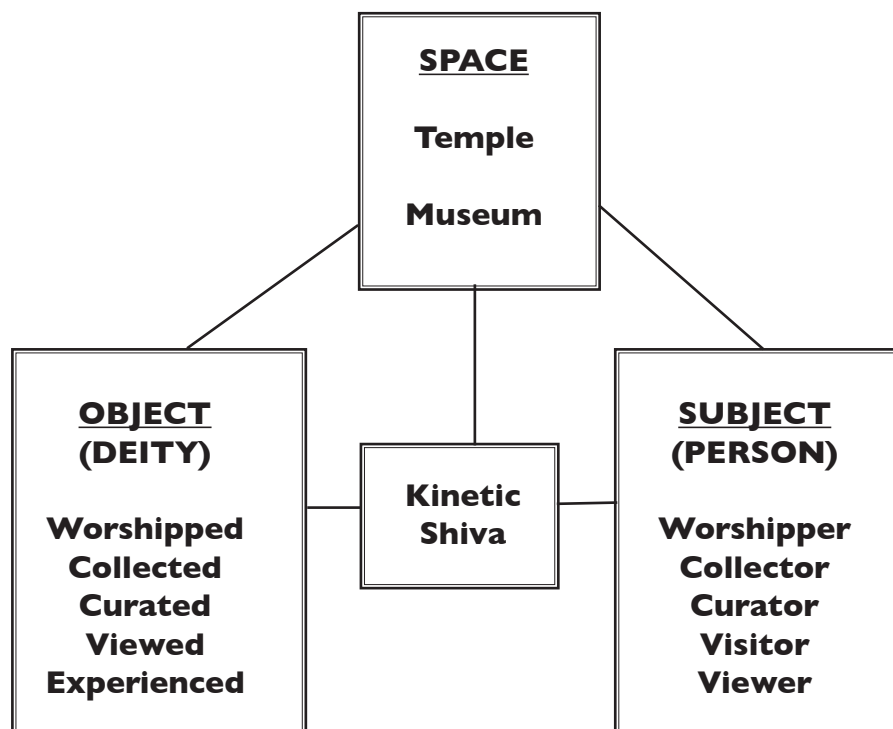
Figure 3.1.

Instruction to the British Museum visitors (photo: author)

Through ***Kinetic Shiva***, an interactive installation, I make the visitor conscious of the ritual s/he is performing. The facets that connect the three forms of ritual: the temple ritual, the museum ritual and the *Kinetic Shiva* ritual are the space in which rituals are carried out, the object that is subjected to the ritual and the subjects that carry out the ritual (figure 3.2). In this chapter I will examine the role of ***Kinetic Shiva*** by referring to object – space – person interactions in the meaning making process.

Figure 3.2.

Diagrammatic representation of the relationship between subject, object and space



2. Kinetic Shiva

In this section of the chapter I will introduce one of my four artworks that is instrumental in the dissemination of the research as it tests visitors' ritualistic behaviour in the secular museum environment.

2.1. Aims

Kinetic Shiva embodies two principles: ritual performance, and liminal experience. My aims in conceptually developing and making this artwork are:

1. To create a microcosmic liminal space in the macrocosmic museum building;
2. To generate conscious temple and museum rituals amongst visitors in the exhibition gallery that precede the viewing of the sculpture installed in the inner sanctum and hence cause them to perceive it in a dialectical light;
3. To present *Shiva* as a restored museum artefact and simultaneously as a deity in the archetypal temple sanctum;
4. To create the temple and museum effect and hence facilitate attentive viewing which encompasses wonder, reverence and curiosity;
5. To present mechanised interactive circumambulation;
6. To reveal the philosophical concept of a unified energy within the diverse universe.

2.2. The Construction

Kinetic Shiva is an interactive kinetic artwork. I am depicting *Shiva* as an object in his museum context which has deteriorated in time, but has been restored and repaired for a longer life. It is a paradoxical image as it refers to *Shiva* as the 'Lord of Destruction'. I made sections of *Shiva* and assembled them to create the complete image.



Figure 3.3.

Stage one of the construction of the three-dimensional image of *Shiva* (photo: author)



Figure 3.4.

Assembled image of *Shiva* (Photo: author)

In my artwork *Shiva* is gilded in gold leaf and sits in a meditative pose, as the *kalyanasundara* or *anugraha murti*, the benign, graceful image¹³ (rather than the dancing pose), emanating his power to the one who is willing to evoke it. I have given him his golden exterior, which makes him the fiery god, the centre of the cosmos, the god who will destroy and facilitate creation for all living beings. I have lit ***Kinetic Shiva*** from within, in his dark crimson *garbhagriha*, which literally means ‘the womb’, and is emanating light outwards. The *garbhagriha* is a square or a rectangular room in the innermost part of the temple from which the divine energy radiates outwards in all directions¹⁴. ***Kinetic Shiva*** is installed on a rotating base in his abode in a structure that I have constructed for the visitor to walk into.

¹³ Mitter, p. 38. *Shiva* in his human form with the trident sitting in a meditative posture
¹⁴ See Chapter 2, pp. 85-8.



Figure 3.5.

***Shiva*, gilded in gold leaf sits in a meditative posture
(photo: author)**



Figure 3.6.

**The interior of the created archetypal sacred space
(photo: author)**

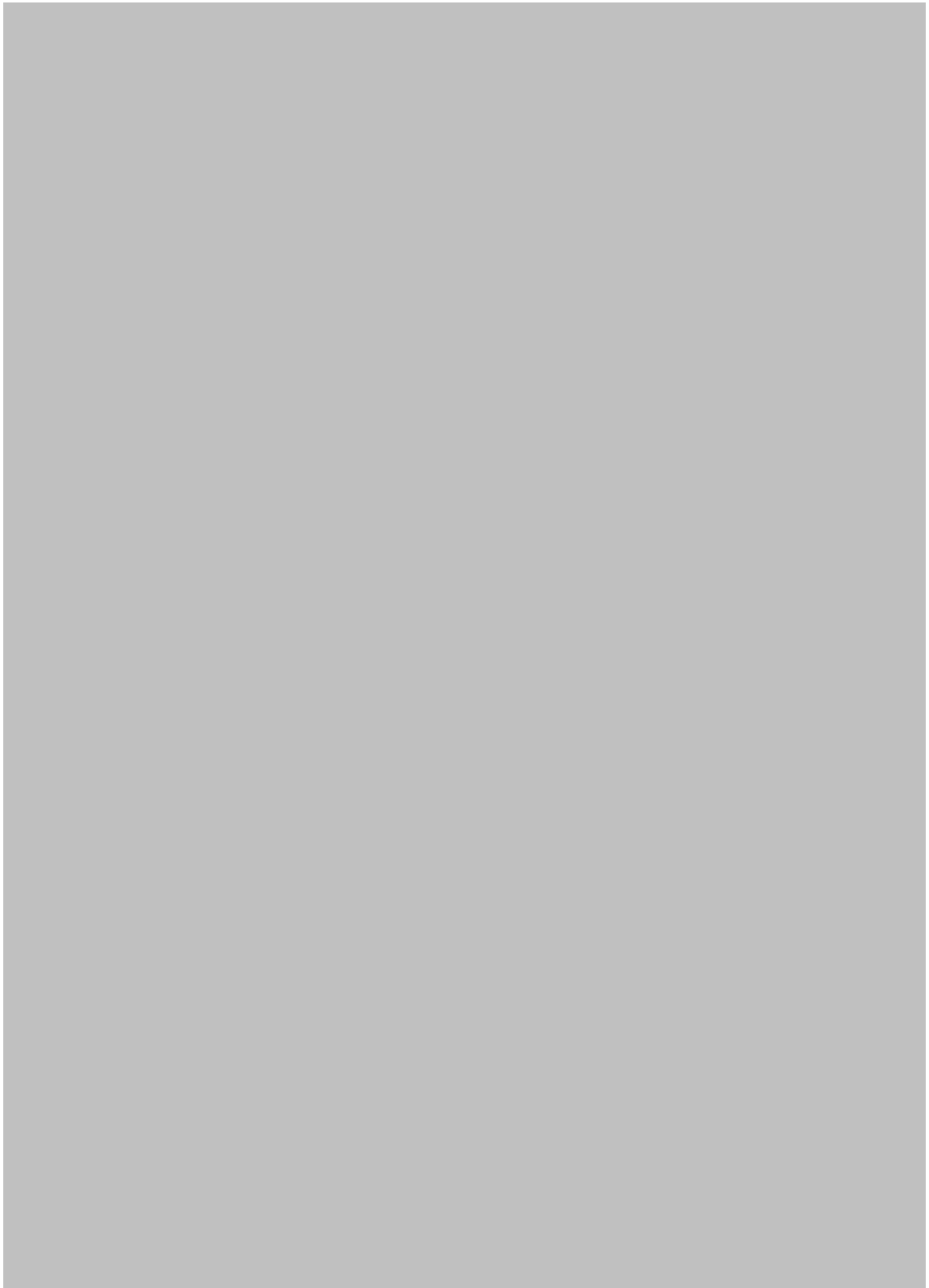


Figure 3.7.

Shiva in the womb-like sanctum
(photo: Joe Hague)

The performer in my artwork enters the dark sanctum through a short and narrow corridor. (Figure 3.8.)

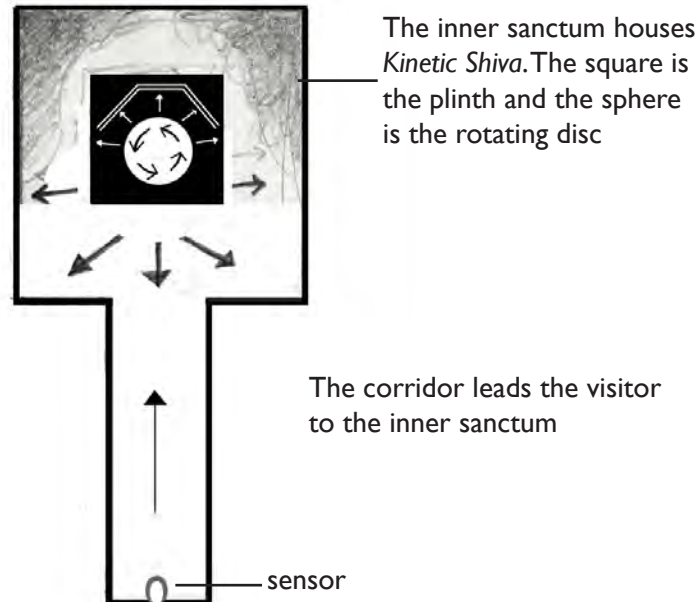


Figure 3.8.

Floor layout of the sanctum. In a womb-like chamber, the *Kinetic Shiva* is installed on a black plinth at the centre of the enclosure and is flanked by three mirrors. The light from *Shiva* emanates outwards and is reflected in the mirrors.

At the entrance of the corridor below the ceiling is a sensor (figure: author)

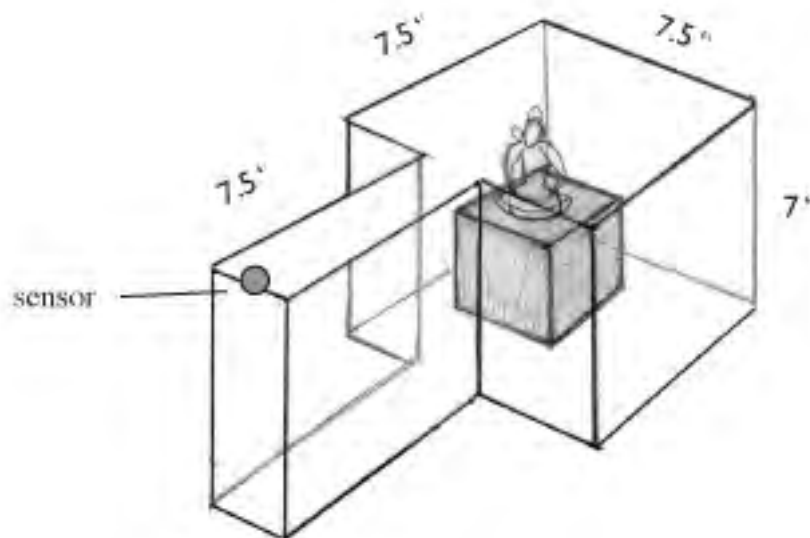


Figure 3.9.

**Elevation of the *Kinetic Shiva* sanctum.
Square or rectangle is the standard shape for the temple *garbhagriha*. It is a three-dimensional yantra. This structure is evocative of the *garbhagriha* (figure: author)**

This T-shaped structure created a distinct space within the exhibition gallery in the museum building in the exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth***. It is large enough to accommodate one person at a time to facilitate a one-to-one encounter with the ***Kinetic Shiva*** in the sanctum.

2.3. Ritualistic Behaviour

A sign at the entrance of the enclosure provides a cue to visitors to remove their shoes before entering the space. Such an instruction not only facilitates a temple ritual, it is a reminder of museum signs, which are regularly used to prevent or encourage certain behaviours in the museum. The worshipper removes any footwear before entering the temple as a gesture of respect and for contact with the sacred earth – “It is, as it were, that spot where the force and vigour of the earth can be transmitted to human beings ¹⁵”. Hence, ***Kinetic Shiva*** creates a liminal space within the larger museum building and offers the temple experience

¹⁵ Jutta Jain-Neubauer, *Feet & Footwear in Indian Culture* (Ontario: The Bata Shoe Museum Foundation, 2000) p. 53.

of moving in this marked-off ritual space with bare feet. I will discuss liminality in the next section of this chapter.



Figure 3.10.

Sign at the entrance of the *Kinetic Shiva* sanctum (photo: author)

The act of stepping into the narrow corridor causes a sensor to trigger the sound of a temple bell transforming the womb-like enclosure and evoking the feeling of being inside an archetypal sacred space accompanied by the resounding sacred sound ¹⁶.



Figure 3.11.

Sensor installed on the roof of the sanctum at its very entrance. It sensed movement in the corridor and triggered the sound of a temple bell (photo: author)

The entire experience is enhanced through the performer's direct contact with the ground as a result of walking with bare feet. As the visitor enters this space and moves inwards towards *Shiva* installed on his plinth, s/he sees the source of light that emerges from within the three-dimensional form, in the 'enclosure' ¹⁷. ***Kinetic Shiva*** sits on a circular rotating base that moves when operated manually by turning the handle on the right of the structure. Three mirrors

¹⁶ View enclosed DVD which is a recording of the experience of being inside the exhibition space and within the ***Kinetic Shiva*** sanctum.

¹⁷ Madhu Khanna, *Yantra, the Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1979). The author uses the word 'enclosure' to separate a sacred space from its surroundings.

are installed behind him, which reflect multiple images of the visitor and *Shiva*. Whilst the museum classifies the idol as religious art and a specimen of culture, identifying its material construct and geographical origin, in the temple it is worshipped as an icon of energy manifested in a physical form. Furthermore, it is believed that the five elements are present in all beings, living and non-living. The following lines by saint Ramakrishna Paramhansa, enlivens this concept and rules out all notions of classification and distinctions of deities with ritual accoutrements discussed in the museum context.

I used to worship the Deity in the Kali Temple. It was suddenly revealed to me that everything is Pure Spirit. The utensils of worship, the altar, the doorframe – all Pure Spirit. Men, animals, and other living beings – all Pure Spirit. Then like a madman I began to shower flowers in all directions. Whatever I saw, I worshipped.¹⁸

The one energy that is existent within the diversity of the universe, according to the Hindus, and can be focussed within their spiritual centre through meditation, is conceptually evident in the multiple reflections. It is a visual depiction of the infinite cosmos and the singular *Brahman*, the 'One' ¹⁹.

18 Mookerjee, p. 8.

19 See Chapter 6, p. 227.



Figure 3.12.

**Multiple reflections of the subject in the three mirrors
(photo: author)**



Figure 3.13.
Multiple reflections of Shiva
(photo: author)



Figures 3.14. and 3.15.

**Performers rotating the *Kinetic Shiva*
(photos: author)**

The visitor walks up to *Shiva*, holds the handle in her/his right hand and turns the entire structure in an anti-clockwise direction. *Shiva* moves and s/he views the complete surface area of the idol in its 360°. In this viewing s/he is concentrating on the form, the light emerging from within, and reflections in the mirrors. By rotating the idol anti-clockwise, the viewer is performing a temple ritual mechanically but consciously. S/he is literally viewing himself perform an act in the created sanctum. A worshipper performs the act of circumambulation or *pradakshina* around the deity in a temple (figure 3.16). The circumambulatory path is built into the temple architecture and symbolises a cosmic orbit within which the human plays her/his part as a natural being, with the deity at its centre. In this instance of the museum visitor's interaction with the idol, s/he is stationary and the idol is moving, but s/he is still seeing the similar three-dimensional kinetic surface of the deity as s/he would in the temple.



A



B



Figure 3.16.

Worshipper performing *pradakshina*. There are windows on three sides of the *garbhagriha*: one behind, one on the right and one on the left side of the deity. Devotees view the image of the resident god in 360° (photo: author)

Kinetic Shiva is an installation in a museum setting, through which I am presenting the circumambulation ritual to the museum visitor. The movement of the idol generated by the performer of the ritual occurs within a space where artefacts are displayed to be viewed unless they are within an interactive ‘hands-on’ space in the gallery ²⁰. They are observed from a ‘safe’ distance, one that is marked by the cabinet glass separating the viewer from the viewed or maintained by the observing visitor as a part of a ritualistic process occurring in the museum setting. The religious/secular dichotomy established during the Enlightenment, the emphasis on objective rationality and the exploration of the Kantian aesthetic philosophy for the appreciation of art, provided the museum its authoritative status in upholding these ideals. As a public museum, the purveyance of museum ideals meant a control of the community it represented. Duncan explains the rituals generated as a result:

²⁰ For further discussions on hands-on displays, refer to Chapter 6.

Those who are best prepared to perform its ritual – those who are most able to respond to its various cues – are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial, etc.) the museum ritual most fully confirms.²¹

The nature of interaction carried out in ***Kinetic Shiva*** is one of intimacy as it involves a tactile action, and functions as a critique of the ocular museum's hegemonic role. Touching the artwork, the image of an idol in the museum, breaks any barriers and removes the distance between the object and the subject. New rules of behaviour are written for the museum visitor and s/he enacts them. In actively participating in the ritual I have created within the enclosed space, the performer embodies the temple experience of interacting with the deity and is in a position to construct the dialectical meanings of the kinetic artwork.

The moving image of *Shiva*, like *Nataraja*, is a metaphor for life in this artwork. In a temple, the power in the deity is evoked through the interaction of the worshipper with it. In ***Kinetic Shiva***, meaning is generated through a ritualistic interaction with the image. Not only does my artwork enliven the concept of the latent cosmic energy within the deity, it simultaneously presents it as a museum object. The concealed light within *Shiva* enhances the pieces which I have assembled to suggest restoration. Moreover, when rotated and observed carefully, ***Kinetic Shiva*** reveals its acquisition name - **KS 2107** (figure 3.17).



Figure 3.17.

Kinetic Shiva's
accession name

(photo: author)

²¹ Duncan, *Civilizing Ritual*. p. 8.

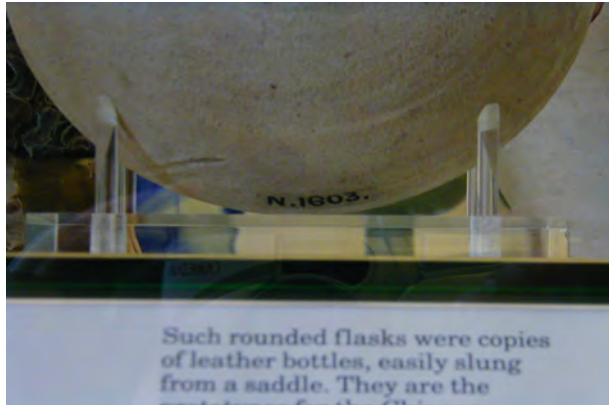


Figure 3.18.
Ceramic flask's
accession name,
British Museum
(photo: author)



Figure 3.19.
Collection of Hindu idols,
Hotung Gallery, British
Museum
(photo: author)

When collected or acquired by the museum, an object becomes a part of a larger collection (figure 3.19), it “fills a gap”²² and has achieved its “collection apotheosis”²³. It acquires two names: one that is its accession name (figure 3.18) comprised of a set of digits or letters, and the other its cultural name such *Shiva*, or *Ganesh*, which Pearce argues “is because our memories, which are cultured, work through the interlinking association of image-name-object, while numbers only link with images and objects if they have come to take the place of a name”. Pearce calls this systematic collecting.

For well over two centuries systematic collecting, both inside and outside museums, has in all its different manifestations in the various disciplines been accorded an intellectual primacy, which seems to derive from its apparent capacity to demonstrate understanding rather than feeling, and so to extend our control of the world.²⁴

Hence, in the museum setting, the idol becomes a part of the established belief and value system. It is subject to museum rituals.

²² Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections* (London: Leicester University Press, 1992) p. 87.

²³ Pearce, p. 128.

²⁴ Pearce, p. 84.

2.4. Cue for Performance

The cue to perform a ritual comes spontaneously or from the priest to the worshipper in the Hindu temple. It also comes from an understanding of the 'script' that is handed down through generations and is practised regularly. The devotee absorbs the knowledge of the *yantra*, through observation in temples or in the domestic environment. Types of rituals vary from simple everyday practices to complex rituals performed by priests ²⁵.

Duncan elucidates that the museum's structured spaces, sequenced exhibits the lighting and the architectural features provide a stage and a script for the enactment of rituals, whether or not the visitor can "read the cues" ²⁶. Following a prescribed route, recalling certain narratives and experiences and engaging in the structured experience created by the museum, are some of the rituals that are performed in this special marked off museum space. Rituals commence upon entering the museum. In large public museums that attract crowds such as the British Museum and the V&A Museum, one follows the wave of people through the doors and steps into a space where regularly-practised activities, such as viewing the floor plan, buying tickets, depositing belongings at the cloakroom and walking through the galleries, take place. The design of the displays with their cabinets, plinths, lighting, text panels and architectural details cause visitors to stop, view and move to the next object, read textual information, point towards objects and speak softly amongst themselves.



Figure 3.20.

Visitors at the British Museum door which marks the separation of the outside world with the museum's interior space (photo: author)

²⁵ These include the *pranapratishta* ceremony of instilling life in the newly created divine image, daily *pujas* and *pradakshina* or circumambulation.

²⁶ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*. p. 12.

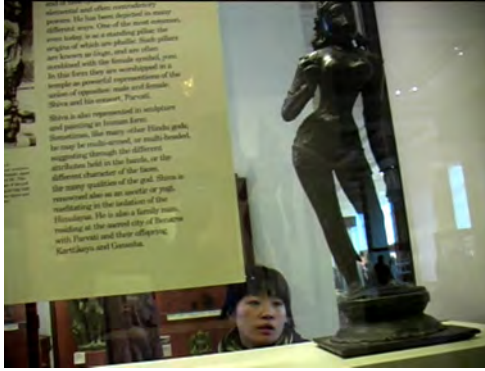


Figure 3.21.

Visitor observing displays, the Parvati bronze is in foreground, British Museum (photo: author)



Figure 3.22.

Visitor pointing at a display, Horniman Museum (photo: author)



Figure 3.23.

Visitors peeping into an empty sarcophagus, British Museum (photo: author)

Duncan refers to the museum as a civic body that provides a universal base of knowledge, validates its highest values, and most cherished memories; it is the preserver of the community's official cultural memory and fosters learning. The ordering of the world through collections, or the construction of meta-narratives in the museum building, creates a ritual setting wherein secular rituals pertaining to the construction of meaning and conforming to the hegemony of objective

truth are practised. As explained by Duncan:

...like other cultures, we, too, build sites that publicly represent beliefs about the order of the world, its past and present, and the individual's place within it. Museums of all kinds are excellent examples of such microcosms; art museums in particular – the most prestigious and costly of these sites – are especially rich in this kind of symbolism and, almost always, even equip visitors with maps to guide them through the universe they construct.²⁷

The effectiveness of creating a stage and providing the right cues for the visitor to perform the museum rituals is an important function of curating. Hence, “performances dovetail (or fail) to curatorial agency”²⁸. Visitors perform these rituals consciously or sub-consciously. Bouquet and Porto point out the importance of the visitor's agency in creating these rituals. People create patterns and habits; they make meaning, appreciate or reject displays and make the museum a ritual site.

The visitor is provided with cues before s/he enters the ritual space of **Kinetic Shiva**, through direction and a brief explanation of the concept. A text panel at the entrance explains:

Notice the handle on your right in this archetypal shrine. Gently turn it away from you to experience mechanised circumambulation.

An excerpt from the adjoining panel that provided my interpretation of the artwork is quoted below:

‘Kinetic Shiva’, an interactive artwork, mechanises a commonly practised Hindu ritual in the temple called ‘**pradakshina**’ or **circumambulation**. The worshipper in the temple walks in a clockwise direction around the deity, demonstrating the revolution of the earth around the sun. It is a form of meditation and a means to achieving unity with the creative energy that is believed to be existent in all matter.

The enclosure in which it sits is a depiction of an archetypal sacred space: the ‘**garbhagriha**’ literally meaning ‘**the womb**’ of the temple. It is the innermost chamber created for

27 Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*. p. 8.

28 Bouquet and Porto, eds. p. 4.

the primary deity. The logo for this exhibition, is a diagram of the sanctum. The passage leads the spiritual aspirant towards the spiritual centre.²⁹

It is said that the idol should never be hollow. I have, therefore, filled Kinetic Shiva with light in his dark sanctum.

Multiple reflections of you and Shiva in the mirrors symbolise cosmic infinity.

The direction is clear and makes the visitor aware that s/he will perform a ritual in that space. This method is very similar to a religious ritual. Consciousness of the ritual is vital and is achieved by instruction and experience. Whilst **Kinetic Shiva** evokes the feeling of being in a recreated temple sanctum, its curation in the museum building, the structuring of meaning and experience, dissemination of information through text panels and instructions to behave in certain ways suggests museum rituals. The performer in the exhibition gallery conforms to museum ritualistic behaviour and subsequently enters the **Kinetic Shiva** sanctum to perform a different set of rituals with the rotating *Shiva*. The visitor encounters the deity's fragmented meanings: religious in the embodied experience; secular in the mechanisation of the interaction with the kinetic object.

The transition from the museum gallery into the enclosure itself is an indication of a change in behaviour specific to an adaptation to the new environment, one that is dimly lit with *Shiva* as the focal point. The *garbhagriha* in the Hindu temple is the darkest chamber. It is lit with lamps and decorated with flowers, but lacks natural light. Similarly, the sanctum created in this artwork is a dimly-lit space and contains the aroma of sandalwood, engulfing the visitor in a multi-sensory environment. The visitors interacting with **Kinetic Shiva**, as well as the temple worshipper, have to be conscious of their encounter with the powerful energy that is associated with and is manifest in the form of the deity. This combination of self-consciousness, performance of the ritual and the experience of uniting with the cosmic energy makes one a successful *yogini*³⁰ or *yogi*: "one who is the seeker or one who aims to achieve union with the reality of the cosmos."³¹

The visitor turns to leave the enclosed setting of **Kinetic Shiva**, upon which

29 See Chapter 7 for further information on concepts that underpin the exhibition logo and other graphic material, pp. 271-4.

30 *yogini* – female spiritual aspirant, *yogi* – male spiritual aspirant

31 Khanna, p. 172.

the recorded temple bell resounds in the space. **Kinetic Shiva** communicates on various levels: it is an installation that takes its audience into a unique realm; it compares the metaphysics of the temple and museum space ³² and prompts its audience to experience both. It comments on the physical form of *Shiva* that has deteriorated and is re-created. The experience and observation of my artwork is a starting point for further questioning by the visitor, which could lead to a quest for acquiring further knowledge. The questions could be as simple as these:

- Why is there a light inside the figure of *Shiva*?
- Why is it constructed from broken pieces?
- Why am I encountering this artwork in a museum setting?
- How do I see *Shiva* in a museum and what makes this experience unique?

These questions were projections, and roughly predicted the lasting impression of the experience. They were crucial in providing a framework in my process of making and installing **Kinetic Shiva**. The aim of my artwork was to present a setting that would generate a ritualistic response in the audience. One of my aims in this research (this is strongly evident in **Kinetic Shiva**) was to make artworks which embody metaphysical and ritual meaning and present a set of visual propositions to the museum visitor for further enquiry and questioning. This could be a line of religious or museological enquiry.

2.5. Kinetic Art

In this section of the chapter I will review and compare the twentieth century Kinetic Art movement on the one hand, and the *Nataraja* dancing *Shiva* on the other, in order to identify their visual language and locate my practice within contemporary art. The role of this argument is to establish the context of my own work within art practice.

³² Refer to Chapter 2 for 'museum metaphysics', pp. 88-96.



Figure 3.24.

Nataraja (front), Bronze, British Museum, Hotung Gallery for Oriental Antiquities, Chola period (photo: author)



Figure 3.25.

Nataraja (back), British Museum (photo: author)

Nataraja can be described as a kinetic image as it depicts motion and energy (figures 3.24 and 3.25). It is a portrayal of *Shiva* dancing in a ring of flame. Art historian Padma Kaimal describes the image:

The form itself of this sculptural type is visually compelling in the dramatic traverse line of the lifted leg, the radial spray of arms, legs and locks of hair, the thrilling tension between dramatic action and balanced stillness.³³

The furious dance of *Shiva* portrays his mastery over the unbroken cosmic cycle. In Hinduism it is believed that each deity created or each form that is worshipped is potent with energy. This energy is evoked through worship. Such an ideology and practice throws light on the anthropomorphic qualities of idols.

The person initiating the movement in ***Kinetic Shiva*** enlivens the image. ***Kinetic Shiva*** demonstrates the concept of potential energy in deities as believed by the Hindus. Furthermore, it depicts the movement of energy occurring on a microcosmic and macrocosmic level in organisms and in the universe. The Hindu metaphysical belief of creation, destruction and movement of energy within forms overlaps with scientific studies of atomic energy in matter. A group of 'kinetic artists' between the 1920s and 1970s, such as Marcel Duchamp, Alexander Calder, Hans Haacke, Jean Tinguely, James Whitney, Gordon Matta-Clark, Takis and László Moholy-Nagy believed in art as "a possible model of the

³³ Kaimal, p. 390.

universe”³⁴. They explored the “language of movement”³⁵ in art that was inspired and was caused by movement in space. The added dimension of time created four-dimensional works of art within a space to create perceptions of kineticism and repose. Guy Brett, in his essay “The Century of Kinesthesia” called the artworks “a thread of cosmic speculation”. He wrote:

It is a thread of fascinating intricacy, precisely because the structures that artists have arrived at, combine an investigation of reality with the investigation of the aesthetic. It is as if speculation on the structure of the universe, for these artists, is inseparable from a transformation of the formal structures of art, and vice versa, that the formal transformation of art is itself a proposition on the structure of the universe.³⁶

The process I have employed in making ***Kinetic Shiva***: assembling the segments of *Shiva*; the rotating motor, the handle, the base of the sculpture and the light within it, is a preparation for the ritualised movement. Recreating an enclosed form in my artwork is an act of containing energy for which light is the metaphor. The energy spreads outwards and is absorbed by the space around it and the person standing within it. This artwork is a visual commentary on temple and museum ritual. Whilst it empathises with the ideology of the kinetic art movement of the twentieth century, it distinguishes itself from having a ritualistic purpose. It is designed to move only when the action is triggered by a performer. It depicts the performance of a conscious meditative act within the created sanctum and highlights its interpretive role through its site-specificity: the discursive museum space.

Kinetic artworks such as Hans Haacke’s ‘Condensation Cube’ and Alexander Calder and Julio Le Parc’s mobiles transform, move, reflect and refract light as a result of the effect of forces of nature on them. ***Kinetic Shiva*** moves as a result of human interaction with it. It invites the actor to play, question and understand the multiple layers of meaning presented to her/him. S/he goes through a journey commencing at the entrance of the enclosed structure through to the discovery of the handle into the slow movement of *Shiva*. This change from the apparently³⁷

³⁴ Suzanne Cotter and Cathy Douglas, *Force Fields. Phases of the Kinetic* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2000) pp. 10-11.

³⁵ Cotter and Douglas, p. 9.

³⁶ Cotter and Douglas, p. 10. Guy Brett was the curator of the exhibition ‘Force Fields: Phases of the Kinetic’ at the Hayward Gallery, London, 13 July-17 September, 2000.

³⁷ The word ‘apparently’ is used here as Marcel Duchamp claimed: ‘nothing is at rest in the universe.’ See Cotter and Douglas, p. 10.

static object to a moving structure is the start of an experience that engages the performer intellectually and physically with ***Kinetic Shiva***.

The Hindu deity in the museum is classified as 'art'³⁸ and as a cultural sign. In its religious setting, it is believed to be alive with the divine power, but with similar physical attributes to a human being. Its tangible surface will deteriorate and diminish over time. ***Kinetic Shiva*** rotates and demonstrates the effect time has had on its physical form and continues to elucidate its dialectical meaning as a museum object and a deity. The practice of conservation in the museological context and the impact of time on materials are aptly expressed in the following statement by Guy Brett³⁹:

To be more accurate one might say that the kinetic object and the static sculpture are moving at different speeds. The sculpture is undergoing a slow process of change and decay, whatever the museum does to arrest it. One of the achievements of kinetic art was to reveal the subtleties in the phenomenon of speed and time, as an experience generated between work and spectator.

The mechanised and conscious ritual of ***Kinetic Shiva*** occurs within a setting especially created for its performance within the museum environment.

3. Ritual

In this section of the chapter I will examine the nature of ritualistic behaviours practised by individuals in religious and secular environments. They carry out ritualistic acts in order to attune themselves to a particular environment or transfer themselves to a different psychological and physical state or simply follow a laid set of cues. Ritual is defined thus:

Ritual. *adj.* relating to, or of the nature of rites. *n.* the manner of performing divine service, or a book containing it; a body or code of ceremonies; an often repeated series of actions; the performance of rites; a ceremonial act.⁴⁰

³⁸ The V&A's collection of Hindu gods and goddesses is in the Jawaharlal Nehru Gallery of Indian Art, The James Green Centre of World Art at the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery and in the Department of Eastern Art at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford to name a few.

³⁹ Cotter and Douglas, p. 35.

⁴⁰ *The Chambers Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd, 1993).

Rituals occur within belief systems, or conceptual frameworks. Action follows thought and in many cases certain spaces trigger ritual action. The Hindu temple is designed for the enactment of rituals. A worshipper behaves in very specific ways within this sacred space. The same worshipper would be performing very different rituals outside the religious arena, depending on the role s/he is performing in the society and her/his environment. Social scientist, Erving Goffman⁴¹ stated that “role is the basic unit of socialization” within which a person takes on the “whole array of action encompassed by the role” in society. This emerges from established social values, expectations from society, or in presenting a certain self-image. He continues to explain that each individual will be involved in more than one system or pattern and, therefore, perform more than one role. A person in the temple attains the role of the worshipper and performs religious rituals, whereas in the museum the same person would be enacting the role of a museum visitor. Before this section of the chapter further examines the difference between these two roles, and the rituals that are generated as a result of acquiring these roles, it is important to establish the meaning of the term ritual and its paradigms.

Ritual is associated with ritualistic practices – with the realm of belief, magic, real or symbolic sacrifices, miraculous transformations, or overpowering changes of consciousness.⁴²

... Concerning ritual and belief, I would argue that the two are intimately connected. Negatively, we speak of some practice or another as “meaningless ritual,” or “mere ritual.”⁴³

The latter statement throws light on the dichotomy of thought and action within ritual. Catherine Bell describes a structural pattern in which “ritual is differentiated from mental categories as readily as action is differentiated from thought”⁴⁴. The thought – action dichotomy is evident in the two cases of living exhibitions discussed in Chapter 2⁴⁵. This is reflected in an argument presented by Bell:

Outsiders will see in ritual only the mere presentation of a particular religious perspective, which they may appreciate

41 Erving Goffman, “The Self and Social Roles,” *The Goffman Reader*, eds. Charles Lemert and Ann Branaman (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Limited, 1961).

42 Duncan, p. 8.

43 Langdon Elsbree, *The Rituals of Life: Patterns in Narratives* (New York: National University Publications, 1982) p. 7.

44 Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 20.

45 Go to pp. 104-110.

aesthetically or analyze scientifically. For participants, on the other hand, rites are “enactments, materializations, realizations” of a particular religious perspective, “not only models of what they believe, but also models for the believing of it”.⁴⁶

Certain ceremonious rituals in the temple, such as the eye opening ceremony, are observed by an audience. However, this display is of the rite of awakening, and the act of looking makes the ritual experience complete for the devotee. The same act in the museum is an exhibition of the concept of the awakening, one that is viewed and was acted out by the Bengali community for its audience, the museum visitors.

Bell compares the thought – action dichotomy to Ferdinand Saussure’s perspective on ritual and continues to describe the second pattern, one where thought and action reintegrate. She states that “ritual mediates thought and action” and elucidates this clearly:

Ritual emerges as the means for a provisional synthesis of some form of the original opposition.⁴⁷

The performer in the ***Kinetic Shiva*** installation is conscious of the rituals s/he enacts. Hence, as an actor in the museum setting, s/he is the performer as well as the observer. The dichotomy of thought and action re-integrates in my interactive artwork.

Rituals can be “gestural and dramatic”⁴⁸, or symbolic with a specific goal and facilitating transition from one space into another and one state into another. Arnold Van Gennep has called this a ‘territorial passage’ in which the person steps into a marked off or a defined space distinguishing the sacred and the profane.

Whoever passes from one to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds. It is this situation which I have designated a transition.⁴⁹

46 Bell, p. 28.

47 Bell, p. 21.

48 Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) p. 53.

49 Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika Vizedom and Gabrielle Caffel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) p. 18.

He also describes the direct rite of passage in which “a person leaves one world behind him and enters a new one.”⁵⁰ The door and its threshold marks and provides the transitional passage.

Precisely: the door is the boundary between the foreign and the domestic worlds in the case of an ordinary dwelling, between the sacred and the profane in the case of a temple. Therefore to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with the new world.⁵¹

The three stages: the rite of entrance, the waiting and departure, are described by Van Gennep as ‘pre-liminal’, ‘liminal’, and ‘post-liminal’. He defines the pre-liminal rite as the stage before liminality in which the person separates himself from an existing status within society, situation or circumstance before entering a new phase. Conceptually, it is a mental detachment from a fixed state into a new enlightened state. The Hindu temple liminal rituals incorporate the rite of pre-liminality followed by transition, union and last of all a temporary separation from the idol. From entering the temple to moving towards the *garbhagriha* and performing meditative rituals with the aid of *yantras*, the person is elevating himself from one state to another⁵². Hence, the temple embodies its own liminal areas. Turner describes *liminality* (limen is “threshold” in Latin⁵³) and *liminal personae* (“threshold people”) as an ‘ambiguous condition’ in which “the persons elude or slip through a network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.” He continues to describe:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial.⁵⁴

Hence, liminality is both a phase and a state. It is directly relevant to and practised by worshippers in the Hindu temple, as it is applicable to the museum experience, which is a marked-off space for the viewing and admiration of displayed objects.

50 Van Gennep, p. 19.

51 Van Gennep, p. 20.

52 See Chapter 2, pp. 96-98.

53 Victor Witter Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell Publications, 1977) p. 94.

54 Turner, p. 95.

4. Conclusion

Alpers has pointed out that religious artefacts or altarpieces in museums invite visitors to look attentively due in their newly acquired position as museum artefacts⁵⁵. The layout of the temple is such that it isolates the deity from the temple complex within its *garbhagriha*. The devotee's ritualistic movement towards this womb-like space heightens the sense of approaching the nucleus of the temple culminating in an enhanced viewing of the image, the aim of which is to apprehend the transcendental qualities of the deity. The museum practice of observing artefacts has been critiqued in *Kinetic Shiva*, which when exhibited in the museum setting invited the visitor to walk towards the image and look closely. It further added the multi-sensory dimension and the work of art did not remain the dis-embodied autonomous object, but an experience in the installation space. I explored the dialectics of the temple and museum effects⁵⁶ through the design of the structure (an archetypal temple sanctum), its location in the museum's gallery space (it engenders attentive viewing) and through the conscious mechanised ritual, which caused the performer to transcend the presented image to focus on its meaning. The meanings disseminated are simultaneously religious and museological and hence offer a dialectical study of the deity in two contexts: the religious and the secular.

