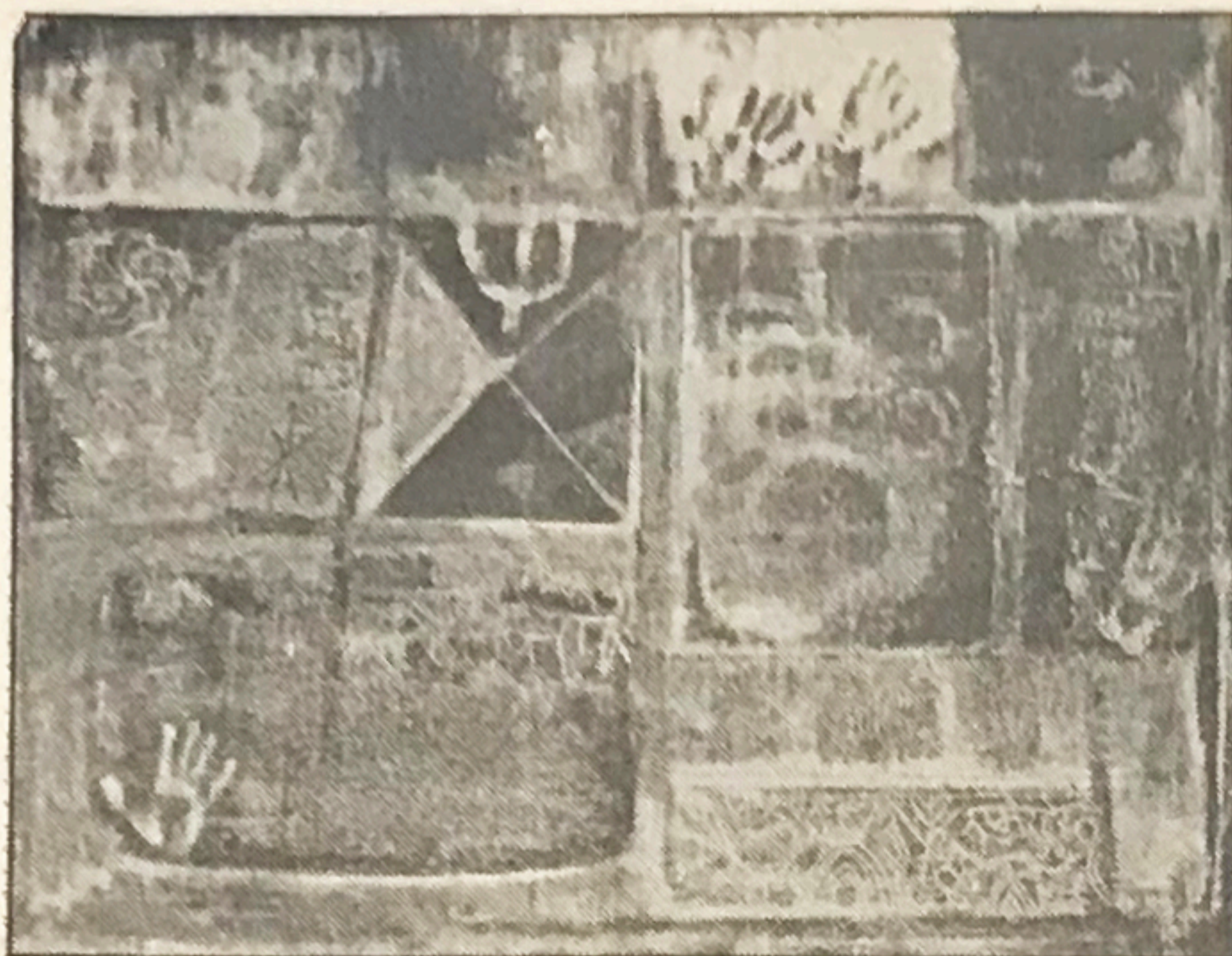


An exposition of vulnerability

by Chaitanya Sambrani



J. Swaminathan
(oil on canvas 1965)

An exhibition of paintings, sculpture and prints was organised at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda from 9-12 December concurrently with the UGC National Seminar. The exhibition was curated by Chaitanya Sambrani. Excerpts from the catalogue essay.

