

NOTES ON BHOPAL, MP — PRADEEP DALAL

Swaminathan, J
The Perceiving Fingers Bhopal:
Roopankar, Museum of Fine Arts
Bharat Bhavan, 1987

Swaminathan, J
The Magical Script Bhopal:
Roopankar, Museum of Fine Arts
Bharat Bhavan, 1983

Charles Correa
Bharat Bhavan
Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh
1975–81

Charles Correa
Vidhan Bhavan
Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh
1980–96

स्वामीनाथन, ज
द परसीवीगं फिंगर्स भोपाल:
रूपंकर, ललित कला संग्रहालय
भारत भवन, १९८७

स्वामीनाथन, ज
जादुई लिपि भोपाल:
रूपंकर, ललित कला संग्रहालय
भारत भवन, १९८३

चार्ल्स कोरिया
भारत भवन
भोपाल, मध्य प्रदेश
१९७५-८१

चार्ल्स कोरिया
विधान भवन
भोपाल, मध्य प्रदेश
१९८०-९६



1

Submerged Archipelago

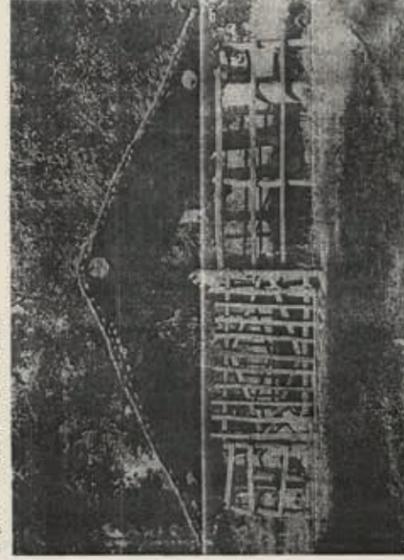
१ १ गणतंत्रात, नव्या नव्या शिवाय, मला
सुखी ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११
११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११
११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११
११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११
११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११ ११

—The song ends!

What has happened to me, Oh, what has happened to me
What has happened to me this day
In the Tehsil, the Tehsil, the Tehsil, the Tehsil
And in the Thana, the Thana, the Thana, the Thana
In the jungle, the forest
What has happened to me, where am I to go
What has happened to me this day