I have chosen 'ritual' as the appropriate term to describe the actions of visitors due to its religious connotation and its link with civilizing actions in the museum setting. The interaction of the visitor with my artwork is physically active and simultaneously meditative. The act is conscious and described as ritualistic for the participant as opposed to the uncertain status of the museum ritual. I have referred to the T-shaped enclosure as a recreated archetypal sanctum to encourage the museum visitor to interpret it as one. The dissimilitude between the reconstruction of *Shiva* and the authentic acquired museum object is blurred and the installation prepares the visitor to receive it as a space where s/he performs rituals. The movement of the performer in the gallery is orchestrated through *Kinetic Shiva*. Hence, this artwork is not an act of staging a ritual, which involves performers and a distinct audience; it encourages ritual behaviour.

⁵⁵ Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) pp. 26-27. Alpers points out that the exhibition of material signifiers of other cultures and what was "primitive" in museums isolate these objects from their surroundings and reframe them as art.

⁵⁶ Visit Chapter 2 for a discussion on 'museum and temple effect', pp. 101-104.

The original significance of *Shiva* and its changed meaning in the museum context (its reception as a conserved art object and status as a redundant deity), are presented to the museum visitor through experience rather than through a verbal interpretation or staged performance. The visitor steps into a liminal area created within the larger museum building emphasising the space as a separate entity whilst maintaining its link with the museum. The light emerging from *Shiva*, the sound of the bell and the atmosphere within the enclosed space create a feeling of enchantment. The visitor carries out the ritual performance without agency. Thought and action reintegrate at the reception stage of ***Kinetic Shiva***. The plot is written and presented and the enactment of rituals is carried out by the visitor. My artwork facilitates a unique method of receiving information – through a multi-sensory experience.

In the next chapter I will introduce my video work ***Ganesh, circa 1900*** and will examine an annual ritual which celebrates the cycle of life – death – rebirth of icons.



Chapter 4

Ganesh, circa 1900

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I will present my digital video artwork, ***Ganesh, circa 1900***, which embodies in its four dimensions: the cyclical nature of time, creation, destruction and recreation, as believed by the Hindus. My artwork is a symbolic depiction of the immersion ritual practised by *Ganesh* worshippers in the western states of India. I am presenting its life cycle and simultaneously contrasting it with the practice of preserving Hindu idols in the museum through the image, its movement, sound and the depiction of time. I will refer to the wider context of this video by reviewing other selected artists' work that explore the concepts of time and transformation through moving images.

Furthermore, I will discuss the cultural significance of *Ganesh* and the annual festival which celebrates his life and ends with his immersion in water, in order to reveal his ephemeral status. I will compare his physical temporality with the preservation of his materiality through preventive conservation in the museum. In this chapter I will highlight the use of the vitrine as an icon of protection and simultaneously as a framing device to attract attentive viewing.

Through ***Ganesh, circa 1900*** I am depicting the vitrine as a container for narratives that compare cultural and museological meanings of *Ganesh*.

I. Introduction

Worn-out garments
 Are shed by the body:
 Worn-out bodies
 Are shed by the dweller
 Within the body
 New bodies are donned
 By the dweller, like garments.

Not wounded by weapons,
 Not burned by fire,
 Not dried by the wind,
 Not wetted by water:
 Such is the Atman ¹

The temporal nature of all beings in the universe, living and non-living, is at the core of Hindu philosophy and is poignantly expressed in the verse quoted above. The physical body is a manifestation of the abstract and unseen soul; it is a vehicle and is chosen by the soul. The *Atman* can manifest itself in a variety of forms over time, which makes the body transient, but the soul constant and eternal. This philosophy is widely practised and is embedded within the mythical and iconographic creation of Hindu gods and goddesses. *Vishnu*, The Preserver (figure 4.1), has several incarnations within the Hindu pantheon, a few of the many examples are: the benevolent *Rama* ²; *Matsya*, the fish ³ (figure 4.2) that saved mankind from a consuming flood; *Krishna* ⁴ (figure 4.3) and *Buddha* ⁵. Each of these *avatars* has a distinct personality and is worshipped by specific groups of people or cults. Despite the numerous forms, the divine energy is one, reflecting the

¹ *The Song of God, Bhagvad Gita*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (London: Phoenix House, 1947) p. 42. The *Bhagvad Gita* is a compilation of verses in Sanskrit that were recited by Lord *Krishna* to *Arjuna* on the battlefield in the epic story, *Mahabharata*. He spoke of the philosophical meaning of life as a human and preached the ways of living, meditation and the achievement of *nirvana*. *Atman* is Sanskrit for soul.

² *Rama* is the hero and protagonist of the epic story, the *Ramayana*. He was the king of *Ayodhya*, in the Ganges valley, and defeated the demon king *Ravana* in the *Ramayana*, which was written in Sanskrit by the sage *Valmiki*. His personality is depicted as one of kindness, compassion, heroism and benevolence and his name is used as the word of god.

³ *Matsya*, or the fish *avatar* of *Vishnu*, is a depiction of *Vishnu* as the Preserver. He took the form of a fish and saved mankind and the sacred texts, the *Vedas*, in a flood.

⁴ Widely worshipped, *Krishna* has several identities that have been worshipped by different groups/cults since the early centuries AD and continues to this day. *Krishna* is depicted as a mischievous child, a cowherd who charms the young milkmaids (*gopis*), as a pastoral deity, a controller of the snake deity, a philosopher who narrated the *Bhagvad Gita* and as an urban ruler from the city of *Dvaraka* in Gujarat, on the west coast of India.

⁵ *Buddha*, unlike *Shiva* and like *Vishnu*, has the qualities of a saviour. A historic figure *Buddha* has been considered as an *avatar* of *Vishnu* since syncretism permeated through eastern India between the tenth and twelfth centuries. For a detailed account on the *avatars* of *Vishnu*, see: Richard T. Blurton, *Hindu Art*, 2nd ed. (London: British Museum Press, 1994) pp. 111-153.

thought of the invincible *Atman*. The role of *Vishnu* in the trinity is to preserve and maintain a balance in the universe, whereas the role of *Shiva*, is to create and re-create life. Hence, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth is not only a strong belief, it is the idea that has created an array of gods and goddesses, simple and complex rituals on every level, it is the philosophy that pervades the everyday lives of communities in India.



Figure 4.1.

***Vishnu* with consorts *Bhu* and *Shri*, south India
(photo: courtesy of the British Museum)**

Figure 4.2.

***Matsya*, fish avatar of *Vishnu*, 9th century, central India
(photo: courtesy of the British Museum)**

Figure 4.3.

***Krishna*, *Vishnu*'s avatar, dancing with the *gopis*. Section of a page from manuscript, Rajasthan
(photo: courtesy of the British Museum)**

Ganesh is believed to be the Remover of Obstacles and Lord of Beginnings. He is the second son of *Shiva* and his consort, *Parvati*. He has a distinct appearance: the head of an elephant and a child-like human body. He is the most widely worshipped god in India and is always installed at the entrance of the temple, is ritualistically prayed to at the commencement of any important or auspicious occasion. An important ritual practised in the central states of India starts with the worship of *Ganesh* and ends with his immersion in a natural body of water.

Ethnographic galleries in public museums such as the James Green Gallery of World Art at the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, social history museums such as the Croydon Museum, the Hotung Gallery of World Art in the archaeological British Museum, and religious museums such as the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, all display a *Ganesh* image with their collections. His transference from the live temple, where he is smeared with vermillion, showered with flowers and worshipped daily, into a protected museum environment, is reflected in my artwork ***Ganesh, circa 1900***. The ritual of immersion is symbolic of the cyclical nature of life as believed by the Hindus. This video work presents the tension between the deity's identity and treatment as a living god on the one hand and as a conserved object on the other.

2. Ganesh, circa 1900

In this section of the chapter I will present my video artwork ***Ganesh, circa 1900***. I will examine the concepts that underpin my performative act in staging the dissolution process and its recording as a moving image for exhibition in the museum environment.

2.1 Aims

Ganesh, circa 1900 (duration: 5 minutes and 30 seconds) is my observation through the video camera of the process of the dissolution of *Ganesh* in water in an upturned glass vitrine. The visual elements of *Ganesh*, water, the glass case and the plinth, reflect the two contexts that are at the core of this research: the religious (temple and domestic rituals) and the secular (museum exhibition and conservation) practices. I am using these visual elements to construct a narrative that is symbolic of the two contexts and their dichotomies.



Figures 4.4, 4.5, 4.6.

***Ganesh, circa 1900* stills
(photo: author)**

My aims in developing the concept of ***Ganesh, circa 1900***, and making it for exhibition are:

1. To make visually explicit the comparison between the role of *Ganesh* as a god in its shrine and its exhibition as a conserved cultural symbol or sculpture in the museum;
2. To present the cycle of birth, death and rebirth through the moving image;
3. To create a meditative piece of work that loops with my chanting of the cosmic sound 'Om';
4. To present an annual folk ritual to the museum visitor and to demonstrate the power of natural forces on tangible material;
5. To depict the process of *Ganesh* dissolution, which is never witnessed by man after *visarajana* (immersion), in order to make apparent the transition into nothingness;
6. To use the vitrine as a container and a framing device for a narrative and a phenomenon: one that is commenced by me, but develops spontaneously.

2.2. Making Ganesh for the Video

The three-dimensional form of *Ganesh* used in this artwork is approximately 160 millimetres tall. It is made of a mixture of degradable materials: rice flour, sugar and PVA (polyvinyl acetate) glue, which I poured into a mould. Rice flour and sugar are the two ingredients which are critical in the ritual of offering *prasada*⁶ to *Ganesh* during the festival. *Ganesh* is considered to be fond of sweets and the *prasada* offered to him is a sweetmeat called *modak*, which is prepared with sugar, rice flour, ghee⁷ and coconut. The mould that was used to create the image, was made from an existing form of *Ganesh*, which was more durable. It was created for worship within a domestic environment and not for the purpose of immersion. This is reflected through his small size; a community temple would have a fairly large image of *Ganesh*. The mixture was allowed to set and harden within the mould (the glue worked as the binder), which was then broken to reveal the new form of *Ganesh* for immersion.

I installed a glass container onto a plinth and filled it with clear water. I then started the process of gradually immersing *Ganesh* into the water until it sat on the base of the container and was completely submerged. The initial contact with water, released the trapped air from the form discharging a trail of bubbles, which has been captured on video. I generated the process of natural dissolution and was in return, encountered by some of the natural processes that occur when materials begin to react with one another at a certain temperature within a controlled environment. The release of air and the initial dissolution with water started the process of gradual decomposition of the material.

It is not unusual for *Ganesh* devotees to make their own forms for personal worship. Images are made with natural clay found in soil, papier maché, mud and branches from trees, which are then decorated, with vermilion, fabrics and jewels for the purpose of *puja* or worship. Aparna, a female visitor at the exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth***, which featured both my artworks from this research that depict *Ganesh*, commented on the image of the deity:

I believe that deities have their own ways of taking shape and inspire us to make and pray to them. I have made a small *Ganesh* using the soil from my garden in Croydon!⁸

⁶ *Prasada* – blessed food. First presented to the deity, it is then tasted by the devotees.

⁷ *Ghee* – clarified butter

⁸ Aparna made this comment on 14th August 2008, in the 'Space C' gallery in her conversation with me. This is recorded in my diary and is a vital oral testimony from a *Ganesh* worshipper. The tradition of making images for worship from natural material is still alive. For a

A similar practice in the western state of Rajasthan in India reflects this ubiquitous customary act. Women create small mud images of the goddess, *Parvati*, for the *Gangaur* Festival, which are taken to the fields soon after the seeds are planted. The Goddess *Parvati* or *Gauri* (another name for *Parvati*) is invoked to bless the fields during the harvest season. This is a means to ensure a good harvest and healthy growth. After eighteen days of watering the soil and the emergence of a seedling, ritualistic *puja* takes place, and the women carry the images of the goddess and immerse them in water⁹.

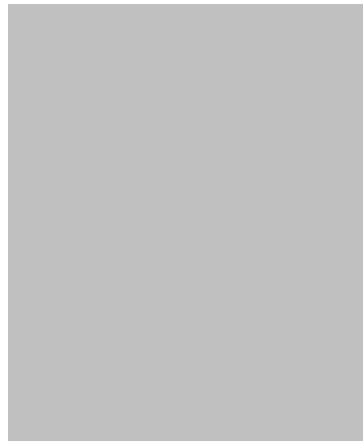


Figure 4.7.

**Women immersing
dried mud goddesses
in water after the
Gangaur festival
(Photo: courtesy of
Stephen Huyler)**

Making images from mud which is a material that lends itself to creating an ephemeral form, and invoking the divine energy within it, is a strong reflection of the *bhava*: the devotional idea or mood that the creator of the image imbues into it when making a deity. The created deity is a manifestation of the *bhava*. Its worship breathes life into it and a deity is born.

2.3. Recording Dissolution

Ganesh, circa 1900 presents the transformation of *Ganesh* to nothingness and his subsequent recreation. It shows the states of the deity that could only be imagined and probably never witnessed. Shot on a digital video using time lapse, the process of dissolution is shown by speeding up the video 20 times. The video camera started recording the transformation at the very moment the idol was immersed in water.

further account on the practice occurring in the Indian state of Maharashtra, see Blurton, pp. 106-107.

⁹ For more examples on the worship of ephemeral images, see Stephen P. Huyler, *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) p. 192.



Figure 4.8.

***Ganesh* immersed in water
(photo: author)**



Figure 4.9.

**Commencement of the process of disolution
(photo: author)**

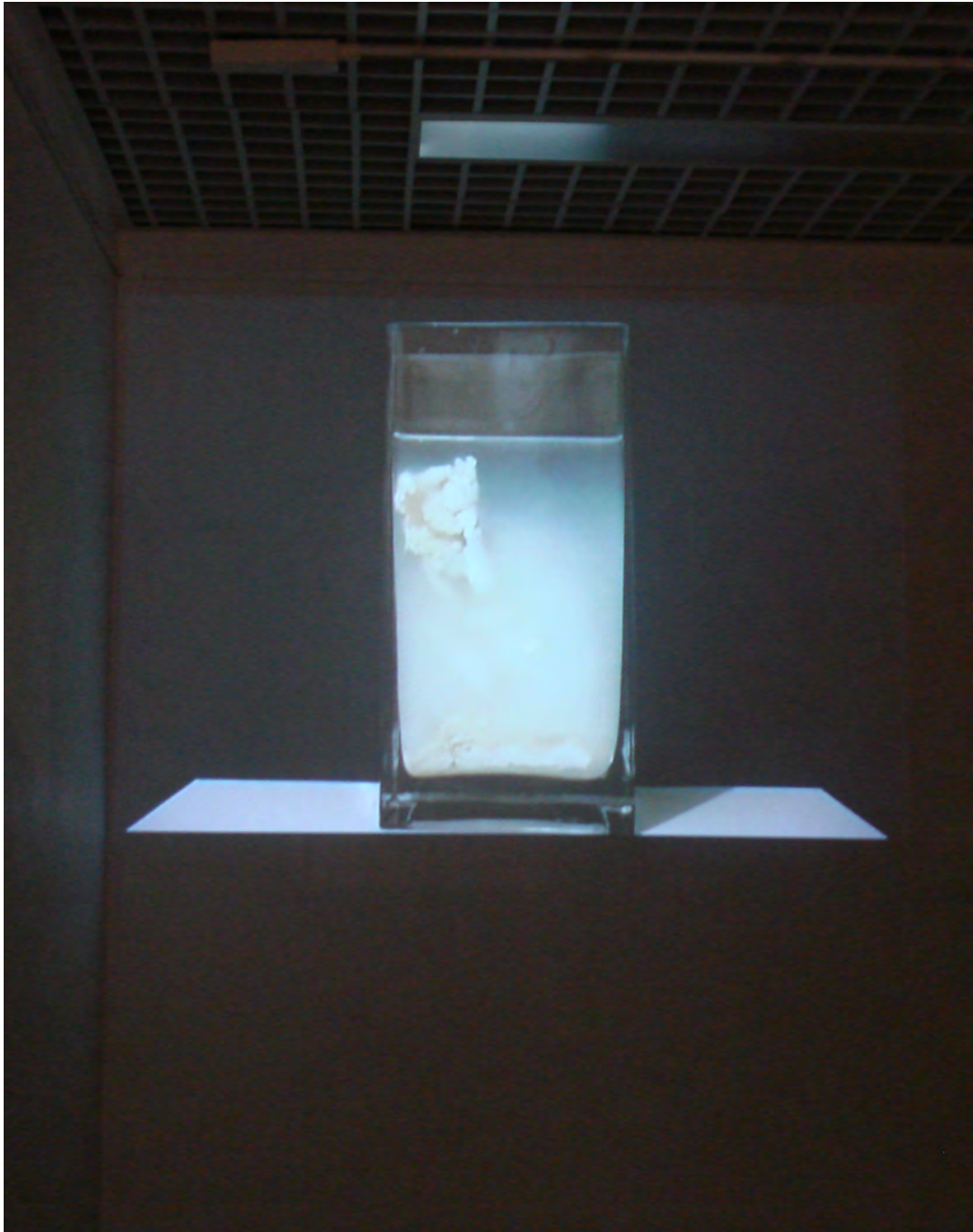


Figure 4.10.

**Further dissolution of the three-dimensional form
(photo: author)**



Figure 4.11.
The collapsing form
(photo: author)

The recording occurred over a period of approximately 48 hours. Five seconds of every ten minutes were recorded onto video providing a footage of 60 minutes and 20 seconds. I was not present to witness every stage of the process of dissolution. The camera, however, was and recorded the slow transformation of the deity into an abstract form of muddy water. I increased the pace of the video at the editing stage and reversed the narrative to create a gradual re-construction of *Ganesh*. Whilst the museum arrests time, I was speeding it up to make explicit the cycle of creation, death and rebirth, through recording the moving image and manipulating time. The lifespan of *Ganesh* would lengthen in the museum, whereas in ***Ganesh, circa 1900***, it is reduced.

Artists such as Ori Gersht, Tacita Dean and Sam Taylor-Wood are using video and film in unique and interesting ways to depict an event or incident over a period of time. Their artworks are visual commentaries on time, ephemeral material and recordings of natural forces. All three artists employ film or video as, unlike any other medium, they embody the element of time in their very functioning and outputs. Each of these artists I refer to, depict time in very unique ways. Whilst their films have been exhibited in art galleries and are stand alone artworks, ***Ganesh, circa 1900***, makes a strong visual reference to museum exhibition and preservation.

Ori Gersht's *Big Bang* (2006) was exhibited at the V&A's 'Twilight' exhibition ¹⁰. Gersht evokes the hour of twilight and associates it with a siren that played at dusk in Israel during his childhood. The high frequency sound of the siren shatters the on-screen still life of a crystal vase and flowers and triggers an explosion of light and colours. *Big Bang* depicts visual beauty and destruction simultaneously. The beauty of twilight is revealed through the broken pieces ¹¹.

¹⁰ Ori Gersht, *Big Bang*, 2006, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

¹¹ Kate Best, "The Magic Hour," *Twilight: Photography in the Magic Hour*, eds. Martin Barnes and Kate Best (London: Merrell, 2006) p. 29.

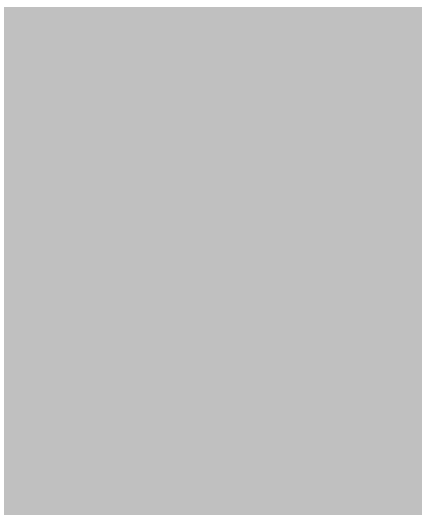


Figure 4.12.

**Ori Gersht,
Big Bang still
(courtesy of the V&A)**

Gersht describes the process of filmmaking in his own words:

The event is filmed with a high-speed camera at a rate of 1600 frames per second. Time is slowed down and the moment is stretched over long duration. Chaos, glare, beams of light illuminate the falling fragments and particles, which in return reflect and bounce light back.¹²

The film depicts twilight as a 'potent-laden threshold' from one state to another and the explosion is the breaking point. Similarly, his 2007 work, 'Blow Up', depicts the detonation of a bouquet of flowers, evoking French nineteenth century still-life flower paintings. Roses, anemones, larkspurs, tulips and lisanthus explode within seconds on screen. Gersht's work is a strong reference to the past and the present; conflict and death¹³. He imbues the feeling of terrible beauty in these poignant images which links visual perception with the human experience of violence. His work depicts time as a threshold for the occurrence of a significant phenomenon.

Gersht depicts death as the ultimate reality whereas I am offering the concept of the continuing existence of material through my work. Time in his work is linear whereas I present it as cyclical. The looping of *Big Bang* in the exhibition gallery at the V&A showed recurrence. In ***Ganesh, circa 1900***, however, I use the facility to add the dimension of continuum. Whilst Gersht has slowed down the time to emphasise the phenomenon, I speed up the slow process of dissolution in my work.

¹² *Big Bang*, Victoria and Albert Museum. 26 October 2007 < www.vam.ac.uk/collections/photography/past_exhns/twilight/gersht/bang/index.html. >

¹³ Jean Wainwright, "Ori Gersht. Time after Time," *Photography & Culture* 1. 1 (2008) pp. 115-118.

Sam Taylor-Wood's work depicts suspended and real time simultaneously, conveying "the sense of being caught between two worlds...of existing in moments without end"¹⁴. Her video *Still Life* (2001) is a time-lapse video¹⁵. A Caravaggesque display of fruit transforms into a heap of rotten matter. The film loops and the viewers witness the speeding up of time, the temporality of perishable material. However, a plastic pen in the frame remains unchanged. Exhibited at Tate Modern, the moving image loops on a plasma screen which is mounted on the wall, creating a frame around the image. This resembles a painting, but takes the representation to a life-like reality within which living matter gradually decomposes. It depicts life within the still life.



**Figure 4.13. Sam Taylor-Wood, *Still Life* stills
(courtesy of the Tate Gallery)**

A Little Death (2002) and *That White Rush* (2007) depict "sensual beauty and visceral repulsion"¹⁶ simultaneously. Taylor-Wood depicts time passing, beauty withering and death as halted time. She also conveys time as an experience and hence, relative. Some realities experience a quickened pace, whereas for some it is much slower. In *The Last Century* (2005) Taylor-Wood has depicted a group of five people sitting motionless in a smoky pub. Time in this work is frozen and suspended in the present. There is a strong sense of perpetuity and lack of closure¹⁷.

I am relating movement with life and time in ***Ganesh, circa 1900*** and am using repetition as a means to re-iterate perpetuity of the life cycle. Taylor-Wood speeds up and slows time in her work; I am speeding up time, but am also conveying a sense of being in an endless cycle which is repetitive and binding.

Whilst Ori Gersht and Sam Taylor-Wood use video, Tacita Dean experiments

¹⁴ In Sam Taylor-Wood's own words. Margo A. Crutchfield, "Unbound," *Sam Taylor-Wood, 1995 - 2007*, ed. Barbara Bradley (Cleveland: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008) p. 18.

¹⁵ Sam Taylor-Wood, "Still Life" (UK: White Cube, London, 2001) See T. J. Demos, "A Matter of Time," *Tate etc.* 9 (2007), p. 99.

¹⁶ Crutchfield, p. 20.

¹⁷ Crutchfield, p. 21.

with film. She uses 16mm film as a tangible medium which not only records the passing of time, but is also, as she describes “a physical manifestation of time”¹⁸. It contains within its format 24 frames per second, which she cuts and edits to create narratives. Her subjects transform over a period of time to create a powerful sequence of images. *Palast* (2004)¹⁹ focuses on a building in Berlin and captures the changing light with the changing time of the day. The film sensitively captures the history of the city that is absorbed in the buildings and the people that live and work around it.



Figure 4.14.

**Tacita Dean, *Palast*
16mm film
(courtesy of the Tate
Gallery)**

The building no longer survives. Tacita Dean films people and things before they disappear or change, which she describes as being in the present. In *The Green Ray* (2001) she has captured a rare phenomenon of the appearance of a green ray in the sky that she witnessed during a sunset in a remote village in Madagascar. Such a rare sight is engrained in the film she used, which she has described as a document²⁰. Tacita Dean depicts time as finitude and her films are evocative of memory. She films in real time, which makes the experience of viewing her work meditative and compelling.

Ganesh, circa 1900 is a reflection of my experiences as an onlooker, witnessing the annual ritual of immersion in the city of Pune, in the western state of Maharashtra over several years. The act of immersion is in itself symbolic of time passing and a continuum. Video allows me to use the facility of time lapse at the recording stage; at the editing stage, it facilitates reversal and repetition.

¹⁸ Tacita Dean, *Film Works / Tacita Dean*; [Text by Briony Fer and Rina Carvajal] (Milano: Charta, 2007) p. 58.

¹⁹ Tacita Dean, “Palast,” (Frith Street Gallery, London: 2004). This film was exhibited at the Tate Gallery, St. Ives, Cornwall in October 2005. See *Palast*, 2005, 20 February 2006 < www.tate.org.uk/stives/exhibitions/dean/default.shtml >

²⁰ Dean, *Film Works / Tacita Dean*; [Text by Briony Fer and Rina Carvajal] pp. 88-89.

My experience of witnessing colourful, tactile, musical and fragrant *pujas*, juxtaposed with the image of *Ganesh* displayed in glass cases in museums, creates a visual and conceptual dichotomy that is at the core of my artwork. The protective glass remains unchanged, whereas the material it contains undergoes a gradual transformation. The work was screened at the exhibition, ***From Shrine to Plinth*** at the Croydon Clocktower Museum which houses Maya's *Ganesh* shrine in its "Now" gallery. Maya ritualistically prayed to *Ganesh*, the remover of obstacles. Her small wooden image of *Ganesh* is, however, displayed in a pristine glass cabinet, removed from its multi-sensory environment and protected from environmental changes that can cause it to degrade.



Figure 4.15.

**Exhibition visitor viewing
Ganesh, circa 1900
(photo: author)**



Figure 4.16.

**Maya's *Ganesh* shrine
(photo: author)**

2.4. The Soundtrack

The soundtrack of the video is a *mantra*, which accompanies the dissolution and recreation of *Ganesh* in the glass case. The constantly transforming deity contains a rhythm in its movement, which is repeated by the looping of the video. The mantra, the sound of *Om* aligns with the repetitive moving image, ultimately

creating a piece that is meditative.

Jnaneshvara, a thirteenth century Indian poet, has identified the significance of the various parts of *Ganesh's* body in nineteen verses. *Ganesh's* weapons and other paraphernalia are linked to *Vedic* doctrines. He is compared with *Brahma* (the god of creation ²¹) and his body is described thus:

Jnaneshvara finally imagines the letter “a”, which is the first letter of the sacred syllable “*Om*” in his pair of feet, “u” in his large belly, and “m” in his big forehead, and thereby homologizes *Ganesh's* body with the sacred syllable “*Om*”.
22

Hence, *Ganesh* is believed to embody the cosmic sound of *Om*, which resonates in the artwork. Just as the deity, the archetypal worshipping space, and *yantra* (cosmic diagram) are the three essential tools for worship, the sacred sound or mantra is vital. A complex *mantra* is composed of monosyllabic sounds and Sanskrit words; the monosyllabic sound is visually depicted with a Sanskrit letter. Khanna states the significance of the sacred sound:

The infinite diversity of the universe as represented by the deities is manifest most explicitly in the iconographic image, more abstractly as the *yantra* and most subtly by the *mantra*. The *mantra* projects through vibrations the subtle anatomy either of the *devata* (from which it is inseparable) or of the forces of the universe. ²³

Khanna explains that concentration, correct pronunciation, rhythm, accent, intonation and the right sentiment can make the *mantra* a powerful force to invoke the divine. *Om*, is a monosyllabic mantra. It is the most powerful of all mantras and symbolises the entire cosmos. Its visual depiction, the letter *Om*, when disaggregated, reveals the five elements that are ever-present in the universe: water, fire, earth, ether and wind (figures 4.17 and 4.18). *Om* is always chanted at the beginning and/or at the end of all other mantras: simple or

²¹ *Shiva*, *Ganesh's* father, is believed to have the powers of *Brahma*, the Creator and he is also the Destroyer. *Ganesh* has received his qualities of creation and is worshipped at the start of any event.

²² B.V. Shetti, “Aspects of *Ganesh* Worship in Maharashtra,” *Ganesh: The Benevolent*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1995) p. 19. The pronunciation of the sound *Om* is ‘*Aum*’ in practice.

²³ Madhu Khanna, *Yantra, the Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1979) p. 34.

complex.

The dissolving god in the video artwork ***Ganesh, circa 1900*** is also reborn in the glass container. The renewal of the universe, which contains the five elements, is depicted through the repetition of image and sound. I am chanting *Om* as *Ganesh* is dissolved and recreated. The physical form changes in this artwork, but the sound is constant. The sound is not just an accompaniment it is a vital dimension that adds meaning to the moving image.



Figure 4.17.

The monosyllabic sound and alphabet *Om* (courtesy of Madhu Khanna)

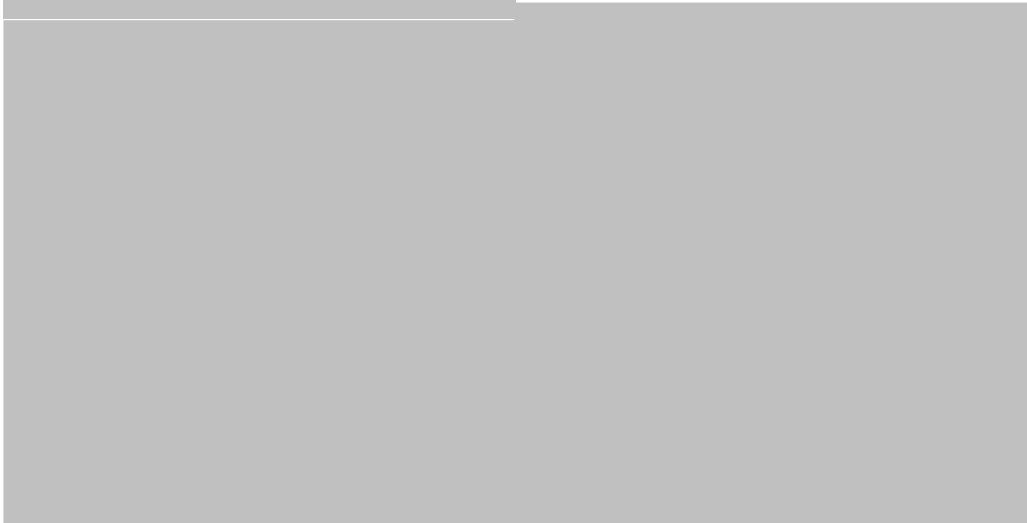


Figure 4.18.

Graphic representation of the five components of *Om* (courtesy of Madhu Khanna)

2.5. Performance in the act of immersion

The ritualistic immersion carried out by the *Ganesh* devotee follows a long process: starting with the preparation of his arrival, installing him in the shrine, adorning him, and performing daily *puja*. This entire performance is a conscious act of making the belief in the concept of regeneration and return explicit.

I constructed a set which consisted of a plinth and a glass case, both tools for exhibition, to perform the immersion rite for my video. Through the plinth and the vitrine, I am elevating and containing the process of dissolution that, generated by me, is taken over by the material components of water and *Ganesh*. I am performing the *visarjana* ritual to present the spiritual characteristics of the deity, by dissolving the physical form. I am also chanting the mantra *Om*, to imbue and evoke meaning in the looping image of a decomposing and reconstructing *Ganesh*. Hence, the performative aspect of my video and the staging of my actions for recording are both instrumental in the conceptual construction of the artwork.

2.6. The Date Circa, 1900

Dating an object is one of the methods by which the information it embodies is derived. Dating the object identifies its age for archaeologists and its relevance in cultural history for art historians. It is also a means to authenticate the object in hand ²⁴ and if a part of a collection, to classify it. Hence, the date is an investigative tool.

The date of an object and its place on the historical timeline assists the curator in developing an exhibition that forms a meaningful narrative. Susan Pearce points out the three philosophical parameters within material culture studies that reflect object characteristics and are used by museums to make meanings. These are: their “functionalist existence as material goods, their semiotic or structuralist role as messages, and their historicity” ²⁵. The date of the object is vital, which Pearce defines as the “historical-value”, but the signs of use and ageing, the “age-value”, are visual signifiers of the biography of the object ²⁶. She refers to the antiquarian’s assigning of value to historic objects thus:

²⁴ Jules Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 133. Jules Prown’s essay is a discussion on the interpretive tools provided by the objects themselves and the methodologies that could be used to extract information embedded in “mute objects”.

²⁵ Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections* (London: Leicester University Press, 1992) p. 119.

²⁶ Pearce, p. 194.

The researchers and writers of antiquarian tastes gave to historic objects a value in which the sheer fact of their age had an impelling emotional significance, an ability to give colour and drama to the past that was not drained from the object by historical narrative, but to which narrative added force and feeling.²⁷

Hence, the date and the visual clues of use give the museum object an antiquarian value. Some objects have traceable provenances but those which are lost, found, buried, excavated, inherited, traded, stolen or purchased might not have a definite acquisition history, but have been “incorporated into the larger world of Western art and its institutions: the market, the museum and the scholarly discipline of art history”²⁸. The first piece of an Indian religious image in England (displayed at the Ashmolean Museum) to be clearly traced and identified is a *Vishnu* from Bengal brought back by William Hedges, Governor of the East India Company in the seventeenth century²⁹. The exactitude in dating a Hindu deity can be challenging, as there has been no record of craftsmen dating their creation on the three-dimensional form. Some deities, during times of battle were buried and found several centuries later³⁰. The style of the image allows an estimation of dates. One of the early examples of *Ganesh* in the British Museum is a mid-eighteenth century sandstone image³¹, and the earliest surviving image is dated back to circa 2nd Century AD in the Indian subcontinent³².

I have dated *Ganesh* as a twentieth century object in my work, ***Ganesh, circa 1900***. The fervent worship and celebration of *Ganesh* festival started in the late nineteenth century and gained momentum in the twentieth century, which has survived strongly to the present times. Hundreds of thousands of *Ganesh* images are crafted for the festival each year; these are ephemeral and their dates are unimportant within the culture. The ritual and its meaning are, however, kept alive by the masses.

The original image of *Ganesh* that I have used in order to create the mould is a mass-produced piece purchased in 2002 in Mumbai. The simplicity of form and its

27 Pearce, p. 194.

28 Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) p. 145.

29 Davis, p. 143.

30 The burial of gods is described in Chapter 5.

31 Richard T. Blurton, “Ganesh in Bloomsbury: Images of the Lord of Beginnings in the British Museum,” *Ganesh: The Benevolent*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1995) pp. 2-3.

32 Shetti, p. 18.

material – fired clay, does not date it to any significant period in art history. It is one of the many images of *Ganesh*, created sometime during the late twentieth or early twenty-first centuries. I am approximating the date of *Ganesh*'s creation as ***circa, 1900***. '*Circa*' is normally used in the context of birth dates and death dates that are uncertain.

Whilst the image of *Ganesh* depicted in this artwork is not valuable from an antiquarian perspective, it is the ritualistic and symbolic act of immersion that I have venerated through its elevation on the plinth. The concept and cultural traditional is preserved within the glass case and the object within it decomposes and regenerates simultaneously.

3. *Ganesh* and his Cultural Significance

This section of the chapter examines *Ganesh*'s iconographic meaning, his popularity amongst Hindu worshippers and his significance in various rites of passage practised by Hindus of all sects.

Ganesh is the second son of *Shiva* and his consort, *Parvati*, but was created by *Parvati* alone with a mixture of unguents and dirt. She breathed life into him and called him *Ganesh*. *Shiva* was away at the time of his creation and unaware of the new child. Upon return, he saw a young *Ganesh* standing guard outside the area where *Parvati* bathed and demanded him to move. This developed into a tussle, which led to *Shiva* chopping off young *Ganesh*'s head. After *Parvati* revealed the true story, *Shiva* ordered one of his attendants to replace *Ganesh*'s head with the first one he finds in his search. This happens to be an elephant's severed head and subsequently *Ganesh*'s new identity³³. A popular narrative in India, this myth is also a commencement of *Ganesh*'s significance as the god of obstacles, entrusted by *Parvati* to stand guard. His new life with the elephant head marks his importance for new ventures and journeys. He is installed at the entrance of temples if he is not the main or resident deity of the temple and it is believed he must always be satisfied. Blurton explains:

Because he can control the positive or negative outcome of beginnings, he is also the Lord of Obstacles (*Vighneshvara*).

³³ Blurton, *Hindu Art* pp. 103-105. Richard Blurton has provided an excellent narrative on the birth of *Ganesh*. He is the curator in the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum.

It is not only the removal of obstacles over which he has control, but also their imposition.³⁴

He is worshipped at the commencement of any auspicious task and at the start of a new year due to the belief that he would remove any obstacles that could possibly befall one. His presence is everywhere in India, “everywhere one looks, above doorways and gateways, in shops and temples, in movie houses and museums”³⁵.



Figure 4.19.

Image of *Ganesh* above a doorway of a house, N. Gujarat (photo: courtesy of John Cort)

Figure 4.20.

***Ganesh* image at the entrance of the Religious Art Gallery, St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, Glasgow (Photo: author)**

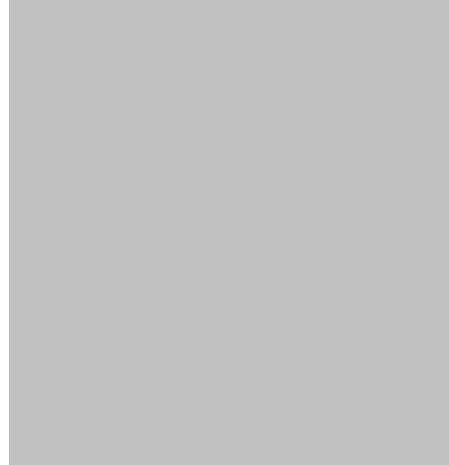
It is remarkable that the image of *Ganesh* exhibited at the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow, is at the very entrance of the gallery, encased in a vitrine. Pratapaditya Pal describes another display in a museum which strongly denotes religious sentiments: the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. A thirteenth century carved *Ganesh* from the Indian state of Karnataka, is always noticed with a garland around his neck and coins at his feet³⁶. The visitors perceive *Ganesh* as a god in the museum and display their sentiment in a physical way, akin to temple behaviour (figure 4.21).

³⁴ Blurton, *Hindu Art* p. 106.

³⁵ John E. Cort, “Absences and Transformations: *Ganesh* in the Shvetambar Jain Tradition,” *Ganesh: The Benevolent*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Bombay: Marg Publishers, 1995) p. 81.

³⁶ Pratapaditya Pal, “Introduction,” *Ganesh: The Benevolent*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1995) p. vii. Pal is an Art Historian. His expertise is on the arts of south-east Asia and the Himalayan region.

Figure 4.21.
Ganesh with a floral garland, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco
Photo: courtesy of Pratapaditya Pal)



E.B. Havell, art historian and a prolific 20th century writer on Indian religious imagery, remarks that the elephant-headed allegory of *Ganesh* is a reflection of his status as a worldly god. Created from dirt and natural unguents, with the addition of an elephant head, *Ganesh* is tied to the earth. Unlike *Shiva*, who is the creator and destroyer of the universe, *Ganesh* is a patron deity of scribes and publishers³⁷. He has the wisdom to protect households, states Havell, and the sagacity of an elephant. In Maharashtra, the *mantra* “*Om Ganeshaya namah*” indicates a new undertaking and is chanted before any other mantras. Hence, the cultural importance of this chubby and child-like god is apparent through day-to-day events and activities in the lives of people.

