# Dashrath Patel's non-aligned alignments

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TO the possible surprise of those who believe that the history of new media art in India began in the 1990s, I would like to revisit a moment in the late 1960s, when the polymath artist, designer and institution builder Dashrath Patel was engaged in a heroic struggle to present a multi-screen projection. The critic Sadanand Menon writes, 'In 1967, Dashrath… creat[ed] a 9-screen 360° projection of "A Journey in India" for the India pavilion at the Montreal Fair, with no access to high-tech equipment. Faced with the task of having to create a "circarama" effect, he devised a plywood housing for nine cameras which he would wear around his neck. Linked to a single remote shutter release apparatus, the cameras facing different directions would go off simultaneously to create the effect of "shooting in the round".'[1]

I retrieve this pioneering moment from the exhibition history of world art fairs as part of a prehistory for new media practices in India that lies outside the domain of the visual arts constructed by its gallery-sanctioned practitioners. I intend, therefore, to emphasize the deficits of reception that have prevented the Indian art world from recognizing and embracing Patel's transmedia experiments as a model of alternative practice.[2] This despite Patel's contribution to the art world as a respected contemporary of M.F. Husain, V.S. Gaitonde and Tyeb Mehta.

My example demonstrates the pernicious effect of the Chinese walls separating different sectors of the Indian cultural domain. Indian designers and architects have long treated the trade fair pavilion as a locus of innovation that feeds directly into their ongoing practice.[3] By contrast, Indian artists, struggling to secure the high, inviolable ground of studio practice, have typically stigmatized any seemingly 'commercial' demand made on the artistic imagination (excepting from the gallery system, of course) as a dilution or contamination. This Brahminical aversion promoted the cult of the single author and aesthetic autonomy, a distaste for collaboration, a segregation between the 'pure' fine arts and the 'commercial' applied arts, and the condescension of academy trained artists towards subaltern practitioners denigrated as 'folk' and 'tribal' artists. To the Indian art world of the late 1960s, the 1967 Montreal World Fair would occupy the questionable realm of trade fairs and expos.
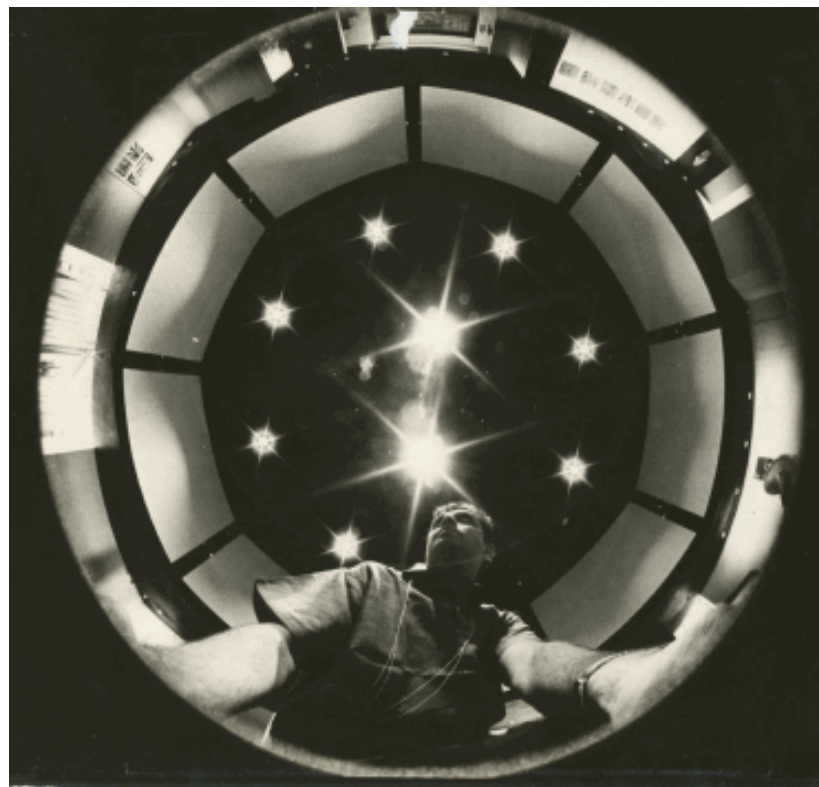
Dashrath Patel surrounded by his 9-screen projection, India Pavilion, Montreal World Fair, 1967. Image courtesy The Dashrath Patel Museum.