DOING this exhibition has entailed for me a challenge not only because of its size or the somewhat ambitious scope of its argument. I was faced with the choice of dealing with the subject in a dry, scholarly, documentary manner or of writing unconventionally, allowing myself to be moved by the work I was dealing with - for without doubt, we are looking at some of the most remarkably intense work produced

in India in the first section. I have chosen at the risk of losing out on academic sophistication and rigour, to follow the latter course - perhaps it is a better way to do justice to my subject.

I believe that the art historian/critic is before everything a writer; a craftsman with words. My work joins that of the others, on the wall - written in response to their times and mine and hopefully entering into a dialogue with its readers.

Act I In Search of the Encounter : Group 1890 revisited

The Group 1890 was formed in a meeting of artists from various parts of the country held at Bha-

vnagar on August 25-26, 1962. It derives its name simply from the house of J. Pandya, who was host to the conferring artists.' (from the Group 1890 catalogue, 1963).

The first (and only) show of the Group was held at Rabindar Bhavan, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi in October 1963. The exhibition was inaugurated by the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in the presence of Octavio Paz, Mexican writer and Ambassador to India.

The participating artists were, Ambadas, Jyoti Bhatt, Eric Bowen, Raghav Kaneria, Rajesh Mehra, Reddeppa Naidu, S.G. Nikam, Balkrishna Patel, Jeram Patel, Himmat Shah, G.M. Sheikh and J. Swaminathan (to whom the Gro-



Raghav Kaneria Scarecrow
(welded steel 1963)

up 1890 manifesto is attributed).

'Those who worship ignorance live in gloom; and they who believe in knowledge live in greater gloom.' (from the Upanishads quoted on the cover of *Contra* '66 no. 5-6, a journal edited by J. Swaminathan, 1967).

Implicit within the unfolding of the rhetoric toward the 'undefining' of art in the Group 1890 manifesto is the admission of a search for an unknown. A search which is worked out as a series of denials of established notions about art, a series of *neti, neti* statements. Perhaps, it would be wrong to say that the search is entirely for that which is not known - perhaps it is a search for that which is known elementarily in some secret corner of the mind. Perhaps, it is an endeavour to unlock, to enter into and to tap the potential of this secret corner, making it the *raison d'être* for one's life, one's work. A search carried out amid a host of confusions, a search which nevertheless displays a lucidity, an honesty that does not stop short of exposing one's vulnerabilities; for do not rebellion and provocative positions entail an acknowledgement of insufficiency, an offering up of oneself as a target? As Octavio Paz puts it 'To say that we don't know with entire certainty where we are going is a proof of lucidity. The unexpected would be if somebody actually knew it. Does any of our pedagogues, moralists, leaders or philosophers, know it?' (Group 1890 catalogue, 1963).

To my mind there are clearly two ways approaching the moment of 1890: by going back in time to scrutinise the reasons and circumstances about the coming together of this group of artists; and by situating that moment - and (therefore) one's own - in relation to each other. These options would tend to merge into one another at some point and that is how it should be, for the pursuit of knowledge can never truly be unilinear.

The coming together of these artists at that moment was perhaps prompted by strategic reasons - both economic and otherwise. The limited extent of patronage to art in India in the 1960s did not allow too many to make a living as free-lance artists. There were a precious few art exhibitions of prestige - the National Exhibition of the Lalit Kala Akademi and the Annual Exhibition of the Bombay Art Society among them. A National Award was still a great achievement to be hoped for in the pursuit of a successful career.

There was simultaneously a feeling of dissatisfaction among these

artists who came to age in the early 60s - nothing was happening, as Gulam Mohammed Sheikh puts it - a dissatisfaction resulting from the work of the elder generation as well as their own, which seemed to be following comfortably in the dual pursuit of formalistic adherence to concerns with line, colour, space, etc., and of a broad 'position' of a sovereign, national, Indian identity informed with a humanist preoccupation.

It would be a quite a natural alliance then, which is formed among young artists seeking to find a space to speak (and to be heard from), to find a collective voice to their discontent.