—Gond Karma Song.¹

Lingo's shrine at Semurgoon, Bhopal

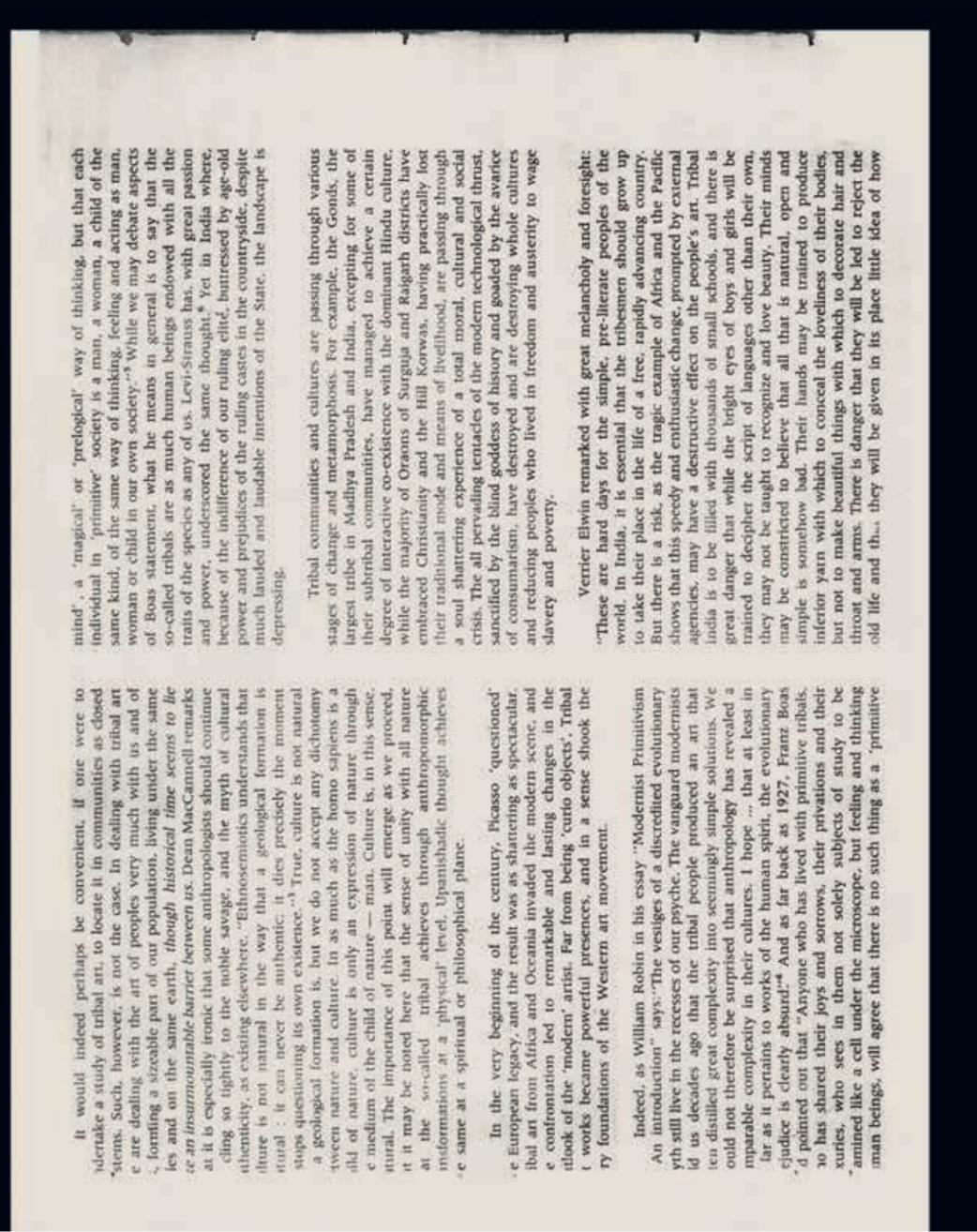


When we talk of tribal art, we at once think of the 'primitive'² — something removed from us by an ocean of time, something which even though created amongst us and alongside us, as belonging to a submerged archipelago within the mainstream of what we consider to be our present day culture. We think that we are responsibly aware of our motivations, what with the development of the social sciences, and that we are fully capable of enquiring with the 'tools' at our command into the motivations behind the creative output of peoples whom we call tribal, and the archipelago we can invade, penetrate, and lay bare, as indeed we seem to do with pre-historic sites of 'ancient' cultures and civilizations. In other words, we are confident in our capacity for reconstructing the 'past' and we tend to bring this wisdom to bear upon cultures which exist amongst us and alongside us but which do not seem to have integrated into what we consider as the mainstream of contemporary existence. In the driving seat in which we have ensconced ourselves, we seem to forget that we ourselves can but be the victims of historical time : for if we can look with self-assurance on what we consider to be the 'past', we should perhaps also remember that the 'future' may be looking down upon us with a mocking grin.

Open-to-sky space / open-to-sky pathway / movement through open-to-sky spaces / open-to-sky processional movement / open-to-sky pradakshina / processional unfolding of spaces, some enclosed, some open-to-sky / contrapuntal open-to-sky areas / complex interlock of pathways, built form and open-to-sky spaces / between closed-box and open-to-sky there lies a whole continuum of zones.



These are some of the terms used by the celebrated Indian architect Charles Correa, to describe a key component in his architecture.



mind', a 'magical' or 'prelogical' way of thinking, but that each individual in 'primitive' society is a man, a woman, a child of the same kind, of the same way of thinking, feeling and acting as man, woman or child in our own society."³ While we may debate aspects of Boas' statement, what he means in general is to say that the so-called tribals are as much human beings endowed with all the traits of the species as any of us. Levi-Strauss has, with great passion and power, underscored the same thought.⁴ Yet in India where, because of the indifference of our ruling élite, buttressed by age-old power and prejudices of the ruling castes in the countryside, despite much lauded and laudable intentions of the State, the landscape is depressing.

Tribal communities and cultures are passing through various stages of change and metamorphosis. For example, the Gonds, the largest tribe in Madhya Pradesh and India, excepting for some of their subtribal communities, have managed to achieve a certain degree of interactive co-existence with the dominant Hindu culture, while the majority of Orasans of Surguja and Raigarh districts have embraced Christianity and the Hill Korwas, having practically lost their traditional mode and means of livelihood, are passing through a soul shattering experience of a total moral, cultural and social crisis. The all pervading tentacles of the modern technological thrust, sanctified by the blind goddess of history and goaded by the avarice of consumerism, have destroyed and are destroying whole cultures and reducing peoples who lived in freedom and austerity to wage slavery and poverty.

Vernier Elwin remarked with great melancholy and foresight: "These are hard days for the simple, pre-literate peoples of the world. In India, it is essential that the tribesmen should grow up to take their place in the life of a free, rapidly advancing country. But there is a risk, as the tragic example of Africa and the Pacific shows that this speedy and enthusiastic change, prompted by external agencies, may have a destructive effect on the people's art. Tribal India is to be filled with thousands of small schools, and there is great danger that while the bright eyes of boys and girls will be trained to decipher the script of languages other than their own, they may not be taught to recognize and love beauty. Their minds may be constricted to believe that all that is natural, open and simple is somehow bad. Their hands may be trained to produce inferior yarn with which to conceal the loveliness of their bodies, but not to make beautiful things with which to decorate hair and throat and arms. There is danger that they will be led to reject the old life and thus, they will be given in its place little idea of how

It would indeed perhaps be convenient, if one were to undertake a study of tribal art, to locate it in communities as closed systems. Such, however, is not the case. In dealing with tribal art we are dealing with the art of peoples very much with us and of forming a sizeable part of our population, living under the same skies and on the same earth, though historical time seems to lie as an insurmountable barrier between us. Dean MacCannell remarks that it is especially ironic that some anthropologists should continue to cling so tightly to the noble savage, and the myth of cultural 'purity', as existing elsewhere. "Ethnohistorians understand that culture is not natural in the way that a geological formation is natural: it can never be authentic; it dies precisely the moment it stops questioning its own existence."⁵ True, culture is not natural a geological formation is, but we do not accept any dichotomy between nature and culture in as much as the homo sapiens is a child of nature, culture is only an expression of nature through the medium of the child of nature — man. Culture is, in this sense, natural. The importance of this point will emerge as we proceed, it may be noted here that the sense of unity with all nature at the so-called tribal achieves through anthropomorphic infusions at a 'physical' level. Upanishadic thought achieves the same at a spiritual or philosophical plane.