Thus Patel's transmedia installations and exhibition design for national and international exhibitions were seen as a commercial, organizational activity rather than as part of an expanded art practice. Today, with the Chinese walls having partially come down, Patel ought to be seen as a pioneer of new media art and an artist-curator of mammoth exhibitions and happenings. As we have observed, the lack of definitive nomenclature leaves practitioners marooned outside history; hence the urgency on my part to research and resurrect this narrative.

As founder-secretary of the National Institute of Design (NID), Patel laid the foundation for professional design practice in India, nurturing the institution for two decades from the early sixties to the early eighties.[4] An influential pedagogue for several generations of design students, Patel initiated and developed courses in visual communication, exhibition design and ceramics. At NID and afterwards, he was chief designer for major state-commissioned exhibitions at home and overseas.

A Nehruvian initiative, NID was international in its outlook from the beginning, seeking collaborators in India and elsewhere. One of the earliest and most significant of these collaborations was with the legendary American designers and educational filmmakers, Charles and Ray Eames. Indeed, NID was instituted on the basis of 'The

India Report' prepared by the Eameses in 1958[5] and commissioned by the Indian government to assess the feasibility of a design institute to aid small-scale industries.

The Eameses' research was funded by the Ford Foundation. Its interests aligned with those of America's military-industrial complex, the foundation was an important conduit for American soft power initiatives during the Cold War. The Ford Foundation presence in India is an example of Nehru's adroitly pragmatic response to the Cold War, which took the form of non-alignment, equidistance from both the USA and the USSR. Having liberated themselves from colonialism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, many of Asia and Africa's new nation states found solidarity under the banner of non-alignment, aspiring to a non-polarized cultural and political regeneration.

NID's teachers and students were products of this confident globalism, which gave Indians the freedom to seek affinities with both blocs of the Cold War rather than engage in futile agonism. Patel interacted and worked with many architects and designers at NID, including the Eameses, Louis Kahn and Otto Frei, as well as polymaths from the Ulm and Bauhaus schools. However, I would contend that the NID design vocabulary in general and Patel's practice in particular were shaped by the Eamesian desire for feverish invention,[6] which had manifested itself in the production of spectacular transmedia exhibitions like 'Glimpses of the USA' (1958) and the IBM pavilion at the New York World's Fair (1964 and 1965). The Eameses had refined the practice of using old and new media to thrill, entertain and introduce audiences to a gamut of subjects from mathematics to history, computers to space science. Taking advantage of mass media such as film and mass venues such as the expo, they engaged directly with the new public that was coming into being in the aftermath of World War II.

While most commentators of The India Report become fixated on the Eameses' valorization of the design of the *lota* – the humble multipurpose Indian vessel – they seem to miss its location within the deep history of communications technology and its role in the larger military industrial complex of the Cold War era of the 1950s and 1960s. To understand what the Eameses meant when they alluded to the challenges that would be faced by a future 'communication oriented society' in The India Report, I would like to analyze an early instructional film, 'A Communications Primer' which they made in 1953.

The primer, a sensorial delight caroming off various fields and theatres of action: mathematics, visual arts, trade, warfare and early computing, was based on Claude Shannon's mathematical model of communication. Like many illustrious mathematicians in the Anglo-American world, Shannon (one of the founders of information theory and of the modern digital computer) had been drafted into the Allied military effort tasked with breaking Nazi communications codes. While deciphering secret communications, Shannon came upon the simple but profound insight that even the most public of utterances involves a code.

The Eameses deploy Shannon's elegant diagram of communication in the primer to demonstrate the distinction between noise and signal. They offer the example of the exchange of messages between two stockbrokers' offices. As the words 'buy' and 'sell' flash on the screen, the voice-over points out that 'noise' acts electronically to change 'sell' to 'self'. Now do we see this as just a case of incorrect transmission as the voice-over directs us or does this communications error hide an existential parable in plain sight. This slippage between the act of 'selling' and 'self-making' is too tantalizing to be left undeciphered. I would contend that this predicament was definitive of both the Eameses' and of Patel's practice (each in their own contexts enjoyed the patronage of the industrialists and the state) and had to negotiate a tricky balance between artistic freedom and political complicity. I have deliberately chosen to read the careers and choices of the Eameses and Patel in proximity with each other to show that despite stark differences of political and cultural contexts there are significant points of affinity (more on this later).

