



WELCOME TO THE CITY OF EXCESS

Exciting, astonishing, Bombay can be loved or hated, but it cannot leave you indifferent. Bombay never stops; it is a bubbling pot that always seems to be on the verge of erupting. Bombay overwhelms, repels, it is polluted and overpopulated, but it is the mirror of the India that – like Tiziano Terzani said – *“once you have seen it you can not live without it, you suffer when you are away”*.

By Maria Teresa Capacchione

Also called Maximum City, the city of excesses, as it was defined by the Indian writer Suketu Mehta, Bombay (Mumbai since 1995) is the ninth most populous city in the world and, above all, one of the most chaotic and dynamic. The way it has transformed is the mirror of a Country that still has an annual growth rate of 7% of its GDP, although the international crisis has not spared the Indian Sub Continent and has also had an important impact on the world of culture and art.

In order to understand what has happened in the past few years in Bombay, we spoke to some gallery owners, curators and artists. But first some context: in this megalopolis where about 20 million people live, there are only fifteen or so contemporary art galleries that represent the

greatest concentration of galleries across India along with those of the capital, New Delhi, that has as many.

During the period 2004-2008 Indian contemporary art gained huge momentum. If a slogan had been coined at that time – says Shireen Gandhi, owner of Chemould Prescott Road Gallery – it would have been “CONTEMPORARY ART IS TRENDING”. But the euphoria has also brought many buyers who are more interested in works as “investments” than in their artistic value.

So, when in 2008 the crisis also hit the Subcontinent, the inevitable downfall was so heavy that the recovery took longer than anyone expected. But since to a large extent the contemporary Indian scene was and is truly authentic, buyers interested in art have resurfaced and are slowly increasing, because – says Shireen Gandhi – “the galleries are serious, the artists that they present are very interesting: in the long run this is what pays in the contemporary scene.”

Another impact of the crisis on art was that on prices: “after 2008 we witnessed a sharp fall in prices of works – says Abhay Maskara owner of Gallery Maskara – but this was not matched by a lowering of the levels of artistic production, indeed, often there is an inverse relationship between price and quality of art. And if you know where to look, you realize that there are wonderful artists at the edges of the market”. Archana Hande, a very committed artist and curator whose work is deeply rooted in the “city of excesses”, is of the same opinion. In the boom years “80% of artists worked hard without being noticed by the market. And unfortunately the younger generation that was born at the time when the market was at its highest, is now in great difficulty.”

But if, on the one hand, the crisis has resulted in a contraction – of investors, prices and galleries – on the other side it has raised the level of the entire system of art: “Indian collectors have become far more sophisticated” - says Shireen Gandhi - and surviving galleries are much more cohesive and have set up the *South Mumbai Gallery Association* with the aim to concentrate efforts, communicate more effectively and build a solid base of contemporary art enthusiasts.

In a city as large as Bombay where the galleries are all concentrated in the areas of Colaba and Kala Ghoda (South Mumbai) and movements are extremely complicated because of the vast distances and traffic, monthly appointments like “Art Night Thursday” the contemporary opening of all galleries on Thursday, with extended hours, debates and meetings with artists, allows enthusiasts to enjoy the pleasure of art.

A feature that does not go unnoticed as you wander round the galleries of Bombay is the fact that almost all the artists on display are Indian, very few are foreigners. Quite a common feature in most Indian galleries, but something that in this city that is so open and cosmopolitan is particularly surprising.

The reason certainly lies in a certain pride in the culture and art of their Country, but that is not all. “Because of the unpredictable nature of the economy, which is reflected in the art market in recent years, there has not been a period of stability long enough to allow the Bombay galleries to open to international artists and therefore most collectors have remained loyal to the local art” –

sustains Matthieu Foss, a French curator who lives in Bombay and co-founder of the Focus-Photography Festival.

But also the “bureaucratic” problems and obstacles imposed by customs complicate the sale of works from abroad. The fact is that after a half-hearted attempt to open up galleries to international art undertaken a few years ago, today we have gone back to seeing almost exclusively Indian artists or artists of the Diaspora (Indians living abroad, mostly in America or the UK).

But if the opening to the outside is still a limit, what is growing is the interest in contemporary art by foundations and public museums: the National Gallery of Modern Art, the Bhau Daji Lad Museum and the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya have played an important role in recent years in facilitating relations between private galleries and public spaces, says Abhay Maskara.

And if the public does not reach art, art comes out of private spaces and invades the city, like with the FOCUS Photography Festival, a biennial event that will celebrate its third edition in 2017: “Bombay is a huge metropolis - says Matthieu Foss -, most Mumbaikars will never enter a gallery, or have access to the exhibitions in the museums. By hosting a festival that is free and open to all, we try to bring the exhibits to public spaces - continues Foss - aiming to build an interaction between the audience of Bombay and contemporary photography. And also we have chosen great themes – such as *memory* for FOCUS 2017 - that can be understood and interpreted by the many partners we work with throughout the city. The goal is to provide a platform for photographers, trying to engage the diverse audience of the city at every level of society.”

So after the crisis, since 2009 we have witnessed the consolidation and opening of art to public spaces, the emergence of more knowledgeable collectors and increasingly aware artists. What then is to be expected in the coming years on the artistic scene of this Asian megacity?

A connoisseur of Indian contemporary art like Peter Nagy, the American gallerist who looks at Bombay from the capital Delhi, where, in 1997, he opened Nature Morte, a gallery that has become an institution in India, argues that “in the last 15 years we have witnessed a huge amount of changes in the Indian art scene, I don’t think much will change again in the next 5 to 10 years. And looking ahead, I would say that the most interesting things might emerge outside the major cities of Delhi and Bombay. But the quality of the art scene will depend above all on the role that India as a country will take”.

Going beyond the boundaries of the city of Bombay, India's role is a very sensitive subject in this time when we are witnessing a strong nationalist push led by the Hindu BJP party of which the current President Narendra Modi is the ultimate expression. A hot topic that can not ignore art even if today, as claimed by Archana Hande “until Hindu nationalism intolerance, which is mounting on the political scene, dies down it will be very difficult to see any artistic practice react in a personal way. Instead, we are now seeing strong collective activism; questions are being raised by artists in different parts of the country, such as Bangalore where some artists set up the

blog VAG Forum (<https://vagforum.in/>). Hindu nationalist “fascism” is the biggest threat to the Country today and could lead to a more widespread struggle in the coming years”.

Then we will see how India and its big cities will react.



FOCUS Festival (2013)