In retrospect the 'Moment of Group 1890' (term used by Vivan Sundaram) becomes significant in that it marks a watershed in the development of the modern in India. The explicit denial of history in the Group 1890 Manifesto seen literally may lead one to the conclusion of an anti - modernist reactionism, a premature leap into the post - Modern, as it were. However, if one takes into account the idea that by the early 1960s independence and sovereignty had come to be values consolidated in the dominant culture, it becomes clear that as alternate identity (or non-identity, in this case) needs to be posited in spaces other than either that of the imagined past - tradition - to which fidelity/connections must be made evident or of the catch - up - with - the - west agenda of Nehruvian policy. Getting the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to inaugurate the show is now significant of a tongue - in - cheek gesture of rebellion, especially when seen in relation to J. Swaminathan urging that 'Indian artists take the risky stand taken by all artists worth the name everywhere; that of being in opposition to the ruling culture.'

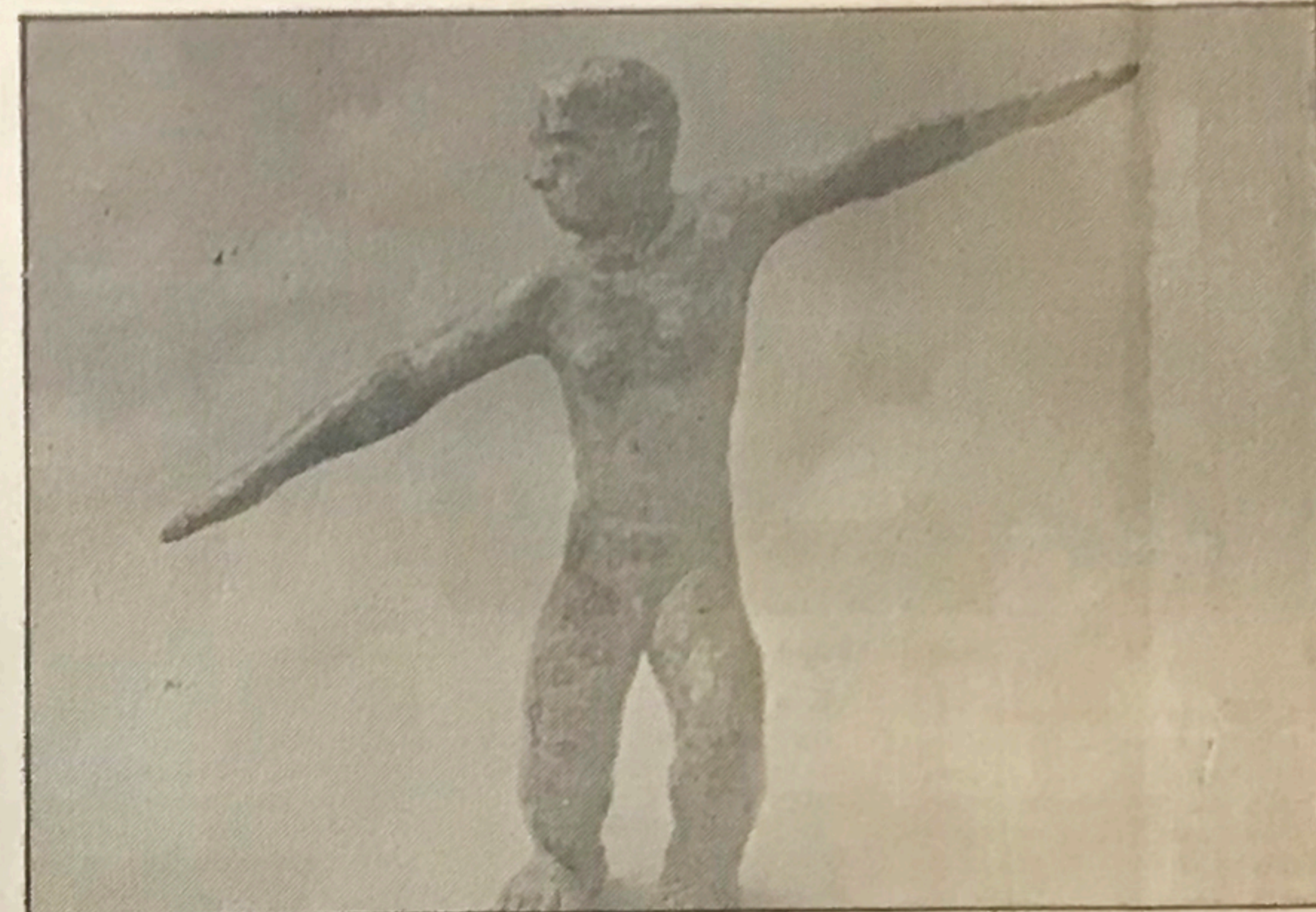
Here then is the point of the coming of age of the modern in India, a place of great fecundity from where many paths branch out for the artists involved and for those who set out to follow them.