In the very beginning of the century, Picasso 'questioned' the European legacy, and the result was as shattering as spectacular. Tribal art from Africa and Oceania invaded the modern scene, and a confrontation led to remarkable and lasting changes in the outlook of the 'modern' artist. Far from being 'curio objects', Tribal art works became powerful presences, and in a sense shook the very foundations of the Western art movement.

Indeed, as William Robin in his essay "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction" says: "The vestiges of a discredited evolutionary myth still live in the recesses of our psyche. The vanguard modernists of a few decades ago that the tribal people produced an art that had distilled great complexity into seemingly simple solutions. We could not therefore be surprised that anthropology has revealed a comparable complexity in their cultures. I hope ... that at least in part as it pertains to works of the human spirit, the evolutionary prejudice is clearly absurd!"⁶ And as far back as 1927, Franz Boas had pointed out that "Anyone who has lived with primitive tribes, who has shared their joys and sorrows, their privations and their anxieties, who sees in them not solely subjects of study to be examined like a cell under the microscope, but feeling and thinking human beings, will agree that there is no such thing as a 'primitive



to love rhythm and vitality, exuberance and delight.”⁷

The situation, if anything, has not changed for the better. The proposition of bringing such communities into the mainstream of national life under present conditions of feudal and capitalist exploitation despite protective legislations and safeguards, is a frightening one. The process of lumpenisation and proletarianisation of these peoples is taken as historically inevitable and the price which the nation has to pay for its progress. That such communities should be left alone to themselves does not seem to be a viable proposition either. Their jungles no more belong to them, they can no more practise their traditional mode of cultivation in the name of conservation of forests (which are, any way being systematically destroyed for catering to “urban and developmental needs”), they can not seek and hunt game any more, and the inroads of the money economy are seemingly irreversible.

The notion that in their freedom lies our freedom, that in their self-respect lies our self-respect, that in their self-identity lies our self-identity, that perhaps we have to learn much from them than they have to learn from us, is piously stated but almost entirely disregarded. A symbiotic approach which could possibly be the catalyst for both the so-called tribal communities and us to emerge into a new world of freedom is shunned. All contact with such communities from the outside seems to be to their detriment.

Thus, in this twilight area, pseudo-modern ideas contend with traditional orthodoxy, and together militate against cultural norms and mores of people's living in the country-side, in the hills and mountains, in the forests and deserts of this subcontinent, known as tribal, but whom we would address, in lieu of a better one, by the Hindi term *Adivasi*.

