INDIAN POST-DIGITAL AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT
The artwork by Rajkamal Aich, presented in this photo-essay, is an example of post-digital aesthetics. His work combines photography with drawing and thereby creates new visions and contexts of mundane objects. A deconstruction of his work and an evaluation of the production context allow an understanding of this decidedly Indian form of what has been called post-digital aesthetics. Viewing and analysing his artwork provides an understanding of one contemporary form of art in India, as it develops at the crossroads of photography, digital art and classical painting.

KEYWORDS
India, digital photography, art, photography, visual art, painting, Indian art

BIO
Katja Müller is a social anthropologist with research interests in visual anthropology, material culture, museum and digital anthropology, as well as environmental anthropology. She has been with the Leipzig ethnographic museum for three years, and received her PhD with a thesis on colonial photographs and objects from India. In 2015 she joined the Halle University, where she is researching digitization of cultural heritage. For this work she has been affiliated with the Centre for Digital Anthropology, UCL London. Additionally, since 2014 she has been working for UTSydney on coal and renewable energy projects.

Rajkamal Aich is a data visualizer, infographist and photographer based in India. He received his Bachelor of visual arts from Government College of Art and Craft, Kolkata, and has been working with Times of India and Economic Times, among others. In 2016 he became art director at TV 18. His artwork and paintings has been featured nationally and internationally in newspapers, magazines, books and online media.

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Post-digital aesthetics

Post-digital aesthetics has gained ground and attention as a term for contemporary art produced with digital means, albeit with focus decidedly on Euro-American art production. It is situated in a European art tradition that tries to term eras of art, such as postmodernism or impressionism. Post-digital art is less to be understood as art after the digital age, but rather combines a notion of digital with the post of post-colonialism or post-feminism (see Cramer 2014). It is art that is well aware of the digital turn in all levels of contemporary life and recognises it as a given. It consequently situates itself in this context, be it through applying digital means excessively, through criticising aspects of it, or through a retro movement preferring analogue methods or appearances. James Bridle (2012) coined the term new aesthetic for similar visualities in art. He draws attention to how machine generated images influence human ways of seeing: we are very much accustomed to street view and satellite views. Digital renderings and virtual realities allow for the distinction between image-making and 'the real world' to dissolve. Algorithmic categorisation influences the way we see things. And in digital photography it is the tools we use that shape us and our ways of seeing – an aspect that is not new to digital and online photography, "[b]ut what seem contemporary are the rapid shifts between tool-using and tool-shaping – decompiling,

reverse-engineering, hacking and rapidly iterating those technologies" (Bridle 2012: 71). This allows a rapid and multiple skipping from the physical world to the digital one, back and forth. This again changes the way we perceive of and deal with photography, this supposedly objective depiction of the truth, and other images.

