



EduInspire-An International E-Journal

An International Peer Reviewed and Referred Journal (www.ctegujarat.org)
 Council for Teacher Education Foundation (CTEF, Gujarat Chapter)
 Patron: Prof. R. G. Kothari
 Chief Editor: Prof. Jignesh B. Patel
 Email:- Mo. 9429429550 ctefeduinspire@gmail.com

FROM IDEA TO UNIVERSALITY: INTERPRETING VASUDHAIVA KUTUMBAKAM IN CONTEMPORARY CONCEPTUAL ART

Dr. Yogita Raosaheb Kandalkar

Assistant Professor,
 PGTD of Fine Arts, RTMNU Nagpur

Abstract

Conceptual art prioritizes ideas, context, and critical inquiry over aesthetic form, enabling artists to engage with philosophical and universal themes. The Indian philosophical principle Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam - meaning “the world is one family” - offers a framework of universal humanism grounded in interconnectedness and ethical coexistence. This paper examines how contemporary conceptual art interprets and activates this universal vision through participatory, symbolic, and socially engaged practices. Through theoretical discussion and selected artist case references, the study argues that conceptual art serves as a dynamic medium for translating philosophical universality into contemporary visual and experiential discourse. Using comparative visual and theoretical analysis of selected contemporary artists and conceptual practices, the study demonstrates that conceptual art operates as a philosophical and ethical medium capable of translating civilizational values into contemporary visual discourse. The research argues that conceptual art provides a critical bridge between abstract philosophical ideals and global social consciousness.

Keywords: Conceptual Art, Universality, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, Universal Humanism, Contemporary Art, Social Practice Art, Indian philosophy

Introduction

Contemporary art has moved significantly from object-centered aesthetics toward idea-based practices. Conceptual art, in particular, emphasizes meaning, process, and viewer engagement rather than material craftsmanship. This shift allows art to function as a platform for philosophical and ethical exploration. The Indian philosophical doctrine Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, originating from ancient Sanskrit literature, proposes that all beings belong to one global family. In today’s interconnected yet divided world, this principle provides a valuable interpretive lens. This paper explores how contemporary conceptual art expresses and interprets this idea of universality through its methods and themes.

Conceptual art represents one of the most significant paradigm shifts in modern and contemporary art history, where the primacy of the art object is replaced by the primacy of the idea. Since the late twentieth century, artists have increasingly moved toward dematerialized, process-based, and discursive forms of artistic production. These developments align closely with philosophical frameworks that privilege meaning and ethical inquiry over surface appearance. In a globalized yet fragmented world, this idea has renewed relevance. This paper examines how conceptual art functions as a contemporary visual and performative language that reflects and activates universal humanist values embedded in this philosophical doctrine.

The objective of this study is to analyze conceptual art practices through the lens of universal humanism and to demonstrate how such practices translate the ethical vision of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam into contemporary artistic expression.

Conceptual Art: Idea as Primary Medium

Conceptual art establishes that the idea behind the work is more important than its physical form. Artists such as Sol LeWitt and Joseph Kosuth argued that art can exist as language, instruction, or proposition. The dematerialization of the art object enables broader intellectual and social engagement.

Core features include:

Idea over object

Process over product

Viewer interpretation

Use of text, action, and installation

Context-driven meaning

Because conceptual art is not restricted to material form, it can communicate abstract universal values more effectively.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and Universal Humanism

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam translates to “the world is one family.” It promotes a worldview based on shared existence, compassion, and ethical responsibility beyond borders. It rejects divisions of nation, class, and identity in favor of universal belonging.

The theoretical framework of this study combines three intersecting domains-

Conceptual Art Theory emphasizing idea, instruction, and context over material object.

Universal Humanism focusing on shared dignity, ethical interdependence, and global responsibility.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam proposing planetary unity and moral kinship across boundaries.

The analytical model evaluates artworks based on conceptual intention, participatory structure, symbolic universality, and ethical engagement.

From Concept to Universality in Artistic Practice

Conceptual art often transforms abstract philosophical ideas into participatory and experiential forms. Rather than representing universality symbolically, it creates situations where universality is experienced through interaction and reflection. Strategies include:

Participatory installations

Public interventions

Socially engaged projects

Symbolic use of common materials

Dialogic performance

Through these strategies, art moves from isolated idea to shared human experience.

Scholarly discourse on conceptual art has emphasized dematerialization (Lippard), idea-based structures (LeWitt), and philosophical propositions (Kosuth). Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics expanded the discussion toward participatory and intersubjective artistic models. Terry Smith and Peter Osborne have framed contemporary art as a field defined by globality and conceptual plurality.