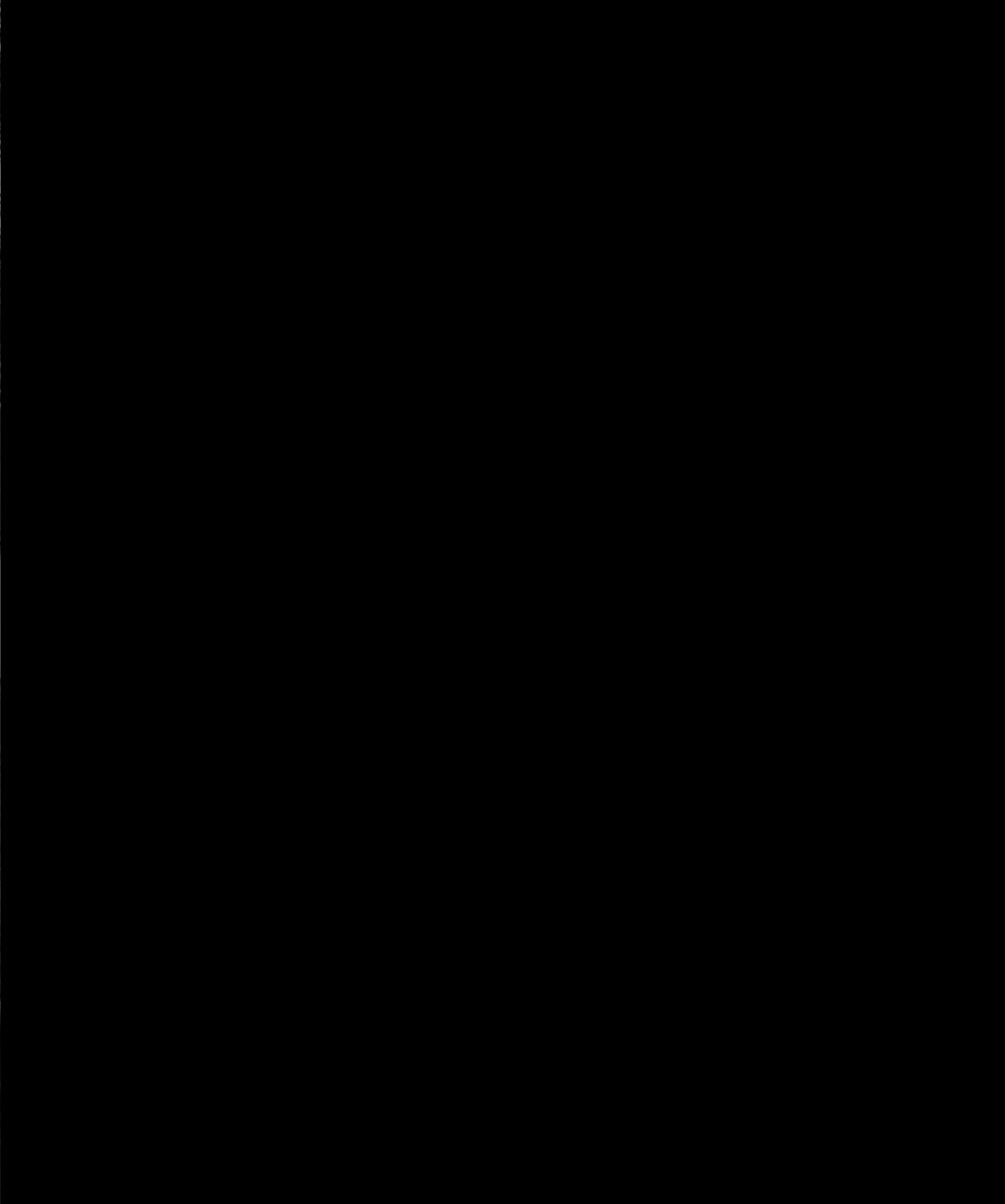
Ours is not a socio-economic or anthropological study of *Adivasi* communities. Ours is an attempt to open our eyes to their art. If we have started on a rather grim note, it is, despite the anguish of the Karma song, not because of any loss of the *Adivasi*'s creative exuberance, but our own concern for our myopia. For the purpose of this essay, the concern becomes a commitment to the artistic expressions of the *Adivasi*, and so in turn, to our own: Let the archipelago dissolve itself in the perpetual presence of art.

References and Notes

1. Provided by a Pardhan from Mandla (Madhya Pradesh). The Pardhans are known as the minstrels of the Gonds.
2. The term Primitive is not used in a pejorative sense in art-historical, or anthropological literature. However, it does persist to connote “backwardness” in the lay, and to some extent, in the so-called “expert” mind.
3. Dean MacCannell on Ethnosemiotics in *Semiotics of Culture*, Mouton Publishers, 1979. Editions — Irene Portis Winner — Jean Umiker-Sebeok
4. “Primitivism” in *20th Century Art — 1985*. This book was brought out in conjunction with an exhibition of Tribal and Modern Art put up by the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1984.
5. *Primitive Art* by Franz Boas, Dover Publications, INC., New York.
6. *The Savage Mind*, The University of Chicago Press, 1966; *The Way of the Masks*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1983; *Structural Anthropology*, London, 1963, by Claude Levi-Strauss.
7. *The Tribal Art of Middle India* by Verrier Elwin, Oxford University Press, 1951

Correa designed the Bharat Bhavan arts centre in Bhopal in the early 1980s.¹ He explained the design as “large areas of open space surrounded by just enough built-form to make one feel one is ‘inside’ a piece of architecture”. For him, the open-to-sky courtyards function contrapuntally, as places for the eye to rest after feasting on the vibrant art in the galleries.²