Digital photography

For Indian post-media aesthetics, the role of photography plays an essential role. Drawing on Rajkamal Aich's artworks as an example for Indian post-media aesthetics, we can see that photography has become an omnipresent medium. Aich uses digital photographs of (Indian) everyday scenes or objects as a background or basis of his work.
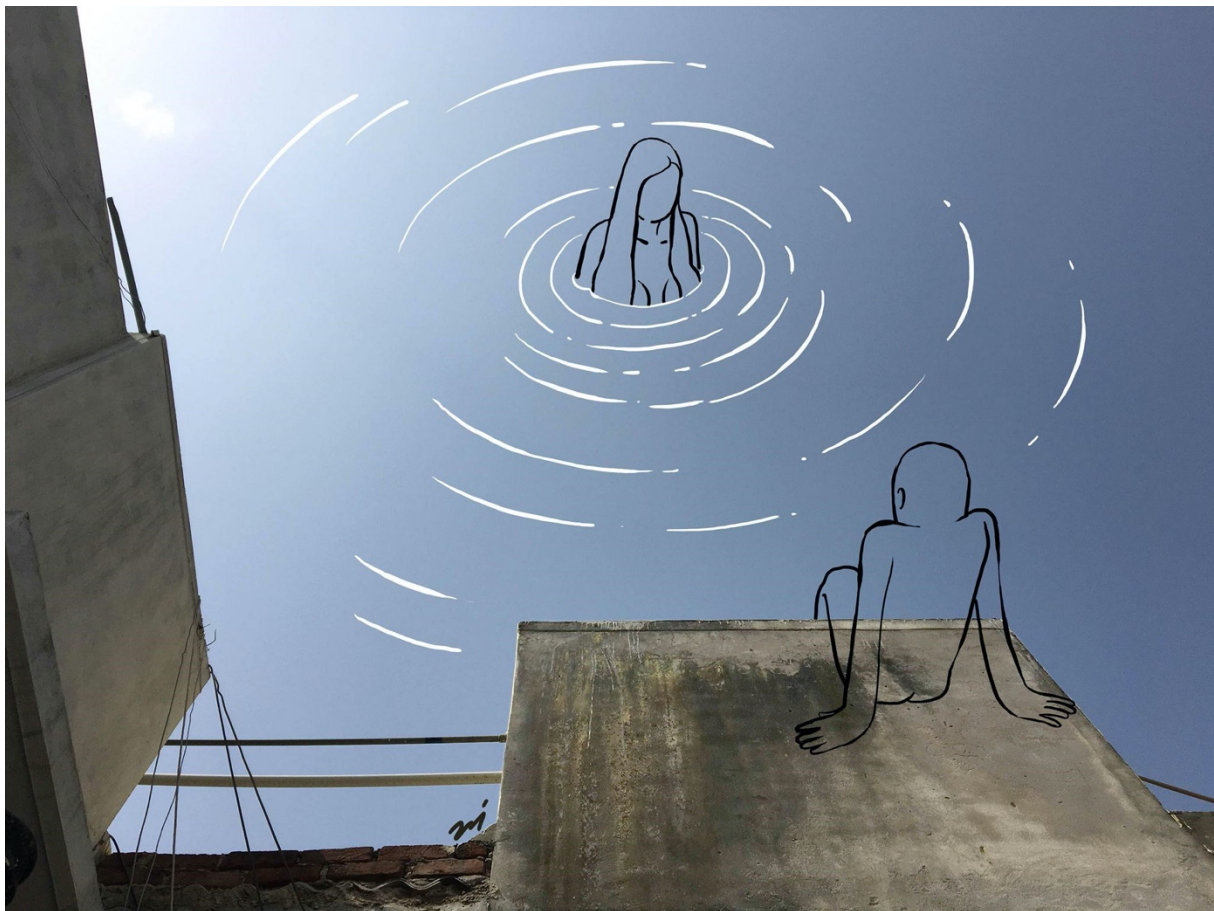
FIGURE 1: Washed off concrete rises into the sky in many Indian cities. Aich photographed the common sight, that he – like so many others – see every day.

FIGURE 2: Auto rikshaws, in the typical yellow-green colours, are not only in Delhi a common sight. The drivers usually wear a uniform and are like this one often stuck in traffic.

FIGURE 3: Paying attention to the details of the everyday: Aich captured parts of a neon tube, a plug, a cut off cable, and a pipe, referring to common improvisations of infrastructure.

FIGURE 4: A street seen from inside a shop: Again constructed as a trivial 'snapshot', this photo shows typical traffic in the background – motorbikes, a car, an auto rikshaw – and the common paper plastic packed sliced white bread in the foreground.

The everyday scenes and objects resort to the usualness of photography as a medium. Aich rightfully assumes that photography in India has been moving from its conventional division into family studio photography and professional photography towards a medium where the distinction between lay and professional photography is vanishing and where private photography is not restricted to being photographed on special occasions.