Studies on Indian philosophical humanism highlights non-dualism, coexistence, and ethical universality. However, limited interdisciplinary research connects conceptual art with Indian philosophical frameworks such as Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. This paper addresses that gap by integrating art theory with comparative philosophy.

Conceptual Art and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: indian Artistic Interpretations

The philosophical principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam proposes that humanity exists as a single interconnected moral community beyond borders, identities, and hierarchies. Several Indian conceptual and concept-driven contemporary artists translate this universalist framework into visual, participatory, and discursive artistic forms. Their practices move from localized narratives toward shared human experience, thereby operationalizing universality within contemporary art.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative analytical methodology based on:

Comparative visual analysis

Conceptual interpretation

Thematic case study approach

Textual and philosophical correlation

Primary case studies are drawn from contemporary conceptual and socially engaged art practices. Artworks are examined through documentation, artist statements, and critical interpretation.

Conceptual Art Beyond Aesthetics

Conceptual art challenges the aesthetic autonomy of art by foregrounding cognition and inquiry. The artwork may exist as text, performance, instruction, social action, or temporary intervention. Meaning emerges through engagement rather than visual pleasure. Such dematerialized practice allows conceptual art to address themes including migration, ecology, identity, inequality, and collective memory - all central to universal humanist discourse.

Subodh Gupta - Shared Material Culture as Global Family Language

Subodh Gupta's large-scale installations constructed from everyday utensils and domestic objects transform local household materials into global symbols of sustenance and labour. Stainless steel vessels - used across cultures - become markers of shared human survival rather than regional identity. Subodh Gupta's large-scale installations using everyday utensils transform domestic objects into global symbols of shared sustenance and labor. His conceptual material strategy reflects interconnected human experience.



Subodh Gupta, Line of Control, 2008. Mushroom-cloud form constructed from stainless steel utensils, symbolizing shared domestic culture and global political tension. made from

thousands of steel kitchen utensils, shaped like a mushroom cloud Line of Control (2008) is a installation by Indian artist Subodh Gupta composed of stainless steel and brass kitchen utensils (pots, pans, tiffins, etc.). The sculpture takes the form of a mushroom cloud, referencing both the nuclear age and geopolitical tensions (the term "Line of Control" refers

to the contested India-Pakistan border). It was exhibited in major venues including the Tate Britain Triennial (2009) and later displayed in public spaces and museums such as the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in Delhi.

Shilpa Gupta - Border Critique and Human Unity

Shilpa Gupta's conceptual works frequently interrogate political borders, surveillance systems, and identity control. Her installations that question territorial divisions reveal how artificial boundaries disrupt natural human interconnectedness.



Shilpa Gupta, There Is No Border Here, conceptual installation. Text-based and spatial work questioning territorial divisions and identity control. Wall Drawing with Self-Adhesive Tapes, 118 1/8 x 118 1/8 in, 300 x 300 cm

Nalini Malani - Collective Memory and Shared Suffering

Nalini Malani's immersive video and shadow installations address violence, exile, and historical trauma through mythic and symbolic language. Her works connect individual



suffering with collective global memory.

Nalini Malani, In Search of Vanished Blood, 2012. Multi-channel video and shadow installation exploring violence and memory. Medium: Six-channel video installation, color, sound, 11 min. and five painted acrylics on Mylar cylinders Dimensions: Variable

Each Mylar sheet: 65 in. × 12 ft. 5 1/2 in. (165.1 × 379.7 cm) Classifications: Variable Media, Ivories and Bone

Vivan Sundaram - Archive as Collective Human Record

Vivan Sundaram's conceptual archival installations reinterpret historical records and personal archives to construct collective memory environments. His work suggests that history itself is



a shared human inheritance.

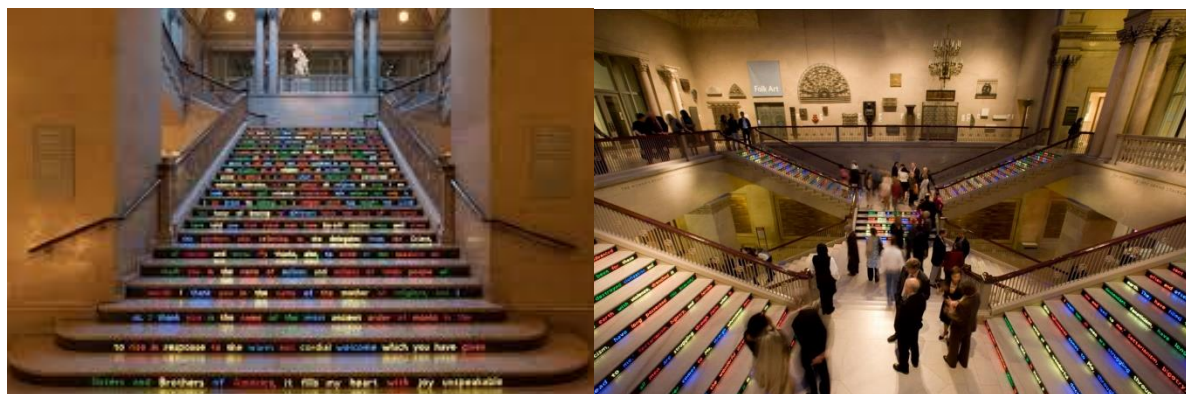
Vivan Sundaram, History Project, installation series. Conceptual reconstruction of historical memory through archival material.