The reference to Shannon in the film is not just to satisfy an academic curiosity regarding communications theory, the acknowledgements at the end of the film signal Eameses' familiarity with the military, scientific, ascendancy that played a pivotal role in the Second World War and continued into the Cold War. Sharing space with Shannon are the names of John von Neumann,[7] Oppenheimer and Norbert Wiener.[8] Neumann was a member of the Manhattan Project led by the US, the UK and Canada, which produced the atom bomb that annihilated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Unlike Oppenheimer, Neumann remained unrepentant to the end of his life, refusing to acknowledge the horrors of technological warfare. In retrospect, we can see how the shadowy development of wartime technology existed in parallel with everyday peacetime applications.

At the end of the film, the Eameses caution us that we should not be controlled by machines but should be able to control them. Whether in *A Communications Primer* or *The Information Machine* (1958),

they urge their viewers to take 'responsibility' for the choices they make in relation to the use of the computer or its predecessor, the electronic calculator, to exert human agency in harnessing technology in a polymathic and imaginative manner.

If Patel waged an Ixionesque struggle with multimedia technology at the Montreal World Fair, I would draw the reader's attention to the self-portrait he produced there, which shows no signs of the struggle. Shot from a low angle, Patel looks regal and statuesque, illuminated by a starburst of lights, ready to broadcast from outer space. A 360° multimedia projection surrounds him, waiting to tell the story of a young nation. The images that were projected on these screens bring us down from intergalactic orbit to India's everyday life: not the Eamesian cloverleaf highways of the *Glimpses of the USA*, but auto-orientalized street and market scenes dense with people of different classes, castes, ethnicities and regions. This density is attended by a sense of flux: people constantly in motion, the country represented as a work in progress.

How do we reconcile Patel's artistic project of self-presentation with India's ideological project of representing itself to the world, aimed at propagating a monolithic image of the country? Did Patel compromise his imagination by acting as a cultural spokesperson for the nation? Like the Eameses, Patel was, in the best sense, a creative opportunist; he made full use of the opportunities to travel, experiment with the latest technologies and profit from intercultural encounters. The 1967 self-portrait shows anything but a compromised figure. He strikes the confident pose of an artist-inventor.

Patel was not averse to creating monumental exhibits even when the subject demanded something more modest, as is evident from his involvement with the Gandhi centenary exhibition, 'The World is My Family' (Delhi, 1969). Inspired by Otto Frei's tensile structures, Patel designed an airy, minimalist pavilion to cover 16,000 sq feet of exhibition space. Since its plastic coated khadi roof weighed several tons, he devised an ingenious system that would permit ease of construction and dismantling; later, he would grandiloquently tell the journalist Sunil Mehra: 'The principle employed to bring it down was [the] same [one] they used in transporting blocks of stone for pyramids.'[9]

But then again Patel's penchant for grand projects did not prevent him from introducing simple 'listening posts' into the exhibition, for viewers to encounter Gandhi's speeches intimately (sound art *avant la lettre*). Patel and the Eameses mediated between the registers of entertainment and education.

For instance, at the Eameses' spectacular IBM pavilion at the New York World's Fair (1964/1965), an ovoid theatre (the 'Information Machine') was equipped with multiple screens, live performances and a seated audience that was raised fifty feet high by a hydraulic lift.[10] It is in the Cold War context of the race for space and innovative digital communication that the Eameses' IBM intervention must be viewed. Yet, below the theatre was the modest exhibition, 'Mathematica: A World of Numbers… and Beyond', where pedagogy was articulated through play: abstract mathematical conundrums were explained through three-dimensional models and graphics without diminishing the poetics of scientific discovery. A millennium of mathematical discoveries unfolded on the 'History Wall': this ingenious timeline 'Men of Modern Mathematics', two by twelve foot long, was later converted into a poster and distributed freely to American schools.

