As art history students in Baroda, we were trained to identify the formal and aesthetic qualities, stylistic variations and iconographical complexities of a wide range of artefacts ranging from Indus Valley terracottas to Pahadi miniatures. We absorbed an immense amount of information about the original cultural milieux within which these works were produced and received, the textual resonances of particular iconic forms, the social and political contexts within which they were deployed, patronage systems and guild formations. Understandably, the more we learnt about these artefacts, the more saturated they became with contextual significance, the more we valued them. This alone, we felt, was sufficient justification for further art historical research.

It took me a few years out of the institutional cocoon of academic art history to question the somewhat conventional nature of this kind of valuation, not to mention its obvious circularity. At the margins of my consciousness lingered the possibility of another kind of value, based on an experience of these objects far removed from that offered by mainstream art history research. Examining my motivations for studying pre-modern Indian art, I realized that what drew me to the discipline in the first place was a series of highly subjective experiences. Encountering the Great Relief at Mamallapuram face-to-face, or the exquisite early Mughal miniatures at the National museum, or the colossal Buddha sculptures in the Kanheri caves – each of these encounters was a momentous event not even remotely connected with all the analyzing and interpreting we did in the classroom. The experience of encounter was a powerfully affective one, with an inescapable corporeal component. It became increasingly clear to me that the capacity that these remarkable productions had to stimulate this kind of affect had little to do with the historical pedigree of the artefacts, their antiquity, the meanings they communicated or the metaphysics they embodied. In stark contrast to their modest and well-ordered procession through the pages of art history texts and in slide-shows, the objects I encountered in the field exuded an uncontrollable, transgressive presence that even the most unimaginatively conceived museums could not repress.
This powerful sense of *disconnect* then, between the objects I studied in the classroom and the objects I encountered in the field, forms the motivational core of the present study. Initially, I was unsure of the academic relevance of the problem; it seemed to be altogether too subjective and idiosyncratic to merit scholarly investigation. However, a stint of teaching pre-modern Indian art history to practicing artists at the post-graduate level convinced me of the validity of the disconnect question.

My lectures on the history of Indian sculpture encountered a major stumbling block, arising from what I came to perceive as a failed vocabulary. I found myself unable to communicate to my students even a fraction of the impact that these works had had on me in field encounters, incapable of animating these remarkable objects in a way that highlighted their affective qualities, their visual and material ‘presence’ in our midst. These were precisely the qualities that I imagined would carry maximum resonance for practicing artists. My re-presentations of these art works in my lectures were unfailingly off the mark. The more I surrounded them with contextual detail in my discourse, the more I seemed to mire them in some inaccessible and somewhat (to young artists, at least) irrelevant historicity. The more I detailed their formal and stylistic nuances and highlighted their aesthetic qualities, the more irrevocably inanimate and ossified they became.

In an attempt to overcome this impasse, I went back to the canonical art history texts we had referred to as students, paying closer attention to approaches, methodologies, narrative strategies and rhetorical styles. This preliminary survey produced a rather unexpected result; I became aware of the fact that the problem exceeded what could be explained away as my personal limitations as a presenter. The inadequacy of my vocabulary was, in large part, a symptom of a more systemic issue; it was a structural feature of the discourse of pre-modern Indian art history, as we had inherited it. There seemed to be something embedded within the discipline’s structure that precluded the possibility of the viewer/interpreter engaging directly with the *material presence* of the objects she studied, and the possibility of reflexively positioning this aspect of the work at the centre of an art historical inquiry. *To investigate why the words we use seem to fail the objects we study* (to
borrow James Elkins’ phrase) – this seemed to approach a respectably academic re-formulation of a personal dissatisfaction and stumbling block.

The obvious course of action was to look closely at different kinds of writing about these artefacts; to try and comprehend which of them came closest to capturing the affective qualities of the objects they studied, and to articulating the tactile, corporeal and kinaesthetic (as opposed to purely visual) nature of the encounter. This necessitated a stepping back from contemporary discourses, a stepping away from art history proper, to explore a wider range of related discourses (travel writings and colonial archaeological reports, for example) that recorded and interpreted these encounters. Given this hugely expanded field, I chose to focus on a small selection of texts – primarily English-language texts dealing with sculptural artefacts.

Somewhat late in the analysis, I experienced a first-hand understanding of two theoretical formulations that are just beginning to influence the way we research and teach art history in India. The first formulation is the poststructuralist position on the mutual constitution of subjects and objects; the second is visual culture’s insight into the “culturality of vision”. What follows in the present project is, from one point of view, an elaboration of this understanding; the four major chapters apply this insight to a theoretically eclectic analysis of select texts. In the final section, I speculate on what an art history that positions the materiality and presence of its objects as a central philosophical question might look like.

As art-history itself has, until recently, avoided disciplinary reflexivity and devoted itself single-mindedly to the study of external ‘objects’ (particularly in some Indian institutions), I have chosen to pick many of my critical tools and concepts from a variety of fields and disciplines. While the influence of post-structuralism, post-colonial and cultural studies is inescapable for a project of this kind, I have also borrowed freely from my reading of anthropology, material culture studies, phenomenology and that new entrant in art history’s neighbourhood - visual culture studies. The resultant theoretical bricolage is untidy but I hope, somewhat productive.