3.1. Ganesh Festival and the Ritual of Immersion

According to Indian evolutionary theory, the cosmos is to be viewed as a continuum. Whatever is born will develop, age and dissolve again into the primordial reality that gave it birth. Like a circle, the cosmic order presents an interrupted continuity. There are three phases of the cosmic process: creation, preservation and dissolution.³⁸

Each year between 20th August and 15th September, the lunar month of *Bhadra*, on the fourth day of the waxing moon, *Ganesh* worshippers celebrate the birth of the deity for ten days³⁹. This day of *Ganesh*'s creation is called *Ganesh Chaturthi*.

³⁷ E.B. Havell, *The Ideals of Indian Art*, 2nd ed. (Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1972) p. 82.

³⁸ Khanna, p. 77.

³⁹ Some temples and families enjoy two or five days of celebration. The *Ganesh* festival has had a national and political significance in Maharashtra from 1893 onwards, generated by freedom fighter, Bal Gangadhar Tilak. It was his method to unite the brahmins and non-brahmins in the freedom movement; this aspect of the *Ganesh* festival is still criticised by the devout *Ganesh* believers. See: Shetti, pp. 24-25. Shetti is a prolific writer on Indian art and archaeology.

The festival marks a beginning with the arrival of *Ganesh*, a three-dimensional unfired clay form. Stephen Huyler, cultural anthropologist and photographer, has provided a detailed account of the festival as practiced in the western states of India. He explains: as the act of *darshan* or meeting of the devotee's eyes with the deity's eyes is an auspicious occasion and the communion with god, some worshippers ask for pupils to be carved or painted to facilitate *darshan* ⁴⁰. Others carry out the ceremony of opening his eyes once he is in his shrine. He is blindfolded on his journey, which is often accompanied with dancing and music, to the place that will be his home for the next ten days ⁴¹. The blindfold is removed and he is welcomed into his new home. The shrine is often erected especially for the new arrival in one of the main areas of the home: the living room or the kitchen (figures 4.22, 4.23). He becomes a part of the family.



Figure 4.22.

***Ganesh* shrine
created for the
festival
(photo: courtesy of
Stephen Huyler)**

⁴⁰ Huyler, p. 199.

⁴¹ This is symbolic of birth as the newly conceived does not see or know where and when the birth will take place: family, location and time.



Figure 4.23.

***Ganesh* shrine with offerings
(photo: courtesy of Stephen Huyler)**

Households and community temples perform *pujas* or ritual worship twice a day: in the morning and evening. Through *puja*, the worshipper tries to achieve a state of concentration and invokes the spirit latent in the deity. It is also a means to express adoration towards the deity by offering sandalwood paste, flowers, incense, lighted oil lamp, and food, associated with the five elements (*pañchopacara*)⁴². The ten-day festival is a time where musicians, theatre artists, dancers, sculptors, painters and the community as a whole come together to create scenarios where their art and skills can be exhibited. Philosophical, mythical, romantic, religious and humorous plays are staged. Elaborate meals are prepared and served to friends and family. The devotees of *Ganesh* and the participants of this festival comprise all age groups and all families irrespective of class. After the celebration and worship, *Ganesh* is taken to meet his end on *Ananta Chaturdashi* (*Anant* meaning endless, infinite, and the supreme spirit). Huyler describes *Ganesh*'s last day in the household in the following words:

On the morning of the final day *Ganesh* is offered a special breakfast, thanked for the blessings that he has bestowed on the household by his stay, and invited to depart. He is again carried in a joyous procession through the streets. If the image is large, he may be pulled in a cart or in a bicycle rickshaw or even carried in a car to a river, pond, or beach, where the last *puja* will be conducted.⁴³

42 Khanna, p. 101.

43 Huyler, p. 199.

The last prayers are said and Ganesh is immersed in water accompanied with loud chantings from the devotees “*Ganapati Bappa Moraya, Pudchya Varshi Laukar Ya*”, meaning “*Oh Lord Ganesh, come soon next year*”⁴⁴. The end is symbolic of a new journey and beginning.



Figure 4.24.

Devotee carrying *Ganesh* with garlands to the sea. *Ganesh* festival, Southend-on-Sea (Photo: courtesy of Fran Wilde)

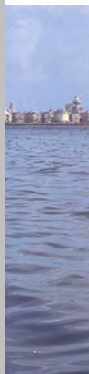


Figure 4.25.

***Ganesh* immersion in the Arabian Sea, Mumbai (photo: courtesy of B.V. Shetti)**

The performance of ritualistic *pūja* is key in the worship of *Ganesh*. Ritual is an introductory phase of spiritual discipline. The initiation of a ritual prepares the worshipper for his journey towards integration with the cosmos. The ceremony of initiation makes the performer experience a ‘rebirth’. Stage two of the ritual makes him receptive to cosmic power transforming the space into a sacred space. The third and the last stage of the ritual is ‘*visarjana*’⁴⁵, the “ritual of dispersing the divinity”⁴⁶: it marks the dissolution of the image in the primordial plenitude, as Khanna explains.

44 Shetti, p. 26.

45 Khanna, pp. 97-106.

46 Khanna, p. 172.

These ten days of the year marked by *Ganesh* worship and immersion, represent the cycle of life and rebirth. Each ritual performed is symbolic: the blindfold is a metaphor for a child's birth without the knowledge of the place and time; the festivities are life and the home is a temporary dwelling; the final act of immersion is death. This is an example of the microcosmic human society (with reference to the macrocosm) that has imagined and charted the universe. Through a web of ideas and beliefs they place themselves amidst the cosmic order and enact the whole picture: the cyclic nature of time, the ephemeral quality of matter and the continuing existence of the *atman*. The deity is at the centre of this belief system and ritual connects man to the cosmos. Hence, the existence of the deity and man within the mapped universe ⁴⁷ is both physical and spiritual. The physical is perishable and timed, whereas the spirit is eternal; the conscious human understands the ephemeral nature of the tangible and enacts it to make it common knowledge. The deity is the representation of creation, life and destruction and it is this concept that is acknowledged and worshipped through the ritual of immersion.

The earliest surviving form of *Ganesh* is a terracotta image from the first century AD in the Deccan (south-western region) of India ⁴⁸. Most of the latter ones are carved into the rock-cut temples of Ajanta and Ellora. A few examples from the eighth century are in the British Museum made from sandstone. These are examples of the free-standing *Ganesh* as the tutelary deity of a temple. The resident god and goddess of the temple are installed within the shrine and do not leave their sanctum. Blurton explains:

The image of the god which is worshipped in the temple sanctuary never moves from that location. Therefore at festivals when an image of the god leaves the temple for processions, the icon carried out is one that is kept solely for processional use; this is the *utsava murti*. ⁴⁹

Similarly, the image of *Ganesh* for the festival is created especially for the procession, worship and immersion. During contemporary times, the main deity of the temple will only be removed from the *garbhagriha*, once it ages and loses its main features. It is then left to nature to decompose: either through a burial or

⁴⁷ The physical universe in the context of Hinduism encompasses divine beings, humans, animals, the earth, the solar system and all that co-exists including forces that are intangible such as gravity and divine energy.

⁴⁸ Shetti, p. 15.

⁴⁹ Blurton, *Hindu Art*, p. 61.

immersion in water⁵⁰.

Ganesh images created for the festival are traditionally and commonly made from materials that decompose easily, such as mud, plaster, unfired clay and terracotta. Material deteriorates and unites with nature, but it is still existent, albeit in a new form. The celebration is for the new form and the lament of the old, if still existent, is short-lived. Time, space and spirit are the three symbolic concepts that constitute this annual ritual.

4. Museum Exhibition and Conservation

This section of the chapter examines the museum practice of creating micro-climates within the museum building and the exhibition mechanisms that have been developed to preserve collections. It reviews the influence of display conventions on art practices and analyses the context of ***Ganesh, circa 1900*** in relation to their work and, most importantly, within this research.

The display of objects and their simultaneous conservation are two of the prime aims of museum existence. The Accreditation Scheme outlined by the Museums and Libraries Association has defined the role of the museum in contemporary society in the following words:

Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold for trust in society.⁵¹

Conservator Barclay Jones has pointed out the “irreplaceable value”⁵² of objects as embodiments of knowledge of past cultures and their evolution into the present. Hence the physicality of the object is vital. Its loss would be the loss of knowledge and a link with history. This emphasises the museum’s linearity of time within which death is perceived as the end of the quest for meaning through the object. Archaeologist Sven Ouzman elucidates that as the museum extracts an

⁵⁰ The following chapter will discuss the practice of burying worshipped images.

⁵¹ *The Accreditation Scheme for Museums in the United Kingdom, 2004*, Museums, Libraries and Archives Council 10 November 2007 < www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets//A/accreditation_standard_pdf_5640.pdf > p. 6.

⁵² Barclay G. Jones, “Experiencing Loss,” *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 240.

object from its original context to study it, ownership of its physicality and hence its conservation becomes vital⁵³. Whilst the “Age-value” of an artefact provides a visual narrative to the viewer, the museum tries to slow further ageing, it also attempts to halt ageing. Preventative conservation, the museum conservator’s principle, is a means to reduce the action and reaction between the environment and the object. David Dean, a museum exhibition expert has explained that the constituents of an environment are: energy and matter (which includes organic and inorganic materials)⁵⁴. It is essential to refer to Dean’s work in this section of the chapter, as his knowledge is focussed on the practical methods of exhibition and conservation, unlike the conceptual and classificatory authoring by curators and keepers of collections⁵⁵ and scientific research carried out by conservators⁵⁶.

Elements in the environment are never stable and the changes occurring within them cause interactions in the environment that are proven to be harmful to objects⁵⁷. Preventative conservation reduces these interactions. Dean has listed the environmental factors that have to be controlled. These are⁵⁸:

- Temperature
- Relative humidity (RH)
- Particulate matter and pollutants
- Biological organisms
- Reactivity of materials
- Light

He proposes a control of the micro-environment (the glass cabinet or the room) within which the object is displayed, rather than controlling the macro

⁵³ Sven Ouzman, “The Beauty of Letting Go: Fragmentary Museums and Archaeologies of Archive,” *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, eds. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth Phillips (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006) p. 270. He adds that archaeologists and ethnographers value knowledge over property.

⁵⁴ David Dean, *Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1996) p. 67.

⁵⁵ For example, the curator in the Department of Oriental Antiquities, British Museum, Richard Blurton, has studied the iconography and history of Indian religious images in his book *Indian Art*. The keepers of the Indian collection at the Ashmolean Museum, Dr J.C. Harle and Andrew Topsfield, have written *Indian Art in the Ashmolean Museum* which gives an insight into the history of the collection and provides information on an array of Indian artefacts that are chronologically classified. The format of the book is similar to that of a catalogue. See J.C Harle and Andrew Topsfield, *Indian Art in the Ashmolean Museum* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum Publications, 1987).

⁵⁶ See for instance Boris Pretzel, “Materials and Their Interaction with Museum Objects,” *V&A Conservation Journal* 44 (2003) and M.S. Upton and C. Pearson, “Emergency Treatment of Materials,” *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁵⁷ This phenomenon will be studied in the next chapter.

⁵⁸ Dean, p. 67.

environment (a large museum gallery or museum building). Dean describes micro-environments as “enclosed within and affected by the macro-environment outside them”⁵⁹. “Essentially”, he adds, “this configuration is described as a box-in-a-box”⁶⁰. He states that each vitrine, exhibition case or room has its own internal climate, which can be more self-contained if sealed tightly. Sealing the vitrine to keep out the pollutants, humid air, particles and controlling the fluctuation of light and temperature in the macro-environment, are the basic mechanisms employed by the museum conservator to protect sensitive collections. Bronzes, wooden objects, glass, textiles and silver are a few examples of materials that are prone to damage as a result of external forces. *Ganesh*, in his religious environment is not only susceptible to organic, inorganic substances (as he is adorned with flowers and jewels) and moisture, he is consciously put into a natural water body for gradual erosion and decomposition. I am comparing the two contrasting concepts and practices: preventative conservation on one hand, and the worshipped life of *Ganesh* in my video, ***Ganesh, circa 1900***, on the other.

4.1. The Vitrine

As it is the museum’s role to exhibit objects for viewing and learning, exhibition design is an important factor in the communication of museum meanings. The vitrine or glass cabinet has been the best display tool since the 1960s⁶¹. This was a result of the technological development of plate glass and growing demand (the number of museums had doubled since the end of the nineteenth century). Plate glass was both: clear and secure⁶². Cuboid free-standing glass cases could be constructed and arranged in a museum gallery to present “clarity and content”⁶³ and simultaneously protect the objects.

Not only is the vitrine akin to the museum, it projects symbolic meanings: this is ‘real’⁶⁴, ‘valuable’, ‘protected’ and ‘vulnerable’. The object becomes a work of art with a visual quality, which Alpers has described as “the museum effect”⁶⁵. The

59 Dean, p. 69.

60 Dean, p. 69.

61 Pearce, p. 105.

62 The history of glass in exhibition design is discussed in Chapter 6, p. 250.

63 Pearce, p. 107.

64 Duncan Cameron, museologist, has described the enshrinement of the object when it is exhibited in the museum. It projects the quality of being, special and real. This aspect of museum exhibition has been explained in chapter 2. See Duncan F. Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004).

65 Svetlana Alpers, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

vitrine attracts and facilitates visual contemplation. James Putnam, a curator of contemporary museum intervention art, elucidates:

The effect of placing something in a vitrine is to ‘museumize’ it: the glass creates not just a physical barrier but establishes an ‘official distance’ between object and viewer.⁶⁶

Hence, the vitrine frames an object and creates its own micro-environment. Vitrines have also been used as classifying systems, as they separate groups of objects, or an object and they facilitate the creation of meta-narratives. Lisa Corrin, Chief Curator of the exhibition, “Give & Take” (which was based on two sites: the Serpentine Gallery and the V&A, South Kensington), described classification and the development of taxonomies as tidying complex human experience. Whilst, the museum tries to create an order through classifying and arranging “the stuff of human life”⁶⁷, it also creates a “disjunctive and disconnected reality”⁶⁸. She states:

If anything, the stuff of human experience is its unruliness: a resistance to containment within a glass vitrine.⁶⁹

The philosophic practices that Hindu deities are a part of in their home environments, cannot be depicted purely through their exhibition within a protected space. I am depicting this unruliness, attracting focussed attention, framing meaning and presenting a visual dichotomy through the use of the vitrine in my artwork, **Ganesh, circa 1900**.

James Putnam has pointed out the sculptural quality of the vitrine and its association with the concept of arrested time and protection. Artist Joseph Beuys was born prematurely and his first experience of the world was from within an incubator. His work reflects his fascination with glass⁷⁰. It features vitrines, but as tableaux, small theatrical units displaying relics of his life, which people can curiously peer into. An everyday object becomes special in the vitrine, and an arrangement creates a composition of meanings.

⁶⁶ James Putnam, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001) p. 36.

⁶⁷ Julia Peyton-Jones and Alan Borg, *Give & Take: 1 Exhibition 2 Sites: Serpentine Gallery, London, 30 January - 1 April 2001* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2001) p. 6. Lisa Corrin has written the “Speculative Introduction to a Speculative Exhibition”. See pp. 6-12.

⁶⁸ Peyton-Jones and Borg, p. 7.

⁶⁹ Peyton-Jones and Borg, p. 7.

⁷⁰ Putnam, p. 17.

Beuys was greatly inspired by Joyce's words, especially those from *Ulysses*: "coffined thoughts around me, in my mummy cases, embalmed in spice of words" ⁷¹. Curator Mark Rosenthal describes that Beuys's vitrines are like coffins containing objects from life. He wrote:

The viewer is encouraged to pose questions about the origin of each object, how each relates to the other, and what might transpire by their continued proximity. ...Beuys demanded that the normally rapt gaze required for conventional works of art be applied to an altogether unlikely gathering of objects. ⁷²

Beuys has tried to depict the human 'unruliness', as suggested by Corrin. He has presented the macro-environment and "large-scale ambition" ⁷³ in vitrines which are usually considered to be micro-environments. Similarly, ***Ganesh, circa 1900*** contains beliefs and rituals within the vitrine for the museum visitor's attentive gaze. The preservation of natural history in formaldehyde within glass cases, practiced by Damien Hirst ⁷⁴, is also explored in a poetic and poignant way by artist Marc Quinn. His work, *Eternal Spring (Sunflowers) I* (1998), is a refrigerated and sealed vitrine, preserving cut sunflowers in a vase (figure 4.26). Putnam has interpreted Quinn's work:

Although the cut sunflowers are technically no longer living, their physical reality is preserved, and their immortality as a work of art has obvious parallels with Van Gogh's famous painting of 1888. Yet in contrast the work by Quinn also alludes to the fragile, temporal nature of the flowers and their dependence on an electrically controlled life-support system. ⁷⁵

⁷¹ Mark Rosenthal, *Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004) p. 63. Another significant sentence from *Ulysses* referring to the soul in things, impacted on Beuys's work and has been quoted by Rosenthal: "the soul is in a manner all that is: the soul is the form of forms". p 57.

⁷² Rosenthal, p. 63.

⁷³ Rosenthal, p. 57.

⁷⁴ Examples of his work include – "Lovers" series (1991), Mother & Child Divided (1993), Away from the Flock (1994), Waste (1994) and the *Damien Hirst* (Naples: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, 2004).

⁷⁵ Putnam, p. 37.



Figure 4.26.

**Eternal Spring
(Sunflowers) I
Marc Quinn, 1998
(photo: courtesy of James
Putnam)**

Quinn's actions of arranging the flowers in a vase and refrigerating them, and hence, extending their physical life, is a reversal of my performance and depiction through *Ganesh, circa 1900*. Quinn is making a museum practice explicit through his artwork and is subsequently commenting on the scientific methods used by man to control nature. I am presenting a religious, non-secular belief and ritual, through which the human surrenders himself to nature. Quinn is depicting preservation and I am contradicting the practice through the representation of deliberate dissolution.

Hence, vitrines are enclosed environments that embody the concept of extended time. Photographer Rosamond Purcell has depicted the human fascination with concepts of birth and death (figure 4.27). She has photographed a series of natural history specimens suspended and pickled in formalin. One of these is titled *Babies with Beads*, a photograph depicting the preservation of babies in glass jars ⁷⁶. Whilst Marc Quinn has constructed a sculptural piece through the juxtaposition of visual elements in order to suspend time, Purcell has framed the scientific practice of preserving a moment in time in her photograph.

⁷⁶ Putnam, p. 120.



Figure 4.27.

Babies with Beads
Rosamond Purcell
Photograph, 1992
 (image: courtesy of
 James Putnam)

I have framed the phenomenon of life, death and rebirth through my video camera and have recorded the preservation and survival of belief.

5. Conclusion

Ganesh, circa 1900 is symbolic of ceremony (ritual), performance (my performance in staging the ceremony) and practice (museum exhibition and preservation). Its looping demonstrates the annual ritual characteristic of the religious immersion and simultaneously embodies the concept of the continuum of life through a reversal of the process of dissolution. Hence, the artwork is a metaphor for time: cyclical within Hinduism and linear within the museum, as it comments on both.

This chapter has examined the cultural significance of materials: rice flour and sugar used in making *Ganesh*. The binder in the mixture, PVA (polyvinyl acetate) glue has the qualities of combining materials, it sets over a period of time and additionally, dissolves in liquid. These unique characteristics made it an ideal medium for the creation of the image and its subsequent dissolution. The *Ganesh* I made no longer survives, but only does so on video.

Even, if it was for the sake of recording dissolution on video and its subsequent exhibition, I performed the ritualistic immersion. I allowed water to take over the process of dissolution. The ritual object, *Ganesh*, has been associated with its cult value in the work. Its original functions of worship and immersion are asserted through the moving image. Its exhibition in the secular museum

reframed it as an ephemeral worshipped image rather than as a preserved artefact.

Hence, in this chapter I have compared the contrasting treatment of the deity in contexts of its home culture and its acquired place in the museum through my video ***Ganesh, circa 1900***. Whilst ***Kinetic Shiva*** focuses on the performance of rituals, this artwork takes the study of the reception of Hindu deities one step further and introduces its exhibition in the vitrine, which not only encases the object from external forces, it makes evident its identity as an art object. In ***Ganesh, circa 1900*** the vitrine is employed as a paradoxical tool, one that presents the dissolution of the protected artifact. It continues to attract attentive viewing yet projects a heretical function.

In the the next chapter I will introduce video ***Gods in Storage***: a visual proposition of the access versus conservation issues faced by museum staff. I will examine the natural deterioration of Hindu gods within their cultural domain as a result of regular deity – human interactions, and will contrast it with their stored status in the museum.



Chapter 5

Gods in Museum Storage and their Conservation

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I will introduce my video artwork **Gods in Storage**: a staged documentary, which is a depiction of the phenomenon of gradual deterioration of idols and other objects in close proximity, as a result of their material interactions. I will examine the classification, exhibition and storage of objects in museums as specimens of culture and will compare it with the deity's veneration in the temple. Through studying the worshippers' interactions with the deity I will present them as living entities in my video **Gods in Storage**.

I will address the conservator's attempt to arrest the deterioration of objects in museum storage and will contrast it with the Hindu attitude towards preservation of form, repair and their treatment of their live idols. Access to the deity is of prime importance to worshippers and the rituals they practice allow them to achieve closeness with the deity despite the physical erosion this may cause to the image. I will throw light on the access versus conservation museum debate and will present my work **Gods in Storage** as a comment on these arguments and as 'visible storage' depicting the changes occurring within the confined space.

I. Introduction

Hindus have always considered the deities they have placed in temples and households for worship as living and have treated them as divine persons. They are awakened in the morning, bathed, dressed, fed, entertained, praised and put to bed at night. Elaborate feasts are prepared during festivals and laid out at the altar, dances are performed and worshippers bow at the deity's feet, even touch them to receive their blessings ¹. They are adorned with flowers, jewels and costumes and serenaded with the accompaniment of lamps. Songs of *bhakti* or devotion are sung which express the shared relationship between the devotee and the deity. The *bhakti* poetry expresses the "crucial connection between the poet and the God" ². The poet questions the meaning of the god by repeatedly addressing him with questions such as "why? How can I understand you? Which among all forms is yours? How can I find you?" ³

O wondrous one who was born!
 O wondrous one who fought the Bharata war! ⁴
 Great one, who became all things,
 starting with the primal elements:
 wind, fire, water, sky and earth.
 Great one, wondrous one,
 you are in all things
 as butter lies hidden in fresh milk,
 You stand in all things
 and yet transcend them
 Where can I see you?

- Nammalvar ⁵

Davis states that this is a "quest for a more personal contact" with the god despite the poet's knowledge of the traditions of the icons' incarnations and manifestations on the earth and their transcendental nature.

¹ This act is performed for individuals in society who are highly respected: parents, teachers, elders and whoever is viewed with respect.

² Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 38.

³ Davis, p. 38.

⁴ The Bharata war was fought by *Rama*, an incarnation of *Vishnu* in the epic story the *Ramayana*.

⁵ Davis, p. 39.

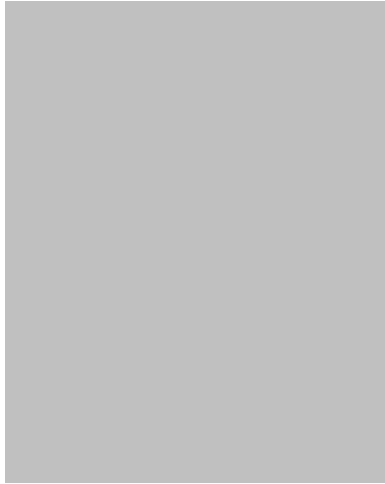


Figure 5.1.

**Adorned image of Radha in
Krishna temple, Jaipur
(photo: courtesy of Ajit
Mookerjee)**



Figure 5.2.

**Krishna Worship, Swaminarayan
Temple, location unknown
(photo: courtesy of the V&A)**

The scientific approach to understanding the world in the nineteenth century (as discussed in Chapter 2) also gave rise to the practice of preservation and restoration of materials, which was subsequently included under the umbrella of conservation. The evolution of conservation as a profession during contemporary times is dictated by changing attitudes towards objects in collections, since the Enlightenment, the socio-political aspect of the museum as an institution and the nature of the ever-changing community it serves. Jonathan Ashley-Smith, the former head of the Conservation Department at the V&A, provides an account on the various influences in the discipline. He has pointed out the connections between the preservation of cultural artefacts to the field of nature conservation that have been made by organisations ⁶. He writes critically:

Supporting this mental link to the conservation of the living world are convenient anthropomorphic medical metaphors for the conservation of objects that have not been alive. ⁷

This view contrasts with Richard Davis' postulate of the deities as living entities,

⁶ Jonathan Ashley-Smith has referred to ICCROM's (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property) suggestion of the museum's closer links with nature conservation. Conservation of man-made and natural heritage, through a management of change, have already been adopted by the National Trust and the English Heritage. Ashley-Smith argues that ecological conservation is a separate realm and cannot be translated into the care of museum collections.

⁷ Jonathan Ashley-Smith, "Sustainability and Precaution: Part 2. How Precautionary Should We Be?," *V&A Conservation Journal* 44 (2003) p. 2.

which is anthropomorphic, but is also evident in their worship on a large scale by the masses. Hence, while the conservator perceives them as inanimate and conserves them, they are treated in contrasting ways in their original context. A deity created for worship is never removed from the temple sanctum, unless it is created for the purposes of procession and immersion. In this chapter I will focus on the storage of Hindu images in museums through my second video artwork and will examine the challenges faced by the museum in providing access to objects whilst preserving them for perpetuity.

2. Gods in Storage

Gods in Storage is a staging and subsequent recording of the material transformations occurring in a group of objects in museum storage. In this section of the chapter, I will examine the meaning of the narrative, and the illustration of objects classified as durables and transients as depicted in the video.

2.1 Aims

Gods in Storage presents a variety of objects that originated from Indian culture, within a collection in storage, and demonstrates the deterioration of *Shiva* and a terracotta pot within the confined space. It is an illustration of the interplay between various materials on storage shelves. This artwork reflects conservation concerns faced by museums in preserving collections for the future and simultaneously improving access within the available resources of space and funds ⁸. A large number of items remain in storage within their lifespan ⁹. Curator and writer, Ingrid Schaffner has aptly pointed out thus:

If the gallery is the museum's public face, the storerooms are its private parts – the place where art is collated, concealed and kept from view. Of the museum collection's obscure bulk, only a tiny proportion ever makes it to the light of the exhibition. ¹⁰

⁸ Several articles published in the last decade refer to the same concerns: storage access, conservation, funds and space. See for instance Simon Stephens, "Stored Items Need Better Access," *Museums Journal* 108. 8 (2008) p. 6. Catrina Lucas, "Pack up Your Troubles..." *Museums Journal* 99. 2 (1999) p. 47. Maurice Davies, "From Here to Eternity for Collection Care," *Museums Journal* 98.1 (1998) pp. 22-3.

⁹ In the article, "From here to Eternity for Collection Care", Maurice Davies states that artefacts which are in storage for too many years are deteriorating and there is a pressing need to display them.

¹⁰ Ingrid Schaffner, "Deep Storage," *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art*, eds. Ingrid Schaffner and Matthias Winzen (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1998) p. 11.

My aims in developing and making ***Gods in Storage*** are:

1. To depict Hindu gods and other items in storage as cultural specimens, equal in status as embodiments of cultural meanings and objects for study through their arrangement on the re-created storage shelf (gods and shoes are presented in mixed company);
2. To contrast my depiction of gods as specimens (aim 1) by simultaneously presenting them as living entities through the soundtrack of human breathing;
3. To respond to museums' access versus conservation debate with specific reference to items in storage and present this video artwork as 'visible storage' in the public, democratic museum;
4. To present the gradually occurring natural deterioration of items in storage to the museum visitor through exhibiting the film in a museum space.

2.2. The Concept

Gods in Storage (duration 3 minutes, 8 seconds) is a staging of the phenomenon in which a variety of materials such as wood, metals, fabric, paper and clay react with each other when placed in close proximity to each other within a space. Boris Pretzel, Materials Scientist at the V&A Museum has explained:

All objects are subject to deterioration from chemical interactions to some extent. The agents of chemical interactions might come from the materials from which an object is made, from materials used to treat the artefact, or from corrosive interactions with emissions from materials in close proximity. The results of some of the degradation processes are obvious while others are less visible but, nonetheless, significant.¹¹

Schaffner has referred to public museums, which include art museums as well as historic museums in her essay. It was also published, prior to this publication, in *Frieze* (issue 23) Summer 1995.

¹¹ Boris Pretzel, "Materials and Their Interaction with Museum Objects," *V&A Conservation Journal* 44 (2003) p. 12.



Figure 5.3.

***Gods in Storage and the arrangement of items,
still
(photo: author)***



Figure 5.4.

***Shiva* in a meditative posture in the created museum store
flanked by silver jewellery, fabric and a brass bell
(photo: author)**



Figure 5.5.

**Cracked terracotta pot beside *Ganesh* and a golden box
(photo: author)**



Figure 5.6.

***Gods in Storage* in the exhibition space
(photo: author)**

Gods in Storage consist of three deities, a ceramic *Shiva*, a clay *Ganesh*, and a stone *Buddha*; plus other items such as silver jewellery, a terracotta pot, a piece of clothing, a pair of Indian leather slippers, ritual objects such as a brass bell and incense holder used for prayer in the temple, a copper utensil, a small terracotta elephant and a Kashmiri papier maché box. The origin of this assortment lies in the Indian sub-continent ¹². I have placed them on acid-free paper: a material regularly used in museum stores to wrap objects in, to protect them from the environment and neighbouring objects. The Brighton Museum and Art Gallery store their collections within similar classified categories that are used to display them for the visitors in their museum galleries. The 'Believers' section in the James Green Gallery for World Art consists of the Hindu shrine and objects of Egyptian death rituals: a mummy and a sarcophagus. They also possess some human remains in storage, which are placed with other items of belief in the museum stores ¹³. They are carefully wrapped in acid-free paper and are deposited in large cardboard boxes. Additionally, the museum uses metallic shelving units designed especially to protect the collections and to enable access by the museum staff. Hence, great care is taken to ensure that objects within the museum stores are protected from factors that cause deterioration. The use of acid-free paper, sealing an artefact which is least inert from the others, segregating display objects to avoid interaction, sealing the objects themselves such as "lacquering silver objects or varnishing surfaces" ¹⁴ reduce the risk of degradation. The problem posed by the interaction of materials is however one that still remains. Increasing access to artefacts increases their chances of degrading ¹⁵ which is a cause of the conservation and access debate. **Gods in Storage** depicts the stage at which the slow process of deterioration has led to the decomposition of matter. The terracotta pot cracks due to its proximity to other artefacts and slight changes in temperature and humidity levels over a long period of time. *Shiva* has been deteriorating gradually in this mixed company with the other objects and small sections from his form are falling off.

This video work does not depict a store from any particular museum. It is a model constructed on the basis of trends and facts as discussed by conservation professionals. It is a reflection of causes and concerns, the argument of access

¹² This is my own collection of objects: they are all used, except the deities that I purchased especially for this artwork.

¹³ Harriet Hughes, curator of the World Art collections, Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, personal Interview, 24 October 2007, in the Brighton Museum stores.

¹⁴ Pretzel, p. 12.

¹⁵ Pretzel, p. 12.

versus conservation, the care taken to avoid permanent damage and the ironic phenomenon of artefacts interacting with each other. The objects playing their part in the film, a combination of gods and functional items, are left in the store and are away from the museum visitors' gaze. One of the reasons for their storage, apart from the shortage of display space, is its condition as "poor stuff"¹⁶. Pearce describes the attitude of curators towards "good stuff" and "poor stuff". "Good stuff" is rare material or highly typical, it is in good condition, is well documented and there is a scope of "finding out a lot about it".¹⁷

'Poor stuff' is not very interesting, commonplace in the wrong way, lacking much contextual information, and in an advanced state of disrepair. Poor stuff will be refused where possible, and if already in the collections may be considered for disposal.

...'good' collections are given gallery space and 'poor' collections are left in store.¹⁸

This is a reflection of changing attitudes towards certain objects in time. Once highly valued and acquired for a collection, they have progressively lost their importance as objects worthy of display and study. Pearce refers to these as "practical day-to-day decisions about which of equally vulnerable objects will be in the store with the dehumidifier and which will not"¹⁹.

All images of deities, consecrated for worship are sacred for the worshipper. Their sanctums in domestic shrines, in community temples and within roadside temples underneath trees are all marked-off sacred spaces. The images could be something as simple as a picture postcard, or something carefully carved out of stone, and in recent times, occasionally made of gold. There is no debate on power and prime importance is given to the relationship between the idol and its devotee. The idols ageing in ***Gods in Storage*** are away from any human contact apart from an occasional visit by the curator or any other member of the museum staff. The dehumidifier, as Pearce aptly states, attempts to give the artefacts a stable environment whilst they are trying to interact with each other.

¹⁶ In his 1998 *Museums Journal* article, "From Here to Eternity for Collections Care", Maurice Davies pointed out that the 'worst' objects are unseen and uncared for and suggests lending such items to other museums. He continued to state that one museum's "junk" could be another museum's "precious object".

¹⁷ Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections* (London: Leicester University Press, 1992) p. 240.

¹⁸ Pearce, p. 240.

¹⁹ Pearce, p. 241.

The Hindu attitude towards their idols as living beings comes into play in my video. Each object is 'breathing' within the constructed storage at different paces and volumes creating an orchestra of breathing sounds. It denotes life and the passing of time. The objects that are most vulnerable deteriorate faster than the others, and their breathing falters. The cracking object is recorded, a process similar to the dissolving *Ganesh* in ***Ganesh, circa 1900***. The objects are placed in a random fashion and there are more than six items on each shelf due to a lack of space.

If any material in the museum storage produces corrodants, "the offending material is removed"²⁰. Museum provisions such as maintenance supplies, exhibition materials and food should be kept separate from the collection storage area, as they would cause great harm to the collections²¹. Whilst every issue is carefully considered by the conservation professional to reduce damage to the collections and in this context to the idols within the collection, every care is taken by the worshipper to treat the idol with utmost veneration, and celebration. The offerings of food and bathing would be extremely damaging to it and so would the lighting of ghee²² lamps and incense.

A combination of better conservation and a desire to increase access to the collections, has given rise to the concept of a 'visible storage' wherein museum visitors can view and study collections. These are stores on display and combine "two functions that modern museology considers separate: storage and display"²³. The high-density arrangements are not interpreted with labels for each object, but provide access to information on the subject area, states Paul Thistle, referring to a visible store in a small museum in Canada. He continues to explain that a visible store provides a better understanding to the visitors about the "museum's responsibilities, resources and true social utility"²⁴ and gives them an opportunity to perceive the museum as their own.

The aim of ***Gods in Storage*** is to provide the museum visitor with a similar

²⁰ Getty Conservation Institute, "Preventive Conservation," *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 85.

²¹ John D. Hilberry and Susan K. Weinberg, "Museum Collections Storage," *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 155.

²² ghee – clarified butter

²³ Paul C. Thistle, "Visible Storage for the Small Museum," *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 187.

²⁴ Thistle, p. 188.

'visible storage' experience, but with a critical approach. It illustrates not only the types of objects in storage, but also the conservation challenges faced by museums at the present time. Hence, I am presenting museological fears and dilemmas and am depicting objects as living entities. Furthermore, I am allowing the public to witness the slow changes occurring in the material composition of artefacts that are on display within storage.

3. Living Gods as Specimens

In this section of the chapter I will review the evolution of conservation in the realm of museum collections. I will trace the changing trends in the field by placing the Hindu idol at the centre of the study and will examine its role as a specimen in a museum context. I will study the same deity through the eyes of the worshipper and will examine its treatment as a living being.

The term 'conservation', derived from '*conservare*', preservation or save in Latin ²⁵ was used in the context of nature and for the protection of persons such as orphans and the disabled who were susceptible to destructive forces. 'Restoration' was a more commonly used term before the 1930s in the context of art and antiquity. The physical wholeness and the aesthetic appearance of the object was given greater importance and restoring an object involved cleaning it, replacing missing parts and improving its appearance. Conservation expert, Miriam Clavir quotes Coreman's comment on aesthetic surgery (1969):

...which gave a work of art a pleasant appearance, even if such surgery greatly accelerated its deterioration. Thus, at this stage the restorer restored, but did not yet conserve. ²⁶

The Enlightenment marked the beginnings of conservation as a scientific approach to preserving collected objects. Scholars and museum personnel were consulting scientists regarding the nature of materials and their condition ²⁷. This

²⁵ Miriam Clavir, *Preserving What Is Valued: Museums, Conservation, and First Nations* (Vancouver: UBC Museum of Anthropology, 1997) p. 3.

²⁶ Clavir, p. 5.

²⁷ Clavir, p. 7. The Enlightenment was a period in history when all the prime fields of study: history, arts, science, philosophy, politics and religion, were interwoven. For instance, an anthropologist communicated with the scientist and the philosopher and a scholar could be a historian, philosopher and a scientist simultaneously. See: Kim Sloan, "Aimed at Universality and Belonging to the Nation: The Enlightenment and the British Museum," *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Kim Sloan (London: The British Museum Press, 2003) p. 13.

was the period when the effect of the industrial revolution was being felt in the atmosphere in Europe. The air was more polluted due to extensive use of coal and gas, which caused collections to deteriorate at a rapid pace. The research of materials and a scientific approach towards restoring objects was becoming a necessity. The act of collecting was considered a scientific activity in itself, especially in the context of natural history collections. It was a predominant method of understanding the world through objects. Ashley-Smith states that science and art were one, and the knowledge of materials went hand-in-hand with the development of the decorative arts ²⁸. He mentions that the separation of the two occurred after the death of Prince Albert in 1861 when the South Kensington Museum was separated into the museum of arts and the museum for science. Ethnographic objects were also placed with natural history collections prior to that and they became 'specimens' ²⁹ for ethnographic study. Hence, scientific methodology was at the heart of all activities in the museum (the word 'scientist' was invented in 1833 ³⁰).

Based on Michael Thompson's analysis of object categories in the 1979 volume, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* ³¹, Pearce argues that museums collect durables. Objects are of three types: the rubbish, the transient, and the durable. The transient is traded for its economic value and the durables contain spiritual, scientific or psychological value. Hence, Hindu deities and ritual objects fall under the category of durables. They are durable not only because they could be made of materials that have a longer life, but due to their status as objects that cannot be demoted to the categories of 'the rubbish' and 'the transient'. The damage, erosion or wear and tear of an object that could be caused by use, or transportation and handling prior to its acquisition by a museum, is to a certain extent retained due to its spiritual, scientific or psychological value and its status as a specimen. According to museum personnel, the sign of its use is a sign of its meaning in a civilization.

28 Jonathan Ashley-Smith, "Science and Art: Separated by a Common Language?," *V&A Conservation Journal* 36 (2000)

29 Clavir, p. 14.

30 Clavir, p. 12.

31 Pearce, p. 34.



Figure 5.7.

Shiva with residual vermilion marks on his forehead and right eyebrow at the British Museum. He displays signs of use, wear and tear. (photo: author)

This distinguishes conservation from restoration. Restoration remains a branch of conservation, but the belief that the physical integrity of the object needs to be preserved and that science is the basis for the proper preservation and treatment of materials, makes it distinct to restoration in a museum context³². The appearance of the complete object and its aesthetic significance are given less importance by the conservator, as the signs of use add to the meaning of the object. It has a story to tell. Hence, when the museum preserves an object, it preserves its cultural significance through the preservation of its physical entity. Clavir states that its historical, aesthetic and conceptual integrity is preserved which, she adds is studied, interpreted and disseminated by members from scholarly disciplines such as archaeology, art history and ethnography.

3.1. Preserving Gods

Hindu idols that were transported to England during the colonial period would have suffered some damage, but the signs of worship would have been apparent. Deities would have had vermilion marks on the forehead, marks of oil, sandalwood paste, flowers and traces of rice; they would have been clothed and adorned with jewellery. Cleaning the surface whether it is stone, bronze or wood would have been carried out before their display in the museum. The effect of organic material and human handling on objects as researched by conservation professionals will be discussed further. The relationship of the deities to their

³² Clavir, p. 4.

worshippers, however, shows that they have been treated as divine personages rather than inanimate objects. They are infused with divine energy, and are protected if there is danger of harm or abuse. At times of threat from invasions and battles with neighbouring princely states in history, it was common practice amongst temple communities to safeguard their religious images by burying them. This was a method of preserving them from damage and theft.