Whether in their contributions as exhibition designers and educational filmmakers for IBM or furniture designers for Herman Miller, the Eameses never lost sight of what Ray called 'the big idea' or the need to evaluate their own work 'critically'.[11] This big idea, we could speculate, was to provide the greatest number of people with access to information and knowledge that was crucial to leading a full life in a world of rapid transformations that threatened to overwhelm the individual subjectivity in the post-World War II era.

Generations of NID students have included the Eamesian 'History Wall' in their exhibition design, perfecting the distinctive combination of typographical, photographic and textual elements associated with this didactic device. In an interview with B.N. Goswamy, while discussing the design for the 1965 Nehru exhibition in New York, Patel acknowledges that he 'learnt from Eames how to create a 'timeline'… Like when Jawaharlal Nehru was so many years old, the film *Bicycle Thieves* was made, or Einstein was doing this or the gramophone was invented. These cross-references make the exhibition interesting.'[12] Although the Nehru exhibition did not include the signature Eamesian monumental multi-screen exhibits, the 'History Walls' activated history at a glance and expanded the boundaries of the viewers' world.[13]

I would contend that the work of the Eameses and Patel cannot be separated from the official policies of their respective nation states. The Eameses were part of the military and scientific ascendancy of post-World War II USA, just as Patel was part of the technocratic narrative of the Nehruvian and post-Nehruvian Indian state. The

relationship with power generated its fair share of dilemmas. The Eameses, by no means technomaniacs, were keenly aware that advances in science can produce both beneficial and sinister effects; some of the key interlocutors on their projects had been involved with the Manhattan Project, which culminated in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Patel, for his part, participated in national and world expos through the 1960s, even as the Nehruvian nation state became besieged by regional discontent and the challenge of radical left wing politics: spectres that would not find representation in the diplomatic circulations of the expo universe. Eventually, though, Patel too would confront the dilemmas of his position.

Patel resigned from NID in the early 1980s. He felt the institution had failed to live up to its early promise; meanwhile, Indian industrialists had not supported innovative indigenous designs and merely copied western designs disconnected from Indian reality. With a new surge of energy, Patel moved from the school of design to the school of dissent. At the Madras based 'Skills' workshop, he put the tools of communication directly in the hands of activists, instead of training design experts who would intervene on behalf of the disadvantaged. There, he evolved an inexpensive screen printing process that activists could use to produce posters and pamphlets on urgent issues like Dalit repression and human rights violations. Like the Eameses, he loved the creative problem solving approach. When Sundarlal Bahugana, the leader of the Chipko movement, asked him to design a slide projector that could work in villages lacking electricity, he devised a simple torch operated projector using a cardboard box and magnifying glasses.

In this later phase, Patel made a transition from Nehruvian technocratic modernity to a Gandhian understanding of *gram swaraj*, rural independence. Gandhi's emphasis on self-sufficiency became the basis of his design praxis. At the invitation of the Gandhian activist Vikasbhai, Patel trained artisans at the Rural Design School in Sewapuri, near Varanasi, making them responsible for their own production units. Discovering that Dalit women who cured leather in lime pits suffered from dermatological problems, he designed large rolling drums that could be collectively operated, saving the women from direct contact with the lime.

Ironically, Patel's patient hand-crafting of the tools of dissent belongs to the same period as his participation in the inaugural events of the Festivals of India. During the mid-1980s, these extravaganzas took India's 'traditional' forms of theatre, art, dance and music to London, Moscow, Paris and other global capitals. While these forms did not belong to a continuous 5000-year tradition, but in the Hobsbawm-Ranger sense were 'invented traditions',[14] their export involved the labour of hundreds of

performing artists and thousands of artisans. In retrospect, marketing India as a folk paradise during the 1980s seems to have been especially ill-timed, when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had proclaimed the advent of the era of information technology, proposing it as a panacea for India's underdeveloped economy.