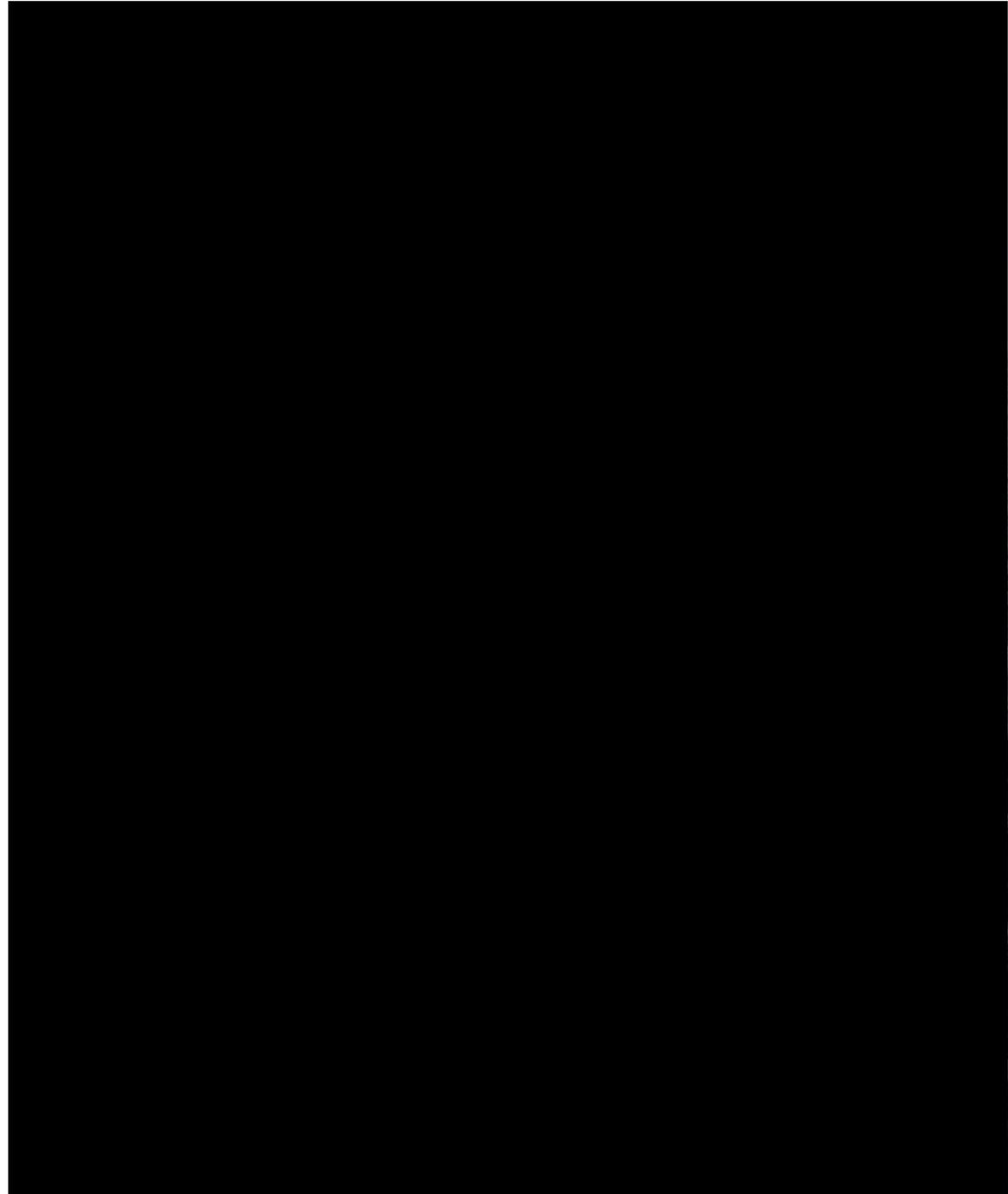
There is no real façade, and as you walk through a series of descending courtyards and terraces that slot sinuously off-axis, the mastery of the design is gradually revealed. Generously proportioned stairs are held within low brick walls. There are shallow plinths and platforms and then there are extra wide, pivoted teak doors leading to the galleries, enabling fluid and swift transitions between the inside and outside.



The trees planted in the courtyards offer welcome shade as well as a filigree of green to offset the austere dust-coloured brick and concrete palette: the champa (*dolochapa, gutachin, chameli, khadchampo, khairchampa, sonchampa*), the neem (*limba, dhanujhada*) and the peepal (*pipdo, pippala vrksha*). All of these elements help create an intricate bricolage of sensory experience that steals up quietly, unannounced.



In his seminal essay on Corbusier's Assembly building in Chandigarh, Correa explained that rather than a single elaborate feature it is the superimposition of multiple elements and patterns that generates the complexity in Corbusier's architecture.³

