

# Object Lessons

Srimoyee Mitra looks at how CK Rajan re-invents household articles to speak about social, political and cultural transformations in a changing world.

IN HIS RECENT WORKS, CK RAJAN ALTERS OBJECTS OF EVERYDAY use into intriguing and bizarre spectacles. By modifying the form and design of utility items and farming tools, Rajan questions the common assumptions underlying mundane activities such as using a broom, telling the time or turning on the fan in our frenetic consumption-oriented society. Rajan is best known for *Mild Terrors* (1991-96), a series of collages, that was included in Documenta 12. Through meticulous image and text montages created from newspaper clippings and popular magazines, he developed through this series a resonant critique of social, political and cultural upheavals in the then newly 'liberalizing' India. In his latest series, *Mad Furnitures and Psychic Objects, Part 1*, showing at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinrucke, Mumbai, from the 16<sup>th</sup> of September to the 16<sup>th</sup> of October, the Hyderabad-based Malayali artist continues to explore and examine the transformations of everyday routines and lifestyles. Rajan breaks out of the two-dimensional frame with his *Psychic Objects*, challenging the viewer's assumptions of engaging with an artwork.

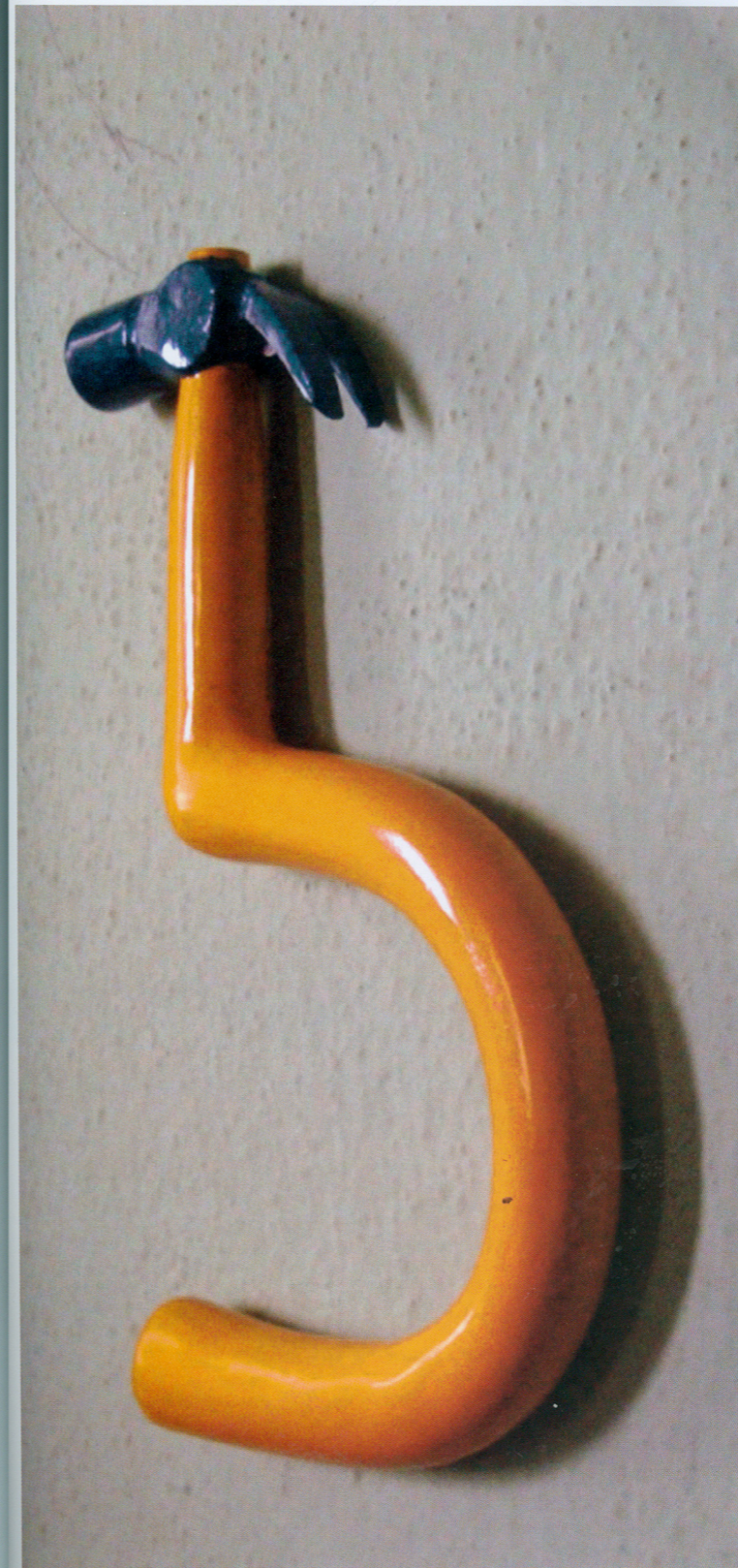
*Psychic Objects* comprise items such as a broom, a fan, a wristwatch, a clock, a knife, a ladle and a hammer. The series also includes gardening or farming tools such as an axe, a sickle and a hedge-cutter, among others. However, Rajan's modifications render these items defunct and futile. For instance, while the fan is complete with a ceiling fixture and three blades, one of the blades is more than ten feet long. Pointed at the tip and painted bright red, it resembles a sword when seen with other blades of the same fan. Evoking a sense of violence and unease, Rajan's fan reminds the viewer of its alternate use as a device for committing suicide.

