

பராயர அரசு ஒரு நாள் அ  
வருவதற்கு அதை நம்பவ்  
தை, நான் மறி தது வாயில் க  
க்கு என்ன வேன் வா விரலை எடுத்த  
காண்டு வா யி தது ராமன் வ  
அரண்மனை ம னால் ராமன்



# The Appalam project

Nostalgia & relational aesthetics  
as creative forces

காண்டு வா “ எ ளயிட தது ராமன் வ  
அரண்மனை ம னால் ராமன்  
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## **Abstract**

My paper is an attempt at identifying the symbiosis of nostalgia and relational aesthetics as an art making resource in my capstone project. Perhaps owing to its colossal pop culture presence, nostalgia is often discounted to an undercurrent in the creative process, swapped for higher intellect terms and literary sources. In this paper, I elucidate the accidental and planned role of memories in art making, the location of my work in the relational aesthetics realm, as well as the technical process involved in the project. Psychologists and artists form the theoretical framework in this paper, notably James G. Hart, Joe Moran and Nicholas Bourriaud amongst others. By reanalyzing the creation of a 'nostalgic' moment, using objects and experiences, I hope to achieve an effective capstone exhibition that projects my nostalgia onto the viewers to create a mimetic nostalgic memory.

## **Introduction**

Nostalgia is a relevant term of definition for work of any period, even when not considered contemporary. In its true form, relational aesthetics shares a similar sentiment in its association with contemporary art, discussing art that contests human relation and the context within which they sit. Although first coined in the 1990s, art before and after that period can be situated within the description of the term.

Over the course of my research, I explore the link between nostalgia and relational aesthetics as an art making force, by means of my capstone project.

Titled 'The Appalam Project', the 60cm by 150 cm installation is an ode to several of my childhood memories as a South Indian kid. The 75 poppadums comprising the work are each handprinted with one scene from an 8-part comic of a Tamil folktale 'Thenali Raman' that I heard often, with a moral about thinking outside the box. The cultural context and commentary of my work is an undertone to the apparent whimsical folktale, accompanying soundtrack and edible poppadums – creating dialogue amidst the viewers about "Why screen-printed poppadums?" "Why this folktale" and so on.

The research will also draw upon some of my previous work in nostalgia, the appeal of memories as maker and my process from conception to exhibition. In order to understand this relation, the psychology of nostalgia, the relational aesthetics movement and artists who work in these fields are studied further. Beginning with an elucidation of nostalgia, the paper will unravel the meaning of the terms discussed above, identify their artistic input as well as compare & contrast works of art associated with them.

## Chapter 1: Examining nostalgia in art

The Germans translate 'nostalgia' as the word '*heimweh*', a parallel for homesickness. Even in its Greco-Anglo roots nostalgia is a combination of going back and pain, (Hart, 1973) associating the word with a morose emotion than a joyful one. It can be understood that home, or returning to an idea, object or person that is home, cures the negative emotions created. This is where we set homesickness and nostalgia apart, in their ability to find a remedy or solution. Nostalgia can be recognized as a sentiment that resonates with our own deepest longings for identity, security and belonging whereas childhood nostalgia is hived off as a separate space and seen as being continuous with adult society. (Moran, 2002)

No matter how hard one tries; nostalgia only exists in situations that cannot be accessed again but can be remembered or mimicked when met by objects, places or people that once participated in said situation. It is understood that childhood nostalgia is important because of its associations with societal progress and the development of individual careers. (John, J 2002)

One can go on to explain the difference between a memory, the reminiscing of a memory and the anticipation related – retention & protention as explained by Edmund Husserl – as two states of mind where the first is a combination of the present with a short memory of the immediate registered past whereas the latter is the anticipation of the extension of retention i.e the expected result of the present. In this sense, it's easy to say that temporally, our experiences & memories are linked with the past, present & future, each being incomplete without the other. This reaffirms the notion that nostalgia can be stimulated in the current using a combination of past, present and future memories.