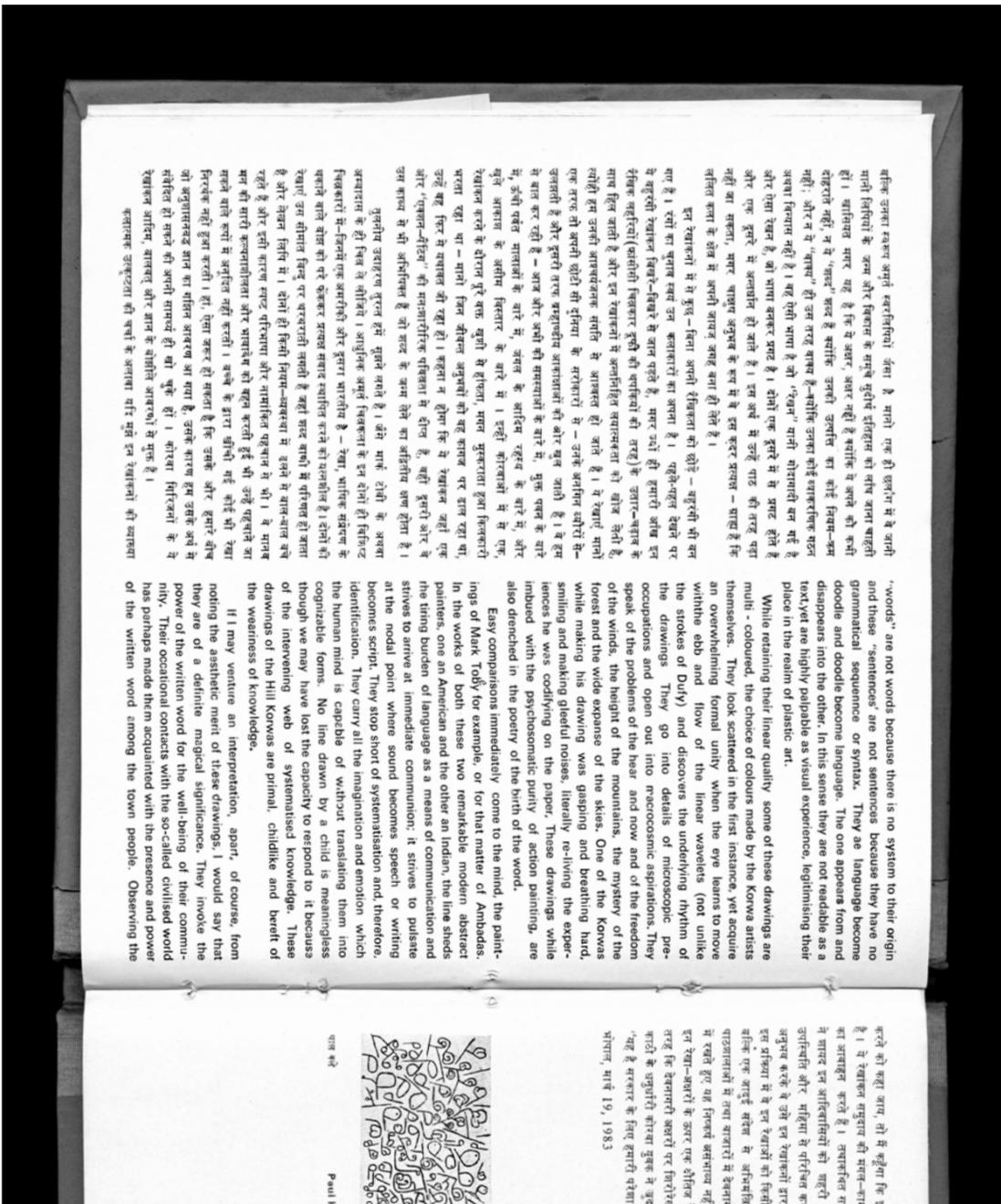


In Bharat Bhavan, Correa too crystallizes his own conceptualized approach to architecture, one that is attuned to the particulars of climate, living patterns, budget and patronage. What seems at first a modest proposition turns out to offer the Indian public a bold alternative to the imported Corbusier model.