Images might find refuge underground, or they might abandon their wealthy and vulnerable temples for more out-of-the-way sanctuaries. The assumption, or at least hope, behind these evacuations was that, when danger had passed, the images would return to their accustomed homes.³³

The purpose of preventive burial was to preserve the physical icon and the animating spirit. Dr. Nagaswamy explains that the religious texts *agamas*, have prescribed burying images for their protection. They clearly state that in times of threat from robbers, enemies and invasions images used in festivals and bathing ceremonies should be hidden³⁴. Both Nagaswamy and Davis have described and quoted the guidelines for ritual procedures as stated in the *Vimānarcana kalpa*³⁵, the priestly handbook, when conducting the burial.

In a clean and hidden place the temple priest should dig a pit, sprinkle sand in it and strew sacrificial grass over the sand. He worships the Earth Goddess in the pit, reciting the mantra “Apoḥiṣṭha”. Together with the patron and devotees he enters the sanctum of the god, bows to the deity, and makes a request: “As long as there is danger, O Viṣṇu, please lie down in a bed with the goddess Earth.”³⁶ He transfers the divine energy (*śakti*) located in the image into the fixed image, or in lieu of a fixed image he may transfer the energy into his own heart. (VAK 435-36)³⁷

After the passing of danger, the idol is dug out, cleaned and consecrated again through ritualistic procedures. Dr. Nagaswamy has described the procedure of restoring the divinity in the image thus:

33 Davis, p. 127.

34 Dr. R. Nagaswamy, *Eslam Bronzes and Copper Plates*, Tamil Arts Academy, 17 April 2009 < <http://www.tamilartsacademy.com/articles/article29.xml>, >

35 Also known as *Marīci Samhita*, *Vimānarcana kalpa* was published in 1926 in Madras (now Chennai). Chapter 70 of the book provides instructions for the ritualistic burial of godly images.

36 One of *Viṣṇu*'s consort is *Bhū*, the Earth Goddess. The other is *Śrī* – Prosperity. See Richard T. Blurton, *Hindu Art*, 2nd ed. (London: British Museum Press, 1994) p. 151.

37 Davis, p. 127-128.

If the conditions improve the metal image should be retrieved, cleaned with tamarind and punyaha rite should be performed.

...different rites are prescribed for images which lay concealed for six months or over one year.³⁸

Its resurrection marks the continuation of its life as the icon of worship. These acts suggest the relationship between the devotees and the idol itself. *Vishnu* is requested to play his part in his preservation. It is to be noted that *Vishnu* is the god of preservation in the trinity of *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva*. In situations where the idol would be stolen, it was not uncommon that it was an act of breaking down the community's sense of morale and pride during battle. Davis describes that according to Indian legal literature, the main god of the temple is the owner or the lord of the temple. He points out that as "proprietors they carry out a host of administrative activities through functionaries who are themselves sometime images"³⁹. They were assigned the position as rulers of kingdoms and to this day it is believed that these icons have sovereign powers. Some idols remained buried in the ground for various reasons, one of which might have been that the location of the idol would be forgotten in a long war or a recurring problem of invasion would require it to be kept concealed and safe from iconoclastics. Some of these were discovered during excavations on building sites or by farmers and found their way into museums, art galleries or private collections in the west in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Art historian Dr. Nagaswamy has provided a detailed account of the discovery of bronzes in Tamil Nadu complete with their worshipping accoutrements such as temple utensils and *puja* bells⁴⁰.

38 Nagaswamy, < <http://www.tamilartsacademy.com/articles/article29.xml> >

39 Davis, p. 7.

40 See Nagaswamy. < <http://www.tamilartsacademy.com/articles/article29.xml> >



Figure 5.8.

Male Dancer, Kerala, South India, circa 12th century AD, British Museum

Made of wood, the figure has suffered great damage as a result of constant subject to rain (photo: author)

The damage caused to the deities in their life of exile and rediscovery has added to the existing signs of wear and tear through worship. If these tell the true biographies of the idols, the museum retains the signs. A great number of these, however, have suffered great damage such as the above wooden dancer in the British Museum and the elephant at the V&A. The bronzes have survived and the museums that have acquired these have attempted to arrest further deterioration through conservation. Bradley states:

Once an object is excavated or rediscovered, modern society expects it to last forever. It is as if the very act of placing an object into a museum will preserve it.⁴¹

The cleaning of marks and stains and the removal of accretions is a common practice before any object is displayed in the museum or stored with the collection (figure 5.9).

⁴¹ Susan M. Bradley, "Do Objects Have a Finite Lifetime?," *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 51.



Figure 5.9.

Shiva Linga and Yoni in a temple in Banaras showered with flowers, rice grains, betel leaves and betel nut (photo: courtesy of Ajit Mookerjee)



Figure 5.10.

Shiva Linga and Yoni, Stone, circa 18th century AD. British Museum (photo: author)

The marks of vermillion and particles of organic material, such as flowers, on idols, would be removed as the presence of any dirt, grime or patina would harm the material composition of the object and hence accelerate its deterioration. Conservators do not remove or add anything to an original object that would significantly alter its original appearance⁴². The aim of the museum conservator is not to present a complete object in a perfect condition, similar to when it was created, but to show its used state; the absolute truth of the object is its real state. Hence, a distinctly different material is used if any part is added to the original object, as it should be distinguishable and reversible (figure 5.11). Ashley-Smith has explained:

All restoration should be detectable not necessarily immediately visible, not even visible on a more than passing inspection, but detectable by an intelligent non-specialist armed with a magnifying glass and allowed five minutes alone with the object.⁴³

⁴² Jonathan Ashley-Smith, "The Ethics of Conservation," *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 16-17.

⁴³ Ashley-Smith, *The Ethics of Conservation*, p. 18.



Figure 5.11.

**Freestanding Elephant
with repaired legs,
sandstone, V&A
(photo: author)**

Julian Spalding, former Director of Glasgow Museums, writes critically about the museum's true interpretation of the objects on display if they have been damaged and restored. He states that:

...most museum labels inform the visitor about dates, measurements, materials, and the provenance of the object on display, but hardly any tell how the object has changed since it was first made, even fewer explain what it meant then and what it could mean today. The challenge museums now face is to see themselves no longer as sole purveyors of the truth, but as seekers after truth on a journey they share with their visitors.⁴⁴

The relationship between the 'authentic' and the 'original' is discussed by Pearce. Improvements made to a "raw specimen" for display can differ from simple cleaning to assembling pieces together for the "continued existence of the piece"⁴⁵. Great amounts of improvements and addition of material might mean replacing the object with new material, leaving something that is authentic, but not original. The value, uniqueness, and the true meaning is presented as a "real thing" in the museum. The physical state of the object contributes to its interpretation. The surface of the object tells its tale as it contains "all the visual and tactile information - the silhouette, the texture, the reflexivity, the colour and the decoration."⁴⁶

Apart from natural erosion and wear and tear through worship, iconoclastic acts such as mutilation motivated by politics and religion, breakage during theft and the abandonment of Hindu religious images, was a great cause for concern for

⁴⁴ Julian Spalding, *The Poetic Museum: Reviving Historic Collections* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 2002) p. 25.

⁴⁵ Pearce, p. 121.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Ashley-Smith, "The Ethics of Conservation," *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 17.

the temple communities as their ritual achievements were annihilated. The lengthy process from creation to consecration and evoking the divine energy did not bear fruition and in the certain cases priests laid out rules to recover their form and revive their spirit through ritual procedures depending on the extent of the damage. It is believed that even a temporary suspension of worship would cause an idol to lose its animating energy⁴⁷. Davis refers to medieval *Saiva* texts, the *Somasambhupaddhati* and *Mayamati*, that discuss the various ways in which the icons would become corrupt.

They might, for example become broken, burned, split, defaced, or worn out. They might have been made improperly in the first place, or made by unsuitable persons. They could be dislocated in a flood. They might be attacked violently by enemy armies or stolen by thieves, and they might be handled by impure persons. ...All these required some ritual recuperation, varying according to the degree of injury.⁴⁸



Figure 5.12.

Four-faced Vishnu, north-west Pakistan or Afghanistan, 9th century AD. British Museum (photo: author)

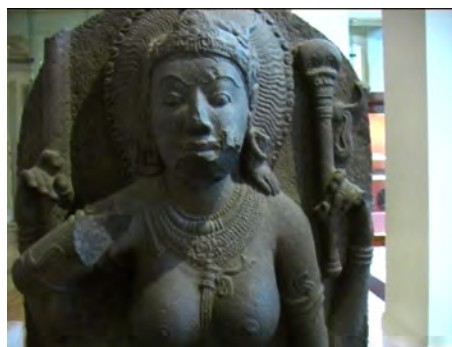


Figure 5.13.

Mother Goddess or Matrika, south India, Tamil Nadu, Pallava Dynasty, circa 900 AD. British Museum (photo: author)

⁴⁷ Davis, p. 253.

⁴⁸ Davis, pp. 252-253.

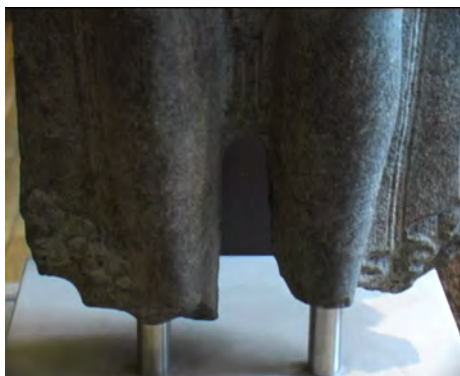


Figure 5.14.

Kartikeyya, son of Shiva, Chola Dynasty, Tamil Nadu, late 10th century. British Museum (photo: author)



Figure 5.15.

Seated Vishnu, Tamil Nadu, Chola Dynasty, circa 1000 AD. British Museum (photo: author)

It is also believed and practised that if the degree of damage is great, the image should be abandoned, as it marks the death of the image. The texts state that if the key features such as the limbs and face are damaged; the image is “no longer fit to embody the god. Images of god should be complete and whole, just as *Shiva* himself is.”⁴⁹ Dr Nagaswamy refers to the *Vimaranakalpa* text in which it is suggested that idols whose minor body parts such as ears or fingers are damaged can be restored, whereas all abused idols are abandoned. They are immersed in water, metal images are melted down and the wooden ones are cremated. He describes the procedure in these words:

When a stone image is damaged or broken, it should be covered with new cloth and tied with ropes made of darbha grass, and taken to a river flowing into an ocean or a lake or tank with perennial water, and after performing certain rites like “angahoma” etc., and after removing the cloth one should deposit it in deep water. If it is a wooden image, it should be consigned to fire and the ashes should be immersed in water.⁵⁰

The treatment of the idol as a human being is strongly evident in the rites of death for the idol just as it is in its creation. In case of deterioration, wear and tear through worship, the idol is replaced with a new one.

⁴⁹ Davis, p. 253.

⁵⁰ See Nagaswamy, < <http://www.tamilartsacademy.com/articles/article29.xml> >



Figure 5.16.

Vishnu's Varaha avatar,
Eastern India, 11th
century AD (photo:
author)

Rama Patel confirmed this practice in her interview: “It is true that we would not keep a broken image of god. I have heard that people immerse it in the river water”⁵¹. It is also believed that if the resident idol of the temple is removed from its *garbhagriha*, has suffered some damage and has temporarily or for an extended period of time remained unworshipped, it has to be re-consecrated as it could become a sanctuary for demons. It is brought back to its original home, is reinstalled and the priest performs *Jirnoddhara*, literally meaning, “rescuing of what is worn out”⁵². Hence, the worship of the complete form is of prime importance. These deep-rooted practices and beliefs since medieval times have shaped the way in which Hindu images are handled by their devotees. The deities I depict in my work ***Gods in Storage*** stand as redundant gods.

4. Access versus Conservation

The handling of objects in the museum by staff, visitors and students is a cause for concern for conservators as it poses a risk to the surface material. There have been spirited debates amongst museum professionals on issues relating to the collections’ public access and their conservation. This section of the chapter throws light on these debates addressing the status of the idol as a conserved historic object in the museum and its interpretive value for the curators – a contrasting approach compared to its life in the temple.

The museum houses historic artefacts, whereas temple practices such as replacing an aged deteriorating deity for a new image reflects its existence in the present. Most museums have been extant for a hundred years and whilst the museum literature expresses a need to preserve collections indefinitely, this is

⁵¹ Interview on 28 December 2007 with Rama Patel, founder member of the Hindu Women’s Group, Brighton at her residence in Hove.

⁵² Davis, p. 254.

impractical according to some, as that would mean reducing access and limiting the role of the museum ⁵³.

The curator's role is to facilitate access for the public to the museum collections and provide interpretation whereas the function of the conservator is to safeguard collections, protect them from harm and ensure their survival. The shift of the museum's focus from its objects to the public is apparent from the 1990s in the UK. Activities for a global reach ⁵⁴, religious cohesion ⁵⁵, understanding the local history and community ⁵⁶, and environmental projects are planned and carried out in the museum. This does not imply that objects are not safeguarded; rather that funding is diverted to public access, research, education and community events. Museum studies expert Knell argues:

Museums must communicate their unique role as collectors, and protectors, of material culture more effectively. In times of economic constraint museums always answer their critics by proclaiming the importance of the education, exhibition and outreach service they provide. As a result, when money is in short supply, there is increased pressure to divert funds away from collections care and into these services; the guardianship of collections should be seen not simply as a support to these services but as a service in its own right. ⁵⁷

Milner elucidates this and points out the nation's "collective duty of care" ⁵⁸ to ensure the collections are preserved and, even though they are subject to natural deterioration and decay, they should receive proper treatment. She writes:

Conservation should not be perceived as a competing priority but one which underpins so many other museum activities. It is not an end in itself but a means to an end.

⁵⁹

⁵³ Ratan Vaswani, "Risky Business," *Museums Journal* Vol 101.3 (2001), p. 38. A writer for the *Museums Journal*, Vaswani is the ethics advisor to the Museums Association, UK.

⁵⁴ Klaus Muller, "World Service," *Museums Journal* Vol 104.1 (2004), p. 25-27. Klaus Muller is an independent museum consultant and a film-maker.

⁵⁵ Felicity Heywood, "Faith Academy," *Museums Journal* 104.2 (2004), pp. 22-25. Felicity Heywood is a cultural critic. Her expertise is African and Caribbean culture.

⁵⁶ Matt Barnard, "Kist and Tell," *Museums Journal* 102.2 (2002), p. 36-37. Journalist, Matt Barnard, has written this in reference to the Open Museum scheme introduced in Glasgow in order to increase public access to historic collections.

⁵⁷ Simon Knell, "Introduction: The Context of Collections Care," *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 2.

⁵⁸ Carole Milner, "Who Cares? Conservation in a Contemporary Context," *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1999) p. 298.

⁵⁹ Milner, p. 298.

Museum professionals' aims, values, interest and policies redefine the role and function of the museum and ultimately those of the museum collections. The status of the Hindu deity from a living culture (albeit a historical object in the museum) is but one of the many artefacts to be considered in the museum. The debate of access and conservation throws light on museum practices such as loaning objects to other museums. Recently the V&A and the British Museum loaned several Hindu idols to museums in Europe (figure 5.17).

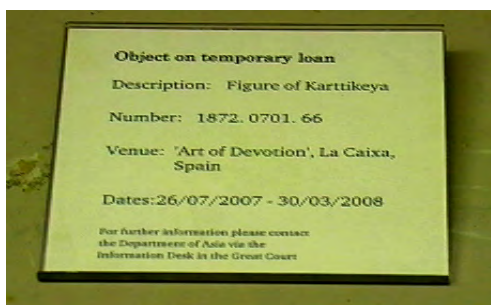


Figure 5.17.

Temporary loan notification label at the V&A (photo: author)

A figure of *Karttikeya*, son of *Shiva*, was loaned by the V&A to La Caixa in Spain for the 'Art of Devotion' exhibition from July 2007 until March 2008. Museums that limit access for the purpose of preservation have been criticised, as expressed in the following words by a former museum employee Karen Knight from a local authority museum. She questions:

How often have we heard that we are here to preserve collections for future generations? Nice soundbite, but which future generations, and will they want the stuff? Will hundreds of pieces of rusting material that I once moved into a purpose built store be gratefully received by any future generation? ⁶⁰

The two distinct ways of thinking, one that favours 'maximum public benefit' and the other 'preservation for posterity' has generated 'preventive conservation' as a cost effective method of achieving a balance of activities and focus ⁶¹. Objects in museums, as in any location, deteriorate as a result of slow and gradual reaction with the humidity in the air, fluctuating temperature, natural gases in the environment and light. As the function of the museum is primarily to display an object (the idol in this case), which is inanimate and can be made to survive longer for viewing, its physical entity is of utmost importance. In the temple, however, it is treated as a living being and the complete physical form is vital for

⁶⁰ Karen Knight, "The Meaning of Museums," *Museums Journal* 103.3 (2003) p. 18. Karen Knight is researcher in museum studies; she is particularly working on the issue of collections in storage.

⁶¹ Knell, p. 6.

a complete worshipping experience even if the act causes it to deteriorate. It was created by the temple communities for this purpose only. The change in its reception from being touched and decorated in a variety of weather conditions, to preventive conservation is in itself a huge shift in the meaning of the idol. It reflects the two contrasting ideologies:

1. The notion that if it is alive, it will die.
2. It is inanimate and hence, it can be made to survive.

I am imbuing this dichotomy in my artwork **Gods in Storage**. I have infused the deities on their shelves with life. Hence, whilst they appear as specimens of culture in a protective storage environment, they are undergoing a natural physical process of disintegration. Not only have they lost their function as gods, they are losing their physical characteristics. I depict them as evidences of the conservation versus access debate.

An example of other belief systems that do not support the preservation of objects but strive to preserve their ritualistic practices and their culture, are the First Nations, indigenous or aboriginal communities from America, Canada and Australia. Clavir describes their stance: their artefacts, some of which are in museums, are passed down through generations and hold ritualistic importance. They need to be used within their ritualistic practices and if they deteriorate as a result of use, they have lived their life ⁶².

The museum presents a contrasting view. Susan Bradley points out that the handling of objects by staff and researchers is the most common cause of damage ⁶³. Contact with objects, moving them, packing, unpacking, and its journey to a new location if it is loaned, are some of the actions that cause the most stable of materials to be affected. Bradley states: "It is therefore important that all museum staff are trained in correct handling procedures and that guidelines for handling of objects by students are drawn up and enforced by supervising museum staff" ⁶⁴. The corrosion of bronzes occurs due to the presence of humidity in the air. Dehumidified showcases have prevented further deterioration of the bronzes in

⁶² See Clavir, 1997. Clavir's published Ph.D. thesis is a study of the viewpoints of people from the First Nations (mainly British Columbia and Canada) towards the conservation of their objects of worship in museums. It is the preservation of their culture and subsequently their identity, which is of prime importance to them.

⁶³ Bradley, p. 53.

⁶⁴ Bradley, p. 53.

the British Museum ⁶⁵. The Bronze *Nataraja* is placed in a sealed glass cabinet to avoid corrosion. Traditional materials such as wood, fabric, paper, adhesives and metals, that have been used to exhibit and decorate displays, have been suspected to cause deterioration due to their volatile gaseous emissions ⁶⁶. Wood releases acidic gases such as acetic acid and formic acid in mild concentrations that affect metals ⁶⁷. Lower temperatures reduce the emission of gases and museums try to maintain a cooler environment by using blinds on windows and concealed air conditioning. The variation of temperature and moisture levels cause shrinkage and expansion of materials and sometimes permanent damage ⁶⁸. Dehumidifiers and air-conditioning systems maintain the flow of fresh air and reduce temperature imbalance, caused not only by climatic conditions but, increased by the body heat of visitors, heat emitted by light bulbs and sunlight ⁶⁹. Hence, huge efforts are taken to arrest deterioration in the museum and to avoid natural forces taking over and causing permanent damage.

Preventive conservation has been adopted as the most beneficial programme in museum conservation in contemporary times. Vaswani has pointed out the practical problems that emerge as the methods described are practised in the museum galleries. Blinds on windows in certain galleries create darker narrower spaces and visitors at the V&A perceive these as corridors leading them to another area ⁷⁰. He adds that a low light on displays causes them to look unattractive and impacts on the visitors' interpretation of objects. Jonathan Ashley-Smith, former Head of Conservation, V&A, has taken the argument of access versus conservation in a more realistic direction. He writes that the needs of the current generation are important in the following words:

If we are not satisfying the present audience, why are we so proud of preserving objects for future generations who will be equally dissatisfied by gloomy displays? ⁷¹

Another problem faced by the majority of museums today is the shortage of display space. "Over 50% of the collections are in storage as there is simply

⁶⁵ Bradley, p. 56.

⁶⁶ Anne Brooke Cradock, "Construction Materials for Storage and Exhibition," *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 129.

⁶⁷ Cradock, p. 130.

⁶⁸ Michael Williams, "Fresh-Air Climate Conditioning at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum," *Care of Collections*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 108.

⁶⁹ Williams, pp. 112-113.

⁷⁰ Vaswani, p. 38.

⁷¹ Vaswani, p. 38.

no room to display them ⁷².” Knell describes space as a limited resource for museums. Effective storage, he emphasises, should permit collections to be effectively organised and physically protected, easily accessible with room to expand ⁷³. But as these areas are used to create galleries, visitor entertainment areas and offices, the most inappropriate spaces are used to store collections such as cellars, roof spaces and outbuildings in which the environmental conditions are unsuitable ⁷⁴. The problem of natural deterioration is not only an issue limited to the gallery areas, it is a pressing concern in the museum stores.

5. Conclusion

Curator Ingrid Schaffner has described the notions of storage as a reflection of memory and history, and especially as a provocative spectacle of material culture ⁷⁵. Whilst Pearce has pointed out the holding of ‘poor’ objects from collections in museum storage, art historian and critic Justin Hoffman takes the status of such artefacts one step further, and states that the act of storing is also the act of destroying. An archived or stored item may never be displayed in the gallery and may never be utilised. This can lead to its deterioration. He concludes thus:

Paradoxically, collecting and preserving would seem to become acts of destruction. ⁷⁶

In the access versus conservation debate, the removal of a deity from human sight and contact would not necessarily preserve it forever. Even if its life is lengthened through preventative conservation, the continuity of its material existence is all that is achieved. The purpose of its creation is human interaction, which is transmuted through its stored status.

This chapter has highlighted the two distinctly different attitudes towards preservation of material by museum professionals, on the one hand, and the Hindu temple communities, on the other. ***Gods in Storage*** demonstrates this contrasting perspective to visitors; the sounds of human breathing and the decomposition of two of the objects, engage the audience in the access versus

⁷² Harriet Hughes, curator of the World Art collections, Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, commented on the shortage of display space in my interview on 24 October 2007, in the Brighton Museum stores.

⁷³ Knell, p. 8.

⁷⁴ Knell, p. 8.

⁷⁵ Schaffner, p. 10.

⁷⁶ Justin Hoffman, “Vanishing: The Fear of Disappearance,” *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art*, eds. Ingrid Schaffner and Matthias Winzen (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1998) p. 272.

conservation debate and the danger of deterioration in storage that has so far been restricted to museum experts.

The presence of the video artwork, ***Ganesh, circa 1900*** and the sound of *Om* mixed with the sounds of human breathing in their exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth*** had rendered the exhibition area meditative and alive ⁷⁷. It created a space where the life and death of Hindu deities were explored through a juxtaposition of sound and moving image.

In the next chapter I will introduce the sculpture ***Tactile Ganesh***, which demonstrates the change in the physical form of *Ganesh* through constant touch. I will also examine 'hands-on' exhibitions in museums and will compare their role with the handling of deities in the Hindu temple through my artwork.

⁷⁷ Watch enclosed DVD which makes a visit to the exhibition.



Chapter 6

The Material and the Spiritual: *Tactile God*

Chapter Summary

I have depicted the erosion of idols occurring through ritualistic performative acts, and the impact of surrounding objects in the three artworks discussed in the previous chapters. In this chapter I will introduce my fourth artwork, ***Tactile Ganesh***, which undergoes gradual transformation through visitors' interaction with it in the secular museum. I will examine its role in testing visitor response towards religious images in the museum by encouraging it to be touched.

I will briefly review the general perception towards touching objects in the process of learning during the Enlightenment and will critically observe 'hands-on' activities in the contemporary religious museum. I will compare such practices with the physical act of worshipping the deity in the temple.

This chapter also studies the problem of interpreting religiosity through deities in museums by oscillating between its material and spiritual characteristics and will establish the instrumentality of ***Tactile Ganesh*** in presenting the numinous aspects of religion.

I. Introduction

The enlivening of the deity carried out by the worshipper in the Hindu shrine is a gradual and painstaking process, stripping away the distance between her/him and the worshipped image. The *sadhaka's* ¹ aim is to awaken the inner centre in her/himself and unite with 'the One' – the primordial centre where the collective energy of the universe is focused through the idol. This "potential all-point" existing within the spiritual aspirant serves as a bridge to and is also the Cosmic Unity "underlying the physical diversity of the world" ². A spider's web is used as a metaphor to represent this concept in the *Upanishads* ³ and is depicted in a *yantra*, mystical diagram ⁴ (figure 6.1). At the centre is a dot, a *bindu*, from which the energy radiates. It is the centre or nucleus of creation. The emergent lines from this central point radiate outwards in a symmetrical fashion, which can be traced back to the centre, forming an expanding and contracting structure held by the *bindu* at the centre. This spider's web is a representation of the Universe and the human's spiritual journey. The scholar of eastern and western philosophy Madhu Khanna explains that he is on a quest, just like a traveller, towards a destination or a summit, and that despite his meanderings arrives back to his starting point, his conscious spiritual centre ⁵.



Figure 6.1.

**The spider's web:
Yantra depicting
evolution and
involution. The *Bindu*
or dot is at the centre.
(photo: courtesy of
Madhu Khanna)**

¹ Spiritual aspirant

² Madhu Khanna, *Yantra, the Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1979) p. 9.

³ Spiritual doctrine of ancient Indian philosophy dated between c. 1000 and 800 BC.

⁴ Khanna, p. 9.

⁵ This is denoted by the dot, the *Bindu* and is prevalent in all *yantras* (the mystical diagram used as a tool for worship). It is a visual representation of the human being's spiritual centre. It is applied to the forehead, the sixth chakra on the human body, the only place representing the supreme principle and the mind. See Khanna (1979). pp. 118-131. Khanna refers to the spiritual aspirant as male.

Hence, the worshipper is aware of the deity's and her/his own physical presence in the created sacred space. It is due to this awareness that s/he is able to contemplate upon the sacred points on her/his body (known as *chakras*⁶, see Figure 6.2), the deity's transcendental qualities as the embodiment of the cosmic energy and the unison of the two. It is through the physical that the spiritual is sought.



Figure 6.2.

The seven *chakras* on the human body. These are the subtle points where energies are interiorised in meditation and yoga (photo: courtesy of Madhu Khanna)

Ethno-musicologist Rolf Killius describes the morning *puja* and rituals performed in temples in Kerala to this day:⁷

Before the first *puja* (*usha*⁸) the priest or *Marar* plays the *shankh*⁹ three times to wake up the main and minor deities (*palli unarttal*¹⁰) followed by *abhishekham*¹¹, the cleaning and oiling of the idol. This ritual is performed in the closed *srikovil*¹².

6 These are *chakra* of space (above the head), *chakra* of the supreme (the top of the head) *chakra* between the eyebrows, throat *chakra*, heart *chakra*, navel *chakra* and *chakra* below the navel. These are the seven points where the energies are absorbed through ritual meditation. For a detailed explanation, see: Khanna, p. 123.

7 Rolf Killius, *Ritual Music and Hindu Rituals of Kerala* (New Delhi: B.R. Rhythms, 2006) p. 28. His description of temple rituals extends to the offering of music to the deities by devotees in Kerala temples. Hence, the *prasada* is not just a food offering, but has developed into a tradition of temple music.

8 *usha* - early morning (5-6 am) Killius, p. 114.

9 *shankh* - conch, sea shell. Killius, p. 112.

10 *palli unarttal* - awakening ritual performed at 4 am. Killius, p. 111.

11 *abhishekham* - ritual of cleaning and anointing the idol. Killius, p. 107.

12 *srikovil* - the inner shrine or *garbhagriha*. Killius, p. 113.



Figure 6.3.

Lord Saneeswaran (Saturn) showered with curd. (photo: courtesy of Dushi Pillai)

Figure 6.4.

Lord Saneeswaran (Saturn) bathed with water after being bathed with milk, curd and honey (photo: courtesy of Dushi Pillai)

The most striking and poignant aspect of being in this environment is the multi-sensory experience it offers. The interaction with the deity goes beyond viewing. It is physical, with a goal to enliven its divinity and to prepare oneself for the ultimate stage of meditation through the focussing of divine energy in the sacred space.

The act of viewing the idol in the museum environment is deemed purposeful for the derivation of meaning and knowledge. Pearce describes the perception in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the qualities of an 'inquiring' and 'curious' man, thus:

...wishes to know and learn everything. When those who have a thirst for learning and desire to look at the treasures of art and nature are described as having an *Inquiring Mind (curieux)* it is meant as a compliment.¹³

The looking or viewing of art has been at the heart of the museum's *raison d'être*. The changes that have occurred in the way museums function in the public arena have been dictated by the two issues, which have been discussed

¹³ Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections* (London: Leicester University Press, 1992) p. 92. Quoted from K. Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990). Original source is Antoine Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universale* published in 1690.

in the previous chapter: access and preservation ultimately reflecting what is “valuable and important in each period of their existence”¹⁴. The current focus on interaction in the museum, the importance of hands-on collections and the inclusion of all ages and communities, poses questions about the nature of interaction for learning, whether viewing is not interactive enough and whether one can learn more from touching an object in the ethnographic museum compared to viewing. I will test these arguments through examining my artwork ***Tactile Ganesh***.

2. Tactile Ganesh

In this section of the chapter I will introduce ***Tactile Ganesh***, which embodies notions of physical and transcendental qualities of the image, as a deity worshipped in the temple on one hand, and an object containing knowledge in the museum, on the other.

2.1. Aims of the Artwork

Tactile Ganesh is a sculpture depicting *Ganesh* and is a tactile artwork as the name suggests. Not only am I allowing the act of touching, I am exposing its physical characteristics that encourage play, exploration and immersion. The act of installing the artwork in the museum environment, the visitors’ reaction to the object, their tactile exploration of the sculpture, all form part of the work. The very nature of the work is performative and experimental. My aims in developing and making ***Tactile Ganesh*** are:

1. To present an image of the worshipped deity in the museum gallery in order to create two meanings – religious and museological, the former through the visual representation and the latter through its exhibition context;
2. To provoke a response to touch the sculpture through an accompanying instruction and by exposing its physical texture. Hence, to generate gradual erosion through the physical ritualistic act of touching;

¹⁴ Pearce, p. 89.

3. To observe and record visitor responses towards my artwork;
4. To record changes occurring in the appearance of the sculpture as a result of constant touch;
5. Lastly, to comment on museum interactive practices that aim at increasing access to collections and the simultaneous desire to conserve them.

2.2. Construction and Transformation of the Form

Tactile Ganesh is made of four layers. The innermost (fourth) layer is its core, spherical in shape and the hardest of all layers. The third layer is soft and impressionable whereas the second layer is brittle. The outermost layer is made of fresh flowers (figure 6.6). The ephemeral nature of the artwork decreases with each layer – the flowers with the shortest life in its current form, the second: a crumbling temporary layer, the third: changeable with the potential for a new form and the last: durable and relatively long lasting.

Conceptually, this signifies the continuum of the soul in the cycle of life and death as believed by Hindus. In the museum exhibition gallery, it initiates the sense of exploration from one layer into another. I refer to this artwork as ‘immersive’. Visitors are allowed to take a flower each from the artwork. The worshippers in the Hindu temple often like to take home a part of the divinity with them and choose a flower from the offerings or some *prasada* (blessed food ¹⁵). The removal of a flower from the sculpture signifies visitors’ free response towards the object in the gallery space within the museum environment. Underneath the layer of flowers is the brittle layer that gradually breaks with touch. Made from plaster of Paris, this layer is white and reveals the soft colourful third layer beneath it. This is the layer of clay or plasticine that is a commonly used material within schools due to its malleable and non-toxic nature. The sight of the material triggers a memory of its texture and compliant nature attracting the person to touch and then play.

This spontaneous discovery and behaviour is a part of this artwork. There is a desire to touch which leads to experimenting with the material. This immersive act of working with the material encompasses a meditative, sub-conscious and

¹⁵ Common *prasada* offerings consist of fresh or dry coconut, a variety of sweetmeats, jaggery and sesame seed nuggets or nuts.

yet a conscious aspect that, albeit with a different intent, resembles the act of touching the idol in the temple.

I make the artwork; the museum visitor changes it, creating a three-dimensional image in constant flux. This is similar to the process in which the sculptor makes the idol, and its worshippers through their interaction with it, cause a change in its surface over a period of time. Experimenting museum visitors gradually change the outer appearance of *Ganesh* leaving the innermost core intact. This is at the very heart of the worship of idols within Hinduism. The belief that the physical is temporal and the energy existent in all matter is everlasting, is immanent in the devotees' treatment of their gods. The devotion or *bhakti* towards the deity is personal and passionate and is expressed through all the senses. The eyes seek *darshan*, the hands touch the feet of the deity, the nose inhales the perfume of the flowers and incense, the ears listen to the music, and the mouth tastes the *prasada*. Each interactive worshipper in the temple leaves her/his impression on the idol through touch. The museum visitor studies the idol on display in its vitrine or on the plinth to acquire its cultural and iconographic meaning. The use of the physical form as a vehicle for something sublime and abstract is present in both: the temple and museum contexts.

A unique example of museum visitors touching a Hindu god on display in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art was recorded in 1995¹⁶ (figure 6.5). A stone *Ganesh*, 81.2 centimetres tall, made in *circa* twelfth century in south India has been touched on his abdomen for approximately twenty-five years by visitors. The area, which has been touched, appears darker and slightly oilier compared to the rest of the image. This was not the case when *Ganesh* was donated to the museum. The museum prohibits touch. However, this practice has been occurring in the gallery for an extended period of time. The reasons could be numerous; there may have been a rumour regarding *Ganesh's* lucky powers, or one sees the other visitor touching in the museum and follows suit, or there is simply an inherent attraction towards touching his rounded belly. This is a remarkable example as it surpasses the museological aim of exhibiting artefacts for visual contemplation and learning.

¹⁶ Pratapaditya Pal has provided an account of the practice. See: Pratapaditya Pal, "Introduction," *Ganesh: The Benevolent*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1995) p. v.



Figure 6.5.

***Ganesh* with a rubbed belly at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (photo: courtesy of Pratapaditya Pal)**

Each person in the temple enters and impacts the physical life of the idol to a certain degree contributing towards its slow end. A similar process occurs in the museum gallery when visitors interact with ***Tactile Ganesh***. The first person or the people that initiate change in the sculpture experience the start of the process whereas those who participate towards the end perceive the changed form. It is to be noted that the entire sequence of actions and events is the artwork. A series of photographs recording significant changes in the sculpture are displayed for the visitors to observe in the exhibition space. The change in the form is a part of the artwork and is a visual sign of human response.



Figure 6.6.

***Tactile Ganesh* installed on a worshipping stool at exhibition *From Shrine to Plinth* (photo: author)**

It was subsequently installed with the stool onto a plinth (an account is available in Chapter 6)



Figures 6.7. and 6.8.

Visitors exploring “Tactile Ganesh” (photo: author)



Figure 6.9.

**The plasticine layer is revealed
(photo: author)**



Figure 6.10.

**Eroding surface of *Tactile Ganesh*
(photo: author)**



Figure 6.11.

***Tactile Ganesh on the plinth
(photo: author)***



Figure 6.12.

***Close-up view of Tactile Ganesh's eroding surface
(photo: author)***

A striking example of an artist greatly influenced by Hindu idols within their cultural realm is sculptor, Stephen Cox. His work has been described as evocative of history when the relationship between art and religion was “profound and direct”¹⁷. His visit to India in 1980 and witnessing the long tradition of temple communities resulted in the establishing of a studio in the south Indian temple town of Mahabalipuram. He is interested in the response of Hindu devotees towards Chola Bronzes (created in southern India between 850 AD and 1279 AD) in their temples. Not only is he inspired by the physical beauty of the deities, which he believes is full of metaphysical significance, but also by the worshippers’ engagement with them, especially the acts of bathing and anointing. He describes his experience:

I was absolutely transfixed by the fact that you have got this form and you pour oil on it, and its path goes completely black and takes on the form of something I was trying to say in the shape.¹⁸

Stephen Cox regularly pours oil over “The Holy Family” evoking temple rituals (figure 6.13).



Figure 6.13.

Stephen Cox pouring oil over “The Holy Family II” outside his studio, 1986 (photo: courtesy of Simon Wilson)

¹⁷ See “Stephen Cox” *News and Events*, 1999, Jesus College, University of Cambridge, 20 February 2009 < <http://www.jesus.cam.ac.uk/news/sculpture/99cox.html> >

¹⁸ Simon Wilson, “Divine Beauty,” *Royal Academy of Arts Magazine* 92 (2006) p. 64.

Cox extracts the essence of the deity and uses it to create abstract sculptural forms. His work is a dialogue between the eastern and western aesthetic of art. It resonates the active interaction of man with the deity in the place of worship. The outcome of visitors' response towards my work is the changed form. It is the artwork.

Hence, ***Tactile Ganesh*** embodies the conceptual (spiritual) and material (physical) aspects of the deity that I am discussing in my thesis. Through its construction, the strata of distinct materials, I am depicting the ephemeral characteristics of matter and pointing towards the belief in the eternal soul as perceived by temple communities. Visitors' interaction and the subsequent changes occurring in the form reveal this layering of material and concepts. The material and the spiritual are intertwined in ***Tactile Ganesh***, in its making and in its reception.

I tested my concepts through exhibiting ***Tactile Ganesh*** alongside the other three artworks in the exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth***. I will examine the visitor response and the transformation of the image in the following chapter.

3. Museum Experience: To Look or Touch

In this section of the chapter, I will examine the importance of visual scrutiny over touch in studying objects in the museum, and I will compare it with the instrumentality of the five senses within Hinduism in the *sadhaka's* spiritual journey. I will briefly examine the role of hands-on activities carried out in the museum in order to make explicit the function of ***Tactile Ganesh*** in its exhibition context.

3.1. Touch in the Post-Modern Museum

It is unarguable that museums have been widely perceived and accepted as spaces that prohibit touch. The seventeenth and early eighteenth century public museums in the UK were accessible to the upper classes and only the elite had a "license to touch"¹⁹ accessioned objects on display whereas the touch of the lower classes was classed as unclean²⁰. A select few have continued to handle

¹⁹ Fiona Candlin, "Museums, Modernity and the Class Politics of Touching Objects," *Touch in Museums: Policy and Practice in Object Handling*, ed. Helen J. Chatterjee (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2008) p. 9. Fiona Candlin is a museologist and lecturer at Birkbeck College

²⁰ See Constance Classen and Davis Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sen-

objects in the democratised museum from the nineteenth century onwards. These are curators, conservators, keepers of collections and connoisseurs, who regularly use their senses to assess the quality of objects, clean them, restore, study and arrange them. Sally MacDonald, Director of UCL Museums and Collections, carried out research on the instrumentality of touch in connoisseurship through interviewing curators and art dealers. Her case studies reflect the discriminatory aspects of touching objects (such as smooth and rough, hot and cold, heavy and light) and the scope for assessing their authenticity, and quality ²¹. MacDonald quotes a curator's comments on the tactility of a sacred object, which suggests the emotional touch practiced by worshippers towards the sacred object in this narrative:

Sculpture is an incredibly tactile medium and all you have to do is to see sacred images to see how often parts of their anatomy are touched. The most obvious thing is the rubbing of St. Peter's foot or toe to such an extent that he has to have a little boot put on. ²²

Hence, the human desire to touch a sacred object (or not) is at the heart of the reception of **Tactile Ganesh**. I am presenting *Ganesh* to be touched, which for some could be a means to explore its material discriminatory aspects, whereas for some it could be attractive as a sacred image or could trigger an opposite response of refraining from contact.