Nostalgia as a term for art-making has been dissected into both a negative and positive influence, nevertheless one can argue that the existence of nostalgia is almost instinctive, even inbuilt in the arts. In capturing a scene, an artwork automatically speaks of a bygone moment, hence, in turn, becoming nostalgic. It is interesting to note that this moment is considered the creation of a 'living memory' (Ingarden, Crowley and Olson, 1973), which when summarized explains the capturing of a departed moment inside a 'living' object, keeping it alive through that object or maybe even person. One can argue that all artwork is in effect 'living memories', intentionally or otherwise, since nostalgia although excessively scrutinized occasionally forms the core of the theoretical framework in art pieces. Upon extensive reading, the association of the term 'nostalgia' with other memory inducing human

behavior is relevant. (Routledge et al., 2012). This association is the direct connection between nostalgia and my next topic, relational aesthetics.

To quote Mark Pennings *“the fundamental proposition in Relational Aesthetics is that art is about “sets of relations” rather than objects. Importantly, these sets of relations are conceived of as “social relations”.*”

In its simplest term, relational aesthetics can be defined as the art movement that produced art as a result of their social surroundings and the human relations, they are perceived in. Begun in the 1990's, the movement was a call for rebellion against the dominant art presented in white painted gallery or curated spaces from the past. Nicholas Bourriaud is credited with coining the term itself and has since become the foremost authority on the topic. The purpose of relational aesthetics is community or human involvement, the latter of which is of course a catalyst for nostalgia, ultimately bringing about socially proactive art. It is also evident in my topics of focus, who have a glaringly common element, human involvement, hinting that the success of my artwork is the byproduct of the impact it creates in its viewers. With its rising popularity in the 1990's, the movement also faced criticism for its superficial claims at being rebellious whilst being set in a curated and constructed viewership. (Bishop, 2004). Their criticism of the movement enlightened me about the cons of gallery focused work, as well as reveal the alternate conceptual path in which my work can be viewed. Further reviews and criticism also identify the necessity of relational aesthetics as the art movement required in a time of global turmoil, to create social interrelations. (Beshty, 2015) Whilst the realm of relational aesthetics art is predominantly experience based, my material-based project is backed up by Potgieters pro-mimetic argument about the ability of an object 'thingy' to spread an aesthetic experience, unmatched to a non-material one. (Potgieter, 2018)

## Chapter 2: Artist and artwork precedents

Jeff Koons was a rebel that shunned the elitist art (abstract art quite vocally) of his time, instead was inspired by the day to day mundane objects you would find at a typical home – at least in the USA. His steel *Balloon Dog* sculptures, probably his best-known works, transpose an ephemeral childhood memory into an enduring form. (The Art Story, 2019) Studying Koons works today, reveals a glaringly obvious common factor – its kindling of nostalgia. From his Hoover vacuums, to the ads from the late 80s, Koons used popular icons to embody different emotions of their era – the vacuums were an epitome of luxury in their years, the magazine ads were symbolic of vices. Yet, they become an image of nostalgia decades after their creation. It is this transition, the immortal relevance the artwork has, that I aspire to transfuse into my project.

Koons, a father of seven, has said that there are two ways to become immortal: procreation and art. The third is through memory. In fact, nostalgia may be the super power behind Koons's most potent work. (Artsy.net, 2019) His work, a blend of pop-culture, ad-culture and maybe even crowd-pleasing antics, is often chalked up to be the antithesis of the art culture when he began his career. Nowadays, however, Koons himself is considered a collectors' dream, crème de la crème of the artists alive, so far as to make his artwork no longer rebellious or sinister. Many say that Koons's greatest strength lies in his ability to capture the zeitgeist of the present moment, but perhaps that is because we are used to seeing his work soon after it is completed. (Artsy.net, 2019) Koons popular nostalgia as a means of representation, is a contrast to my nostalgia, which is inspired from personal memories, much like Louise Bourgeois.

Louise Bourgeois is an acclaimed installation artist, with a career spanning seven decades. As a contemporary to abstract expressionists and surrealists, her work carefully balanced both schools of thought whilst also setting her apart in her feminist ideologies and innovative techniques.