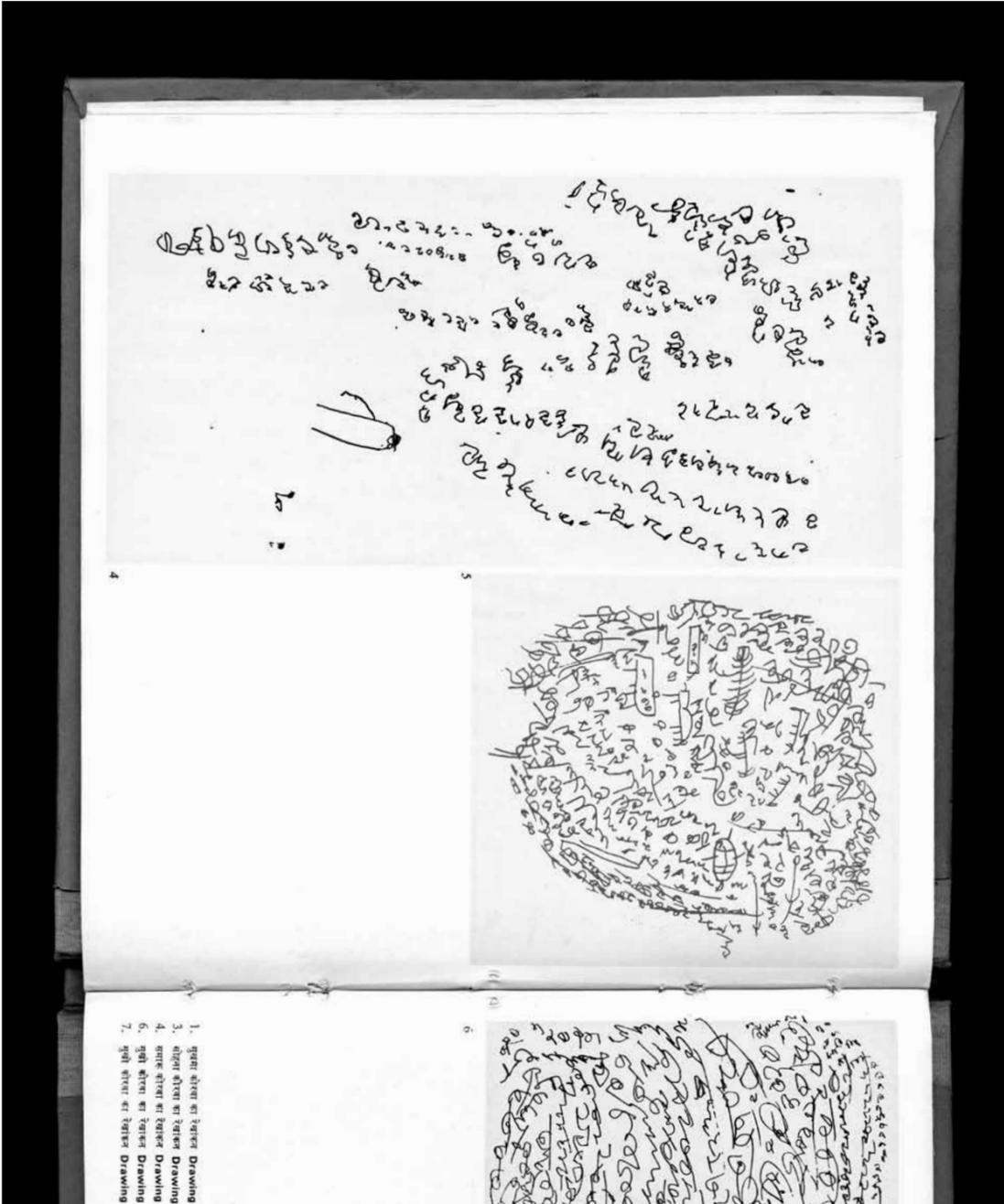


I had also seen a small group of Korwa drawings assembled by the New York gallerist Hudson a few years ago and was smitten. I tracked down catalogues from two previous shows of Korwa works – one at the Drawing Center in New York and another in a Paris gallery. Both showed Korwa works from the collection of the poet Franck André Jamme who had gone to Bhopal and retraced the field trips of Swaminathan after seeing a modest publication on the Korwa drawings at Bharat Bhavan.

I had hoped to find this publication.⁴ Surprisingly, however, it was unavailable even in the Bharat Bhavan library. They did have a copy of another book on the Bharat Bhavan collection by Swaminathan, which they xeroxed for me.⁵ When I returned to New York, I found copies of both these extraordinary books in a library and was able to scan them.