The country has its own history of photography, which is intertwined with European developments. Photo cameras were first introduced to the subcontinent in the 1840s; the first photo studios opened in the 1860s. The first decades saw photography in India to be a medium of the upper classes and their ambition to be portrait in photo studios, and at the same time the British ambitions to document, regulate and rule the country. After independence, at the latest, photo studios also became a place for 'the common man' having his photo taken, while single members of the Indian upper and middle class became professional photographers. Mass market cameras entered Indian households only slowly. In the 1970s the Click III became hugely popular, but with a cost of 300 Rupees remaining a status symbol that not everyone could afford.

The worldwide introduction of digital photography in the early 1990s saw also in India a subsequent move away from the process of exposing a light sensitive carrier material to ultraviolet light towards capturing a scene through sensors, which write information based on binary code on a storage medium. The advent of digital cameras co-occurred with the market liberalisation of the country in 1991, facilitating easier access to the medium's hardware. It was technical changes in combination with easier access to the medium that changed the way professionals, lay photographers, and viewers relate to the medium. Photography became more and more ubiquitous, and the distinction between professional and amateur photography began to diminish.

Today, digital photography and its online dissemination peaks worldwide at an estimated capture of a million selfies a day, 350 million photos being uploaded on Facebook (in 2013, Smith 2013), 40 billion on Instagram (in 2015[1]), and a multitude of this abundance of digital photographs on online and offline storage devices. India contributes to these numbers, with Indian internet users accounting for 462 million, and 250 million Indian active social media users (in 2018[2]).[3] Digital photography has especially among the new (rich) Indian middle class become an integral part of everyday life (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007, Upadhya and Vasavi 2008). Photography is no longer only used for documenting special occasions, but for capturing everyday life. It becomes less a medium for memory making, but increasingly one for communicating current experiences (van Dijck 2007). Technical contexts of digital cameras and the internet slightly alter viewing habits, as spectators are no longer used to seeing only perfect photographs or extraordinary scenes, but photography as a common medium entered as good as every aspect of Indian lives.

Painting and drawing

Rajkamal Aich's photographs of mundane objects and scenes display these viewing habits in the age of digital photography. He does not foreground this ubiquity, but uses it as a background that he enhances with his brushstrokes and pencil drawings.

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[1] According to https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instagram#User_characteristics_and_behavior.
[2] https://www.statista.com/statistics/309866/india-digital-population/.
[3] The penetration of digital photography is, however, by no means equal across the country and its citizens, but remains stratified according to class and caste. Class and caste influence access to smart phones, photo cameras and the internet, leading to a digital divide that also the comparatively low-priced data bundles can't offset.

FIGURE 5: Caption: Locks are used to seal the dented shutters of a shop or store. Aich painted a woman's head on the photograph, turning the three locks into the lady's ear jewellery.

FIGURE 6: The common man or the common woman can with their smartphone cameras now easily click away and capture everything. Here Aich photographed the floor: A scrunched chai cup and a cigarette butt on the dusty, brownish grey ground. Through Aich's brushstrokes they become the setting for a cat curling on a sofa, underneath a floor lamp.

FIGURE 7: Aich also singles out objects through masking it out or cropping the background. Here, a dung cake becomes a woman's bun, and both the bun and the dung cake are part of everyday life in India. Aich makes use of objects and scenes, which especially an Indian spectator will be most familiar with, and which furthermore are gaining acknowledgement as being if not 'worth' so at least not being objected to being photographed.

Other than 'common people' might do or think, Aich's artwork requires a careful and conscious creation process. He frames, selects, waits for the right light. He buys adequate equipment from small box cameras to high-quality paper, to flowers or cow dung. He likes to control every detail of a photograph in order for the idea to come out most brilliantly and for him to establish a connection to the art he creates, which consequently enables him to create good and meaningful pieces of art.

Through the selection and framing processes as well as his drawing, Aich expresses himself as the trained professional artist that he is. Growing up in Kolkata with his father Samir Aich, being a renowned artist himself, the Rajkamal Aich has encountered art, artists and the Bengali art scene early in his life. After graduating from high school, he was admitted to the reputed Government College of Art and Craft, Kolkata, where after five years of training he graduated in visual arts. His artwork and paintings have gained national and international attention, being featured in several books on visual art as well as in online and offline newspapers and magazines.