Jitish Kallat — Planetary Communication and Human Address

Jitish Kallat's text-based conceptual installations frame humanity within planetary and temporal unity. His works often present messages addressed to all people across time.



Public Notice (Nehru Speech), 2003, Burnt adhesive on acrylic mirror, wood, stainless steel, 5 Parts: 78 x 54 x 6 in each, 198.1 x 137.2 x 15.2 cm each, Public Notice 2, 2007,



Public Notice 3, 2010 (installation – LED text on steps)

Jitish Kallat, Public Notice series. Text-based conceptual installation using historical speeches as universal address.

Jitish Kallat's Public Notice series (2003–2010) can be interpreted as a contemporary conceptual articulation of the ancient Indian philosophical principle Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam- the idea that the world is one universal family. By recontextualizing historically significant speeches by Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, and Swami Vivekananda, Kallat transforms political, ethical, and spiritual declarations into material installations that question the moral condition of present-day humanity. The series foregrounds themes of collective memory, violence, tolerance, and ethical responsibility, thereby shifting these historical texts from national contexts into global human discourse. For instance, Public Notice 2, constructed using bone-like resin letters, metaphorically evokes shared human mortality and the cyclical nature of violence, reinforcing the Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam notion of interconnected human destiny. Similarly, Public Notice 3, which represents Vivekananda's 1893 speech on religious tolerance through LED textual architecture, situates interfaith harmony within contemporary global anxieties, emphasizing the urgency of universal coexistence. Through conceptual strategies that prioritize idea over object, Kallat's work dissolves boundaries between past and present, nation and world, self and other. Thus, the Public Notice series functions not merely as historical reflection but as a visual-philosophical framework that reactivates Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam within the language of global contemporary conceptual art, positioning ethical universality as an urgent cultural and humanitarian imperative in the 21st century.

Amar Kanwar - Justice as Universal Ethical Ground

Amar Kanwar's film-installations function as conceptual spaces of testimony and justice. His works address human rights, ecology, and dignity through poetic documentary structures.

Amar Kanwar is an Indian filmmaker and installation artist known for poetic, multi-screen film installations that deal with **justice, testimony, memory, violence, displacement, and political resistance**. His works often combine documentary, poetry, archives, sound, and spatial installation.



Amar Kanwar, film-installation work on justice and testimony

A comparative reading of Amar Kanwar's film-installation practice and Jitish Kallat's Public Notice series demonstrates how contemporary Indian conceptual art re-engages with the philosophical ethos of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, the idea of the world as a unified human family. Jitish Kallat's Public Notice trilogy recontextualizes historically significant speeches by Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, and Swami Vivekananda, transforming them into spatial and textual installations that interrogate collective ethical responsibility in the present global context. Through material strategies such as burnt mirror text, bone-like typographic forms, and LED textual architecture, Kallat converts historical rhetoric into reflective spaces that question violence, religious intolerance, and the failure of human societies to uphold ideals of peace and coexistence. In contrast, Amar Kanwar's film-installations, including *The Lightning Testimonies* and *The Sovereign Forest*, foreground testimony, memory, and justice through multi-screen moving image environments that amplify marginalized voices and challenge institutional narratives of history and legality.

Despite differences in medium and narrative structure, both artists shift discourse from national or regional frameworks toward universal human concerns, aligning closely with the philosophical foundation of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. Kallat emphasizes historical continuity and ethical introspection through the reactivation of political and spiritual texts, while Kanwar constructs immersive testimonial archives that present violence, ecological crisis, and displacement as shared global human experiences. Together, their practices demonstrate how contemporary conceptual art can function as an ethical and philosophical bridge between ancient Indian humanist thought and present-day global socio-political realities. Within a conference discourse on global contemporary art and philosophy, the works of Kallat and Kanwar can therefore be understood as visual-cultural frameworks that translate the moral universality of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam into contemporary artistic

Raqs Media Collective - Knowledge Networks and Planetary Time

Raqs Media Collective is a group of Indian conceptual artists who mix art, philosophy, research, and media to think about how people, time, history, and society connect. Raqs Media Collective produces text-based and multimedia conceptual installations exploring time, knowledge circulation, and global interdependence. Their work positions humanity within shared temporal and informational networks.