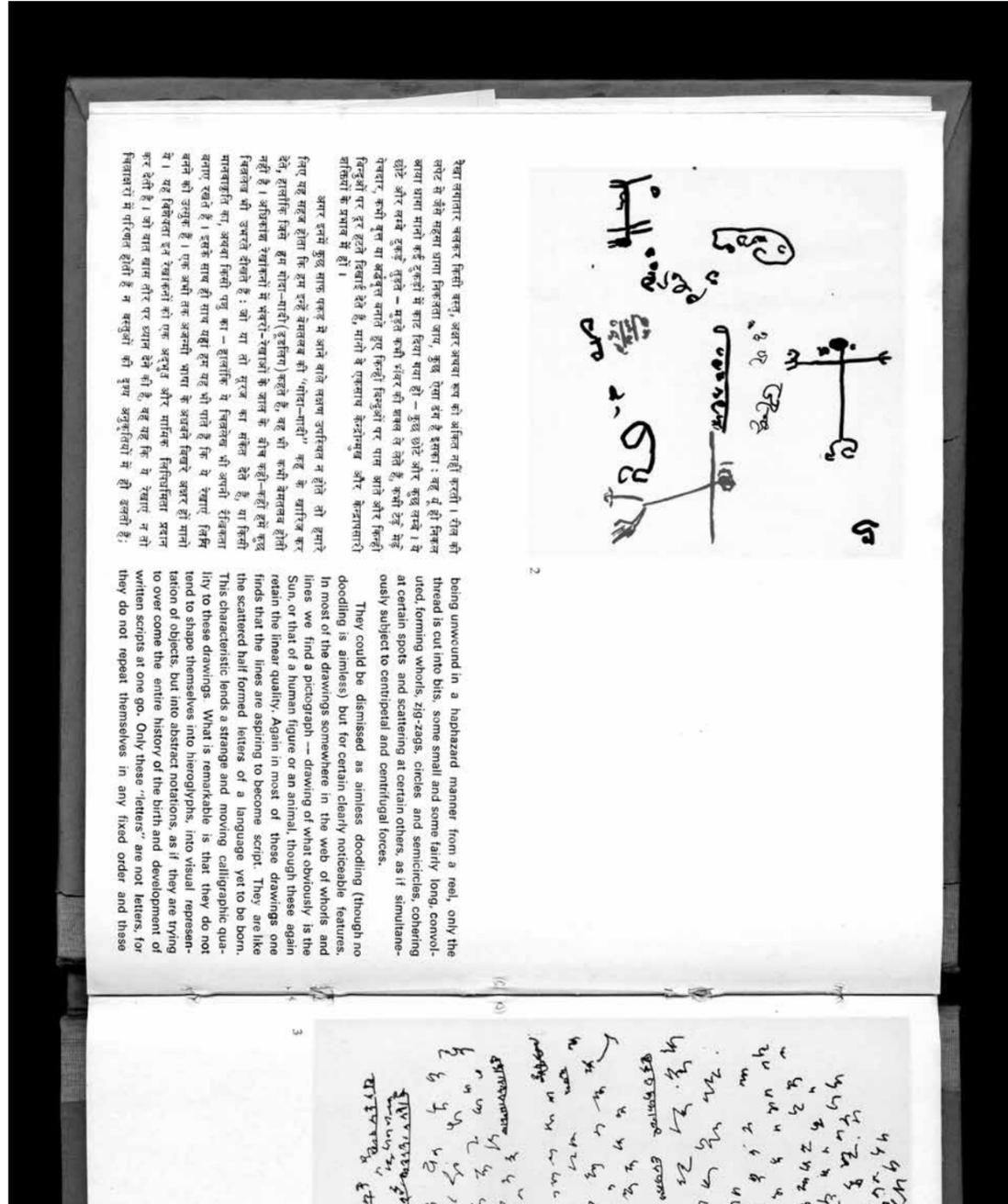


The interplay between the low-resolution xerox copy made in Bhopal and the high-resolution scan made in New York was how I began to make this artist book. I included the complete text of three key essays by Swaminathan to give full rein to his powerfully evocative and incisive voice.

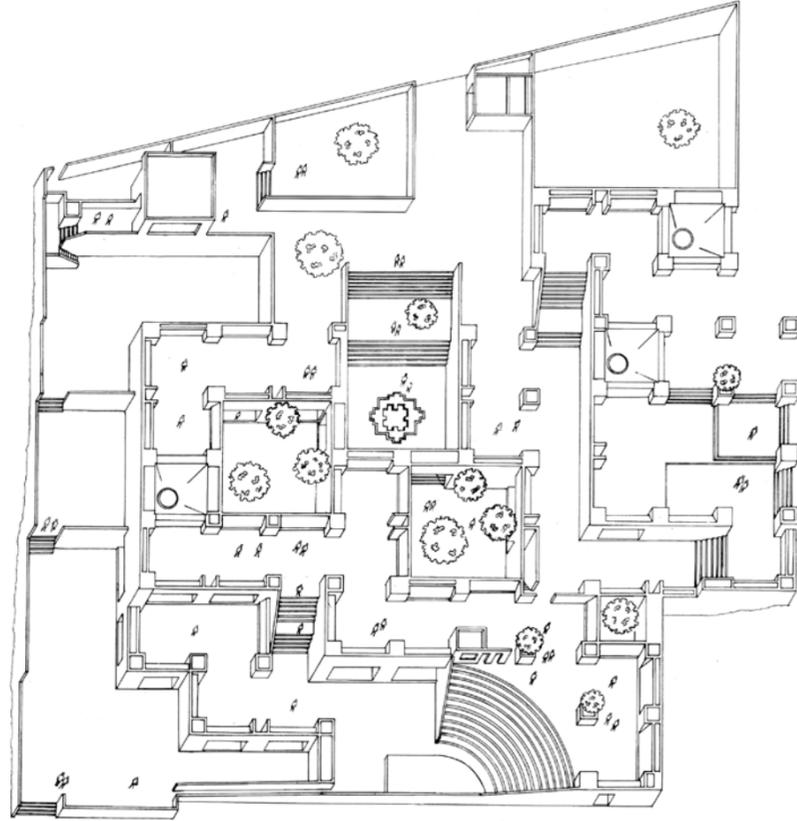


Sample this description of Jangarh Singh Shyam's paintings: "Through the use of colour and line and dot a whole pantheon of gods and deities are created, setting up a grand tableau, the inner magic world of Jangarh, and therefore of the Pardhan and the Gond."⁶

I also included a complete inventory list for the works by Jangarh Singh Shyam and the Hill Korwa artists in the Bharat Bhavan collection—75 works each—as a stand-in for an artist monograph or catalogue raisonné that is probably unlikely to be made.



The architecture of Bharat Bhavan counters and re-imagines received ideas of modern architecture. And Jangarh Singh Shyam's potent art as well as the "protest" art of the Hill Korwa tribes require their place in a genuine understanding of modern and contemporary art.



- 1 Charles Correa, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, 1975–81.
- 2 Charles Correa, "Museums: An Alternate Typology" in *A Place in the Shade: The New Landscape & Other Essays* (Gurgaon, Haryana: Penguin Books, 2010), 48–49.
- 3 Charles Correa, "The Assembly at Chandigarh", op. cit. 11.
- 4 J Swaminathan, *The Magical Script* (Bhopal: Roopankar, Museum of Fine Arts, Bharat Bhavan, 1983).
- 5 J Swaminathan, *The Perceiving Fingers* (Bhopal: Roopankar, Museum of Fine Arts, Bharat Bhavan, 1987).
- 6 J Swaminathan, *The Perceiving Fingers*, op. cit. 47.
- 7 Charles Correa, Vidhan Bhavan, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, 1980–96.
- 8 AL Becker, Keith Taylor & AK Ramanujan, "Interview Two" in Molly Daniels-Ramanujan & Keith Harrison (eds.), *Uncollected Poems and Prose, AK Ramanujan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 55.