Conservators handle accessioned objects regularly in order to assess their condition. Elizabeth Pye, lecturer in archaeology and a conservator, explains that the combination of careful observation and an exploratory touch is employed by the conservator to examine and study the object in great detail ²³. She describes:

Fingertips are used to focus touch through contact with the surface of an object. In this way it is possible to assess temperature differences, texture, flaking, or powdering,

sibilities and Indigenous Artefacts" *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture* eds. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth Phillips (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006). The authors have provided examples of aristocratic men and women such as diarist John Evelyn, Sophie De La Roche and Celia Fiennes who have recorded their experiences of regularly handling objects in museums such as the British Museum and the Ashmolean.

²¹ MacDonald provides the example of a porcelain dealer, one of her interviewees, who flicked vessels with his finger to check for cracks.

²² Sally MacDonald, "Exploring the Role of Touch in Connoisseurship and the Identification of Objects" *The Power of Touch: Handling Objects in Museum and Heritage Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth Pye (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2007) p. 115.

²³ Elizabeth Pye, "Understanding Objects: The Role of Touch in Conservation," *The Power of Touch: Handling Objects in Museum and Heritage Contexts* ed. Elizabeth Pye (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2007) p. 122.

moisture or dryness, stickiness, waxiness, resilience, and telling combinations of these characteristics. Knowledge is gained through the touch of the fingertips, the hands or a hand tool. In many cases this contact with an object is an essential aspect of thinking about the problem.²⁴

Whilst current museum pedagogic practices allow object handling for the general public, it is still limited to non-accessioned objects. If the described nature of an exploratory touch offers a better understanding of objects, why is it that visitors to museums cannot be taught how to touch, if they are already being trained in how to see? This is a valid and important question that emerges from the study of tactility in the context of the museum, and is also raised by Elizabeth Pye²⁵. The practice of touch is, however, still restricted to a selected few: connoisseurs and museum professionals. The ocularcentric museum, to an extent, still survives and the practice of looking at the collected and displayed object is ongoing. Through **Tactile Ganesh** I am not only allowing all visitors to handle the sculpture, but am also depicting the act of touch itself as the concept of my artwork rather than as a method of exploring the object per se. I am directly addressing the transference of the deity into the ocularcentric museum by making it multi-sensory.

3.2. Hierarchy of the Senses

One of the key aspects within the western aesthetic as described in Chapter 2, is the objective distance between the observer and the work of art, an ideology and practice that emerged in the eighteenth century. This “aesthetic distance”²⁶, encompasses a pursuit of knowledge through the object’s formal characteristics rather than “the immediate sensory experience of it”²⁷. The concept of empirical thought, and an academic distance towards learning that emerged in the eighteenth century²⁸ emphasised the higher faculties of human judgment rather

24 MacDonald, pp. 122-123.

25 Elizabeth Pye, “Introduction: The Power of Touch,” *The Power of Touch: Handling Objects in Museum and Heritage Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth Pye (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2007) p. 26.

26 Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel, “No Two Alike: Play and Aesthetics in Collecting,” *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 226. The term ‘aesthetic distance’ is quoted from Kreitler and Kreitler, *Psychology of the Arts*, 1972. pp. 281-4.

27 Danet and Katriel, p. 225.

28 The ideology of academic distance led to the period in the Eighteenth century that was described by Emmanuel Kant as the “Enlightenment”. It was a period during which men and women did not specialise in specific fields and could relate History and Science to Maths and Theology through reason and empiricist study. Roy Porter, a prolific writer on the Enlightenment critiqued Michael Foucault as a cynic towards the Enlightenment who perceived the period as one of “control and domination rather than emancipation”. For a detailed account see Kim Sloan, “Aimed at Universality and Belonging to the Nation: The Enlightenment and the British Museum,” *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Kim Sloan (London: The British Museum Press, 2003).

than base sensory ones. Pye explains:

In Western thought touch is considered to be one of the five senses, and there was traditionally a hierarchy; the higher senses being sight and hearing and the lower sense taste, smell, and touch. While sight and hearing were considered masculine, dispassionate and intellectual, the lower senses were seen as feminine, sensual and suspect.²⁹

The employment of observation over other human senses was vital in the study of natural history (which extended to the study of the artificial world such as art and antiquity). Foucault has explained:

Observation from the seventeenth century onward, is a perceptible knowledge furnished with a series of systematically negative conditions. Hearsay is excluded, that goes without saying; but so are taste and smell, because their lack of certainty and their variability render impossible any analysis into distinct elements that could be universally acceptable. The sense of touch is very narrowly limited to the designation of a few fairly evident distinctions (such as that between smooth and rough) which leaves sight with an almost exclusive privilege, being the sense by which we perceive extent and establish proof, and, in consequence, the means to an analysis *partes extra partes* acceptable to everyone.³⁰

Hence, the use of optical devices such as microscopic lenses aided the renunciation of the other human senses, wrote Foucault, and allowed systematic seeing. He continued to comment on the hindrance caused to one who endeavoured to be a naturalist in the eighteenth century, but lacked sight and emphasised: “the blind man in the eighteenth century can perfectly well be a geometrician, but he cannot be a naturalist”³¹. Foucault’s comment on the visual surveillance and study of nature extended to the visual arts in practice. Art was associated with the ocular and the importance given to viewing art and artefacts was prevalent in the process of their study, which is reflected in museum practices of exhibition, curation and interpretation. Within the western aesthetic, lack of sight hinders a person to appreciate a work of art in its true form. Fiona

²⁹ Touch was associated with emotion and had the connotations of being ‘touchy-feely’. Pye, “Introduction: The Power of Touch,” p. 14.

³⁰ Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) pp. 132–3.

³¹ Foucault, p. 133.

Candlin, however, argues that blind persons use their sense of touch to build an imaginary visual picture³². This emphasises the prime focus on the image and form of an object in order to further one's understanding of it.

Moreover, touch was associated with primitive cultures³³ and with practices of healing and harming in which objects were bestowed with powers that were transmitted through touch³⁴. The devotional practice of taking *darshan* of the deity in the Hindu temple, touching the altar and touching the feet of the deity, are used as methods of making contact with the divine powers that are believed to be present within the image. Anthropologist Jan Geisbusch calls the concept of transference of power 'contagion'. Albeit in reference to relics, this description is applicable to the worship of Hindu religious images. She states:

Certainly, devotees may and do converse with the sacred through vision, yet often enough it is the tactile, corporal encounter that prompts visual niety³⁵



Figure 6.14.

Earth pigment (terracotta) used to draw a yantra (photo: courtesy of Ajit Mookerjee)

Figure 6.15.

Shiva Linga decorated with a flower. A crescent moon and bindu are drawn on the form with the earth pigment (photo: courtesy of Ajit Mookerjee)

32 Fiona Candlin, "Don't Touch! Hands Off! Art, Blindness and the Conservation of Expertise", *Body and Society* 1 (2004) 25 April 2008 < <http://bod.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/10/1/71> > p. 74. Candlin is a lecturer in Museum Studies and Lifelong Learning at the Birkbeck College, she also teaches Museology at the British Museum.

33 Candlin, "Museums, Modernity and the Class Politics of Touching Objects," p. 9.

34 Pye, "Introduction: The Power of Touch," p. 14.

35 Jan Geisbusch, "For Your Eyes Only? The Magic Touch of Relics," *The Power of Touch: Handling Objects in Museum and Heritage Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth Pye (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2007) p. 80.

As depicted in figures 6.14 and 6.15, religious images are smeared with terracotta paste. They are touched by worshippers to transfer the divine energy that images are believed to have acquired. Their sensuous meaning is broken when they are removed from a multi-sensory environment and placed into the “visual system”³⁶ of the museum. Through **Tactile Ganesh** I am reintegrating the image with its sensory reception. Visitors who touch are making this meaning manifest in the museum gallery and are simultaneously interpreting the Hindu deity’s cultural sensory treatment.

Whilst museums rarely allowed touch as a means to learn about art and objects from the eighteenth century onwards, handling sessions are being considered as “an opportunity to look more closely”³⁷ in the post-modern museum. The sense of touch, and the experience of touching an object does not limit itself to the surface texture, it is a means to achieving an awareness of the external world. “It is an interrelation of rhythm, movement, contact, proprioception (postural and bodily awareness), articulation and pressure and with it we can grasp shape, space, size, texture, temperature, vibration and response”³⁸. An awareness of the space surrounding one’s body using the five senses is highly emphasised in Hindu ritual and worship. No one sense is superior to the other and man must utilise his faculties to absorb the energies that surround him. Anthropologist Edmund Leach has pointed out that the fragmentation and allocation of experience to specialists – visual, auditory, tactile etc. results in the impoverishment of total experience³⁹.

3.3. Religious Object-Handling Workshops

Even though it is believed that one of the prime ways in which knowledge can be derived is through attentive looking and observation, the power of touch, the sense of play it provides and the memory it generates is used by museums to facilitate learning. In this section I will briefly outline the nature of a religious object-handling workshop in order to contextualise **Tactile Ganesh** within the area of museum interactive interpretive practices.

The education staff at St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow run drop-in object-handling workshops in the Religious Art Gallery which are open to all age groups. A range of objects, for instance, holy books, worshipping

³⁶ Classen and Howes, p. 200.

³⁷ Candlin, vol. 10, p. 73.

³⁸ Candlin, vol. 10, p. 74.

³⁹ Edmund Leach, “Of Ecstasy and Rationality,” *How Does It Feel?*, ed. Mick Csaky (Over Wallop: Thames and Hudson, 1979) p. 91.

accoutrements such as musical instruments and images of deities, either bought or acquired from the local faith communities by the museum, are laid out to be explored by visitors. A member of staff is present to discuss the functions and uses of the objects, which generates a discourse in the museum gallery. It is a means of engaging the public and reaching the visitor directly through educational activity. Kirsty Hood, museum educator, runs the object-handling workshops and expressed the museum's aims and her own views on the importance of interaction. She reflected upon the visitor response in the following words:

We run workshops on citizenship and sectarianism, (which is an issue in Glasgow) and on multi-faiths – just to encourage more understanding. Handling objects is a good way of doing it because it gets people to touch and smell things, something they cannot normally do in museums. Sometimes there is an aspect of how people feel about sacred objects in each religion. We do encourage active handling but we have to tell children what objects have to be handled with more respect. I think adults generally treat objects with more reverence.⁴⁰

Objects chosen for the workshop were: a Jewish *Torah* (the holy scriptures), a Jewish wooden spice box used during the Sabbath, a *Yad* (Hebrew for hand) used in reading the *Torah*, a plastic statue of Mary, a Buddhist brass bell, a *dumroo* (a small drum-like instrument) that is held by *Shiva* in his *Nataraja* form, a Ramadan Islamic advent calendar, a Koran stand and a Sikh fan for the Guru Granth Saheb. This range of objects from a variety of faiths were chosen due to physical characteristics such as their texture that made them attractive for handling and for discussion in the museum gallery. Some produced sound, some provided an interesting story, and some had unique visual characteristics and attracted play.

The only object that received the least amount of interest for an exploratory experience was the image of Mary. It was perceived as a religious image, which was to be viewed rather than handled. The level of physical interaction with the worshipping accoutrements was significantly active compared to the image of Mary. I have tested ***Tactile Ganesh*** within a similar ideological framework. Visitor response towards the religious image was reflective of their predisposition towards such an image be it as art, a deity, or an object with magical powers.

⁴⁰ I attended the object-handling session on 2 November 2008. The excerpt is from the recordings of our informal conversations that took place whilst Kirsty Hood was preparing for the workshop.

Touching objects in museums are activities designated as handling sessions, but of selected objects. Whilst hands-on activities in museums are seen as a way in which the haptic experience and interactivity they offer facilitate active learning, they are also a means of allowing increased access to visitors and at the same time protect the larger collection from damage through handling. Candlin explains:

Providing handling material at an exhibition is explicitly intended to protect the larger collection by discouraging visitors from touching other more delicate or valuable items, and organized handling sessions or touch tours can be viewed in similar light. Allowing people to touch selected objects from the collection in supervised circumstances is a way of granting access through touch without giving people choice or control over what they touch.⁴¹

Hence, handling is an area that is an outcome and also a hurdle in the access versus conservation debate. Candlin quotes Kevin Hetherington, writer of social and cultural theory: “access often has to respond to the demands of conservation rather than the other way around”⁴².

A museum visitor may not wish to touch what is allowed to be touched. The Bronze Nataraja may attract one’s attention and activate the desire to touch. Candlin argues that the desire to touch arises from the prohibition of touch, the connection with the past and to feel the surface of the object⁴³. These are all human responses to the material world around them. Collectors connect with their collections through touch and play and dominate them with a sense of ownership⁴⁴. The rarity of an object or the magic quality it may possess increases the desire to possess it though, if not by owning it, by touching it. Pearce describes the qualities of the moon-rock, circa 4 million years old and retrieved by the Apollo 17 mission. People usually have a strong desire to touch it and they are allowed to do so⁴⁵. The sign above the glass case, “you may touch it with care”, allows one to touch an object in the space that would normally disallow

⁴¹ Candlin, vol. 10, p. 72.

⁴² Candlin, “Don’t Touch! Hands Off! Art, Blindness and the Conservation of Expertise”, p. 72 from Kevin Hetherington, “Museums and the Visually Impaired: The Spatial Politics of Access.” *Sociological Review*. 48 (2000) 444–63.

⁴³ Candlin, vol. 10, p. 72.

⁴⁴ Danet and Katriel, pp. 228–229.

⁴⁵ Susan M. Pearce, “Museum Objects,” *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 10.

the act.

Tactile Ganesh worked on a similar principle. I allowed it to be touched even though it resulted in the slight change of appearance. Its religious association however, gave it an added layer of meaning. One's inherent desire to touch, to feel the texture of an object, and the inviting sign saying: "You may touch", did not function in as straightforward a way as the desire to touch the moon rock. The moon rock projected the characteristics of widely perceived 'resonance' and 'wonder', whereas **Tactile Ganesh** contained an added dimension of belief and reverence projected by people towards images of divinity. Similarly, if interaction with secular objects such as coins ⁴⁶ and medieval hunting tools ⁴⁷ is focussed on a magnified observant study in the former case and experiential learning in the latter, the handling of sacred objects, especially deities, poses certain problems. The connection is not purely physical, wherein the surface texture is felt, the temperature of the material is experienced, the weight of the object is assessed and the design is observed, but it is also related to a contact with an object that has been created for the worship of its divine powers. Despite its secular setting (the museum), the image of the deity is laden with its original meaning. It is interpreted and perceived as art, but specifically, as religious art. I tested these ideas of receptivity and interaction and played with the notions of the secular and the religious through **Tactile Ganesh**.

3.4. Human Senses and their Role in Experience

The change from the passive (as described by Tim Caulton) to the active learning approach denotes the transition of the museum's focus from the object to the community it serves. The early museum cabinets designed between 1850 and 1900 were made of mahogany bases, the upper case frames were of cast iron and the glass used was ordinary window glass of the day. As one sheet of glass was no bigger than 3 feet square, the cases needed wooden cross bars to cover the structure ⁴⁸. Hence this provided some protection to collections but the viewing was distorted. The objects had to be removed to be viewed which caused problems of access for museums and the conservation of the collections was at stake. Technical advances in glass-making in the 1920s gave way to the use of

⁴⁶ The British Museum conducted coin-handling sessions in the Hotung Gallery of World Art in 2005. Visitors could view both sides of coin, identify images, dates and read the information on them.

⁴⁷ Anthony Holland, "Beyond Bloomsbury," (UK: BBC 2, 2007). Participants of the handling-sessions, held stone implements crafted and used by the Stone Age man which were shaped to provide an easy grasp in their hands during hunting.

⁴⁸ Pearce, p. 105.

plate-glass, which provided “clear and open, but secure and controlled public display”⁴⁹. Hence, the issues of access and conservation have been prevalent in the life of the public museum. The change from viewing collections clearly as good access to being able to have a hands-on interactive experience for learning has marked the attempting transformation of the museum from being the “temple” to the “forum”⁵⁰. George E. Hein describes learning thus:

Learning is an active process in which the learner uses sensory input and constructs meaning out of it, ... The crucial action of constructing meaning is mental: it happens in the mind. Physical actions, hands-on experience may be necessary for learning, especially for children, but it is not sufficient; we need to provide activities which engage the mind as well.⁵¹

The interaction with the idol in the museum from viewing to perhaps touching (if it is designated to be presented in a handling session) is cognitive whereas in the temple it is used as a means towards spiritual identity and fulfilment through experience. The interactions are laden with meaning and intent. Learning, as described by Hein, engages the mind and it is through learning that one is aware of the world. The physical actions and hands-on experience he describes are seemingly sensory receptors or meaningless physiological phenomena. Psychoanalyst Charles Rycroft, however, states that they also “actively select, transform and organise them to construct and create experiences which comprise our identity and biography”⁵².

The traditional Indian belief that self-fulfilment occurs through self-consciousness and experience gives the human senses prime importance. Rawson explains that they are not considered as mere receptors of external stimuli, but as tools to project their image of their environment outwards⁵³. The control

⁴⁹ Pearce, p. 105.

⁵⁰ Duncan F. Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1971) Cameron compared the museum to the church that can enshrine an object, and label it as something important and real. He, in 1971 wrote about the need for a more, what we now call a hands-on, forum-like approach towards curation and interpretation.

⁵¹ Eileen Hooper-Greenhill and Theano Moussouri, “Researching Learning in Museums and Galleries 1990-1999”, 2001. Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester. 26 March 2008 < <https://ira.le.ac.uk/handle/2381/19> >. p. 2. George E. Hein is an authority on museum education and a Professor at Lesley College, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁵² Charles Rycroft, “The Psyche and the Senses,” *How Does It Feel?*, ed. Mick Csaky (Over Wallop: Thames and Hudson, 1979) p. 69.

⁵³ Philip Rawson, “The Senses of India and China,” *How Does It Feel?*, ed. Mick Csaky (Over Wallop: Thames and Hudson, 1979) p. 231. Philip Rawson is the curator of the Gulbenkian Museum of Oriental Studies at the University of Durham. He is an expert on Taoism and Tantra and an artist and writer.

of the faculties gives the individual control over his or her surroundings and his or her experience and knowledge of being in the world is intensified and concentrated. He continues to describe the spiritual ladder a *sadhaka* (spiritual aspirant) strives to climb to reach to the source of the created world, 'the One', as described earlier in the chapter. This ladder, a metaphor of the evolution of the human spirit, marks the various physical and spiritual aspects and stages of a human being (figure 6.16). The highest stage is the fusion of the human spirit (*purusha*) with nature (*prakriti*), which can be attained through meditation and yoga. The first step on the ladder is self-consciousness and the five senses are the instruments that enable the *sadhaka* to experience the world.



Figure 6.16.

The tattva diagram, cosmic principle categories of which the universe is composed (courtesy of Madhu Khanna)

Rawson explains that the *sadhaka* should have achieved awareness of the material universe: *Sattva* (intelligence, ego-sense and mind), *Rajas* (human organs and senses) and *Tamas* (inert quality of the universe – the five elements). S/he should be conscious of the powers of time and causality and lastly the energy of will, knowledge and action. Through this meditative, yogic and ritualistic process, the person is in control of her/his surroundings. Rawson states that:

The objects which we hear, touch, see, taste and smell are taken in this tradition as interpretations by the mind...⁵⁴.

54 Rawson, p. 235.

The human senses are central agents in the continuous act of creation. Their 'elemental atoms' are 'real', but not what they seem. To look for 'Causality' among material facts thus has no proper meaning, only a pragmatic one.

An awoken consciousness combined with an awareness of the physical body are key in the act of worship. The worshipper has to be physically aware of the space surrounding her/him (figures 6.17 and 6.18).



Figure 6.17.

Devotee performing the dream ritual in a *Shiva* temple in west Bengal. The deity is invoked to enter the dreaming mind of the pilgrim (courtesy of Ajit Mookerjee)

Figure 6.18.

Devotee touching *Vishnu's* feet (photo: courtesy of Stephen Huyler)

Tactile Ganesh in the museum space provides visitors an opportunity to use their hands to feel the textures of the material, to use their discretion and control to explore the sculpture. The sign allowing touch makes visitors aware of their action of touching an artwork and hence prompts them to question the act itself and reflect upon their responses towards a religious image.

4. Museum Interactives – a Debate

This section of the chapter is an overview of the ongoing interactivity debate amongst museum educators, interpreters, curators and cultural writers. I will review the different types of museum interactives and assess the role of **Tactile Ganesh** amidst these arguments.

Tactile Ganesh functioned as an interactive artwork that in turn commented on “museum interactives” and the various debates that surround issues of touch, conservation, access and learning in museums. The four artworks, which are instrumental in this research, were exhibited at the Croydon Clocktower in summer 2008. The exhibition **From Shrine to Plinth** was visually connected to an existing display of Croydon resident Maya Chakravorti’s *Ganesh* shrine in the Croydon Museum’s ‘Now’ Gallery. Maya’s shrine consists of a small *Ganesh*, a few other images of deities and saints and worshipping accoutrements such as a lamp and flowers (see figure 6.19). Accompanying the display is a touch-screen digital interactive, that invites visitors to “touch” an object (see figure 6.20).

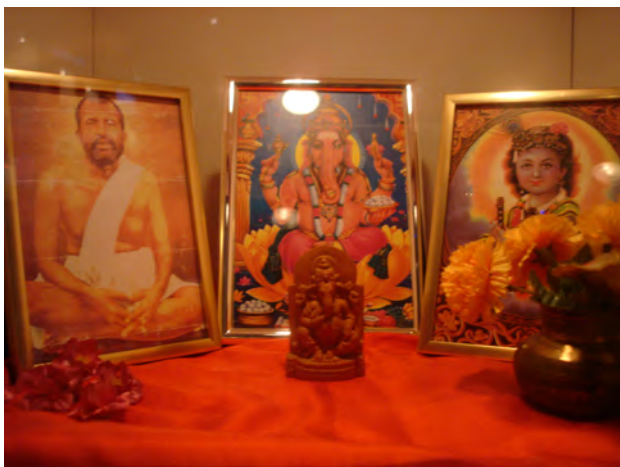


Figure 6.19.

Maya’s *Ganesh* shrine (photo: author)

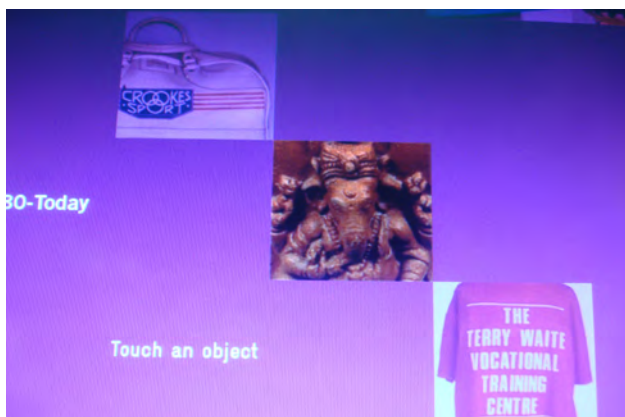


Figure 6.20.

“Touch an Object” touch-screen digital interactive accompanying Maya’s shrine (photo: author)

A thumbnail image of Ganesh takes the interested visitor into a screen that provides links to information pages labelled: *Show* (presents the close-up image of Ganesh), *Tell* (Maya talks about praying to Ganesh), *Explain* (explains the significance of Ganesh) and *Explore* (usually recommends a learning activity).

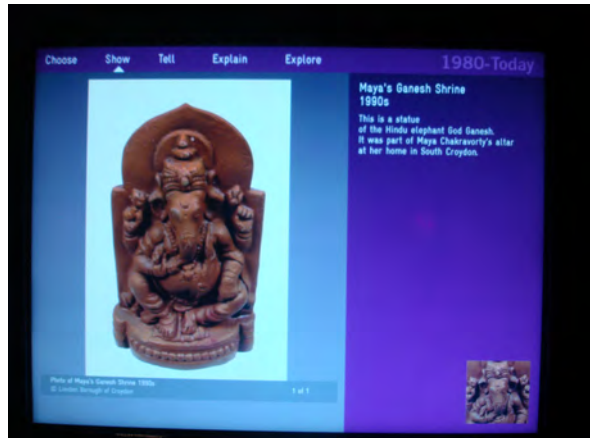


Figure 6.21.

“Show” – a page of Ganesh’s touch-screen digital device (photo: author)

Figure 6.22.

“Tell” – Audio guide within the digital interactive. Maya speaks of her faith (photo: author)

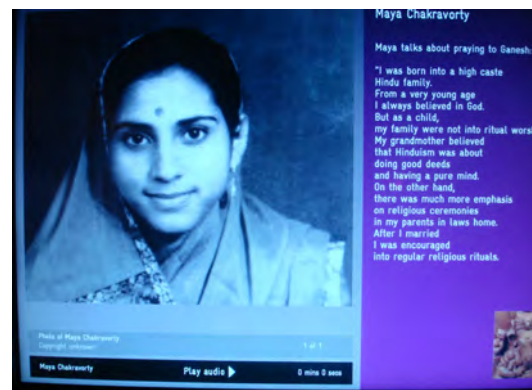
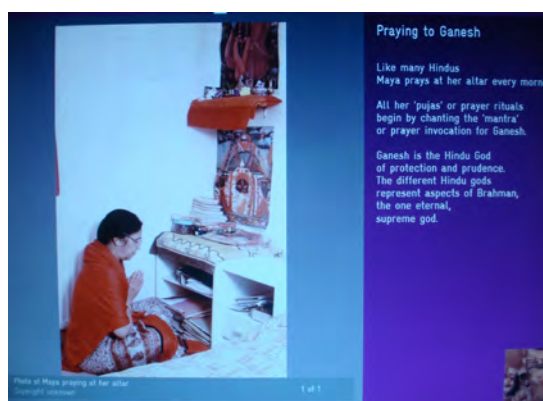


Figure 6.23.

“Explain” – Ganesh’s significance in Maya’s life. (photo: author)



This digital interactive device functions as an interpretive tool. It provides factual information to the visitor only if he or she attempts to retrieve the information. The process of acquiring knowledge is enacted: it is obvious and apparent.

Whilst the same information could be printed on a text panel, the retrieval of information is, in appearance, passive. Josie Appleton from the Institute of Ideas, London, is a cultural and political writer. She has criticised the current trend of museum interactives by pointing out that they are ways in which museums engage with their audiences. They bring the museum and the visitor together through a designed and apparent manner. She adds that if one does not use a computer interactive or does not follow an instruction to try on a gauntlet, they are not undergoing an interactive experience⁵⁵. She has pointed out the three main problems with the agenda of interactivity in museums: “the first: it relativizes knowledge and art, the second is that it treats interaction as an end in itself and the third is that it ends up controlling visitors’ thoughts”⁵⁶.

Several visitors to the exhibition *From Shrine to Plinth* chose not to touch *Tactile Ganesh*. The decision to refrain from engaging in an interactive experience in itself poses interesting questions of the intent of the visitor, whether it is one of disinterest or one that is driven by a particular belief system. The act of touching something could be associated with contagion for the visitor and moreover it could be seen as a method of conforming to a certain ritualistic practice. It could also be perceived as an extroverted action towards an artwork in the gallery. Hence there is a tension between the meanings projected by the space, the image and human behaviour which I have made apparent through *Tactile Ganesh*. It is vital to point out that my artwork is not a “museum interactive” as it does not necessarily require physical interaction for a construction of meaning. All responses are vital in my study of the reception of a sculpture resembling a deity installed in a secular space.

There is a wealth of scholarship in the area of museum learning and the role played by interactivity in the process of acquiring knowledge. Mariana Adams and Theano Moussouri⁵⁷, researchers of museum pedagogy, have described and defined levels and boundaries of interactivity through the terms: ‘hands-on/minds-on’, ‘participatory’ and ‘immersive’. Although these terms appear to be self-explanatory, it is crucial to discuss their museum definitions in order to contextualise *Tactile Ganesh* in the realm of museum intervention. Hands-

⁵⁵ Josie Appleton, “Interactivity in Context” *Proceedings of the Interactive Learning in Museums of Art and Design Conf. Victoria and Albert Museum: 17-18 May 2002*. 25 March 2008 < www.vam.ac.uk/res_cons/research/learning/index.html. 5759_file.pdf > p. 2.

⁵⁶ Appleton, p. 1.

⁵⁷ Mariana Adams is associated with the Institute for Learning Innovation, Annapolis, MD and Theano Moussouri is from the University of Leicester, Department of Museum Studies.

on activity implies engagement through touch and manipulation, which should involve thinking, thus making the interaction ‘minds-on.’ ‘Participation’ refers to collaboration with the artist in making or changing an artwork and to an extent so is ‘immersion’, which is also associated with virtual reality environments ⁵⁸. Collaborative art-making falls under the area of education.

Tactile Ganesh can be described as participatory, but as it causes the visitor to reflect upon their response and the experience of touching the sculpture, I associate it with immersion. They are mentally and physically engaged with the interactive experience. The environment in the exhibition, **From Shrine to Plinth** was meditative, multi-sensory and contained liminal spaces. This impacted the experience of **Tactile Ganesh**.

One of the outcomes of the research carried out by Moussouri at interactive exhibitions was that the visitors perceived exhibits as unbreakable ⁵⁹. Hence, the distinction between what can and cannot be handled divides the museum into two sections, one which is conserved and the other which is accessed, directly addressing the conservation versus access debate that has been discussed in Chapter 4. The increasing use of interaction in museums, described by Appleton as the “fetish of interactivity” is causing a divide between the accessioned and the non-accessioned. It is creating a greater disparity between what is valuable, conserved and real on the one hand, and what is for general use, is durable, a surrogate and less valuable version of the object on display. **Tactile Ganesh** contains four layers that represent the ephemeral quality of the body in contrast with the eternal soul. It was an artwork on a plinth that invited touch and handling. The interaction with the deity in the temple does not reflect the need to conserve that particular entity. The preservation is of its spiritual meanings. The image of the deity is vital, but the divine energy can be evoked in a different form. Hence, the material and the spiritual qualities of the deity are paradoxical. I presented this paradox, in the climate of the interactivity debate in museums, through visual and performative means.

⁵⁸ Marianna Adams, and Theano Moussouri, “The Interactive Experience: Linking Research and Practice” *Proceedings of the Interactive Learning in Museums of Art and Design Conf. Victoria and Albert Museum, 17-18 May 2002*. 25 March 2008 < www.vam.ac.uk/res_cons/research/learning/index.html. 5748_file.pdf > pp. 1-2.

⁵⁹ Adams and Moussouri, p. 3.

5. Of the Material and the Spiritual

In this section of the chapter I will examine fetishisation of objects within material culture and specifically in the museum. I will identify problems in interpreting the spiritual and transcendental functions of religious images through their physicality in the museum. I will proceed to examine **Tactile Ganesh** as an embodiment of the tensions between material and spiritual meanings of deities.

Anthropologist Henrietta Riegel has critically discussed the “viewing culture” generated by “western museums” through their ordering, defining and representation of cultures. She wrote (with specific reference to anthropological museums):

Museums have a contentious history of the dual processes of collecting and display within a scholarly, and more recently, educational context. Under the guises of philanthropy, value-free knowledge and a certain patina of ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’, museums have made it their business to reproduce other cultures for the visual consumption of their visitors.⁶⁰

She continues to refer to objects and their politics of representation, which, she states are often unrecognised by museums. There is more focus on ‘what’ is on display rather than ‘how’: the mode of representation⁶¹. Similarly, Peter Gathercole discusses the role of the ethnographic object in museums. He argues: “museum artefacts are analogous to commodities, in that they have properties bestowed upon them by virtue of their museum existence”. They are considered to be evidence of cultural behaviour as a result of which they are transformed into cultural artefacts. He calls this assigning of properties as the “fetishism of artefacts”⁶². Sociologist Jean Baudrillard has provided one of the several meanings of the word *objet* (object):

Anything which is the cause or subject of a passion.
Figuratively and most typically: the loved object.⁶³

⁶⁰ Henrietta Riegel, “Into the Heart of Irony: Ethnographic Exhibitions and the Politics of Difference,” *Theorizing Museums*, eds. Sharon Macdonald and Gordon Fyfe, 1st ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) p. 83.

⁶¹ Riegel, p. 84.

⁶² Peter Gathercole, “The Fetishism of Artefacts,” *Museum Studies in Material Culture*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Leicester University Press, 1989) p. 74.

⁶³ Jean Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting,” *The Cultures of Collecting*, eds. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1994) p. 7. Translated of Baudrillard’s original essay in French ‘Le système marginal’, 1968.

He delves into the psychology of this passion in collecting objects. Albeit his essay focuses on personal collections, his reference to object fetish and the abstraction of object meanings precedes Gathercole's work and strongly relates to museum collecting. He wrote on possession and assigning of meaning:

Possession cannot imply to an implement, since the object I utilize always directs me back to the world. Rather it applies to that object once it is *divested of its function and made relative to a subject*. In this sense, all objects that are possessed submit to the same *abstractive operation* and participate in a mutual relationship in so far as they each refer back to the subject.⁶⁴

The museum representation of the worshipped Hindu deity as an art object and a cultural symbol is an abstraction of its meaning. The deity has always been assigned properties within its secular context. In spite of the object fetish, it is also unarguable that museums cannot exist without artefacts. Hence, their curation, asserts Gathercole, should reflect the knowledge they provide, rather than their exhibition as cultural symbols. This practice has certainly changed in the last decade in museums in the United Kingdom. Hindu religious images are being presented in their social context (as well as art objects) and aspects such as rituals and iconographic meanings are being introduced through interpretation. The St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art presents the cultural beliefs and practices associated with each faith in the daily aspects of life such as birth, motherhood, marriage and death. The focus, however, remains on the displayed object. The classification of the deity as religious art and as an ethnographic object is evident in its exhibition in the Museum's art and life galleries

For instance the large *Nataraja* Bronze in the St. Mungo's Religious Art Gallery is exhibited in a separate room in a created shrine-like space (see figure 6.24). It is installed on a platform flanked by two bronze lamps that are hung from the ceiling. An excerpt from the text panel that describes the iconographic significance and history of the image of *Shiva* as *Nataraja* says:

Bronze images of Shiva as Lord of the Dance were made as early as the 11th century CE but are usually much smaller than this one, which was made in the 18th or 19th century. The sculpture was cast in five separate parts, using the 'lost wax' method. It would probably have originally been

64 Baudrillard, p. 7.

sited in a cave and lit by candles.

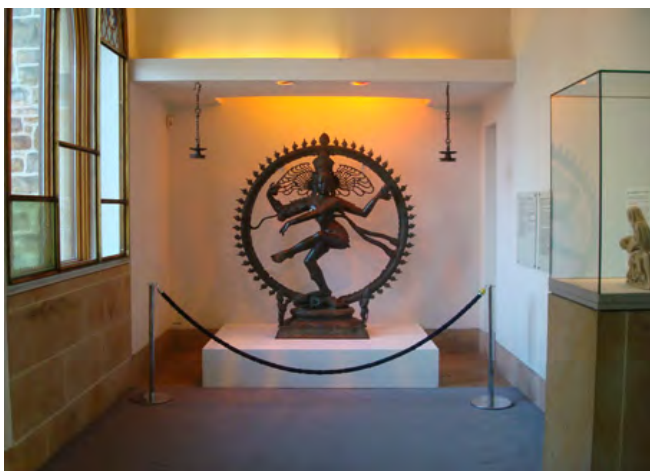


Figure 6.24.

**Dancing Shiva (Nataraja)
in the Religious Art
Gallery, St. Mungo
Museum of Religious Life
and Art, Glasgow**

(photo: author)

Displayed in the Religious Art Gallery, this explanation focuses on factual information and clearly establishes *Nataraja* as an example of sculptural art. It is, however, displayed as an image potent with energy and power. Coomaraswamy and Havell's work not only examined their aesthetic qualities and their iconography, they explicated their spiritual qualities. Richard Davis quotes Havell⁶⁵ from his 1908 book *Indian Sculpture and Painting* and explains thus:

To redefine Indian religious images as “fine art”, Havell began by identifying its “fundamental character”: “Indian art is essentially idealistic, mystic, symbolic, and transcendental”. The spiritual essence, he went on, links it with Gothic art, which has already been rehabilitated as “art” in European taste. ...“Indian art appeals more to the imagination and strives to realise the spirituality and abstraction of a supra-terrestrial sphere”⁶⁶.

Havell pointed towards the transcendental qualities of Hindu religious images for a complete appreciation and understanding of their metaphysics. Whereas, K. de B. Codrington, who later wrote the introduction to the catalogue for the “Art of India and Pakistan” exhibition held at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1947, refrained from referring to the spiritual qualities of the idol and instead wrote: “concentrate upon the thing itself”⁶⁷. He advised his readers to view the visual

⁶⁵ As discussed in Chapter 2 E.B. Havell contributed towards the changing perception of Hindu images as art.

⁶⁶ Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) p. 178.

⁶⁷ Davis, p. 178.

qualities of the 'sculpture' as they would any other sculptural works.

The representation of religiosity through objects is challenging, as the most spiritual and transcendental of concepts, which are at the core of the faith, cannot be presented through objects. Chris Arthur, Senior Lecturer of Museum Studies at the University of Wales, has posed a series of questions that are crucial in this discussion of the material and spiritual qualities of worshipped objects and their exhibition. He asks:

For many if, not all, faiths have at their centre a key element which eludes expression, does this not drastically limit any attempt to exhibit religion from the outset? How should museums of, or concerned with religion approach this tension between words, images, objects and apparently incommunicable core? When it comes to exhibiting the sacred, a fundamental challenge is, quite simply, how do you picture the unpictureable; how do you mount a display about what, at root, is resistant to all forms of expression; how do you convey to visitors that what religions themselves see as of primary importance is something which lies beyond all the carefully assembled material which museums present for their scrutiny? ⁶⁸

This is a crucial line of enquiry and is especially relevant in my approach towards presenting the non-material qualities of the religious images through my artworks. I have focussed on rituals that make apparent the transcendental qualities of deities by simultaneously depicting their ephemeral qualities. The visitor takes on the persona of an actor in a journey through the exhibition of the four artworks; s/he perform a series of ritualistic actions that offer an experiential way of exploring the life of the idol in its temple and the essence of the religion.

Brahman is, within Hinduism, the Absolute Principle of the universe: it is the *bindu* at the centre of the spider's web and in the individual it is the centre of consciousness. Krishna explains the meaning of *Brahman* to *Arjun*, in the epic, *Mahabharata* (his words encompass the *Bhagvad Gita*):

Brahman is that which is immutable, and independent of any cause but Itself. When we consider Brahman as lodged within the individual being, we call Him the Atman. The creative energy of Brahman is that which causes all

⁶⁸ Chris Arthur, "Exhibiting the Sacred," *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion* ed. Crispin Paine (London: Leicester University Press, 2000) p. 2.

existences to come into being.⁶⁹

The spiritual union of man with his own *atman* (soul) is the same as being one with *Brahman*, his origin, which is nothingness. This abstract yet complex concept of cosmogony is at the heart of Hindu daily living and worship. The cosmic diagrams (*yantras*), the deities and temples represent this concept in two and three-dimensions⁷⁰. The human body is the vehicle and instrumental in the unison with *Brahman* as it performs meditation and ritual. It is remarkable that the practices surrounding the idols are rich in meaning. The deity itself is at the centre of a great deal of activity. The enactment of rituals and the temple architecture, which facilitate the ritual and the human-deity relationship, project belief more strongly than the autonomous idol.

A very brief excerpt of a ritual in which Hindus are circling a sacred serpent shrine in south India, is on show at the St. Mungo Museum's Religious Life gallery. The focus of the museum is, however, on the objects; carefully displayed in glass cases and on plinths. Idols contain iconographic, historic, and cultural meaning, which is described through literature. It is their spiritual characteristics, which are infused into the idols through ritual that the museums have found challenging to interpret⁷¹. The deity then remains to be perceived as a work of art and its material characteristics take precedence. Chris Arthur questions whether object-centred museums are able to channel visitors' interest beyond the object itself to the essence or core of a religion which is usually intangible. He adds "or are they irrevocably anchored by their exhibits to a level which is of only secondary importance to the faiths concerned?"⁷²

The practices of making a deity out of mud and subsequently immersing it in water and drawing a *yantra* in sand to focus divine energy for meditation, could not emphasise more the ephemeral nature of these worshipped objects. Coomaraswamy has eloquently pointed out:

It need hardly be added that it is taken for granted that those who look at earthen images "do not serve (*na-abhyarch*) the clay as such (*mrtasamjna*), but without regard

⁶⁹ *The Song of God, Bhagvad Gita*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (London: Phoenix House, 1947) p. 94.