By transforming their scale, form and shape, *Psychic Objects* draw attention to the invisible challenges that form an intrinsic part of contemporary social, political and cultural life. Let me discuss a few objects here, which successfully explore these aspects of quotidian life. The lamp, for example, resembles a regular electric lantern from afar. On closer scrutiny, it is clear that it does not light up, as the electric bulb fixture is replaced with a carved wooden sun. Rajan's lamp can be understood as a comment on the acute power shortage that leaves major portions of the country in darkness. Similarly, the 13-foot-long band of a wristwatch with buckles at its ends resembles a belt rather than a wristwatch. This can be understood to refer to the growing pressures of fast-paced urban life. Rajan portrays the age-old wall clock as being literally 'stuck in time', as its arms stretch out of its frame like unkempt whiskers. Living in a time when mega constructions have become the norm, cranes are more effective than a shovel. Designed with an L-shaped handle, the bent shovel is useless. Painted in baby pink and blue, it resembles a childhood toy rather than a tool used for digging the earth. In his re-designing of the hammer and sickle, Rajan confronts the loaded icons of Communism (as well as his earlier Marxist leanings). The hammer and sickle, which represent the union of industrial and agricultural workers, are portrayed as ambiguous question marks as if they are redundant and irrelevant.

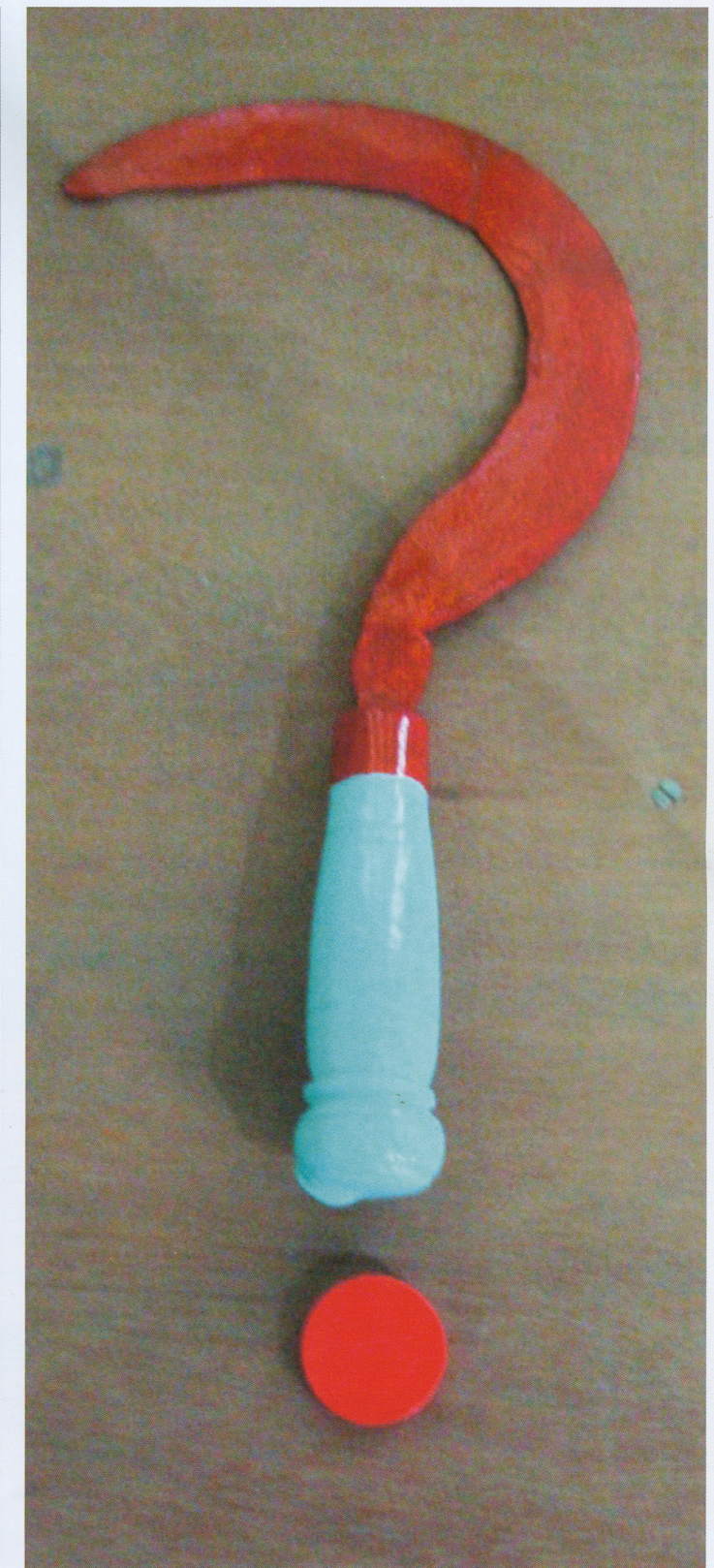
Rajan's *Psychic Objects* are conceptually driven. The strength of the series lies in the fact that it does not make any conclusive statement. While the objects draw attention to domestic, urban and agricultural spaces, they also engage with the place of display – the gallery. The irregular and unique dimensions of each object in the series resist conventional modes of display as the objects cannot be categorized simplistically as sculptures or installations. The hybrid characteristics of the works and the diverse influences that inform Rajan's new objects resonate well with the shifting terrain of everyday life in our rapidly globalizing, media-saturated society.



CK Rajan. *Axe*. 2009-10



CK Rajan. *Hammer*. 2009-10.



CK Rajan. *Sickle*. 2009-10.