



Anita Dube

by Philippe Vergne

Initially trained as an art historian and critic, Anita Dube's work brings together experiences of mortality, desire, pain and pleasure. Over the years she has developed an aesthetic language that privileges sculptural fragment as a cultural bearer of personal and social memories, history, mythologies and phenomenological experience. Employing a variety of found objects drawn from the regions of the industrial (foam, plastic, wire) craft (threads, beads, velvet, sequins, pearls), the somatic (dentures, bones), and the ritual and the popular (ceramic eyes), Dube explores a divergent range of subjects that addresses a very human concern with both autobiographical and societal loss and regeneration.

Her early experimentation as a practitioner, as a sculptor, was the result of her affinity with the Radical Painters and Sculptors Association from Baroda in the 1980s. This association or collective of artists emerged in the aftermath of anti-Muslim riots and aggressively leaned towards a radical-left sensibility and provided a sharp and abrasive critique and analysis of the Indian social and political situation. At that time, Dube's work was dedicated to an exploration of the human body, its tactility and its resilience. Human body parts were carved out of logs of wood in varying sizes, as autonomous pieces of sculpture assuming their own formal qualities.

The work *Desert Queen* (1996) is considered a shift in Dube's practice. From that moment, she started to work using fabric and ephemeral material. The work itself was conceived during a residency in Africa. It is made out of ropes, sequins and dyed-blue velvet. The work itself suggests a protective shield breastplate, as well as a skinned, slaughtered, spread-legged relic or animal. The object bears the ambiguity of its own status, between a woman, an animal, or goatskin bottle. With *Desert Queen*, Dube embraced a strategy which aimed towards the crystallization – in an almost Stendahlian understanding of the word – of the experiences of death, celebration, physical pain, refined aesthetic pleasure and the embodiment of desire. Such a work also brought her practice to a more conceptually-oriented methodology that draws from both traditional means and practices as well as from the language of installation art in its Western modernist acceptance. Challenging both models by merging them together, she re-introduced 'emotion' into conceptual practice, while at the same time she introduced irony and distance into a traditional language of forms – a language of forms that had become increasingly complex and referential.

With *Silence (Blood Wedding)* (1997), Dube pushed her agenda a step further. The work is an assemblage of thirteen sculptural objects displayed in pristine, transparent, Plexiglas cases. Each object is made out of bones from a dismantled human skeleton that has been stitched in red velvet and adorned with sequins. The series acknowledges once again a twin inheritance at a level that would confer with the notion of personal mythologies: one relates to the memory of her father as a surgeon, the other references her mother's skill in craft and tradition.

Here again, the body is the center. Dube has converted parts of the body, such as femurs, into the shape of a fan or a garland, making the bones resemble precious jewels. In this way her work starts to draw a very thin line distinguishing the macabre from a ravishing and enticing sophistication. Each object becomes a kind of forbidden jewel that thrives in a more than ambiguous (if not tension-filled) relation between Eros and Thanatos: a relationship that does not consider Eros without Thanatos or Thanatos without Eros. Dube embraces visually a sophisticated relation to flesh, pleasure and pain that neither Georges Bataille or Michel Foucault would have denied. But her level of sophistication, as ambiguous as it seems, never leans towards self-indulgent fetishism. Her experience, or the experience that she makes available, remains more in the field of a political perception of the world than in an exclusive eroticized perception of the body. Her previous radical political experience is still very present in her work, and the body she refers to is consciously political and critical, avoiding with grace the trap of message-based art or dogmatism. The silence that Dube suggests in her title does not call for any kind of submission but rises as a reticent and rebellious one against a conservative, exclusive "status quo." Her silence belongs more to intense desire than to quiet repression. For instance, and as she has stated many times, the use of the enticing red color resonates with alternative relationships and modes of perception: the bloody and visceral dimension of living, the different sexuality which has to do with taboos such as lesbianism, or even an Oedipal relationship: "I wanted to keep the auspiciousness of red within Hindu custom, but also profane this with the suggestions of a lesbian marriage, even an incestuous marriage. So the 'silence' here is a reversal, a rebellion that takes on death and patriarchal cocksureness."¹