⁷⁰ For an in-depth explanation and definitions of terms, see: Khanna, pp. 70-79, 171-172.

⁷¹ Chris Arthur, "Exhibiting the Sacred," *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion* ed. Crispin Paine (London: Leicester University Press, 2000).

⁷² Arthur, p. 6.

thereof (*anadrtya*) honor (*nam*) the deathless principles referred to (*amarasamjna*) in the earthen images (*mrmmaya prakriti*).”⁷³

Viewing the idol in the museum as a cultural or aesthetic artefact, conserving it and ultimately lengthening its life for public consumption contrasts with the worshipping practices of adorning, enlivening, developing a close relationship with it and allowing it to disintegrate naturally. Whist the latter can be described as idolatry, the materiality of the deity is subsidiary. **Tactile Ganesh** is a visual comparison of image worship and object fetishisation. It generates a human response towards it that ranges between curiosity, ritualism, surprise and immersion. I have disseminated the non-material qualities of the deity and have made apparent their numinous core through my artworks in this research.

6. Conclusion

Museums employ mechanisms that prohibit the act of touching accessioned artefacts on display. Barriers, glass cases and, at times, signs that say “do not touch”, are used to protect the surface of the object from contact with human skin, which contains oil and perspiration. This attempt at conserving, with the established culture of viewing for observation and learning, has a cumulative effect on the museum visitor’s perception of the artefact itself. It becomes precious and important. Stephen Greenblatt, Professor of English and a historian, examines museum objects through the lenses of “resonance” and “wonder”. Resonance is the quality of the object (or is constructed through its exhibition) to “reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex cultural dynamic forces from which it has emerged”, and wonder is “the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention”⁷⁴. The resonance of the religious image is its historic and iconographic significance. Moreover, its isolation in the museum, a distancing from its original context gives it the visual quality that engenders enhanced viewing, what Alpers has described as “the museum effect”⁷⁵. Greenblatt elucidates that “boutique lighting” used in exhibition spaces enhances the experience of wonder and provides the

⁷³ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “The Part of Art in Indian Life,” *Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. Roger Lipsey, vol. 1, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) p. 88.

⁷⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) p. 42.

⁷⁵ See Chapter 2, pp. 101-2.

object with a surreal effect of power. He continues to compare this lighting with commerce and remarks upon the desire to acquire or possess the object that is constructed through its exhibition. He points out:

Yet the whole experience of most art museums is about *not touching, not carrying home, not owning* the marvelous objects. Modern museums in effect at once evoke the dream and evacuate it.⁷⁶

The feeling of wonderment goes hand-in-hand with distancing. Greenblatt calls this paradoxical result, an intensification of access and exclusion. The bronze *Nataraja* at the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art is exhibited to excite the feeling of wonderment. The lighting casts shapes that resemble flames suggesting the object's power and energy. A barrier separates the viewer from the object, yet the life-size image has a strong impact on the individual in the room.

Tactile Ganesh removed barriers and exclusions and allowed a subjective interaction to occur between itself and the audience in the exhibition gallery. By installing it on a domestic worshipping stool, I gave it the aura of a domestic deity similar to Maya's *Ganesh* which is displayed in a vitrine. The plinth, the exhibition context and the interpretation, however, defined it as an artwork. Thus, the religious and secular connotations imbued in the work itself generated visitor responses making the artwork complete, yet in a state of constant flux.

Worshippers in temples enliven the deity through ritualistic acts. Interaction with ***Tactile Ganesh*** ranging between viewing, scrutinising, touching, holding and exploring made the concept of my artwork apparent and ideologically alive in the gallery. A potential reflection of their predispositions, their behaviour towards my sculpture in the museum gallery encompasses the dialectics of the deity's secular and religious contexts that I have aimed to imbue in my artworks.

In the following chapter I will visit and review the exhibition of my four artworks in the Space 'C' Gallery at the Croydon Clocktower. I will explicate the instrumentality of the exhibition in testing research ideas through reviewing visitor response and through examining the conceptual juxtaposition of the four artworks.

⁷⁶ Greenblatt, p. 49.



Chapter 7

FROM SHRINE TO PLINTH: Exhibition at the Croydon Clocktower, 26 July-4 September 2008

Chapter Summary

I exhibited my artworks and disseminated the research in the Croydon Clocktower, a social history museum in Croydon. The dialectical nature of the study the critical exploration of the meaning of the deity in its newly-acquired secular museum setting, was a major contribution towards exhibiting the artworks in a museum. As the Museum of Croydon contains a small collection of Hindu gods, the space became a suitable discursive site for the dissemination and testing of the concepts discussed in this thesis.

In this chapter, I will review and critique the exhibition of my artworks to explicate its physical, intellectual and conceptual contexts. I will also analyse the function of my artworks in their exhibition context, the design of the exhibition and will assess visitor responses.

I. Introduction

I have examined the meaning of the Hindu deity in its religious context and have compared it with its newly-acquired status as art, social history artefact or an archaeological specimen in a museum. An understanding of the human behaviour that surround it in both contexts is a key contribution to the conceptual development and making of the artworks. The behaviour is a reflection of human relationships with religious images: worshipping and devotional on the one hand, one of interest, curiosity accompanied with a desire to preserve on the other. My artworks: ***Kinetic Shiva, Ganesh, circa 1900, Gods in Storage*** and ***Tactile Ganesh*** are comparative studies and present the tensions occurring between the status of deities as living gods in their temples and as conserved objects in museums. They embody the research and assimilate key concepts of time, metamorphosis, theology, and material culture and offer a discourse when exhibited in the museum space for their audience – museum visitors. Not only is their exhibition a dissemination of the research, it generates a set of behaviours in its visitors that reflect temple and museum rituals.

Croydon Clocktower houses the Croydon Museum, which showcases the social history of Croydon in the 'Then' and 'Now' galleries. I exhibited my artworks from 26 July 2008 until 4 September 2008 in the Space 'C' gallery, which is located in the museum building. I visually linked the exhibition with Maya Chakravorti's Hindu shrine displayed in the 'Now' gallery. Maya Chakravorti, a Croydon resident, donated a small wooden *Ganesh*, framed images of *Krishna*, saint *Ramakrishna Paramhansa*, and *Ganesh* from her domestic shrine to the Croydon Museum. The exhibition and Maya's shrine, as well as the museum building framing the two in its entirety, created an installation where the temple and museum contexts of deities were explored and ritualistic behaviour amongst the visitors was generated.



Figure 7.1.

**Exhibition title on the Space 'C' gallery window
(photo: author)**



Figure 7.2.

**View of the museum space from within Space 'C' gallery
Tactile Ganesh is in the foreground
(photo: author)**

I will continue to refer to the object – person, object – space and person – space interactions which took place in the exhibition in order to reveal the role of each, in the overall construction of meanings that I have endeavoured to disseminate. As I have studied human behaviour in museums and temples in the previous chapters, it is vital to review visitors' responses that I have recorded through conversations and through comments cards towards my artworks. A qualitative analysis of visitor response in the exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth*** and a reflection of my research aims are the methods I have used to test the success of the exhibition in presenting non-tangible characteristics of Hindu gods through interaction. A more appropriate term that I will employ in the latter sections of this chapter is 'visitor feedback'. An exegesis of visitor feedback is the method through which I can ascertain if my premise for a visual, immersive and artistic response towards the deities is received with an empirical, observational and reflective attitude. This chapter and Chapter 8 provide a critical analysis of the artworks and their exhibition.

2. Aims of the exhibition

I designed the exhibition for the Croydon Clocktower, making it an idiographic exercise in this research, and the museum visitor was my audience ¹. I aimed to:

1. Make explicitly evident my artistic intervention in the museum space;
2. Generate ritualistic behaviour amongst visitors;
3. Facilitate a construction of dialectical meanings imbued in the artworks and disseminated in their exhibition through visitors' interaction with them;
4. Construct experience and provoke awareness of liminal spaces;
5. Offer scope for subjective interpretation after outlining the artworks' material, functional, symbolic and contextual significance;
6. Present a parallel interpretation to the museum's interpretation of Hindu

¹ The location of the Space 'C' Gallery, however is such, that it not only attracts museum visitor, but also visitors to an adjacent café, library and cinema.

deities: one that explores their non-tangible characteristics.

3. Exhibition Contexts

The curation and exhibition of my artworks in the museum building was in itself an act of presenting a visual dialogue between the deity in the museum and its original worshipped context in the temple. Whilst my artworks embody the tensions between these two contexts, their exhibition makes them apparent and generates conscious performativity in the museum space.

The journey of the idol from being a god into becoming art, a cultural object and a preserved symbol has given it fragmented identities but also a biography that is never discussed in museum interpretation ². After its removal from its original context, the deity's function, iconographic significance, date of creation and provenance is disseminated in its museum interpretation. Non-tangible aspects of the belief system, such as the ritualistic immersion of the deity in a natural body of water to celebrate the cycle of life and death, the worshipper's meditative movement in the temple to imitate cosmic cycles, the assigning of godly powers to fire and diagrammatic *yantras* which are abstract tools for worship and the ritual performance of *puja*, are highly rich in meaning and reveal its essence. These are discussed through literary work and in documentary films ³. **From Shrine to Plinth** provided an experience to visitors which revealed the numinous characteristics of idols. I directly suggested the change in context of the idol from its shrine to the museum plinth through the title of the exhibition. Both terms "shrine" and "plinth" suggest veneration of the object: the former is associated with a sacred space and the latter with exhibition galleries. The physical context of the exhibition, the museum, which is central to material culture, directly addressed the representation of the Hindu deity.

The meditative atmosphere I created in the gallery, in conjunction with cues for

² This matter is also expressed by Julian Spalding, former Director of Glasgow Museums, in his 2002 work, "The Poetic Museum", which has been a controversial book. He questions the status of the museum as a purveyor of truth and provokes his readers to question the exhibits. See Julian Spalding, *The Poetic Museum: Reviving Historic Collections* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 2002) p. 25.

³ See Stephen Huyler's *Meeting God* (1999) and Richard Davis's work *Lives of Indian Images* (1997). An example of a documentary film, depicting rituals performed by the craftsman in making temple images is in the 1992 film, *Vastu Marabu*. A more recent ethnographic documentary film that touches the various aspects of Hindu philosophy, belief and ritual, is an episode of the BBC series "Around the World in Eighty Faiths". See Graham Johnston, "Around the World in Eighty Faiths," (United Kingdom: BBC, 2009).

ritual performance such as the roses on **Tactile Ganesh** and the fragrance of sandalwood in the recreated archetypal T-shaped sanctum, provoked religious responses in certain visitors. I tested my hypothesis and Brian Durrans's proposition ⁴ that human behaviour can easily transgress from the secular mode into a religious mode and vice versa. Quite obviously, the exhibition's physical context evoked a routine response amongst visitors: reading the interpretive panels, constructing meaning through exhibits and following the signs to Maya's shrine.



Figure 7.3.

Visitor reading interpretive text before entering the Kinetic Shiva sanctum (photo: author)

Their behaviour, however, changed once they found themselves immersed in the exhibition. They found themselves moving through the space and experiencing a variety of senses: smell, sound, sight and touch. The immersive environment I created in the gallery removed the distance between the work of art and its audience. **Tactile Ganesh** and **Kinetic Shiva** became agents of human behaviour and the concept of the exhibition reflected Bruno Latour's concept of the amalgamation of objects and humans within society ⁵.

I presented cues for performance in the gallery and through the trajectory leading to Maya's shrine. They were designed to be discovered by the audience

⁴ Durrans, Deputy Keeper of the Department of Ethnography, has pointed out the blurring of the lines between religious and secular practices. Brian Durrans, "(Not) Religion in Museums," *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion*, ed. Crispin Paine (London: Leicester University Press, 2000). p. 63.

⁵ This has been described in Chapter 2, p. 124-6.

and for them to respond and construct meaning in the space with some assistance of interpretive material. The exhibition of the artworks and the dissemination of the research were heuristic. The research context of the exhibition, its contemporary art context, and its physical context in the museum attracted an audience that was comprised of a variety of interpretive communities. The local residents of Croydon, academics and researchers, and regular visitors to art galleries experienced the exhibition.

4. Exhibition Design and Interpretation

My prime aim, to make evident the artistic intervention in the museum space, meant that in the in museum building I was constructing meaning in its three-dimensional space. The significance and function of Croydon Clocktower in a busy commercial area of Croydon is to offer the local communities a central cultural space of which the library, the museum, exhibition galleries, the cinema and the café are essential parts. Hence, I was essentially placing the exhibition in a space wherein visitors brought their expectations to acquire knowledge and to entertain themselves. The Space 'C' Gallery is located on the ground floor in close proximity to the building entrance, the café which hosts live classical music afternoons, the library, and the temporary exhibitions gallery. The staircase leading up to the Croydon Museum is situated opposite the Space 'C' Gallery. The museum visitor's goal of enlightenment and entertainment, with the additional factor of the physical location of the Space 'C' gallery, contributed towards my plan of creating a trajectory from the busy common areas into the Space 'C' gallery and leading up to Maya's shrine. Posters displayed at the entrance of the building signposted the exhibition. The title of the exhibition transferred onto the clear glass front of the gallery was assisted by a 4 inch diameter red dot. Three more dots continued into the exhibition on the gallery floor leading visitors into the space.

4.1. The Logo

Whilst the title of the exhibition referred to the contexts I have compared in my artworks, the logo represented the search for enlightenment: spiritual in the temple and learning in the museum. It was a diagrammatic representation of the archetypal square sanctum that is located in the innermost regions of the temple. It also referred to the structure that I constructed to house **Kinetic Shiva** in the exhibition (figure 7.4).

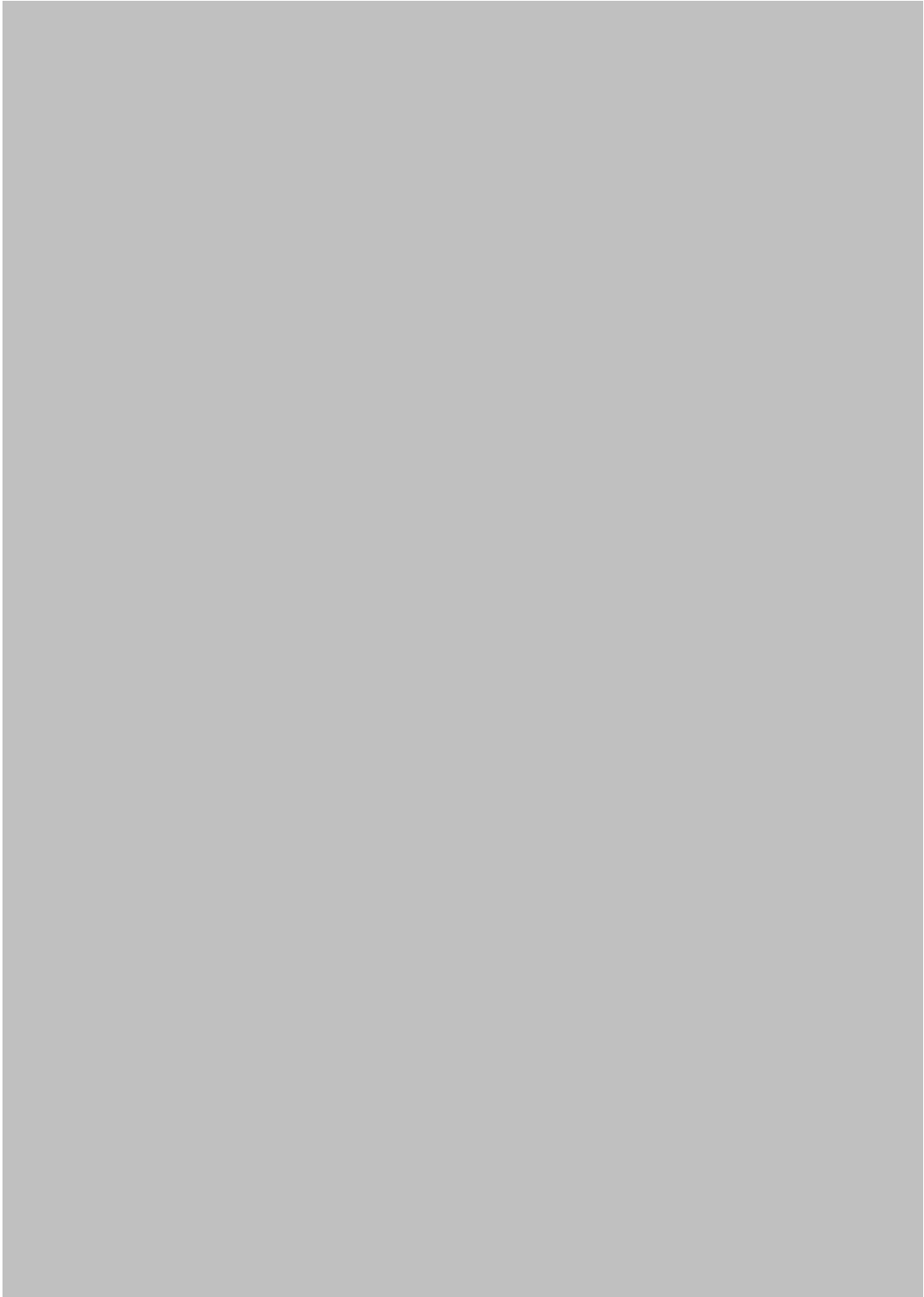


Figure 7.4.

**The *Kinetic Shiva* sanctum under construction
(photo: Alice Hatrick)**

The logo consists of two outer layers depicting the external walls of the temple fabric, on one the hand, and the framework of the exhibition, namely the museum and the gallery within the museum building, on the other. I sought to represent the movement of the worshipper from the exterior regions of the temple, through the corridor and into the central region of the temple for a communion with the god. I depicted this graphically using a rectangular corridor connected to a square, which contained a circle at its centre.



Figure 7.5.

**The Exhibition Logo
(design: author)**

As the movement towards the interior of the temple is meditative and the ultimate aim of the spiritual aspirant is to unite with the energy existent in the universe, he is focussing his attention on himself, his spiritual centre and the energy represented by the deity. This is a conscious act. This spiritual journey towards one's inner self could be compared with one's search for knowledge, a process in which the learner absorbs and constructs meaning in his/her mind from a transmitting source that could be external ⁶. The visitor views displays, absorbs the information provided, reflects upon it, constructs and assimilates meaning. The logo thus depicted the process of learning in the museum and the quest for spiritual enlightenment in the temple.

4.2. Exhibition Design

I presented a still image from my video artwork ***Ganesh, circa 1900*** on the exhibition poster. *Ganesh* is immersed in water in a glass case. One of the five

⁶ George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998). Hein, Professor at Lesley College, Massachusetts, is a leading authority on museum education. He refers to Paulo Freire's idea of "critical consciousness", a concept that describes an active learner, a very similar ideology to one proposed by the expert on learning theory, John Dewey. Dewey described learning as an "active-mind" position.

spiritually sensitive regions on the human body as believed by the Hindus, called *chakras*⁷, is at the centre of the head⁸. I marked this region of *Ganesh* with a red dot in the illustration used for the poster. I transferred this dot into multiple adhesive dots to mark the path connecting the exhibition to Maya's shrine in the 'Now' gallery. Conceptually, this was a mechanism for transferring the graphic symbol representing the divine energy on *Ganesh*'s head into multiple visual anchors that would focus the attention of museum visitors' movement through the building.

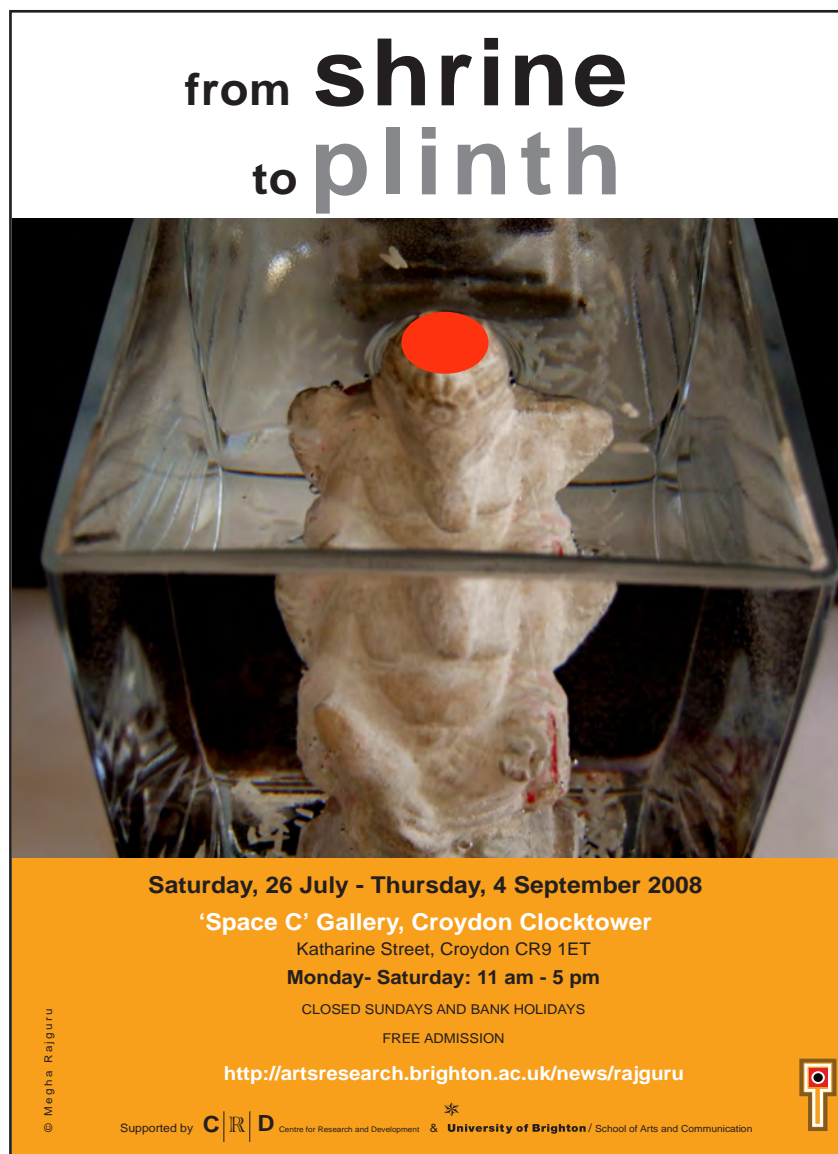
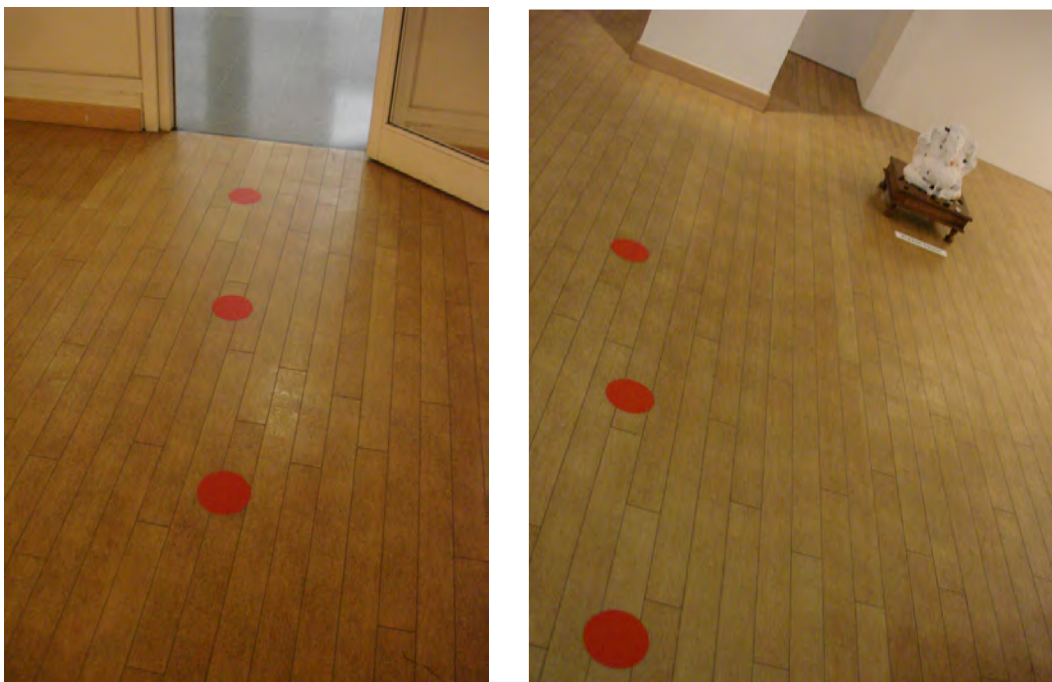


Figure 7.6.

**Exhibition poster design
(design: author)**

7 See Chapter 6, p. 228

8 The *chakra* of space.



Figures 7.7. and 7.8.

**Three red dots lead visitors into the gallery
(photo: author)**

The red dots led the visitor from the exhibition to the Croydon Museum and vice versa. I made two maps depicting this route – one was displayed at the starting point and the other at the destination (figures 7.11 and 7.12). It is to be noted that both – the exhibition and Maya's shrine were starting and destination points. I will discuss the interactive processes that were suggested and predicted in the exhibition later in this chapter. The visual linkage generated a specific movement in the museum space – from the created meditative and immersive exhibition space to the object-display galleries of the museum and vice-versa.

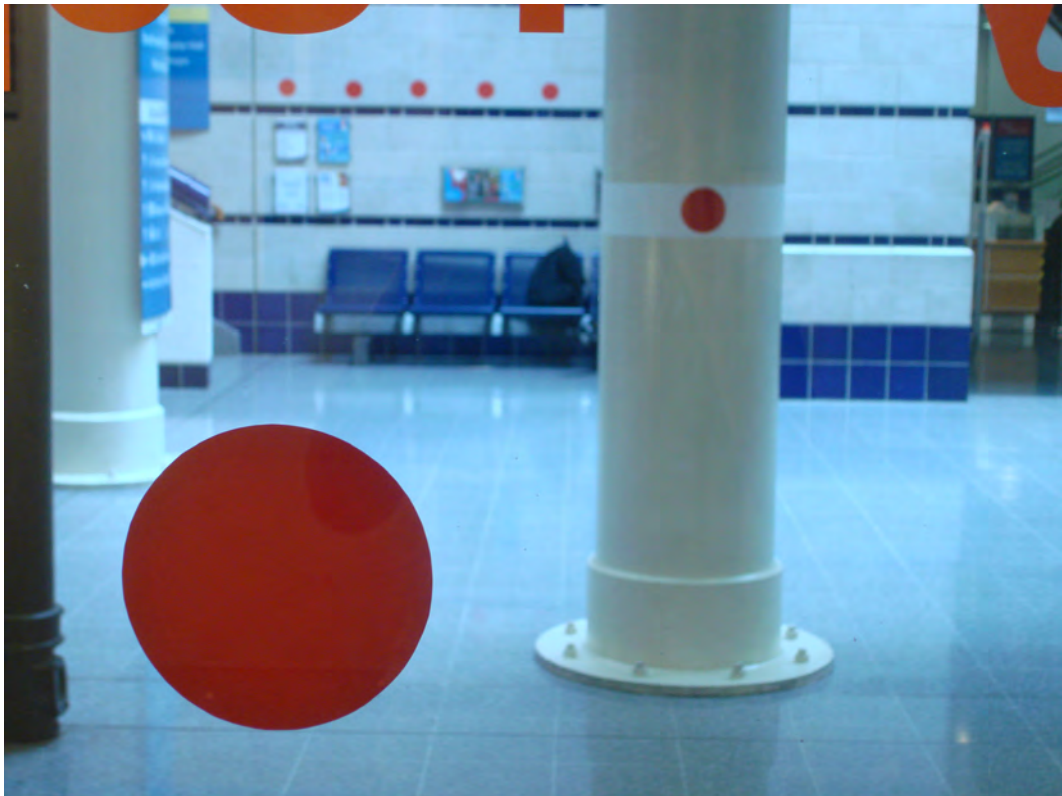


Figure 7.9.

**View of the dotted trajectory from the exhibition gallery
(photo: author)**



Figure 7.10.

**Dotted path to the museum's NOW gallery
(photo: author)**

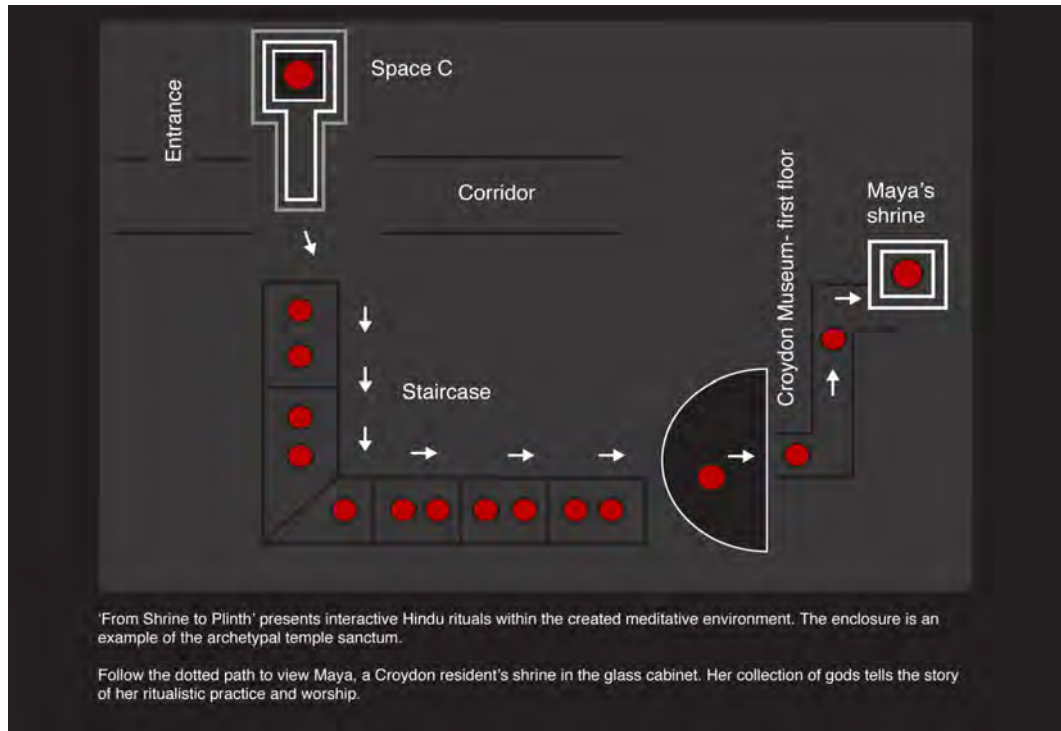


Figure 7.11.
Map in the exhibition space directed visitors to the museum's 'NOW' gallery (map: author)

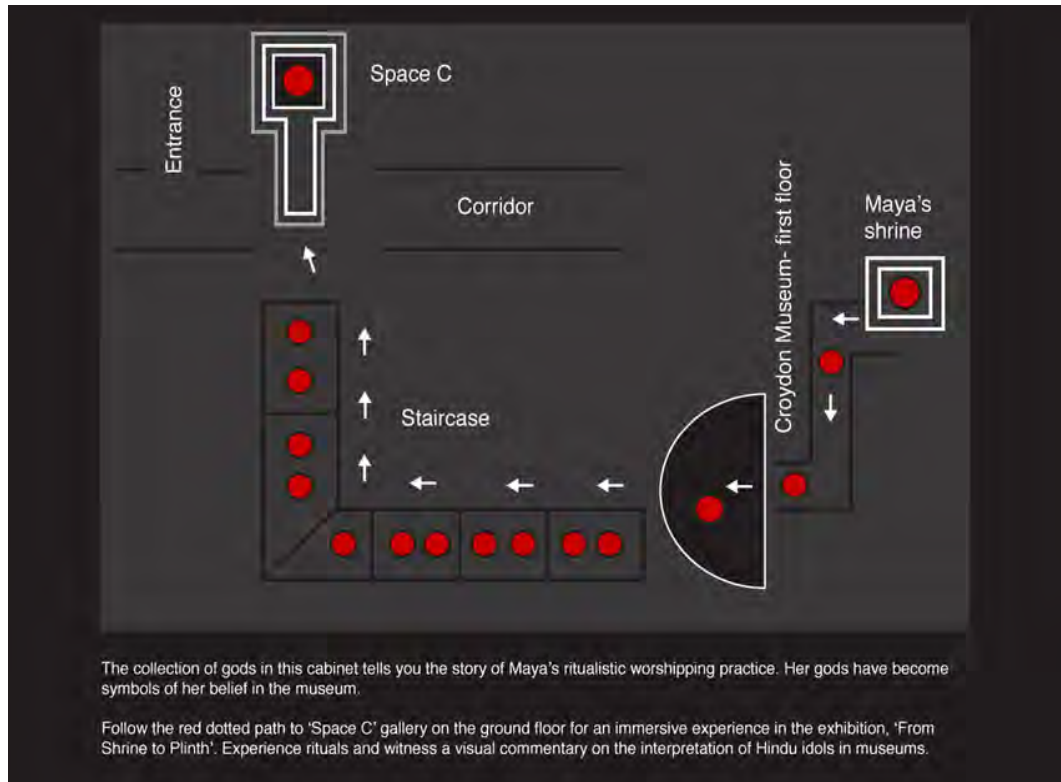


Figure 7.12.
Map displayed at Maya's shrine directed museum visitors to the exhibition space (map: author)



Figure 7.13.

**Dimly-lit space in the gallery
(photo: author)**

I divided the gallery into three distinct environments for the exhibition of the four artworks. I projected the videos in the dimly-lit space of the gallery and housed ***Kinetic Shiva*** in a T-shaped dark sanctum, which was installed at the centre of the gallery. This created the appropriate levels of light for the video artworks at the rear of the gallery and for ***Tactile Ganesh*** at the gallery entrance. Through an audio guide, I described the context of the exhibition, the ritual practices carried out by worshippers within the Hindu temple, their curation in museums and the changing gaze received by deities due to their re-contextualisation as art or cultural objects, from one of devotion to one of curiosity.

As discussed in the previous chapters, the interpretation of a Hindu idol reflects the type of museum it is displayed in. It can be represented as a social history object, art object, historic artifact, and a cultural symbol. Through my artworks and their exhibition I refrained from purely depicting the deity's aesthetic qualities and historical and iconographic significance, presenting it as a living being within a form, which is created and, hence, can experience dissolution. I revealed the following non-tangible characteristics of idols within their temple context through my artworks in ***From Shrine to Plinth***. These also sum up the core concepts of my four artworks.

1. Worshippers' realisation and acceptance of their limited physical life in their existing form – a human attribute – gives them a quality of life and separates them from other artificial objects. This is evident in most artworks and highly apparent in ***Tactile Ganesh*** and ***Ganesh, circa 1900***.
2. The prime deity of the temple, such as *Shiva*, is regarded as the epicentre of the universe. Hence, the ritual of circumambulation is practised around him with *Shiva* as the focal point. I recreated this ideology in ***Kinetic Shiva***, but mechanised it to comment on *Shiva* as a collected object, which made the interaction functional. This impinged upon what could be the complete temple experience and, in turn, commented on 'museum-interactives'.
3. The prime deity is installed in the innermost central region in the temple.

There is a hierarchical structure within the arrangement of symbols carved on temple structures, such as the vehicles of the gods, celestial beings and saints. This extends to worshipping accoutrements such as lamps, bells and incense holders. Those that are used especially for the worship of the prime deity, are located in the inner sanctum. Through **Gods in Storage** I have offered a direct contrasting visual comment on museum classification practices where objects are not given status based on religious notions such as power and potent spiritual energy, but on value, design and inherent meaning.

4. The worshipper does not wear shoes in the temple space. This is as an external gesture of respect. S/he feels a direct contact with the temple floor and experiences liminality in the marked-off sacred space. This was practised in **Kinetic Shiva**.
5. The deity is surrounded by sounds such as the ringing of the temple bell and fragrances such as flowers, incense and sandalwood. I evoked a multi-sensory experience in **Kinetic Shiva**.

It was essential to focus on experience, the elements of surprise within the artworks, and formulating a juxtaposition of ideas in the exhibition space (this includes the trajectory leading to Maya's shrine), in order to create meta-narratives on life and preservation, of religion and secularity and ultimately of the transcendental experiences of worship and acquiring knowledge. I made apparent the ethereal quality of deities imbued into them by their worshippers through the sounds of *Om* and human-breathing, which are essentially soundtracks to the two video artworks, which floated through the gallery space. On the one hand was the repetitive nature of the sounds, akin to the chanting of mantras, and on the other was the image of *Ganesh* dissolving into nothingness and simultaneously being recreated within his glass container. **Kinetic Shiva** housed in his dark sanctum and lit from within, emanated the light outwards.

This gave a feeling of containing the potent energy in a tangible form. The curators at the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art have attempted to create an aura for a bronze *Nataraja* in the Religious Art gallery through projecting light beams that cast moving flame-like patterns onto *Shiva* and the wall behind. I created a sanctum that housed *Shiva*, presented a view of him in

360°, and used his form as the provider of light. It may appear that the attempt to create effects and environments for the interpretation of objects deflects the viewer's attention from the object itself and reduces the intensity of objective viewing for the acquisition of knowledge. I used this technique to lure my audience into the sanctum and to generate a feeling of curiosity and play. Through its exhibition in the museum setting, in relation to Maya's shrine, the work was a critical comment on the museum's authoritative role in generating visual scrutiny and offered a multi-sensory experience. The purely distanced viewing and admiring of *Shiva* was replaced by the discovery that the object moved, and by the realisation that they controlled and generated this movement. Again, the movement was cyclical and repetitive. *Shiva* was backed by three mirrors installed with their edges aligned to each other. Mirror-One, directly behind *Shiva* was parallel to the small plinth it was installed upon, whereas Mirrors-Two and Three on either side were at obtuse angles to Mirror-One. This created multiple reflections for the viewer standing opposite the structure. The effect of the light emerging from *Shiva*, the reflection of *Shiva* and their own image in the mirrors made the amalgamation of the self, the deity, the energy and the movement of these in the cosmos apparent and profound. The use of multiple senses, including viewing the images reflected in the mirrors, is an experiential method in constructing meaning.

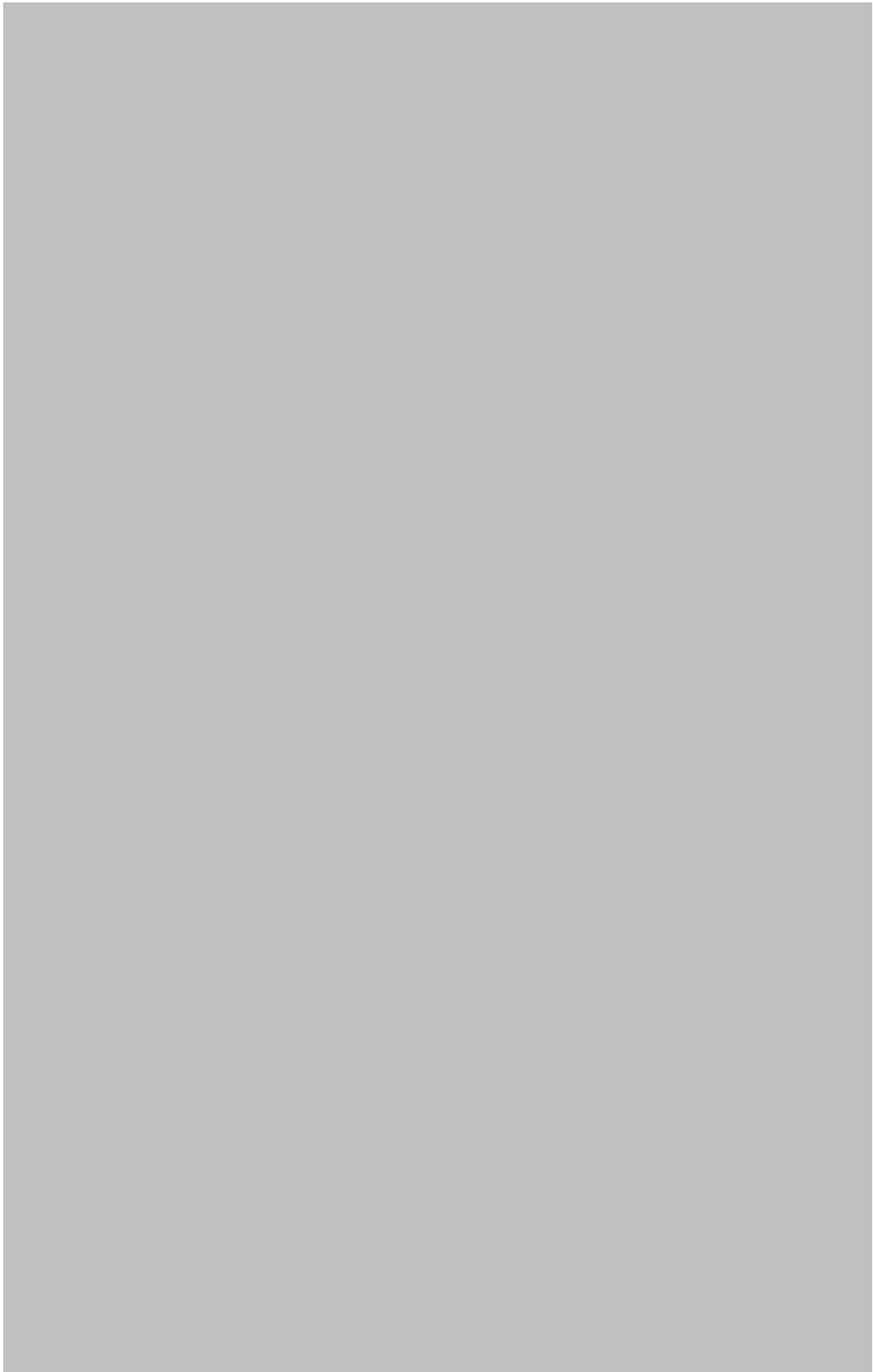


Figure 7.14.