Heavily autobiographical, the pieces...betray an anxiety born of unresolved emotional issues. "My solution," Bourgeois explains, "is to make an effort to learn, about myself, every day." (Diehl, 1995)

With the obvious difference being the positive mood, my personal experiences incur in contrast to her; I see myself relate to Bourgeois ethos of using her creative process as a cathartic release. It fetches memories in every step of the process, up until the moment it is presented to be analyzed, criticized and absorbed by the viewers in an exhibition setting. This is the layer of nostalgia often overseen by the artist, viewer and even maybe the critic – during the process of making the work itself. Without having to be spelled out in its artists statement or description, there exists a nostalgic feeling that any work arouses

whilst still undone or being made – in every medium that is considered, every technique that's experimented.

In my case, the poppadums are both my chosen medium and vehicle for nostalgia, the food coloring I used in the edible poppadums are still used to this date in typical south Indian households and the story illustrated, much like the mythology seen in Louise Bourgeois work, is also a mythological story with a moral to learn. The usage of food as well as the theme of relational aesthetics propelled me to look into the work of Rirkrit Tiravanije's "Thai Curry".

Tiravanije's work is considered the personification of relational aesthetics. Critiqued since its exhibition in 1992, the show itself set a standard for what could be considered 'art' in a new way, a show entirely made to feed its viewers Thai curry and rice. The leftovers from the viewers were the 'materials' that formed the art – so much as to have a recipe for the dishes by Rirkrit Tiravanije instead of an artists statement in the catalogue. In essence, one can recreate the work – by using his recipe to make that curry again. The work along with the movement has been criticized for not implementing in action its rebellious tag, yet it has garnered an importance that no amount of criticism can destroy.

Though the overtone of my project is nostalgia, relational aesthetics is where one can situate it in the contemporary art field. Unlike the participants of Nicholas Bourriaud's examination of relational aesthetics, my project has 'things' in it. It questions its position, its context to the viewer yet doesn't go as far as to take itself so seriously to be called anarchist or revolutionary. It filters relational aesthetics to its soul, which is an art movement where the man 'viewer' is as important as the work. I know that my project would be incomplete and even idiotic if set in the social setting that rises out of – for it aims to educate an audience unaware of its history, a history considered trivial by its day-to-day users. The simple participatory activity in the project, of eating the poppadum, is one that was anticipated by the audience, in effect cementing the importance of the human element in an artwork. This participation is another similarity I share with Tiravanije's work, however I do not intend to count the leftovers of it as a physical contribution to the work. The socializing that takes place while participating, the conversations it causes and the Instagram photos all add up to the edu-tainment that the project was designed to generate.

## Chapter 3: The Appalam Project

'With the rationalization and bureaucratization of everyday life the past . . . becomes a theatre in which adventures of personal action can still be played out (Wright and Krauze, 2009)

Having divided my childhood between the cities of Dubai and Chennai, my art has always questioned the concept of home and identity, provoking questions of finding oneself, with my self-identity being the center of it. The aesthetic influence of these cultures can also be seen seeping into my work, intuitively but also as a reinforcement of the conceptual framework. My immediate environment is also a direct stimulus in my creative process, often deciding the medium, technique and display for my art. Having embraced the arts as a teenager for me meant a strong foundation in the conventional technical skills and theoretical knowledge, permitting my undergraduate & graduate phases to be experimentative. From oil painting to 3D printing, color theory to curatorial studies, I've collected a reservoir of information that feeds my work in layers from their conception as a thought seed to their fruition as an exhibited masterpiece.

Contemporary mediums, revolutionary context can be seen permeating my work over the course of my oeuvre – aiming to become further and further significant to ongoing & future contexts – whilst still maintaining their root in my nostalgia. Nostalgia for childhood feeds into real anxieties about the effects of recent economic and social change on both adults and children, even if the 'solutions' it offers are necessarily individualistic and backward-looking. (Moran, 2002). I can go as far as to say that this can be seen as the timeless quality of my work, making it immortal in its significance to present & future audience. Even the use of my microcultures customs and habits can be seen as documentation along with its apparently informative overtone.



