

Gandhi goes on sale

The Mahatma has become a roaring commodity

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For those strolling (or power-walking, as New Yorkers are wont to do) across Manhattan's downtown art district of NoHo this summer, there was occasion to pause and stare at the window display at the Aicon Gallery. The reason for their double-take might have been a sculpture of Mahatma Gandhi pecking away at a laptop, a smile caressing his face as if he were checking out a particularly quirky status update on *Facebook*. As these bewildered walkers moved ahead and gazed into the next window, they would react similarly: this time, at twin sculptures of the Mahatma industriously engaged at a call centre desk, headset and mouthpiece in place.

This unique concept is the brainchild of 35-year-old sculptor Debanjan Roy, and the exhibits were part of a solo exhibition, "Experiments with Truth".

The exhibits had a basic theme – the Mahatma employing 21st century gadgetry. There he was, walking a dog, dressed nattily in a tee and cargos and chatting on a cellphone. Elsewhere, familiar images of the Mahatma had been given an unusual twist. The historic photograph of him with Jawaharlal Nehru had been sculpted perfectly, but with a difference – a figure of the sculptor had replaced India's first prime minister and he was sharing iPod buds with the Mahatma.

Or take the other celebrated image of the Mahatma supported by his two grandnieces. They had morphed into a pair of commandos,

accessorised with Bluetooth headsets. Again, in the likeness of the artist.

An inherent irony was at play. The Father of the Nation, who professed simplicity, followed a minimalist lifestyle, espoused cottage industry, and spoke of India living in its villages, had been transposed to a gizmo-ridden world, where consumption is the king.

Roy has an explanation for his vision and the use of Gandhi as his muse: "We live in an India where there is more [rampant] consumerism. Even the lower middle-class, even rickshawpullers have mobiles. I'm trying to establish that through an icon."

And that effort is signified not just in the finished pieces but in their very superstructure. He uses fibreglass for the sculptures, and automotive paint. "To make the idea of the market more accessible," he explains.

The collection has a modern, urban aesthetic to it and you'd think Roy is another hip, glitzy denizen of that world. But you'd be wrong, for Roy is ensconced in Gandhi's idealised India, the village of Madhyamgram, near Barasat in West Bengal. He rarely uses email as a form of communication, and his cell reception is unreliable. Curiously enough, it was on October 2, the 140th birth anniversary of Gandhi, that we finally managed to secure a clear connection with each other after dozens of abortive attempts. The interview was almost entirely in Bangla, Roy's native lan-

guage, because his grasp of English is tenuous.

He places himself next to Gandhi in some works simply "as a common man as he was always close to the common man".

Aicon has supported and promoted Roy in recent years, but this was his first solo show and included large installations, each of which took him over two months to complete. "This is a milestone project in his career," says Aicon's partner, Projjal Dutta. "Solo shows tend to include works that aspire to be artistic rather than commercial. As a gallery, we felt we should support him."

While some of his larger work may be "eminently non-saleable" (as Dutta puts it), Roy has retained his value in the market, with prices of his creations ranging from \$10,000 to nearly \$45,000. Despite the negative impact on the art market in a recessionary economy, Aicon's partners indulged Roy as he focused on non-commercial sculptures that may hold less interest to buyers than to the curators of museums.

The Gandhi motif has been stressed by Aicon. On January 30, 2008, the Mahatma's 60th death anniversary, it held a group show, *Who Knew Mr Gandhi?*, at its London gallery. There was serious symbolism involved in that concept. Any person who was old enough to be aware of the assassination of the Mahatma at that time would now be nearing the life expectancy limit of the average Indian. As Dutta points out, "In a few years time, no one will remember Gandhi as a living human being."



Debajyan Roy's work has a strong allusive character to the larger commodification of Gandhi

Although Roy kept his commercial instincts largely at bay in his Gandhi exhibits, his work does have a strong allusive character to the larger commodification of Gandhi and his appropriation into pop culture, an entrant into the hipster mythos. This is especially relevant to America, since the current hero of the group that derives its cultural direction from hipster-heavy Brooklyn is President Barack Obama. And Obama himself regularly obliges by bowing before Gandhi as he did on October 1, en

route to Copenhagen for Chicago's unsuccessful bid for the 2016 Olympics: "We join the people of India in celebrating this great soul who lived a life dedicated to the cause of advancing justice, showing tolerance to all, and creating change through non-violent resistance." Even earlier, in September, when asked by a school freshman about which person, dead or alive, the US president would most like to dine with, Obama opted for Gandhi, with the caveat, "It would probably be a really small meal."

Therefore, it wasn't startling that Roy's New York show produced a frenetic discussion online, one post on the metablog *Sepia Mutiny* attracting several dozens of comments. One likened Gandhi to Prometheus: "Punishment for enlightening mankind. The gods are cruel. Mankind is unworthy. But wouldn't that bust look lovely on your piano?" Another stated an obvious truth: "He has become just another picture, an icon in the already vast collection of icons/deities we have – used to rep-

resent the 'good' that we put up on the pedestal and then conveniently forget about!" A third remarked, "It's that anti-industrialization, pro-cottage industry stand that I find most at odds with the idea of him sitting in a call center, since it's globalization that's enabled and even necessitated the Indian call center."

Gandhi as neo-Luddite redux makes for a welcome proposition in a new globalised reality of cratering markets and unemployment woes.

There's a ridiculous simplism to that view, since Gandhi never rejected the tech accoutrements of his age, such as the automobile or the telephone. In fact, Gandhi, the political mass leader, may just have approved of *Facebook* or *Twitter* because of their value as tools of mobilisation, as evidenced in pro-democracy protests in Iran, according to George Paxton of the London-based Gandhi Foundation in an interview to *National Geographic*. "Indeed, Paxton thinks Gandhi would have approved of such technology if it 'empowered the ordinary person'," the article says. And, in the Indian context with its bandwidth constraints, probably even more to cell-phones, sending SMS messages.