Kinetic Shiva installed in a created womb-like sanctum (photo: Joe Hague)



Figure 7.15.
Multiple reflections of *Kinetic Shiva*
(photo: author)

4.3. Interpretation

It was my aim to use the available gallery and museum space to its optimum advantage to present the numinous characteristics of Hindu idols. The artworks were the focus, but the space surrounding them not only provided the essential punctuation and pause, they also provided moving and meditative space for visitors. I endeavoured to provide just enough information through printed and audio interpretation to introduce the visitor to the subjects that were being discussed. I took a non-didactic approach in the interpretation and allowed room for the construction of meanings and dialogues to occur within the gallery space between the artworks and themselves. I disseminated my interpretation of the exhibition using two voices in the text panels and audio guide. One was objective and provided the necessary factual and contextual information and the other was in the first person. I spoke directly to my audience and briefly shared my personal experiences of visiting temples and my response towards deities in temples and museums. The example below is an excerpt from the introductory panel, which was positioned at the entrance to the exhibition. It said objectively:

A Hindu idol in its shrine is bathed in milk, adorned with flowers and jewels, anointed, serenaded with lamps and treated as a live being. It lives and deteriorates as any other being. The physical presence of the idol is vital in worship, but its role transcends the physical.

In the museum, it becomes a part of the collection, a cultural symbol, and is treated as an embodiment of knowledge. It is conserved and its physical existence is of greatest value.

This contrasting attitude towards idols in the museum and the temple is where the paradox lies, since both processes, worshipping for spiritual enlightenment and viewing to learn, transcend the physical.

I continued by sharing my own thoughts in the following words:

I grew up observing the rituals people performed on a day-to-day basis in temples and noticed shrines in their homes. As we did not have any of the idols referred to in this exhibition in our own home, I have viewed the worshipper's gaze and actions with a slightly objective eye. The memories are, however, rich and the colours of the flowers still vibrant. I see these gods standing in their positions, mute and still, in museum buildings. I attempt to bring them alive through my

artworks.⁹



Figure 7.16.

Introductory text panel at the entrance of the gallery (photo: author)

I engaged the audience in a dialogue between the image and the text. A quote from Khanna's book, *Yantra, the Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity* emphasised the Hindu belief of the cyclic nature of time and was incorporated in the panel adjacent to my video artwork ***Ganesh, circa 1900***. The excerpt read:

According to Indian evolutionary theory, the cosmos is to be viewed as a continuum. Whatever is born will develop, age and dissolve again into the primordial reality that gave it birth.¹⁰

These words very clearly communicated the ideology that underpinned my artwork and engaged the viewer in creating meaning through the moving image projected onto the wall. The process of making *Ganesh*, immersing it in water and its dissolution, are as equally important as the final edited piece. The choice of materials and their cohesion, incorporate the anthropological study of *Ganesh* worshippers in western India, as explained in depth in Chapter 4. I felt it was vital to communicate the meaning of the materials I had used in order to provide layers of visual and textual information for visitors to refer to and take with them. The text panel briefly described the *Ganesh* festival and I referred to my artistic practice using the following words:

The materials I have used to make the form of Ganesh are rice flour, sugar and PVA glue. Rice flour and sugar are the

⁹ See Appendix I for the complete Introductory text.

¹⁰ Madhu Khanna, *Yantra, the Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity*. (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1979) p. 77.

main ingredients used to prepare sweets during the Ganesh festival. The glue in this artwork binds the materials together but also has the characteristics of dissolving in liquid.¹¹

In addition to communicating the framework of ideas, one of the main aspects of the exhibition was to instruct visitors to interact with the artworks. Both, **Tactile Ganesh** and **Kinetic Shiva** are interactive and I had to provide cues for the visitor to act. **Tactile Ganesh**, installed on a domestic worshipping stool was mounted on a plinth which had a sign instructing, “You may touch”. This sign was noticeable from outside the gallery and invited visitors to enter the space in order to experience tactility. However, **Kinetic Shiva** was installed in the dark space, which meant that the instruction to turn the handle in an anti-clockwise direction had to be made prior to the visitor’s entry into the T-shaped sanctum¹². A similar instruction was present near the handle inside the sanctum. Three sequential photographs of a worshipper practising the ritual of circumambulation in a *Ganesh* temple were mounted on the wall opposite the **Kinetic Shiva** installation.



Figure 7.17.

Circumambulation triptych (photo: author)

This functioned as an illustration of temple architecture that facilitates ritualistic movement for the exhibition visitor. Hence, I was communicating through the artworks, through the text and other visual references and interpretation. The visitors were responding firstly to the exhibition space, secondly to the artworks and thirdly to the interpretive material to construct meanings. This was followed by a reflection of their experience in the created meditative environment.

It was vital, at the stages of designing the exhibition and in communicating

¹¹ See Appendix 1 for the full interpretation of *Ganesh*, circa 1900.

¹² See Chapter 3, p. 151.

meanings through the interpretation, to provide information on three different levels or depths to visitors. The first: to present the basic framework of ideas through the artworks themselves, through their titles and the exhibition title; the second: the communication of factual, contextual and subjective meanings through the text panels; and lastly, the third: a dissemination of research contexts and my motivation in creating the work were communicated through the audio guide and the exhibition booklet, which could be taken away by the visitors for further reading. I provided the literary reference to Madhu Khanna's quote in the text panel adjacent to **Ganesh, circa 1900** and in the booklet. A web-link to the exhibition ¹³ was printed in the booklet, which pointed out further means visitors to carry out their own investigation and research. Hence, the artworks, the design of the exhibition and the interpretational material were presented to form a coherent yet heuristic set of ideas and visual narratives. The movement of visitors in the exhibition and their experience of the created liminal areas added to the process of constructing meaning.

5. Liminal Zones

A liminal experience is a transitional one and encompasses a transformation of physical and mental states. It is followed by the post-liminal state, one that marks the person's arrival into a new phase. The exhibition **From Shrine to Plinth** contained several liminal zones. The movement of the visitor from the busy Katherine Street in Croydon into the Croydon Clocktower building and then into the exhibition space are the first three areas that marked off very distinct physical environments and functional spaces ¹⁴. Croydon Clocktower, a museum building, is a centre for culture and recreation. The centre court is an area for activity where people meet, talk and disperse. The door of the Space 'C' Gallery led people into the exhibition, clearly marked with the three red dots on the floor. **Tactile Ganesh** was installed on a plinth and was visible from the central court.

Hence, the image of the deity in the gallery was in itself an attracting visual element, but also had the potential to mark the space where religious sentiments or ideologies were paramount. This meant that people would either be deterred from entering the space or be attracted to experience it. I consciously decided

¹³ "From Shrine to Plinth" 20 August 2008 < www.artsresearch.brighton.ac.uk/news/rajguru >

¹⁴ See enclosed DVD for a journey through the exhibition

to reveal the moving-image aspect of the exhibition and projected the video, ***Ganesh, circa 1900*** on a wall that could partially be seen from outside the gallery.

5.1. Exhibition Experience

I am referring to the exhibition as being “experienced” rather than “viewed”. ***From Shrine to Plinth*** had a distinct ambience in comparison to its surroundings. The entrance of the gallery was brightly lit and dimmed towards its rear. The sound of *Om* emerging from the video, ***Ganesh, circa 1900*** and the ensemble of human breathing was audible upon entering, which created a calm and meditative atmosphere. It is remarkable that the images of the deities in all four artworks were either, dissolving, cracking or deteriorating: on the surface, these had strong iconoclastic connotations for the viewer. But, visitors experienced the sounds, smells, touch and responded to them by staying in the space, returning several times and often remarking that they preferred to be alone to enjoy the ambience. Some visitors wrote down their experiences on comments cards and described them in the following words:

Very interesting. There is a very quiet and soothing atmosphere in this room.

Great Ambience. Good to be alone and go back to your roots. 28/07/08

Very valid exercise in isolating different aspects of the religious experience and putting them into a different context. Made me reflect more effectively on my experiences in searching for a meaning in life. An excellent idea. 29/07/08

These comments are spontaneous and offer a subjective response to the exhibition. They also point towards a reflective frame of mind that was evoked by the space, which was a result of a liminal experience. Whilst the temple and museum visitor is aware of the role of the institution or building she/he is entering and of the purpose of the visit, the exhibition contained elements of surprise and discovery.

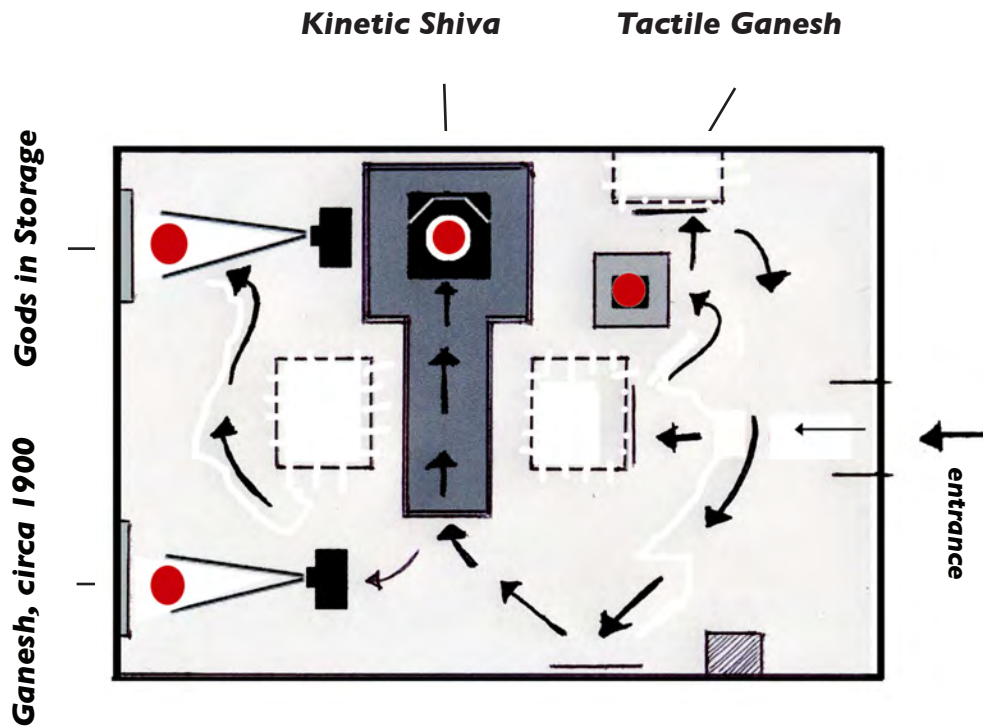


Fig. 7.18.

Floor plan of the Space 'C' Gallery and the movement of visitors in the exhibition space (author)

The sounds floating through the gallery were the first to be experienced, followed by the sign inviting the person to touch *Ganesh*. Its surface textures - roses, plaster and then the soft modelling material underneath, were discovered by those who responded to the sign. Hence, from the liminal stage, the visitor entered the post-liminal stage only to be met by the next threshold, one that led her/him into ***Kinetic Shiva's*** dark sanctum. This was marked in the form of an instruction, which lay across the entrance on the floor and said "Please remove your shoes before entering". It is important to point out that visitors to museums and art galleries are attuned to signs and respect them. They did remove their shoes and stepped into the dark space with bare feet. The touch of the floor beneath the feet and a dramatically reduced level of lighting inside the space provided a distinct liminal experience. The size of the T-shaped sanctum restricted the entrance of more than one person at a time. Hence, a visitor was preparing himself to experience the womb-like crimson chamber and encounter *Shiva*, which was lit from within and installed on a black plinth. Upon arrival in the darkest region of the structure, the multiple-reflections and interactive rotation of *Shiva*, marked the next post-liminal experience through which the

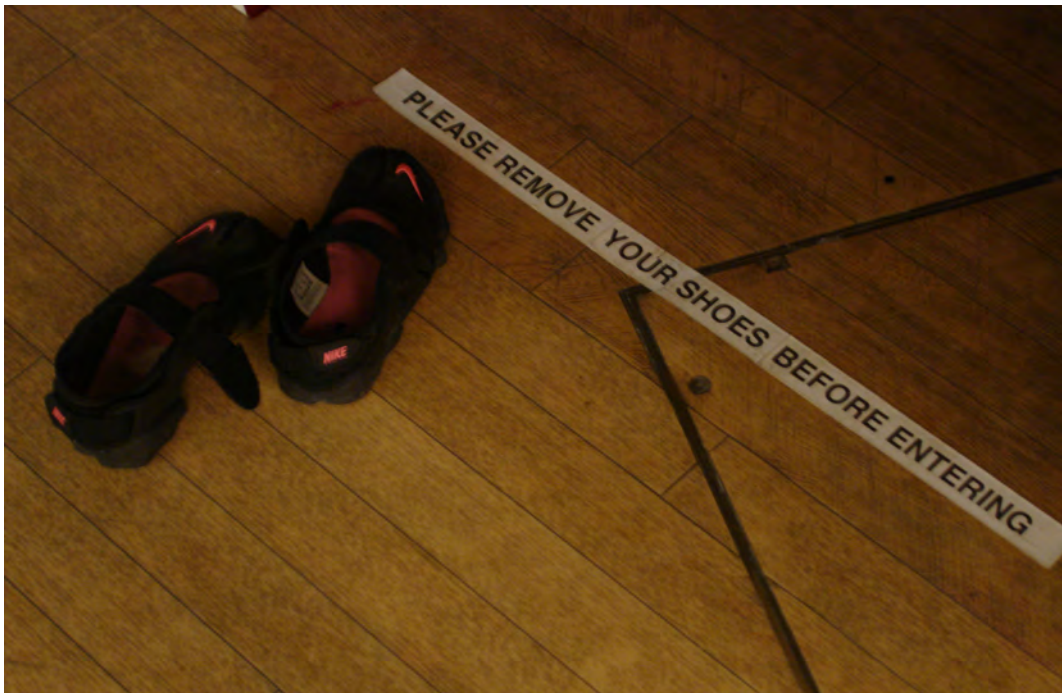


Figure 7.19.

**A visitor's footwear at the entrance of the installation
(photo: author)**



Figure 7.20.

**A visitor rotating *Kinetic Shiva*
(photo: author)**

visitor experienced the ambience, the one-to-one encounter with the sculpture, she/he was following the instruction by turning the handle and simultaneously formulating questions and constructing meanings.

It was vital in my experiment of creating liminal areas that they were distinct, yet subtle, and that each represented a temple or museum ritualistic practice. The interactive nature of the exhibition, its analysis and instrumentality will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. The liminal experience precedes active interaction and the journey towards Maya's shrine in Croydon Museum from the gallery space, was the next liminal experience for the visitor. Marked by the red dots, the path went through the central court, then upstairs into the 'Now' gallery. This gallery is dotted with spotlights in vitrines that are lined with an eclectic mix of objects: fabrics, Croydon Tram signage, Barbie Dolls, early models of computers, badges, bottled sauces and Maya's domestic shrine. The museum gallery contains rows of digital interactive touch-screen devices that provide information on the objects on display. Not only was the ambience distinctly different from the exhibition's, the display of Maya's gods and her worshipping accoutrements were encased in glass, away from visitor contact and protected ¹⁵. One visitor described the display as "sterile" ¹⁶.

The movement and experiences of the liminal personae was in one sense interactive and responsive to the spaces, their changing functions and environments. My artworks embodied and presented visual meanings, but the space between them added to these meanings, within which the temple and museum rituals were compared and practised. Contact with the artworks in the created environment extended the interaction to what museum educators describe as 'hands-on and minds-on'.

6. Interactive or Immersive?

It is clear that the worshipper's interaction with a Hindu deity in the temple is direct, physical and spiritual whereas the visitor's interaction with *Ganesh* in Maya's shrine is channelled through the digital device and is thus indirect and focussed on acquiring information. The desire for conserving form and the

¹⁵ Watch the enclosed DVD, "A Journey through the exhibition".

¹⁶ Nicola Ashmore, lecturer and Ph.D. student at the University of Brighton instantaneously responded to the display of Maya's shrine as sterile after making the journey from the exhibition to the museum gallery.

recognition of its deterioration through handling is absent in the temple and the domestic shrine. I showcased a series of responses to the debate on museum interaction through its artworks within which the object itself was interacted with; it moved, changed shape and came alive as a result of visitors' actions. The cues to perform made exhibition visitors conscious of their acts. Hence, they were attuning their experience within the multi-sensory space and identifying their ritual acts as being akin to temple practices through the information provided. The various types of interactions associated with the artworks in their exhibition context were in themselves meaningful. I did not generate them as tools to uncover available information, they contained the information. The removal of shoes before entering the **Kinetic Shiva** sanctum is a temple ritual, which was directly experienced by the visitors.

An important aspect of interaction is the 'inter' and the 'action': a phenomenon in which an exchange takes place between the person acting and the object being acted upon. This exchange occurred when the visitor stepped into the **Kinetic Shiva** sanctum to walk towards *Shiva*. The movement triggered a sensor, which played the sound of a ringing temple bell ¹⁷. Visitors were met with a direct response from the artwork itself as a result of their movement into the enclosure. They viewed the mirrors and saw their own reflection and that of *Shiva* and they turned the **Kinetic Shiva** handle, which generated the rotational movement. Touching **Tactile Ganesh** and watching his surface change slightly made the sculptural artworks truly interactive. The worshipper in the temple believes that he is enlivening the deity through his ritual acts. He takes *darshan* and believes that the image opposite him is returning his gaze and transmitting its divine energy towards him. There is an aspect of give and take, action and response, which takes precedence over the realisation of deterioration occurring as a result of the interaction. This change is considered to be an inevitable part of its life cycle. Hence, the interaction in the exhibition was a reflection of temple rituals. It was my aim to take the visitors' interactive experience to a level where it became immersive through the experience of smells, sounds and touch in the created meditative environment.

The immersive environment removed the distance between the visitor and my artworks. My artworks embodied the meanings and the potential to respond. It was the visitor who generated the response to make the meanings apparent:

¹⁷ Watch enclosed DVD, a recording of the exhibition experience.

a process in which the action, the response and the change in form, all three formed part of the artworks. My sculptures generated interaction, whereas the video artworks recorded and presented it. The interaction between the three-dimensional form and water in ***Ganesh, circa 1900*** caused the dissolution to occur. Hence, the effect of nature on material was every as bit potent as the effect of human action.

The process of interaction in the video artwork ***Gods in Storage*** occurs between objects confined to a small space. Each level of interaction reflected a temple practice, a natural phenomenon or a museum practice. The performance of the visitors was a part of my artworks.

7. Visitor Response and Feedback

As explained earlier, it is vital to analyse visitor experiences through their comments and feedback. The inherently interactive nature of my artworks and their exhibition leads to the analogy of the enlivening of the deity through regular ritual; both contexts contain interaction as a method of generating meaning. Visitors' participation and movement in the space crystallised latent abstract meanings. Liminal spaces have potential, but do not actually become such without their liminal people. The artwork-deity-space interaction contains the research, through which temple and museum rituals became apparent, the practice of conservation versus the believed cyclical nature of time were realised and the construction of meaning through experience was explored. I did not aim to analyse the response of visitors in a quantitative method; it was purely qualitative and occurred as a result of my regular conversations with them in the gallery and their written comments.

The exhibition attracted a range of visitors: from children to the elderly, families and individuals from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The interactive nature of the exhibition complimented with the meditative environment in the gallery. Children found that touching Ganesh was "fun" whereas adults commented on the "quiet" and "soothing" atmosphere in the space. The visitor feedback varied with age, but a more striking difference emerged between the comments of those who practised religion and those who were either agnostic or atheist. Instinctive human responses irrespective of age, race, gender, faith and cultural background, were expressed towards the signs - "You may touch" and "please

remove your shoes before entering”. The former was immediately met with surprise, uncertainty or excitement, whereas the response was more curious and occasionally hesitant towards the latter.

It was clear that each individual responded in subjective ways towards the ideas explored in the exhibition and towards the signs that functioned as cues for participation. Being present in the exhibition space on most days, I had the opportunity of being the observer and often the recipient of the opinions. This generated a new level of interaction, within which thoughts were being discussed in the gallery and I was, as the artist-researcher, not only provided with an insight into the visitor experience, I was able to witness the concepts being tested in-situ. My empirical observation shows that most visitors were keen on spending some time on their own in the gallery to view and experience the artworks. They then expressed their opinions and discussed their responses to whoever was present in the gallery. By maintaining a regular record of my observation of visitor behaviour and conversations with them, I have outlined a testimony of responses. In addition, they wrote comments on cards which reveal certain patterns of responses towards the artworks and the exhibition. The visitors whose comments I have chosen to explicate are examples from a range of age groups and faiths and those who have provided their informed or carefully thought feedback.

Selected examples of visitor comments from comments cards are below:

1. The children experienced the “changing” of the idol at first hand. I felt this was valuable for them as a window into another belief system (we are Christians).

Anonymous

2. I like the fact that we had to take our shoes off. Nick

3. It was amazing being able to touch the artwork! Never experienced it before and it was shocking to actually be able to touch the work and interact with the art – it feels like it is a part of yourself because you are interacting with it.

4. A good study on the roles of museums in society while educating me on Hindu rituals and religion. A very interactive experience. I enjoyed it thoroughly.

Anonymous. 21/08/08

5. Thank you for the experience. As a Christian I am unfamiliar with embracing holy icons but it was good to do. I did not wish to change the model... I enjoyed the warmth of material rather than the coldness of metal, hardness of wood... I own a beautiful icon but the idea of touch set my mind to thinking in another dimension. Eileen Calver

Visitor Responses to the Exhibition

Visitor(s)	Aspect of the exhibition that was most influential	Response/Feedback	Date
Indian woman with daughter	Tactile Ganesh	Removed their shoes away from the sculpture and bowed with knees on the floor and head touching the ground	28 July '08
Marie, West Indian woman	The exhibition itself	Said: "Art can be truly moving". Told a story about her daughter losing confidence after an accident. Felt that the exhibition would be helpful for her to uplift her spirit and to regain her will to enjoy art and study.	28 July '08
<i>Male visitor from Kerala, south India</i>	Kinetic Shiva	Compared Kerala Orthodox Christian Church rituals to Hindu temple rituals. The church ring bells and sing during mass, light ghee lamps like the Hindus. Comment: Good ambience, only one person should be in the exhibition at one time as too many people would spoil the visitor experience.	28 July '08
A male atheist	Tactile Ganesh	Explained that he was hesitant to touch Ganesh as he felt that it was potent with energy even though he did not believe in God. Said that he normally viewed the Hindu deities from an orientalist perspective.	29 July '08

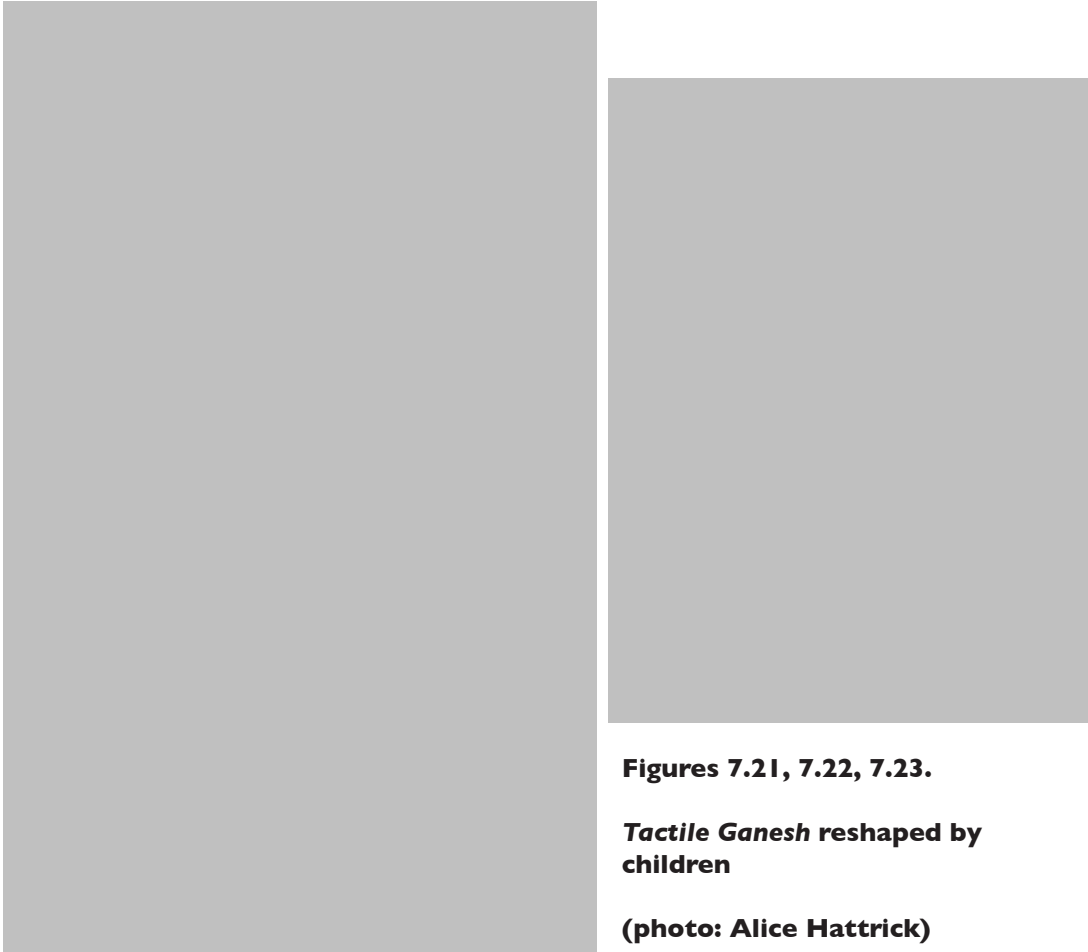
Visitor(s)	Aspect of the exhibition that was most influential	Response/Feedback	Date
Elderly couple	The exhibition space	The lady explained that she felt reassured with the idea that everything deteriorated including gods! The couple removed their shoes and experienced the entire exhibition with bare feet. She touched Tactile Ganesh and remarked "I can leave my fingerprints on the clay".	7 August '08
Rama, an Indian male	The concepts, temple and museum context	Said his mother has a domestic shrine. She prays everyday and if she is travelling, she carries the small image of Krishna from her shrine with her to care for it. He described her relationship almost like a mother and child's. He visits the temple for a meditative experience. He said he perceived deities in museums as art.	9 August '08
A Family – mother and two children	Tactile Ganesh and Kinetic Shiva	The mother did not allow her children to go near Ganesh or inside the Kinetic Shiva sanctum. Apologised and said they were Christians.	14 August '08
A young couple	Tactile Ganesh	Said they were surprised by the "You may touch" message as they were accustomed to reading signs in galleries and museums that said "Please don't touch" or used barriers.	15 August '08
Development officer and researcher in sociology working in central Asia	The exhibition	Asked many questions: why is the breathing heavy in the video "Gods in Storage"? Do mirrors like the ones in Kinetic Shiva exist in the temple? Said he liked discussion and provoked response through questioning.	16 August 08
A woman	Tactile Ganesh	Said she was interested in Ganesh and felt it was emanating energy. Explained that she was reading about meditation – orange is a warm and important colour.	1 Sept. '08

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF VISITOR RESPONSE

	Educational// thought provoking	Touch	Religious/ spiritual	Interactive value and experience	Orientalist perspective/deity as art	Ethnographic
A combination of subjectivist and objectivist approaches	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓		✓	✓	✓ ✓
Meditative/peaceful			✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓			
Consciousness of action/experience		✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓		
Impulsive physical response			✓ ✓	✓		

Empirical observation of visitor comments and their verbal testimonies shows that most visitors engage with the artworks and express opinions that range between subjective and objective approaches. A significant number of visitors express that they found the exhibition educational or thought-provoking. Whilst the element of touch has been commented on by several, some have described their experience of touching whilst some share their opinion on prohibition or permission of touch in exhibitions. This reveals that they were conscious of their action and experience of touching in the gallery. Some Hindu visitors were unable to perceive the tactile and kinetic sculpture as works of art with a research function. They reacted towards them with devotion or revulsion. A significant number of visitors who provided feedback, commented on the meditative and peaceful atmosphere of the exhibition. Some refer to it as religious or even holy, whereas some have spoken of enjoying navigating the exhibition alone to enjoy the sounds. I created the multi-sensory environment, presented cues for the performance of certain temple rituals and allowed direct contact with the sculptures. Interaction with the artworks have been described as exploratory by some and as a challenge to their habits and existing beliefs by some. A few responses refer to the visitors' study and understanding of rituals and belief systems; two of which suggest an ethnographic approach. The analysis of visitor response is a hermeneutic enquiry and reveals characteristics of the exhibition that visitors have identified and responded to: Educational, Touch, Spiritual, Interactive Value and Experience, Deity's Meaning in the Museum, Ethnographic Role of the Deity.

Further observation of their behaviour in the gallery reveals the semiotics of the artworks generated by the display mechanisms I employed. Certain people became regular visitors and explained that they discovered new meaning through visual clues during each visit. One of the most obvious and noticeable response was towards **Tactile Ganesh**. My initial plan, which I practised, was to install the work onto a low rise wooden domestic worshipping stool to generate the action of bending or sitting on the floor to touch the sculpture. The sign "Please Touch" was placed on the floor. The work was at easy reach of children, which caused them to play with it. The sculpture was changed quite dramatically but did not realise an abstract form.



Figures 7.21, 7.22, 7.23.

***Tactile Ganesh* reshaped by children**

(photo: Alice Hattrick)

The transformation was rapid. A Hindu visitor remarked that he was displeased to see that change as the resemblance has disappeared. He found this disrespectful. I mounted a series of images recording the initial changes on the wall for visitors to view and compare. This sudden change, unapproved by certain members of the public threw light on the difference between slow change through touch and damage. The transformation and its photographic recording experienced a surprising lack of continuity. I then gave back the sculpture its shape and reinstalled it, with the domestic shrine onto a plinth. A sign on the plinth read “You may touch”. Hence, the tone changed from the earlier commanding one, to one that allowed touch. The elevation suggested veneration and was received it with a similar sentiment.



Figure 7.24.

***Tactile Ganesh* installed onto a plinth
(photo: author)**



Figure 7.25.

The nature of interaction changed after *Tactile Ganesh* was elevated onto a plinth (photo: author)



Figure 7.26.

**This visitor held the sculpture gently between her hands
(photo: author)**



Figure 7.27.

**The plasticine layer was revealed in areas that were touched the most
(photo: author)**

This exercise has striking similarities to an episode that occurred at the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Art and Life in Glasgow. I make this comparison in reference to the exhibition design rather than visitor sentiment. The large bronze *Nataraja* in the museum is exhibited in a room along with a few other objects from the collection, most of which belonged to collector, William Burrell. The most prominent ones are: an alabaster Mary and Christ and a stained-glass window installed in the window niche. These sit in *Shiva's* company, which was installed on the floor when the museum opened in 1993. A man walked into the room and rocked the *Nataraja* with both hands and knocked him over. This caused damage to his arms. The museum subsequently raised him onto a plinth and placed a barrier in front of him to avoid the recurrence of such an attack¹⁸. Hence, the function of the plinth in the museum and in the exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth*** was to increase veneration towards the object itself and the image of the deity.

The exercise of elevating *Shiva* onto a plinth from the floor was valid and in retrospect, has proven useful in testing ideas and visitor behaviour. The subsequent response was one of curiosity. The touch was less playful, but more exploratory in which the textures were felt and there was an awareness that the image of god and an artwork was being touched. Discussions about the elephant-head occurred and memories linked to *Ganesh* were discovered. Some responded to the act of touching and compared it with its traditional prohibition in the museum. Hence, some of the responses were subjective, generated through a review of familiarity of images or ideas, or towards the sounds, often towards the artworks themselves and the media used. Some opinions were spontaneous and reflective of how they “felt” whereas some were more informed. My aim was to construct and present meanings through my artworks and their exhibition in the museum setting. The process of assimilating information through viewing and experiencing the space, involves an inward seeking of existing knowledge relating to facts that are already known. The meaning-making process in the museum is described as constructivism and the “connections to the familiar”¹⁹ are a given in the learning process. Hein quotes Abraham Kaplan’s²⁰ words, which describe this concept most accurately:

¹⁸ Kirsty Hood, educator at the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Art and Life described the incident at an interview with on 3 Nov. 2008 in the Religious Art Gallery. Kirsty was uncertain of the timeline for the decision of installing *Nataraja* on the plinth but guessed it coincided with the episode of the attack. The Hindu community in Glasgow requested that the image be installed onto a plinth.

¹⁹ Hein, p. 156.

²⁰ Kaplan was a behavioural scientist and his expertise was in cognitive science.

We always know something already, and the knowledge is intimately connected with what we know next, whether by observation or in any other way. We see what we expect to see, what we believe we have every reason for seeing, and while this expectancy can make for observational error it is also responsible for veridical perception.²¹

The subjective response of visitors towards the exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth*** and their discourse with the work was a response that is sought after by museum curators and educators, as explained by Hein²², and Caulton²³ in their accounts of the constructivist museum. It was my intention to leave scope for subjective interpretations of the exhibition, which evoked a variety of interesting responses in visitors. Hence, whilst the occurrence of constructivist theory has been clarified by the visitor response, its function in this research is purely a tool for the visitor response analysis. It helps to delve into the methods of inquiry that museum visitors employ as my artworks were exhibited in the museum setting, and my audience primarily comprised of museum goers.

8. Conclusion

I have discussed the process of attaining spiritual enlightenment in the temple and the acquisition of knowledge occurring in the museum. ***From Shrine to Plinth*** compared the two by generating interaction between the visitors and my artworks in the created liminal areas. The extent of the artworks went beyond factors that delimit them, their media, their individual visual language and their curation. The performative audience became a vital part of my artworks and in the dissemination of my research.

The empirical significance of my artworks in their making and exhibiting emerges through their synergy. My role as the artist and as the curator of my artworks entailed a careful consideration of the audience and the surrounding space in their conceptual development and creation, especially as the artworks are site-specific and the exhibition was internal to the museum space. However, it is impossible to accurately predict visitor responses (this includes their movement

²¹ Hein, pp. 156–157. This excerpt is from: A. Kaplan, *The Conduct of Enquiry: Methodology for the Behavioural Sciences* (Scranton: Chandler, 1964) pp. 132–133.

²² Hein, *Learning in the Museum*. Hein is expert on museum education

²³ Tim Caulton, *Hands-on Exhibitions: Managing Interactive Museums and Science Centres* (London: Routledge, 1998) pp. 36–38. Caulton is a museum developer and manager.

in the gallery and their interaction with the artworks) as they bring to the space their subjective response driven by their predispositions. The exhibition was highly instrumental in the derivation of this finding and in establishing this as fact. Above all, the mixture of religious and secular responses towards the artworks in the created multi-sensory environment was a reflection of the fragmented identity of the deities that I am depicting through my artworks. Hence the four artworks came together in the exhibition space and explored the dialectical meanings of the deities as living gods and as objects of art or as cultural symbols.



Chapter 8

Conclusion

I have compared and contrasted two belief systems: secular (museum) and religious (temple) in this research and have examined the deity's identity in both contexts through my artworks. By selecting the museum space as the site for their exhibition, I have directly addressed the idol's curation and interpretation in this secular environment.

1. Curatorial Intervention

I have drawn critically upon a variety of disciplines: art history, aesthetics, archaeology, anthropology, museum and religious studies, in order to examine the meanings of the deity. This is evident in my artworks and projects a tension between the various approaches in defining the role of the deity. I have depicted rituals and erosion, simultaneously presenting deities as museum objects and living entities. Hence, my cross-disciplinary approach in my site-specific art practice blurs these disciplinary distinctions. Ethnography, museology and theology are fused in order to communicate the tension in object meanings. My artworks' intervention in the museum space allows the audience to experience them in a secular realm within which the non-tangible meanings of the deity are explored. Each artwork contains and presents a distinctive core: an embodiment of a particular dialectic, which is its own identity and an essential part of the argument presented in the museum space.

The museological aim to facilitate conscious learning amongst visitors through displays and the rituals performed by devotees in the temple ¹ culminate in my artworks and their exhibition in this research. Visitor reactions to the exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth*** did not remain 'mere rituals', they oscillated between the religious and the secular and triggered a combination of religious and secular (learning in this context) sentiments. Each act carried out by the visitor was not

¹ As compared in Chapter Three, "*Kinetic Shiva and Ritual*".

only conscious, it contained the potential for reflection upon her/his behaviour in the multi-sensory space. The work aimed to cause visitors to introspect, compare belief systems and the role of artefacts within them. I facilitated such a response through the artworks, their juxtaposition in the exhibition space, their interpretation and the distinct environment created inside the gallery space compared to the museum environment.

I have focussed on the Hindu deity due to its misinterpretation and its characteristics as a tangible object with transcendental functions. This important paradox can only be expressed in a non-verbal, non-prescriptive manner. Not only does each artwork embody this paradox, it facilitates an encounter of the exhibition visitor with itself, which allows the paradox to be experienced at first-hand. By combining the underlying concept of the artworks and their pragmatic characteristic of interaction, I have given form to abstract dialectics such as contrasting perceptions of time, the life and death of the deity and its material and spiritual qualities. I have externalised these concepts by making them tangible and placing them in a created multi-sensory museum environment.

My approach as an artist in perceiving the deities in their two contexts is not limited to their physicality in the two locations, nor does it encompass a purely objective, distanced approach. It is also a mixture of a sensitive and emotive responses with an aim to present the anthropomorphic qualities of deities and give them a voice in their de-contextualised state. This approach, however, is an informed and conscious one fed by a study of the role of the Hindu deity within its culture and in the museum.

Through the exhibition of my artworks in the museum space, I have opened up a discussion of meanings of the worshipped deity to a wider audience. I am presenting a new way of seeing the idol in the museum. Artistic intervention in the museum space brings with it innumerable possibilities for the artist, the visitor that experiences, and for the museum itself in exploring the knowledge imbued in objects and their cultures in creative and imaginative ways. In my research I am approaching the museum space (between the rows of vitrines, walls, people's bodies and walkways) as an important part of the nexus of objects and visitors. This is the space where rituals are enacted and liminality is experienced. Predictability and normality in exhibition design can cause the ritual to become a 'mere act', one which is sub-conscious and regularly practised. For a more

effective method of communication that breaks habits and makes the participant active in the space and a conscious recipient of meanings, an artistic or curatorial intervention is the most effective tool. It makes the museum space significant and meaningful for a discourse to occur between visitors, the artworks and objects displayed adding a new dimension to interpretation. The museum building is an archive of knowledge in the form of artefacts – a quality which makes it an interesting space for artists to extract meanings from and present these through their art practices.