Dube's own rebellion, here commitment to a liberal political agenda makes understandable her interest and commitment to the work of the 'divine marquis,' the Marquis de Sade for whom sensuousness and voluntary sexual servitude were paving the way to freedom and maybe -- more important and difficult to reach -- liberation. Part of Dube's recent body of work, *The Theater of Sade* (1998) conciliates both the political agenda and the deeply personal, if not intimate, essence and implication. The objects, evocative of feminine shapes, animal masks, or torture instruments are smoothly coated with black funeral velvet, all denoting cruelty and ritualistic violence. According to the artist, *The Theater of Sade* is "about bondage and the triumph of will. Sade's will through sex. It is about a language of compulsive psychological violence and betrayal positioned against the sacred."² Seen in this way, Dube's work is aiming to overcome morality, asceticism, fear of desires and pleasures, and to promote hedonism as an aesthetic ideal that re-invents freedom and love through non-guilty flesh, bewildered possession, and cross-gender "libertinage." Far from encouraging a fetishism of death, her work embodies a theory of the loving body; her work is a genealogy of desire.

More recently, Dube has begun working with industrially manufactured ceramic eyes that are meant to be incorporated into Hindu religious idols commonly found in Indian temples. Site-specific in their installation, she began to affix these variably-size eyes to the spots in the ceiling where the walls of a room form a corner (*Intimations of Mortality*, 1997). According to the artist, "these eyes are like people for me and this could speak of large migration in history. It also has to do with the village-city migration that is fraught with despair. Lastly it could be cells growing from the other like a viral disease."³ She also stresses that the material is a popular votive object

in her cultural context that is used 'ritually' to sanctify an idol.⁴ In her hands, this popular marker is transgressed in order to enter a secular, subjective, and political framework. This framework invokes, through the clustering of the eyes, the both revolutionary hordes and fascist formation. To Dube each eye is a person, a human substance reduced to its smallest denominator, its essential, horrifying condition.

On the other hand, such installations provide a disturbing sexualization of the architecture itself. How can one forget how Giacometti saw in the eye a symbolic equivalent of an open vagina, and how the vagina has been compared to a "third eye," a sophisticated antenna that never sleeps and remote-senses the data it receives. Once again her use of sculptural fragments, of fragmented body parts, invokes a humanists critical agenda as well as a need for permanent uncompromising transgression as the underlying matrix of her practice. Her work is an aggressive metaphor that threatens the established order: the order of a country structured on multiple divisions from the caste system, to religious difference, to gender barriers, and the order of canon imposed either by tradition or by the dogmatism of modernism. Because she permanently aims to liberate her own practice and its genealogy, she embodies what Homi K. Bhabha has called a "relocation of culture." The alternative she proposes is constructed on contradiction and ambiguity and therefore belongs to a middle ground, a metaphorical third space as well as a third sex.

1. Kamala Kapoor, "Sieve-O-Physis: An Interview with Anita Dube," *Art Asia Pacific*, Issue 26, Sydney, 2000.
2. Anita Dube from a statement about her series *The Theater of Sade*.
3. Yashodhara Dalmia, "From Bone Sculptures to Krishna Idols," *The Art News Magazine of India*; Vol V. Issue III.
4. In an unpublished e-mail conversation with Walker Art Center curator Douglas Fogle, on July 17th, 2002.

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Statement by the artist on *Silence (Blood Wedding)*, 1997.

Lady Macbeth washes her hands again and again in a sink; a blunt-injury trauma brings on an abortion – the beloved child long held in the womb flows out as fragments; Lorca's *Blood Wedding* in the pitched sounds of the *barat* band playing *dil hai ki manta nahin*. At the *Kalka Mandir* a *sadhu* senses my despair, says something about the position of the planets – the trajectory of my fate -- and sells a stone ring I want for my work for fifty rupees. A few stalls away and a few days later I buy similar rings from a shirt-pant-clad salesman from Manipuri for five rupees each. Velvet, the velvet of your skin (is warm), bones – the fragments of my death (are cold). I dye the white cloth red to bathe my ancient bones like a taxidermist – in the material of fire and blood. The anatomy lessons of my father mix with the vulnerable, embroidered tablecloths of my mother; Dehavada traditions join with the skills of old Muslim artisans. History sleeps with art on a phenomenological earth-bed.

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