However, Patel's Festival of India events in Moscow and Paris, which included spectacular transmedia exhibits, were animated by his desire to democratize public spaces: to produce happenings where Indian performers were not treated as 'performing monkeys' (at least that was his intention). Instead, through a participatory choreography, an attempt was made to 'blur' the distinction between audience and performers.[15]

Even in this predicament, Patel shared an affinity with the Eameses. The Eameses could be seen as being committed to the production of a *gesamtkunstwerk*,[16] a total artwork, in a manifestly democratic public space like an expo; correspondingly, Patel was preoccupied with the transportation, even the *translation*, of festive forms like the Indian *mela* and the *utsav* (the former being a more secular celebration than the latter) into a European context.

At the Moscow edition of the Festival of India in 1987, Patel 'worked out an entire procession of flotillas on the Moskva river for the eight kilometre stretch from the Kremlin to Lenin Stadium. Literally a million people lined up on either bank of the river.'[17] And at the Lenin stadium on a gigantic 9-screen projection in the round, a film portraying the movement of crowds at an Indian utsav was projected. Patel planned the procession of flotillas to subvert the 'rigidity' of the Soviet system and 'get the whole of Moscow to participate.'[18] The unticketed procession, as a gigantic form of sociality, allowed for a breaking down of hierarchies that would baffle an avowedly communist state where an oligarchy ruled in the name of the people.

I would like to end this essay with a moment of floating adjacency between the visions of Patel and the Eameses. *901: After 45 Years of Working*, a film by Eames Demetrios – the grandson of the Eameses – documents the shutting down of the couple's office at Washington Boulevard in California after Ray's death in 1988. You could miss a particular sequence if you are not looking carefully. Amidst the *bric a brac* of work and play, the camera sweeps past what looks like a wall clad with the *Pabuji no pad*, an Indian narrative scroll. Below it we catch a glimpse of the Mathematica poster, both in turn, flanked by the Indian flag. An Indian picture narration scroll next to an American pedagogic timeline – how do we read the nature of this

proximity? Both objects exemplify cellular narratives nested in each other to form a complex whole: one a predecessor of cinema, the other a precursor of hyperlinked cyber narratives.

My account of the prehistory of new media art in India – entangled as it is with the history of exhibition design and the world expos, nationalist politics, Cold War intercultural encounters and grassroots activism – is intended to elude many default binaries, including those of art versus commerce, art versus activism, and old versus new media. I may have utterly baffled the reader with my lifting of Indian new media history into a hyperspace of transmedia exhibits, only to land on the intimate but uncertain ground of friendship.[19]

What role, you might ask, does friendship play in the construction of a regional history of Indian new media practices? It could allow for a rip in the Cold War history of binaristic self versus other worldview. Despite the unsurmountable political and cultural power play, friendship makes space for a possible self-presentation in entanglement with the other's predicament, as against opposed self-representations that are often already marked by neocolonial aggressiveness, post-colonial defensiveness, performances of nationality, or geopolitical exigencies. In other words, friendship – with its nuances of mutual curiosity and collaboration – could open up the unmarked space of non-aligned alignments.

Footnotes:

1. Sadanand Menon, 'In the Realm of the Visual: Five Decades (1948-1998) of Painting, Ceramics, Photography, Design by Dashrath Patel.' Exhibition Catalogue. NGMA, Delhi (September 18-October 18), 1998.

2. For more than a decade now, I have been excavating the prehistory of new media art in India, and in the process attempting to develop a regional history of Indian new media practices. As part of my research, I have retrieved and reframed the contributions of the Vision Exchange Workshop, initiated in 1969 by Akbar Padamsee and supported by the Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship programme. Vision Exchange was an early laboratory for interdisciplinary research; its outcomes took many forms, including the production of photographic series, prints and artists' films. Other explorations that I have retrieved from historical amnesia are Krishen Khanna's improvisation with wide angle lens projectors to create palimpsestual photographs, as well as M.F. Husain and Tyeb Mehta's films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, sponsored by the Films Division and the diverse contributions of the polymath Dashrath Patel to design, art, collaborative action, exhibition-making practice and institution building, especially in his early work with the National Institute of Design and his later involvement with the Festivals of India and grassroots activism. See Nancy Adajania, 'New Media Overtures Before New Media Practice in India' in Gayatri Sinha (ed.), *Art and Visual Culture in India 1857-2007*. Marg, Bombay, 2009. See also, Nancy Adajania, 'An Archaeology of New Media Practice in India' in Partha Mitter, Parul Dave-Mukherjee and Rakhee Balaram (eds.), *Twentieth-Century Art*. Skira, forthcoming.