But he probably would have been overwhelmed by how cyberia greeted his birth anniversary this year.

The day dawned with the mega search engine, *Google*, featuring Gandhi on its homepage, hotlinking the image to search results related to Gandhi, topped by one from the virtual encyclopaedia, *Wikipedia*. The humongous cyberspace resonated with a cult of personality centred upon Gandhi. India's Minister of State for External Affairs Shashi Tharoor tweeted: "Challenge to Indian tweeters – Can we make Gandhi a Trending Topic on his birthday today?" Tharoor, of course, is a former under-secretary general at the UN and his former employer was also getting in the mix. In India, a flurry of text messages went out over mobile networks with the choicest of Gandhian



Debanjan and his students and aides in his studio at Madhyamgram in West Bengal, preparing for the exhibition "Experiments with Truth"

quotes in SMSspeak like "An I 4 n I mks d wrld go blind."

By that evening, the United Nations was releasing a US\$1 stamp to commemorate The International Day of Non-Violence. The stamp, a spectacularly multihued impression of a somewhat pouty Mahatma by the Tampa, Florida-born Ferdie Pacheco, will be used by the UN's Postal Administration. Pacheco is as colourful as his stamp, having at one time enjoyed a career as a "fight doctor", the corner man for boxing champions like Muhammad Ali. Certainly, the choice of one with a background in pugilistic pursuits possibly provides a counterpoint to his depiction of one who was, as the clichéd phrase goes, an apostle of *ahimsa*. But at least Pacheco's effort remains firmly in the realm of snail-mail. After all, letters and postcards were the preferred mode of communication for Gandhi.

As new Gandhic objects are delivered to the market, they form the latest manifestation of the reincarnation of Gandhi as a brand in the offline world. Of course, for decades, government offices in India couldn't exist without the requisite portrait

of the Mahatma overlooking clerks at their dusty desks seeking bribes. But the new avatar possibly came into being in 2006 with the Sanjay Dutt-starrer *Lage Raho Munnabhai*, which gave the term "Gandhigiri" to popular parlance.

But it certainly is 2009 that has served as the watershed year for the brand to explode into prominence. In March this year, a set of Gandhi's effects most associated with him, including a pair of spectacles and a Zenith pocket watch, came up at an auction in New York. As the Indian government fretted over such desecration of the memory of Gandhi, liquor baron Vijay Mallya dispatched an emissary to Antiquorum Auctioneers to purchase the lot for US\$2.1 million, including commissions (nearly Rs10 crore) so that it could be returned to India. The lot was owned by a scion of the Otis family (known for its elevators), who attempted to withdraw the items after controversy brewed, failed in his effort, and then, in faux Gandhian manner, proffered silence and a fast as penance.

That created a wellspring of Gandhiana, in India at least. A



Debanjan, who replaced Nehru (in the photograph hanging on the wall behind the tableau) with a sculpture of himself, and Gandhi

report in the Delhi daily, *Mail Today*, said that the publisher, Jaico Books, was bringing out an audio version of Gandhi's autobiography: *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. "We have come out with leather-bound editions for gifts and libraries," Priyanka Malhotra, managing director, Full Circle Books, told the newspaper.

The Illinois-based Gandhi Worldwide Education Institute, which has his grandson, Arun, and great-grandson, Tushar, among its principals, is promoting a Gandhi Legacy Pilgrimage to India from December 29, 2009, to January 11, 2010. That tour will include stops at Sabarmati Ashram and Raj Ghat. It will also focus on centres of the "resistance movement against corporate-dominated globalization." The pilgrimage comes at a cost of US\$2,900 (about Rs1.4 lakh) which does not include international airfare to India, or, if the tourists so desire, an extension to Agra.

Of course, the price tag for this pilgrimage is less than an eighth of that

for the limited edition, gold and silver Mont Blanc pens launched to mark Gandhi's 140th birth anniversary. Each such pen is worth US\$25,000 (approximately Rs12 lakh).

While the Gandhifest continues, in an article in *Huffington Post*, Mira Kamdar, a senior fellow at the New York-based World Policy Institute, cast some perspective upon how Gandhi is being trivialised and his non-materialistic ideology ignored: "Gandhi's most radical political insight was the relationship between boundless consumption, social injustice and unending military aggression. 140 years after his birth, it is an insight the world is little prepared to accept."

Perhaps Gandhian idealism is near extinction. Like another endangered species that Debanjan Roy wants to concentrate upon when he embarks upon his next project – sculpting the Royal Bengal Tiger. The mighty *baagh* barely survives in India, and Roy wants to use polythene shop-

ping bags to create reliefs that show that plastic, the symbol of environmental destruction, proves a contrast to the tiger. After all, unlike the tiger, non-biodegradable plastics will never go extinct. Not to speak of such plastics and their PVC cousins being far removed from Gandhi's material of choice, *khadi*, which is environment-friendly, but still occupies only a niche market in India. Khadi is marked mainly by sales at Cottage Industry emporia on Gandhi Jayanti or political attire during election campaigns.

For now, however, the Gandhi of Roy's imagination, in its vivid red colour, is the major export from his village workshop.

As for the Gandhi he has juxtaposed to the tech devices of today, the Mahatma is enjoying (or possibly not) a rebirth at the centre of a Gandhiana industry. One post from the blogosphere underlines the real relevance of Gandhi's mantra today: "If Gandhi were alive today, I would guess he would be dead, since he would be quite old." □