Raqs Media Collective, conceptual text and media installation on time and knowledge systems.

Marina Abramovic: Presence and Human Connection

Abramovic's performance works create direct relational encounters between artist and audience. The shared experiential field dissolves distance and hierarchy, emphasizing common humanity.

Marina Abramovic and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: Presence as Universal Human Connection

Marina Abramovic's performance practice can be interpreted through the philosophical lens of **Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam**, the ancient Indian principle meaning "*the world is one family*." This concept, originating in the Maha Upanishad, expresses the idea that all human beings and even all life forms are interconnected beyond boundaries of nation, identity, or difference. Abramovic's art similarly attempts to dissolve boundaries between self and other. Her performances create situations where the individual identity of the artist merges with collective human experience. In works such as *The Artist Is Present*, prolonged eye contact and shared silence transform the performance space into an environment of emotional communion, demonstrating how simple presence can generate deep human connection beyond language. Her performance-based conceptual works create direct human encounters, emphasizing presence, vulnerability, and shared emotional space.





Marina Abramovic, *The Artist Is Present*, 2010. Durational performance at MoMA highlighting relational presence between artist and viewer.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam as Conceptual Paradigm (conceptual framework for global harmony)

When interpreted through conceptual art, functions not merely as a philosophical slogan but as an operational artistic paradigm. It supports:

Transnational artistic dialogue

Collective participation

Ethical spectatorship

Cross-cultural symbolism

Conceptual art translates metaphysical unity into social and visual experience.

Synthesis (Combination)

Taken together, these Indian conceptual practices demonstrate that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is not merely a philosophical slogan but an operational aesthetic-ethical framework. Through shared materials, participatory structures, border critique, collective memory, and universal address, conceptual artists translate the idea of global family into experiential artistic forms.

Conceptual Art as Ethical Platform

Conceptual art functions not only as artistic expression but also as ethical inquiry. It encourages questioning, dialogue, and awareness. This aligns with universal humanist philosophy by:

Promoting empathy

Creating shared spaces of reflection

Challenging exclusionary narratives

Encouraging cross-cultural understanding

Thus, conceptual art becomes a medium of philosophical activation rather than aesthetic display.

Discussion

Despite its universal intent, conceptual art can face barriers:

Intellectual complexity

Limited accessibility

Institutional mediation

Cultural misinterpretation

For universal humanist values to be effectively communicated, interpretive support and inclusive platforms are necessary. Despite its strengths, conceptual art faces challenges in accessibility, interpretation, and institutional framing. Universal humanist intent may be limited by elite discourse or restricted contexts. Greater pedagogical mediation and public engagement are required to realize inclusive philosophical communication.

Conclusion

Conceptual art provides a powerful contemporary language for expressing philosophical universality. When interpreted through Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, conceptual practices reveal their capacity to foster global human connection and ethical awareness. The movement from idea to universality occurs when art becomes participatory, relational, and socially conscious. Contemporary conceptual art thus operates as a bridge between ancient universal philosophy and present-day cultural expression. By shifting emphasis from object to idea and from viewer to participant, conceptual art embodies ethical interconnectedness. The convergence of conceptual methodology and universal philosophy demonstrates art's capacity to function as a global moral language.

References

- Alexander Alberro, B. S. (2006). *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Bakargiev, C. C. (2012). Nalini Malani: In Search of Vanished.
- Gupta, S. (2014). *Everything Is Inside*.
- Meyer, U. (1972). *Conceptual Art*. New York: Dutton Press.
- Mieke, B. (2016). In *Medies Res: Inside Nalini Malani Shadow Plays*. Hatje Cantz.
- Sbarra, P. B. (1974). *Rhythm 0*. *Monu#23*, p. 82.
- Witt, S. L. (1994). *Sentences on Conceptual Art*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Bourriaud, N. - *Relational Aesthetics*
- Maha Upanishad - Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam verse Bourriaud, N. (2002). *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les presses du réel.
- Danto, A. (1997). *After the End of Art*. Princeton University Press.
- Kosuth, J. (1969). *Art after Philosophy*. *Studio International*, 178(915).
- LeWitt, S. (1967). *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*. *Artforum*.
- Lippard, L. (1973). *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*. University of California Press.