ACT II Characterising My Generation: Six Young Artists. Artists represented: Kriti Arora, H. G. Arunkumar, Avantika Bawa, Shruti Nelson, Parvaize, Praneet Soi.

'How shall I characterise my generation? In a sense, nothing has ever happened to us; most of us have almost no public life, no party or nation; no public event has shattered our lives...; we've never been forced to clarify our values. It's perhaps more difficult for us than for the Weimar generation to identify heroes and villains; the villains are inside us. So many 'heavyweight' subject matter is more likely to be drawn from another place or historical epoch than out of our own present predicament.' (the British artist and critic, Timothy Hyman, 1981).

The exhibition occupied two separate rooms, but I intended for them to be seen in relation to each other. I say *relation* at the risk of sounding vague but that is deliberate; not that I want to emphasize the value of ambiguity at this juncture. Rather, that is the very point of the argument: the artist - rebels of the sixties in the other hall were speaking in many voices, disparate notes that yet had a common denominator - that of a passionate search for authenticity.

We, on the other hand, though we speak in many tongues feel simultaneously tongue-tied at the idea of articulating a dialogue with



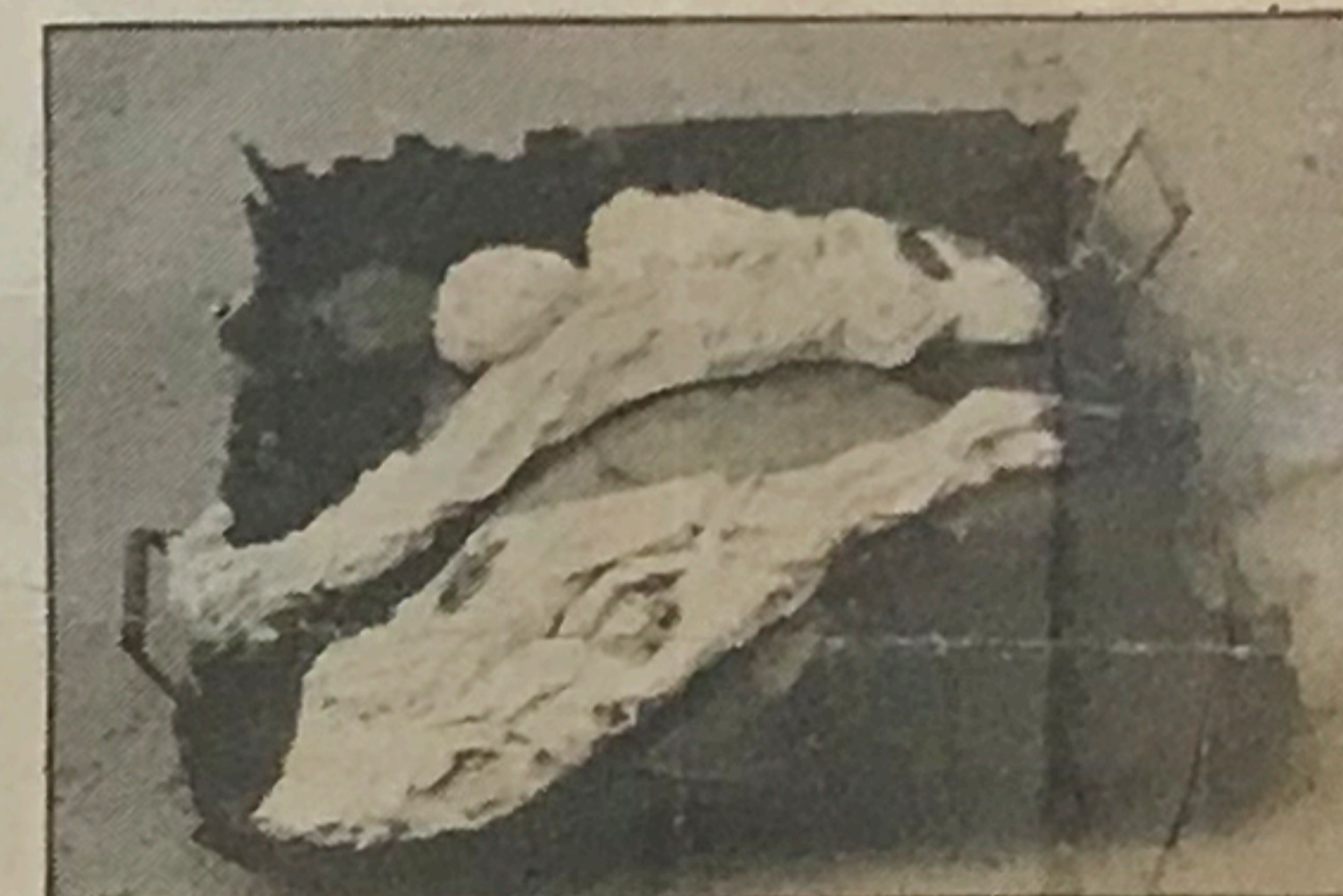
H. G. Arun Kumar Platform (Bronze 1994)