*'Illam' – Sindhu Bharathi, 2018*

I see the above work as a perfect example of my style – experimentative, simplistic yet rooted deep in personal emotions. Illam is an installation work that combines ready-mades and hand-mades, to create the comfortable safe space a tent provided me as a child. Swathed in my mother's saree, it extends the idea of the pretty pink femininity I identified with as a little girl, cooking toys, teddy bears and fluffy blanket included. The tent & its cubbyhouse version is globally identified as the space children fixate with, answering the questions of commonality across borders in their small way. The name itself translates to home in my mother tongue Tamil, a homage I pay to the classical language that extends beyond a means of communication, in some way in all my work. It is interesting to know that 'Illam' is also used as the second part of the title or name given to their humble abodes by homeowners in my part of the country. As mentioned above, my background seeps into my work across different layers, meaningfully and evocatively.

The appalam project, where appalam is the tamil word for poppadums, also sees a similar sentiment in its naming, albeit the hybridity of Tamil & English as an almost ironic play on the title of the paper it constitutes, the capstone project. Screen printed poppadums were all the rage in the weddings I attended as a child in Tamil Nadu, the state I hail from in India. Printed like thank you wishes or invitations for the weddings, these poppadums were as glorious as they tasted, but mostly fascinated me as a kid. Their recreation in my project, is testimony to unforgettable memories, and in effect a projection

of my nostalgia onto my viewers – in an attempt to amaze them with a never seen before medium and technique.

The project is an extension of a previous experiment with screen printing on poppadums, where the history of poppadums as a product of cottage industries fueled the design of the print made on it. In this project however, the history of the medium itself takes a backseat to its nostalgic association in my life. In my rendition of the 'Thenali Raman' story, I was faced with a design element to keep the visual appeal of the installation from looking cluttered. This meant the story was converted into a textual backdrop, legible, albeit missing some words so as to be altered to fit into the circular form of the poppadum.

From formation to the final exhibition, my creative process draws upon knowledge embedded within nostalgia. Unknowingly I accumulate and understand processes involved in the objects & beings that connect with me, helping me create the artwork I latter extract from them. It also connects me with fellow artists, friends and family whose expertise I am able to tap into in order to solve the hurdles I come across, all whilst sharing nostalgic chatter about one another's journeys about the information I seek. In its own way, these journeys pierce themselves into my project as though they are a soul of nostalgia. They develop into conversation pieces, hopefully, for years to come, continuing to live vicariously through dialogue.



The work set up in the Blackbox at the UNSW A&D campus. It consists of 5 rows of printed poppadums, with a white net background. The poppadums are attached to the net using white jump rings, from the holes drilled on the top and bottom of the poppadum. The print on the poppadums are made of two colors – brown and black. The text, that reads the story of 'Thenali Raman and the crying kid', forms the background in brown ink. The illustration is in black ink, overlapping the brown text.

The story is divided into 8 scenes, laid out from the right to left reading sequence. After each set, i.e eight poppadums that form the story, is over a non-story poppadum is seen – using the same style. Some of these non-story poppadums are a design from typical Tamilian wedding invitations, altered to be an invitation for this show itself. The work is set up in the centre of the room, light by a single dramatic yellow-ish light. In the background, we can hear a narration of the written story, in Tamil, in a womans voice. The soundtrack continues to play throughout in a loop.



## **Conclusion**

As appealing as creative ideas are, they pose challenges that one cannot be prepared for, or can solve using the help of another artists' experience.

The originality and the challenges posed, drove me into completing the project. As a comparatively novice screen printer, an artist without a strong digital or design base, every hurdle I crossed was a lesson learnt. Since my capstone project's target is to recite a story from my childhood, using a notable element of my food habit (poppadum), memory inducement and cultural insight was the key to creating a genuine experience. The project evoked memories in me throughout the process, the thesis, the readings I did in order to understand my concepts better as well as the response from my audience – ultimately creating a successful work.

Contemporary artworks dealing with memory assert that memory keeps us in contact with the past through affect, empathy, melancholy and nostalgia. Therefore, memory allows us and individuals with no real sense of home or belonging, to situate ourselves in a specific time and place. (Martinez, 2015)

As a comparatively concise thesis, I see this paper as the start of my foray into these fields for study in the form of theoretical as well as project-based research.

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