As my research specifically examines the role of Hindu deities, it inevitably addresses the scholarly community of ethnographers, art historians and archaeologists who study their cultural, iconographic and historical significance. I have identified the problems in defining the deity as art and a cultural sign. Through my art practice approach in re-interpreting Hindu deities, I am commencing the movement towards perceiving them as they were created within their original contexts: as living entities with the potential to embody energy. Hence, my intervention in the museum space with my artworks is key in opening new arguments for museum visitors and ultimately encourages them to question the meanings of other artefacts in museum displays, that may have biographies rich and varied prior to their relocation in the museum.

2. Reviewing the ‘*Lacuna*’ in the Study of Hindu Deities

The significant change in the definition of Hindu gods as art has dictated the perception and ultimately their treatment within the secular environment. Mitter criticises Coomaraswamy’s work thus:

However persuasive Coomaraswamy’s interpretation may have been it did not bring us any closer to the understanding of Indian art. In short, the limitations in Coomaraswamy arose from the fact that even he ultimately fell back upon European standards for evaluating Indian art, a problem which had beset his predecessors. This is particularly in evidence in his comparison between Indian and Medieval European art.²

Mitter concludes in his book, *Much Maligned Monsters* that there is an urgent need to view Hindu gods with new eyes because of the “lacuna” left by the

² Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977) p. 285.

scholar who would have been “most suited to answer questions on style and taste”³. Even though my research has not risen from nor been influenced by Mitter’s thesis, it too questions the true meaning of the deity. My study, however, does not approach the deity as art, as Mitter’s does, but as a living entity. The purpose of its creation is for it to be enlivened through worship and not to be admired as sculpture or an aesthetic artifact. It is in the actions of worshippers towards their idols that the meaning of the deity can be searched and found just as its treatment in the museum reflects its material significance. It is a given that the intent of the maker of images dictates its definition, however its reception by its audience defines and establishes its meaning. If the role of the museum is to interpret the true context and meaning of the deity, it should not be as art, but as a living entity. Its existing definition as art in the secular arena, however, reflects its reception as one within the new context and hence provides an additional layer of meaning to the deity. I am defining this layering of meanings as the fragmented identity of the deity. Whilst Mitter’s aim of reassessing the interpretation of Indian gods lies in its religious context, it is from an art historical perspective. He proposes a study of the existing art criticism at the time the images were made by Indians.

Through my artworks, I am redefining the deity as a worshipped idol with supernatural qualities, not as an aesthetic object. I have depicted the deity’s imminent death and survival in order to interpret its temple meanings. This is brought to life and made more evident by the dialectic of its conservation in the museum, a method which highlights characteristics of the deity that do not limit to the art historical, but open up its interpretation by simultaneously revealing its religiosity.

3. Reflective Analysis of Research Methods and Methodologies

In the early exploratory stages of the research, I employed visual methods of photography and video to record object displays, visual signs of worship on the surface of the idols, and visitor and worshipper movements in the museum and temple spaces respectively. These methods of gathering evidence functioned in tandem with the study of text and diagrammatic representations of temple and museum architecture and the patterns of human movement and behaviour within the spaces. This exercise aided in extrapolating the semiotic similarities and

³ Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, p. 286.

differences of the idol in the two contexts. My enquiry into the use of touch or handling allocated museum objects as a means of gaining access and facilitating learning was carried out at the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art. The case study method proved to be insightful into museum access policies in keeping with their conservation aims. It aided in gaining first hand knowledge about the desire or reluctance to touch religious objects through observation and had a direct implication in my heuristic analysis of the artwork ***Tactile Ganesh*** and its reception in the exhibition.

The development of a distinct line of enquiry into the lengthening of the physical state of the deity through conservation and contrasting ritualistic temple practice contributed towards the practice-based methods of visualising and producing the artworks. For instance: in the use of the vitrine as a container for the process of dissolution, a narrative as well as an icon of preservation combines the depiction of museum curatorial practice and temple ritual practice. The process is one in which I distil and combine visual metaphors, and develop them to produce narratives in three and four-dimension. I used the exhibition space to incorporate sound, touch, and smell, synthesising the dialectics of the worshipped deity and the curated artefact in the work. The discourse between the artworks, the exhibition space, and the visitors contained the research and its outcomes. The configuration of the exhibition space is recorded through photographs and video, and depict the interaction between the space, the visitor and the artworks. I have employed photography as a primary method of recording the use of space at each stage in the research.

The internal configuration of the artworks in the space in relation to Maya's shrine aimed to generate specific response and movement between the secular museum into the meditative exhibition space amongst visitors. The audience feedback obtained from written comments and oral testimonies reveal responses towards the interactive nature of the exhibition, the created liminal areas, and an educational role in providing an insight into the meanings of deities. The method of gathering feedback from comments cards and conversation has the potential of revealing unpredicted responses to the exhibition. In hindsight, a much more structured approach such as the use of a questionnaire and personal interviews would have provided a more in-depth understanding of the audience response and more data for analysis. My aim to create a meditative environment that explored the non-material meanings of the deity, however, meant that carrying

out interviews in the setting would interrupt the experience that visitors have described as peaceful, calming and thought-provoking. The environment was not conducive for immediate questioning. The question arises, at what stage can the interview take place after the process of the absorption and assimilation of meaning occurs? In retrospect, contacting visitors after the visit may have proven to be an effective course, as reflected in the two e-mails sent by visitors to me after their visit to the exhibition ⁴. A function of my research is to cause the audience to re-consider the meanings of the deity in the museum. Quantifying the success of the exhibition with reference to the thinking that can take place after the visit can be difficult. The methodology employed to test the success and limitations of the dissemination is carried out through a critical review of the curation of the exhibition in relation to the research aims and existing, albeit limited, visitor comments (see section 3 of this chapter).

By engaging with a dialectical study of the semiotics of the deity in the temple and museum with specific reference to critical museum studies, this research is a critical inquiry into its biography. I have examined the dominant ideologies in the role of the museum from being a space for visual contemplation; as a ritual site, to being a site that produces knowledge. The artworks articulate the shifts in the meanings of the deity historically and contextually by revealing the various layers of its identity: as a material object with transcendental qualities, as an embodiment of knowledge, and as a ritual piece and a cultural sign. This non-textual method offers a unique interpretation of the deity received through the use of multiple senses in the exhibition space. It reveals the ever-changing nature of the deity: its ephemeral characteristics and its re-creation, which is methodologically possible through art. The use of material and form to dissolve, erode, crack and rejoin, creating an installation through which individuals can move and explore the artwork at first hand and the use of sound to evoke the feeling of life in the object, are methods that offer non-verbal comparisons of the meanings of the deity.

My methodological approach of comparing the human-deity interactions occurring in the temple and museum contexts, extracting elements of these actions that reveal the contrasting perception towards the idol, adapting them in the process of making and installing the artworks, highlight the performative nature of the work. As a reflective practitioner, I consciously developed the

⁴ See Appendix II, pp. 350-352.

methods of making, such as dissolving *Ganesh* in water and re-constructing pieces of ***Kinetic Shiva*** for a complete form, which reflected and illuminated the dialectics of the secular and religious belief systems. Carole Gray and Julian Malins have referred to Donald Schön's 1983 work and have elucidated reflective practice as an attempt "to unite research and practice, thought and action into a framework for inquiry which involves practice, and which acknowledges the particular and special knowledge of the practitioner"⁵. The work does not function as an illustration of the research; the visualising and making the artworks at each stage posed questions that further developed the body of work. The enquiry grew in tandem with the process of making. Furthermore, the stage of designing the exhibition to create a distinct multi-sensory environment with the focus on the visitor's reception of the work through their actions in the space is an integration of the research, thought and the practice. The methodology of considering the audience's response towards the artworks as an integral part of the dissemination, the testing of ideas, and the enquiry furthers knowledge in practice-based research.

4. The Extent of my Artworks

I am experimenting with the very extent of each artwork, through the medium and its surrounding space. I made the three-dimensional form of *Ganesh*, immersed it in water and recorded the process of dissolution onto video. Hence, I made the three-dimensional image and presented it in its four-dimensional state wherein changes were occurring in the form over a period of time. Whilst this was projected in the exhibition space to be viewed by the visitor, s/he actively explored the four-dimensional state of ***Kinetic Shiva*** by rotating it. An installation, this artwork enveloped the visitor. ***Tactile Ganesh*** appeared as a sculpture on a plinth, but allowed touch and each visitor could contribute towards the change in the surface of the image. The visitor subsequently witnessed a gradual erosion of objects in the video work ***Gods in Storage***. Hence, each artwork encouraged varied levels of interaction amongst visitors. They viewed a phenomenon in the exhibition and also caused a change to take place in the artwork itself.

The criteria for evaluating the artworks and their exhibition are based on my

⁵ Carole Gray and Julian Malins, *Visualizing Research: A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004) p. 22.

research aims. They are in the form of questions and illuminate the process of a critical assessment of the work.

1. Did the visitors perceive the deity depicted in the artworks as gods, museum objects or both?
2. Did I successfully facilitate a construction of dialectical meanings through the exhibition (in relation to the above question)?
3. Did the visitors perform the actions that were generated in the exhibition through instruction?
4. Were they conscious of performing rituals?
5. Did they visit Maya's shrine?
6. Were they aware of their movement through various liminal spaces?
7. Did they learn more about the deity's metaphysical meanings in an empirical way through the artworks than they would have by viewing them in the museum?

Whilst the employment of a questionnaire and structured interviews would have assisted in a more critical evaluation of the artworks, the methodologies used to visualise and produce the artworks and the designing of the exhibition, with the support of existing visitor feedback, fulfils certain criteria of evaluation from which to draw conclusions. A closer look at the aims of the artworks and their exhibition reveals the main objectives, which are also the research aims: examine the deity's fragmented identity; analyse the treatment of the deity in the contrasting contexts as a result of attitudes towards conservation; generate conscious ritualistic response in the exhibition space; explore the potential of a multi-sensory setting in generating an experiential method of constructing meaning; exhibit artworks in a museum setting to present parallel non-material interpretation of Hindu deities; and re-iterate museum intervention as a means to present new arguments.

The visitor response analysed in Chapter 7 reveals that a majority of the visitors that commented on the exhibition addressed the religious role of the deity, either in an ethnographic sense, cosmological perspective or its presence as a holy object and reflected on their own physical and emotive response towards it. The experience of being in the space has been consistently described as peaceful and meditative which is a contributing factor in the reception of the artworks as depictions of spiritual meanings. This meaning-making process carried out in the

exhibition points towards a comparative analysis: whether the visitors questioned the depiction and interpretation of the idols in Maya's shrine. The lack of sufficient evidence due to a limited visitor response poses a challenge in answering this question. However, the curatorial mechanisms used: the map and the audio guide, connected the exhibition to and highlighted the semiotic role of Maya's deities in the museum. The visual connection with the museum collection, created a setting and a premise for an experiential comparative study. Hence, as the artist and the curator of the exhibition, I extracted and integrated curatorial elements from the site, appropriated the space to create a new context to present the deity with its multiple or fragmented identities.

A visitor to the exhibition has referred to the act and experience of touching **Tactile Ganesh** as a "window into another belief system". The indirect digital interaction presented in the Croydon Clocktower as an interpretive tool for Maya's shrine, is contrasted by the direct interaction with **Tactile Ganesh**, a simple yet effective method in comparing material realities of the deity in the two contexts with relation to attitudes towards conservation. Methodologically, the exploration of the relationship and interaction between the space, individuals and the deity remain constant and apparent at all stages of the research: from visualisation, to producing artworks and their exhibition. In retrospect, the crucial details of constructing the artworks such as the multiple layers of **Tactile Ganesh**, each becoming less ephemeral, should have been revealed in the exhibition space by way of a diagram. The knowledge of the hidden meaning of the artwork would have enhanced its interpretive framework and consequently added greater emphasis on its material reality. In hindsight, this would have proven to be a meaningful interpretive tool in the exhibition.

The methods used to create liminal areas, lighting, sound and cues to perform rituals, contributed towards the consciousness of behaviour. The removal of shoes in the exhibition heightened awareness of space and consciousness of action. Some comments from visitors reflect this, whereas some have discussed their experience of performing the act. The generating of conscious rituals was successfully achieved and not only contributed towards the audience's reception of the artworks and the process of constructing meaning, the rituals' performative nature highlighted their interaction with the site. They further appropriated the space (beyond my intervention through the artworks) by transforming themselves into liminal persons.

My approach in my art-making process is crucial in this research as it reflects my research aims and enquiry. For instance, I have literally used cyclical time in editing the video ***Ganesh, circa 1900***, but am depicting linear time in ***Gods in Storage***. The arrangement of objects for the video directly addressed the arrangement of Maya's gods and worshipping accoutrements in the museum's vitrine. Hence, whilst each aspect of the artworks has a function in communicating a part of the meaning, they collectively work as a composition depicting varied life cycles of deities. My concepts and intent have caused me to use media in the ways that I have in this research project. Whilst I have blurred disciplinary boundaries through my enquiry, I have allowed moving image and sculpture to overlap in ways that one takes on the personality of the other. The mirrors in ***Kinetic Shiva*** frame the reflection of rotating *Shiva* and the visitor, and present a moving image.

Located in the realm of museum intervention art practice, doctoral work by Duncan Mountford and Julie Bacon engages with the notion of the museum as a site of authority and control and explores the poetics of archival space. Through employing visual methods and incorporating elements of the museum artefact, Shirley Chubb made work that addressed post-colonial debates and contemporary realities. She curated four exhibitions in provincial museums, each working as a direct response to the space. Research in this area focuses on the use of the visual sense in engaging with the work and the methodology employed questions institutional function and object interpretation. I have placed emphasis on the visitor experience of the artworks juxtaposed in the exhibition space in a created multi-sensory environment. Through this process of generating a first hand experience of interacting with the deity in the museum space, I have re-integrated its religious meanings and its status in the secular museum and offered the audience a parallel interpretation of the deity. The emphasis has been on the conscious use of multiple senses and the performance of ritualistic acts in experiencing the dialectical meanings of the deity. This research has critiqued the status of the deity in the museum storage, and has examined its gradual deterioration in the setting.

Artists such as Fred Wilson, Hans Haacke, Sonia Boyce, Joachim Schmid, Marysia Lewandowska and Neil Cummings have been commissioned to create museum site-specific work which have functioned as institutional critiques; a practice that has been criticised as an extension of the museum's self-promotional apparatus,

and positively as creating a premise for a discourse between object histories and contemporary realities. Through employing curatorial techniques, artists have used museum collections as raw material and have re-arranged them to re-configure new meanings that address race, post-colonial, social and material culture issues. The work made for the exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth*** functions as an institutional critique and the methods used actively explore the elements of time and change caused through human – object – space interaction. I do not use the museum object as raw material, instead the focus is on the active engagement of the audience with the work through employing multiple senses and causing changes to occur in the physical state of the work. The exploration of the dialectical meanings of the deity is evident in the process of making the work and is further developed in its exhibition space through the audience's behaviour in the created liminal space.

5. Exhibiting Numinosity

My research is vital in establishing the problems of interpreting objects that hold spiritual significance for the communities that create and worship them. I have discussed the limitations in depicting their spiritual characteristics through purely their physical presence in a single-sense environment in Chapter 6.

The numinosity or essence of the Hindu belief system can be derived through experiencing or observing temple practices and daily rituals that surround the deity in a multi-sensory space, and not necessarily through a pure viewing of the autonomous idol in the museum setting. Extracting the idol from its multi-sensory environment for which it was created, is in itself problematic for its correct reception and interpretation. Hence I have not proposed new ways of curating Hindu idols in museum collections. I have employed my art practice to examine the material and spiritual qualities of the deities. The exhibition in the museum setting functioned as a critique of museum practices and explored the intangible meanings of Hindu gods in museum collections. I have attempted to reveal their numinosity by imbuing my artworks with the abstract philosophic concepts of cosmic time and energy, of ritual and consciousness that I have presented to the visitor to be experienced, responded to, and assimilated.

6. Future Developments

My research is exploratory and critical and I have fulfilled my aim to test my research assumptions through my artworks. I have disseminated my research in the museum space and have demonstrated the crucial role of my artworks in presenting fresh ways of perceiving the deity. Future exhibitions of the work and curatorial experiments in diverse settings such as museum galleries in conjunction with archaeological and ethnographic collections, selected heritage sites that contain displays of Indian collections, disused museum storage spaces, and contemporary exhibition spaces, to name a few, would reveal fresh ways of generating non-material meanings of the deities. Each site would encounter a different audience, which might elicit unique responses, maintaining the physically and conceptually stimulating character of the work. If such a task is to be undertaken, collaboration with the hosting organisation and prior planning can offer methods of achieving greater insights into the visitor experience, especially in their use of multiple senses and in performance. As a reflective practitioner, this knowledge would further my experimentation in making interactive installation art and in exploring multi-sensory methods of generating object meanings in the ocular museum space.

This work can be perceived as an example of practice-based research that has identified feedback from its audience at the dissemination stage as crucial, and through its successes and shortcomings, offers other researchers a possible methodological framework to help support their premise. The employment of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies in obtaining and analysing visitor feedback can provide the artist-researcher with a critical understanding of the reception of the work exhibited in response to the aims of the research and can help substantiate claims. In practice-based art research, this especially holds true in inquiries that involve interaction with an audience. If the role of the exhibition is not solely to show the work and disseminate the research, but also functions as a testing ground for the research, it demands from the researcher a means to assess the work. Whilst a spontaneous response such as visitor comments can be useful in encountering the unpredicted, it may not provide the researcher with the data required to test research objectives. The use of a questionnaire supplied to visitors after their visit to the exhibition has been identified as the appropriate method in acquiring audience feedback in this research as it would have not only allowed for the assimilation of information and reflection on experience, it would have avoided potential disruption to the interactive experience in the exhibition space. Hence, the methods used to

collect the information as well as the timing of the inquiry are crucial factors in obtaining the required feedback from the audience. The researcher would also benefit from seeking guidance from available expertise, such as that of a market researcher working with the hosting institution at the stage of planning visitor contact, consent and inquiry. Thus, a combination of spontaneous comments provided by visitors in the exhibition space and planned elicited responses can offer the artist-researcher crucial data to analyse and draw conclusions from. The resulting findings could not only contribute towards the development of the researcher's own practice, they would allow for a transfer of knowledge in the chosen field of research.

The outcome of my research poses further questions: *can museum objects, especially those with emotive and spiritual pasts, be freed from the burden of object fetishisation through a review of their biographies (including their de-contextualisation)? Can further experimentation in art practice allow these to be revealed in a non-didactic manner?* The museum has the potential to become a space in which meanings can be generated effectively by allowing the use of senses other than the visual. The paradox of encountering the non-material characteristics of artefacts through an enhanced physical experience of its materiality and its surrounding space has been explored in this thesis, and offers a fresh perspective on the museum's conservation and access debate. Furthermore, it reveals the potential of artistic intervention in museums that explores ways in which generating performance in the audience can open up new ways of constructing meaning and creating narratives for the manifestation of non-material ideologies.

A large number of Hindu deities have stood in museums for over two centuries as mute objects of ethnographic value and as religious art. There is a pressing need to reassess their purpose within the secular realm. I have commenced this process for those who are in a position to study and carry the research forward.



Glossary of Sanskrit Terms ¹

1. *Anant*: Endless, boundless, eternal, infinite
2. *Anugraha*: Favour, kindness, showing favour, conferring benefits, promoting or furthering a good object; assistance; facilitating by incantations. *Anugraha Moorti* is the image or manifestation of such a characteristic.
3. *Ardhanarishvara*: The androgynous form of *Shiva* in which the left side of the body is depicted as female and the right as male representing the culmination of all male and female forms.
4. *Atman*: The 'essence or principle of life'. This term is variously derived from *an*, to breathe; *at*, to move; *va*, to blow. Later the term was used in a metaphysical sense to denote the individual notion of reality and thus to distinguish it from the empirical self (*jiva*), which was regarded merely as the sum of the sense faculties. Therefore, while the equation of soul and the empirical self may be justified, it is not incorrect to define *atman* as 'soul'.
5. *Avatar*: 'A descent'. The incarnation of a deity, especially of *Vishnu*.
6. *Bhakti*: 'Devotion', 'worship'. From *bhaji*, meaning in a religious context adoration or loving devotion. It is also considered that *bhakti* does not only mean devotion offered to a single divinity, 'but reciprocal participation', its verbal root *bhaj* meaning 'to share, to partake, to enjoy'.
7. *Bhava*: Becoming, being, existing, occurring, appearance
8. *Bindu*: dot, spot
9. *Brahma*: (masculine) The first member of the Hindu triad; the supreme spirit manifested as the active creator of the universe
10. *Brahmin/Brahman*: The first of the four castes, the sacerdotal class, the members of which may be but are not necessarily priests.
11. *Darshan*: From *drs*, literally, 'looking at', 'viewing'
12. *Deva*: A celestial power, the deification or personification of natural forces

¹ Definitions are obtained from the following Sanskrit – English dictionaries:
 Williams-Monier Monier, *A Sanskrit - English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899)
 John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature*,
 Trübner's Oriental Series (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co. Ltd., 1914)
 Margaret and James Stutley, *A Dictionary of Hinduism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977)

and phenomena etc. each distinguished by name and by particular attributes.

13. *Dumroo*: A drum, shaped like an hour-glass. It denotes primordial causal sound (*nada*), the drum is also one of *Shiva's* emblems when he is represented as the cosmic dancer, *Nataraja*.

14. *Ganesh*: Lord of the *Ganas* or troops of inferior deities, especially those attendant upon *Shiva*. Son of *Shiva* and *Parvati*, or of *Parvati* only. He is the god of wisdom and remover of obstacles. Hence he is invariably propitiated at the beginning of any important undertaking, and is invoked at the commencement of books.

15. *Garbhagriha*: The centre or inner sanctuary of an Indian temple enshrining the main deity, regarded as the container of the seed (of universal manifestation)

16. *Mantra*: Though generally defined as 'a formula' comprising of words and sounds which possess magical or divine power, no single definition adequately expresses its significance. It is a verbal instrument, believed to possess power. A word or formula...[which] represents a mental presence or energy, by it something is produced and crystallized in the mind.

17. *Moorti*: Any solid body or material form; embodiment, manifestation, incarnation, personification

18. *Nataraja*: 'Lord of the Dance. A name applied to *Siva* (as the cosmic dancer) when he performs the *Tandava* dance, which represents the continuous creation, maintenance and destruction of the universe, and indicates the perfect balance between life and death.

19. *Pradakshina*: 'Circumambulation' The prefix *pra* indicates a natural process (urge), *Daksina*, literally 'south or 'southern' in this context denotes circumambulatory motion relative to the sun which at noon is due south, the object circumambulated being always on the right. The *pradakshina* of sacred trees, animals, shrines etc., is performed as an act of reverence, respect, submission or sacrifice.

20. *Pranaprathista*: 'Endowing with breath', i.e. the act of endowing the image with life. Several rites are performed to animate an image. The eyes are opened first, and life is installed inside. The image is now 'god' himself, being filled with the vital breath (*prana*) of the deity it represents.

21. *Puja*: honour, worship, respect, reverence, veneration, homage to superiors or adoration of the gods.

22. *Rasa*: The sap or juice of plants, juice of fruit, any liquid or fluid, the best or finest or prime part of anything, essence, marrow.

23. *Rishi*: An inspired poet or sage. The inspired persons to whom the hymns

of the *Vedas* were revealed and under whose names they stand.

24. *Shilpa Shastra*: The science of mechanics; it includes architecture.

25. *Shiva*: *Shiva* (*Siva*) is the third deity of the Hindu triad and the supreme god of his votaries. He is shortly described as the destroying principle, but his powers and attributes are more numerous and much wider. Under the name of *Rudra* or *Maha-Kala* he is the great destroying and dissolving power. Destruction in Hindu belief, however, implies reproduction, so as *Shiva* or *Sankara*, 'the auspicious', he is the reproductive power which is perpetually restoring that which has been dissolved and hence he is regarded as *Isvara*, the supreme lord and *Maha-Deva*, the great god.

26. *Upanishad*: Hindu texts. From *upa*, 'supplementary', 'additional', and *ni-sad*, 'to sit down near a teacher', from whom a pupil received esoteric knowledge.

27. *Veda*: root, *vid*, 'know'. 'Divine knowledge'. The *Vedas* are the holy books which are the foundation of the Hindu religion. They consist of hymns written in an old form of Sanskrit, and according to the most generally received opinion they were composed between 1500 and 1000 BC. The *Vedas* are four in number: (1) *Rig* (2) *Yajur* (3) *Sama* (4) *Atharva*.

28. *Visarjana*: Ritual of dispersing the divinity from the yantra after worship. ²

29. *Vishnu*: The second god of the Hindu triad. As preserver and restorer *Vishnu* is a very popular deity, and the worship paid to him is of a joyous character. He has a thousand names (*sahasra-nama*), the repetition of which is a meritorious act.

30. *Yantra*: A mystical diagram believed to possess magical or occult powers. The term is derived from *yam*, meaning 'to hold, curb or restrain', the suffix *tra* denoting the effective instrument and hence by extension 'fetter, tie, thong, rein' etc.

² Madhu Khanna, *Yantra, Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1979) p. 172.



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APPENDIX I

FROM SHRINE TO PLINTH: Exhibition Interpretation
(includes text panels and the transcript of the audio guide)

1.1. Introduction

Hindu idols are displayed in museums around the world as examples of religious art, ethnographic artefacts, and objects that embody iconographic meaning. They are presented as representative of their original culture.

The artworks in this exhibition are developed and created for the museum space. The exhibition converses with the existing display of the Hindu shrine at the Croydon Museum and with its visitors, as a result of their interaction with the artworks. A red dotted path visually connects the exhibition and the shrine for the visitor.

A Hindu idol in its shrine is bathed in milk, adorned with flowers and jewels, anointed, serenaded with lamps and treated as a live being. It lives and deteriorates as any other being. The physical presence of the idol is vital in worship, but its role transcends the physical.

In the museum, it becomes a part of the collection, a cultural symbol, and is treated as an embodiment of knowledge. It is conserved and its physical existence is of greatest value.

This contrasting attitude towards idols in the museum and the temple is where the paradox lies, since both processes, worshipping for spiritual enlightenment and viewing to learn, transcend the physical.

From Shrine to Plinth is a visual proposition of these comparisons. It investigates aspects of human behaviour surrounding worshipped objects in temples and collected objects in museums. It explores established temple beliefs and museum values.

I grew up observing the rituals people performed on a day-to-day basis in temples and noticed shrines in their homes. As we did not have any of the idols referred to in this exhibition in our own home, I have viewed the worshippers' gaze and actions with a slightly objective eye. The memories are, however, rich and the colours of the flowers still vibrant. I see these gods standing in their positions, mute and still, in museum buildings. I attempt to bring them alive through my artworks.

This exhibition is a result of my practice-based PhD research at the University of Brighton.

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1.2. Tactile Ganesh

Tactile Sculpture

2008

Tactile Ganesh is an immersive sculpture. It encourages play. It refers to museum 'interactives' and generates a response to touch the idol, to remove and take a part of it with you as a worshipper would in the temple.

The interaction with the deity in the temple goes beyond viewing. It is physical, involving touch, with a goal to enliven its divinity and to prepare oneself for the ultimate stage of meditation. The act of viewing the idol in the museum environment is deemed purposeful for the acquisition of meaning and knowledge. Both transcend the physical. This artwork comments on the role of the material to reach for something more sublime: knowledge in the museum and meditative bliss in the temple.

The artwork reveals the concepts of permanence and ephemera through its materials. The act of installing the artwork in the exhibition in the museum gallery and your tactile exploration of the sculpture to discover the changes that occur all form part of the artwork.

I have played with the belief that the soul is permanent inside an ephemeral body in this piece. The deterioration of the body through living is inevitable. The Hindus treat their gods as live beings and they are naturally allowed to meet their ends. Their physical appearances would change, then diminish. But the physical interaction is vital and is in no way seen as a means to an end.

I have been exposed to two ways of thinking: the western aesthetic in which you appreciate art objectively and the eastern in which you derive pleasure from beauty. The idol is not art, but is beautiful. It is physical and sublime at the same time.

.....

1.3. Ganesh, circa 1900

Video Art, 2005
5 mins 30 secs

Ganesh, circa 1900 is an observation and replay of the process of Ganesh's dissolution in water in an upturned glass vitrine. It is meditative, heretic and celebratory.

According to Indian evolutionary theory, the cosmos is to be viewed as a continuum. Whatever is born will develop, age and dissolve again into the primordial reality that gave it birth. ¹

This work depicts the annual ritual performed by worshippers in Western India, denoting the celebration of life and death and continuous creation. A Ganesh idol is brought home, worshipped for nine days and immersed in a natural body of water on the tenth day.

Installed on a plinth, and encased in a glass case, the dissolving Ganesh demonstrates two beliefs: the continuum of life dictating the Hindu ritual; and the safeguarding of the museum artifact for perpetuity in its museum context.

The title refers to the uncertainty of Ganesh's date of creation in this artwork. 'Circa' is normally used when birth dates and death dates are uncertain.

The materials I have used to make the form of Ganesh are rice flour, sugar and PVA glue. Rice flour and sugar are the main ingredients used to prepare sweets during the Ganesh festival. The glue in this artwork binds the materials together but also has the characteristics of dissolving in liquid.

The process of making the idol and the filming of the dissolution, coincide with my enquiry of the contrasting beliefs and hence, contrasting

¹ Khanna, Madhu. Yantra, *The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1979. p. 77.

treatment of gods when they are worshipped and when they are collected.

.....

1.4. Kinetic Shiva

Kinetic sculpture
2006 – 07

Kinetic Shiva, an interactive artwork, mechanises a commonly practised Hindu ritual in the temple called '**pradakshina**' or **circumambulation**. The worshipper in the temple walks in a clockwise direction around the deity, demonstrating the revolution of the earth around the sun. It is a form of meditation and a means to achieving unity with the creative energy that is believed to be existent in all matter.

The success of the ritual lies in the conscious integration of one's inner centre with the idol; and the infinite cosmic energy.

Shiva, in this work, is a reconstruction of a collected museum object. It has suffered damage in the past, but has been restored for a complete image.

The enclosure in which it sits is a depiction of an archetypal sacred space: the '**garbhagriha**' literally meaning '**the womb**' of the temple. It is the innermost chamber created for the primary deity. The logo for this exhibition, is a diagram of the sanctum. The passage leads the spiritual aspirant towards the spiritual centre.

Secluded from the other artworks in this exhibition, Kinetic Shiva attracts focussed attention. This is a commentary on museum curation and the design of the temple sanctum, both facilitating ritual.

It is said that the idol should never be hollow. I have filled Kinetic Shiva with light in its dark sanctum.

Multiple reflections of you and Shiva in the mirrors symbolise cosmic infinity.

.....

1.5. Gods in Storage

Video Art , 2008
3 mins 8 secs

Gods in Storage is a staging of the phenomenon in which a variety of materials such as wood, metal, fabric, paper and clay react with each other when placed in close proximity to each other within a space. It depicts the stage at which the slow process of deterioration has led to the decomposition of matter. It presents objects as specimens within a collection in museum storage.

Clay Ganesh and Shiva, and stone Buddha sit amidst a group of objects made from a variety of materials: paper, wood, terracotta, fabric, brass, leather and silver. The effect of air on materials, especially wood, silver and leather, cause gaseous emissions, gradually weakening neighbouring materials. The desire to safeguard museum artefacts for future generations, and hence to protect them from human touch and nature, itself contrasts with the Hindu attitude of allowing the idol to follow its natural course of disintegration. Hindus treat their idols as live beings. They are awakened in the morning, bathed in milk, anointed, serenaded with lamps and offered food.

This video work is a visual commentary on nature's power over material, despite measures taken to increase longevity.

A large number of objects in museum collections are in storage. That is purely due to lack of space. I am depicting the storage room as an example of an ethnographic collection, wherein all the objects are symbols of their culture. The gods and the slippers are in the mixed company of jewels and clothing. A worshipper would never take his or her footwear into the temple and Shiva would be installed in the inner shrine separate from worldly goods.

.....

1.6 Exhibition Audio Guide Transcript

I am interested in observing the interpretation of objects and the visitors' response towards them in museums especially those surrounding religious idols, relics and voodoo objects as these project magical characteristics and spiritual

significance.

Hindu idols are neither objects nor humans. They are treated as supernatural beings by their worshippers. Whilst growing up in India, I was exposed to worshippers' attitudes towards the various Hindu gods and the rituals which formed an important part of their everyday lives. They regularly visited temples and performed puja or prayers in their personal shrines.

Temples are constructed to facilitate ritual with the ultimate aim for the sadhaka or the spiritual aspirant to find his spiritual centre through the deity. The function of the idol is to act as the vehicle for the aspirant in his spiritual journey. The worship of the idol transcends its physical form. At every stage: from conception to creation of the godhead of the temple, a series of rituals are carried out to invoke the spiritual power in the idol. These include bathing it with milk, anointing with fragrant oils, decorating it with fabrics, flowers and jewellery and installing it in the temple sanctum. Daily worship includes lighting lamps and singing praises to the lord. Domestic shrines undergo similar rituals on a smaller scale as you can learn from viewing Maya's shrine in the Croydon Museum's Now Gallery. The idols would be housed in a small room, a niche or in cupboards. The low standing stool in the artwork ***Tactile Ganesh*** is a domestic pedestal for the household god.

As the interaction with the idol is physical, the deterioration of the surface material is inevitable. Vedic texts describe the procedures to be followed in case of extreme wear and tear of the image. It should be cremated, buried or immersed in a natural water body. Hence preservation of the image is secondary to its use.

This concept of the idol having life throws light on the museum's treatment and interpretation of the idol as art, as a physical entity with historical and ethnographic significance. Bronzes are displayed in separate glass cases to avoid oxidation and corruptions. Access to them is limited. This striking contrast between the greater physical interaction in the temple as compared to the limited interaction in the museum is at the heart of my research and is explored through my artworks. I am interested in people's behaviour towards these idols and the belief that underpins this response.

This exhibition attempts to create a liminal space: one which is distinctly different to the rest of the museum building. The word liminal means threshold, which marks a change in the physical and psychological state. You are stepping into a meditative space where the rules change. The idol can be touched, you remove your shoes to enter the dark sanctum and interact with the kinetic object in this exhibition. The contact of your feet with the floor marks the change from being into one space and moving into another. Hence, ritual generates a liminal experience.

The artwork ***Tactile Ganesh*** is an experiment. I am observing people's response to the object and recording the change occurring in the artwork. Each artwork depicts the change in the idol as a result of the human and nature's interaction with it.

I carried out experiments with a variety of materials in the video ***Ganesh, circa 1900***. The idol had to dissolve in a shorter period of time so I could film it. The work is a documentary recording a phenomenon. I find that film is an interesting medium to in due to its four-dimensional nature shaped by sound, image and movement.

The temple is a multi-sensory environment and I am exploring the senses of sight, touch, sound and smell in this exhibition.

The journey from developing the concepts for the artworks, making them, designing and installing this exhibition has been exciting and rewarding!

APPENDIX II



A Selection of Visitors' Comments on Exhibition ***From Shrine to Plinth***

1. Thought provoking and original, good use of mixed media. Interesting and engaging. *Neal and Helena.* www.theartscollaboration.com
2. It is very well made and its great that you can touch it. Yours Faithfully,
(signed by visitor.)
3. Very original and educational, I especially liked 'Ganesh, circa 1900' and the idea for 'Tactile Ganesh'. Very impressive, although I have to say I was slightly disturbed/freaked out by 'Ganesh, circa 1900', I think I may have some weird phobia of seeing things decay. *Matt Parsons*
4. Thought provoking. Unusual but good to see.
Religious Calm Mirrors Tunnel Formation
Dissolution Accurate Scary
Anonymous
5. A very thought provoking exhibition. A lot of time and effort has gone into your pieces and I particularly enjoyed the projections. *Anonymous*
6. It's interesting to displace physically and spiritually the figurative idols. It's also significant to have such an exhibition as it comment on the possible and different interactions in the perspective of interactor and interactive environments. *Fegsen. S.*
7. Very beautiful artworks. The information around it was very readable and interesting. I was surprised that the Ganesh was made of plasticine, very original and creative. The background horn helps create a holy atmosphere. *Anonymous*
8. Concept seems good, but being a Hindu myself, honestly do not

understand it! *Anonymous*

9. Interesting! Not sure I totally understand the idea behind it but food for thought. *Anonymous*

10. Expected Trafalgar Sq. plinth. Have been to India 3 times and love the country deeply. My Ganesha is dancing with his attributes + the rat at his feet. He faces the inside of my home and sometimes wears my hat(s). He stands about 2 feet high – is made of brass...he has a much loved presence in our home. I can only hope he likes it there! *Anonymous*

11. It's been good to experience the space and explore the different layers and narratives. *Julia Winckler*

12. Great to see such a culturally inspired exhibition in Croydon. I particularly love the Kinetic Shiva. There is a real sense of peace when standing in front of it. *Aaron*

13. Particularly liked "please touch" it makes for a good welcoming piece. *Runa*

14. Thank you for the experience. As a Christian I am unfamiliar with embracing holy icons but it was good to do. I did not wish to change the model... I enjoyed the warmth of material rather than the coldness of metal, hardness of wood.

...I own a beautiful icon but the idea of touch set my mind to thinking in another dimension. *Eileen Calver*

15. Comments on the Exhibition Received by E-mail

15.1. Sent by Ian Cooper on 22 August 2008

Dear Megha,

If one of the objectives of Art is to make people think and question then 'from shrine to plinth' certainly achieves this. Unfortunately, when I visited Croydon Clocktower on the afternoon of the 20th August, there were no flowers and the 'aum' was silent.² However, these were minor factors.

² A minor technical problem had occurred which was soon resolved

Taking first the touchable image of Ganesh, it seems to me that this allowed visitors to be party to both the creation and the destruction of the image. The small particles of the red and white clay at the base of the image emphasised this. This idea only occurred to me after your work inspired me to read up about the symbolism of Ganesh.

Having been brought up in the Anglo-Catholic (Christian) tradition, I am familiar with the concept of veneration of religious images. However the altar and particularly the Crucifix in a 'high' church are unapproachable. If one has to go anywhere near then one genuflects. They are never walked around and they are most certainly never touched. Although I now consider myself to be a Unitarian / Universalist I was interested to notice my reluctance to remove my shoes when entering the shrine dedicated to a representation of the Divine but in a form other than the one which I had been taught as a child to consider to be the only true image of God. I thought I overcome this conditioning but I obviously have not.

So thank you for your very thought provoking installation and I wish you every success with your future projects.

Namaste
Ian Cooper

15.2. Sent by Joseph Nwokorie on 14 September 2008

I found the exhibition to be a kaleidoscope of beauty in various forms. First of all, it made me ask myself questions about perception, such as: How do I see other beliefs? How much closer are we (they and I) than I have admitted so far? What can I take from this experience?

Secondly, the experience created in me a new awareness of the similarities in Oriental and Occidental religious philosophies – raising the bigger question of what is Truth? I was particularly fascinated by the belief in spirits and in the belief that we are much more and far deeper than flesh and blood and by the strident expression of belief in a hereafter which even so exists as a parallel world as portrayed by your works.

The combination of sound and lighting was another thing which I found worthy of comment. It commanded reverence, meditation and a review of our use of Time (specifically: where are we hurrying to? What is all the rush about? Why do we have to move about so fast almost all the time?)

I would also say that the theme, From Shrine to Plinth was a masterstroke as it seemed to be saying: “we come to you – you don’t need to look for us or worry about coming our way – we come to you”. And come it did! Your work met me at my level and on my terms, allowing me to experience it in any sensory or extra-sensory way I decently and comfortably could.

I am willing to expatiate on these comments should the need arise. I wish you every success in your future endeavours and growth.

Best and sincerest regards,

Joseph Nwokorie, Ip.



APPENDIX III

Studies on DVD: ***Gods in the Museum***
Fragile Object Behind

I filmed ***Gods in the Museum*** in the Hotung Gallery of World Art, British Museum in 2007. It is a study of deteriorated Hindu deities, museum display conventions, and liminal experiences in the museum.

Filmed in 2007 at the V&A, ***Fragile Object Behind*** is a recording of museum staff protecting Hindu idols with plastic sheets in the display galleries. The work functions as a study and is evidential of the museum's practice of safeguarding collections.