out predecessors (whom most of us have come to know in the first place as artists of established stature). The question is: how precisely do I address the passion of Swaminathan who spoke of the 'threshold for the passage into the state of freedom', or the explosive-and chilling-candour of Jeram Patel when he denied the ideal of 'create'ing art? What shall I say to the liberationist zeal of those who spoke so eloquently and so convincingly of anarchy and of a destructive aesthetic? (That there is a need to articulate such a dialogue I have already argued in the previous section. The relevance of the possibility if any, of this dialogue should get clarified as we proceed hence).

We are the inheritors of a savaged environment and of a social order barely holding its own against the inexorable pressures of overpopulation, of ethnic strife: a world constantly teetering on the brink of collapse. Sardar Sarovar, Bosnia, Jammu and Kashmir, Ayodhya, Bombay, Rwanda, Somalia, Haiti, Nagpur...the list is endless.

And yet we are told to believe in the global village - as if AT&T possess an answer to all the world's problems; trust me - the operator's frozen smile flashes from the billboards - and I shall put you through.

What do we know of liberalisation, we whose faculties for sensitivity and for rational thought have successively and ruthlessly been be-numbed by a constant bombardment



Kriti Arora Untitled (Newspaper, plaster and tin cans 1994)

of desensitizing messages - from - the media. Media which seek to embody, to completely and seamlessly portray an unending vista of a golden globe - to give us/to wrap up us as it were in an inexhaustible reel of gigantic film with no cuts, no retakes as it zips through, glosses over an increasingly abbreviated world, where Marilyn Monroe grins from the neon jungle beckoning us into the wonderland the real world where presidents eat out of the hands of film stars - and where a Prime Minister sits at the feet of god-men prior to discussing state policy.

What meaning then, can authenticity have for us, we who have witnessed without murmur the very

notion of the authentic being short-circuited through predigested forms of ready-to eat consumables - whether material or ideational? We who must then turn to a Bob Dylan, a John Beaz, a Bob Marley, or in a different sense, to a Swaminathan or a Jeram Patel for emancipation and a renewal of faith in the value of rebellion.

There are no answer blowing in the mind here for no winds blow upon this desolation of the mind; where the market poses as the sole arbiter of values, where the chant of *Bigger, Better, Faster, More* seeks to become the mantra to salvation.