3. For instance, the very first item in the architect Charles Correa's chronology is the Handloom Pavilion designed and built for the All Indian Handloom Board at Pragati Maidan, Delhi, in 1958. The entry for the Hindustan Lever Pavilion, in 1961, states that, 'The industrial fairs held annually in Delhi provided an extraordinary opportunity for architects to experiment.' See Kenneth Frampton, *Charles Correa*. Perennial Press, Bombay, 1996, p. 236 and 241.

4. Patel was invited by the culturally conscious and progressively inclined industrialist Gautam Sarabhai and his sister Gira to join NID.

5. See Charles and Ray Eames, The India Report, April 1958, National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad,1997.

6. The story of NID's inception is a many-layered one. The India Report was evidently found to be too abstract for implementation by the institute. In 1960, the Ford Foundation commissioned the Danish architect Vilhelm Wohlert and Swiss photographer Ernst Scheidegger to provide a working plan based on the report. According to Farhan Sirajul Karim, while the Eameses' report provided 'the moral framework for the institution, it was the German connection in general, and the Hochschule fur Gestaltung (HfG) at Ulm more specifically, that had a profound impact on the formation and evolution of NID's pedagogic philosophy.' See Farhan Sirajul Karim, 'MOMA, the Ulm and the Development of Design Pedagogy in India' in Shanay Jhaveri (ed.), *Western Artists and India: Creative Inspirations in Art and Design*. The Shoestring Publisher, Bombay, 2013, pp.127-128.

However, as I shall show later in this essay, NID's pedagogic philosophy was *also* indebted to the larger Eamesian vision (the flawed India Report notwithstanding) which expressed itself in their approaches to exhibition and furniture design and multimedia. As with all institutional histories, it is important to study NID's birth moment from multiple perspectives with each narrative encrypting its own political and cultural strategies of reading. I choose to concentrate on the Eamesian connection specifically because I am creating a contextual reading of the history of new media.

7. John von Neumann made significant contributions to the fields of mathematics and computer science.

8. Another name that appears in the credits is that of Norbert Wiener, the father of cybernetics. He conducted his research on information theory during the Second World War independently of Shannon and became a pacifist in later life.

9. See Sunil Mehra, 'Colours of a Genius', *Outlook*, 28 September 1998.

10. Charles Eames along with Eero Saarinen designed the memorable IBM pavilion at the New York World's Fair, which was seen by millions of people. The fair's main thematic was a universal call for 'Peace Through Understanding', blithely ignoring, of course, the superpower's escalating military presence in Vietnam.

11. Ray Eames, in a television interview meant to promote their new furniture masterpiece on the Arlene Francis 'Home' show broadcast on NBC television network, 1956.

12. Dashrath Patel in conversation with B.N. Goswamy, 'Intensifying the Experience of Light' in Menon 1998, op. cit., p. 40.

13. See Saloni Mehta's critical analysis of the Eameses' contribution to the Nehru Exhibition, 'Charles and Ray Eames in India', in Shanay Jhaveri 2013, pp. 91-93. However, Mehta does not mention the Eameses' intercultural encounter with NID designers like Dashrath Patel.

14. See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995.

15. A.G.K. Menon, 'An Indian Mela in Paris', in *Architecture + Design* 2(1), November-December 1985, pp. 82-87.

16. See Martin Filler, 'Charles and Ray Eames' in *Makers of Modern Architecture*. New York Review of Books, NY, 2007, p. 116.

17. Dashrath Patel in conversation with B.N. Goswamy, in Menon 1998, op.cit., p. 36.

18. Ibid., p. 36.

19. My privileging of the notion of friendship can be seen as a form of tribute to the cultural theorist Rustom Bharucha's account of the 'affective affinities' between the worldviews of two friends, the Indian poet and thinker Rabindranath Tagore and the Japanese cultural historian and curator Okakura Tenshin. See Rustom Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006.