FIGURE 8: *Aich has a professional training in art and worked in visual art for several years. This expresses in his CV both in form and content.*

FIGURE 9: Aich has been working for Times of India for several years; his designs also embellished the newspaper's front page.

Aich's artwork might seem at first glance to be not the most expressional or sophisticated paintwork. We argue that this is one aspect of post-digital aesthetics he incorporates: The accelerated speed of visual flow provides the average viewer with less time to take an image in. Hence Aich creates pieces that are easy to grasp. Yet, his artwork at the same time subtly asks the viewer to think out of the box. It disrupts the mentioned conventions of seeing omnipresent photography. Aich adds brushstrokes that create a different scene on top of the photograph. Aich unsettles the habits we developed through the ubiquity of photography, assuming that photos can be taken at all times and that they portrait what is there at a given time. He challenges the viewer to see things differently, to see things that are not so obvious, but nonetheless potentially present in the photo.

It can be argued that this request to use your imagination in everyday life comes with a slight undermining of photography as being an objective medium. This critique, already voiced before the introduction of digital photography, can be understood as being embedded in externalizing the 'beyond' of colloquial photography. There is a sheer endless potential for 'seeing' in photographs, that Aich taps on. He frames the photograph, not only in terms of using the photo camera as a technical devise to do so, but also by inserting artistically his view of the scene.

FIGURE 10: Scratches in the wall turn into planes' vapour trails.

FIGURE 11: Aich makes us see the ordinary differently, so that a carelessly discarded, broken rubber band on concrete becomes a girl's jumping rope.

FIGURE 12: Directing the view and the imagination: Aich drew a paper-like white moon on a weathered wall that he photographed. He thereby converts the bamboo ladder leaning on this wall into a staircase to the sky.

Indian post-digital aesthetics

In sum, when reading Rajkamal Aich's artwork as an example for Indian post-digital aesthetics, we find an expression of these in the context of India's changing relation to photography: Once a medium characterized by a colonial agenda and photo studios, the access to digital cameras in combination with an increased visualisation in an ever-expanding internet use (especially of social network sites), photography understandably plays a major role in contemporary aesthetic. Indian post-digital aesthetics is thereby rooted in the new rich Indian middle class, in which a digital life has become a given. The Indian middle class has always had a strong relation to fine arts, be it visual arts, literature or music, especially in Bengal and Kolkata. It does thus not come as a surprise to see the new aesthetics here in combination with artistry from that area. Aich in his artwork draws and paints with electronic and felt pen, pencil and colour onto and around photography, resorting to his rootedness and studies in Bengali fine art.

In reverting to graphic art and photography, Rajkamal Aich finds a way to cater to the taste of his employers in newspaper and television media. It allows him to be creative as well as make a living

through his artistic skills. With regards to contemporary aesthetics, this style can be understood as way of dealing with the accelerated speed of media perception in the age of the internet. With the amount of visuals increasing and the span of attention diminishing, his comparatively easy to grasp visual artworks exemplify another aspect of an aesthetics situated in the context of changing acquaintance with especially digital photography and art.

This leads to the question of haptics, requiring further investigation. The haptics of an art piece are less relevant – in India as in other countries – when it comes to art disseminated online. The human-computer interface has replaced the physicality of a 'conventional' art object. The calibration of the screen, the adaptability of websites and editing software is now the (material) infrastructure determining the perception of net art, of digital photography and online videos. Rajkamal Aich, for example, uses exclusively digital photography, and paints also with digital pens. However, he refers to a handful of earth, mounted and framed in a white wooden frame as the most meaningful piece of art he has ever created. It is earth that Aich brought from a visit to his ancestral place in Bangladesh. He brought it for his grandfather who could not make the journey back to the place from where he once migrated from during the partition of India and Pakistan.

FIGURE 13: The framed crumbs of soil from his ancestral place in Bangladesh decorate the walls of Rajkamal Aich's home.

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