

# REDEFINE: Curatorial and Artistic Practices in the South East

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Tanya Abraham

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Raqs Media Collective, Shwetal A Patel, Carlo Rizzo, Sanjoy K Roy, Pablo del Val, Muhammad Zeeshan

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# REDEFINE: Curatorial and Artistic Practices in the South East

## Editorial by Tanya Abraham

This issue focuses on understanding the art practices in Asia and the Middle East through a local lens. To offer strength to my work in India on the possibility of rethinking curatorial formats based on the needs of a society; society and social impact are key aspects in my view. I invited curators and artists working in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, South Korea, Israel and the Middle East to share their ideas and experiences, reflecting on how art practices are connected to a nation's cultural nuance, offering not only a unique flavor to the events but also insight into how such art intersections propel new socio-cultural frameworks and impact local regions. This issue has aimed to collect a varied sapor of art practices from practitioners working to enhance the possibilities of creating new dialogues within existing indigenous socio-cultural frameworks.

In this issue, Pakistani curator Muhammad Zeeshan, in his writing titled *Flight Interrupted: Eco Leaks from the Invasion Desk*, recalls his curatorial work at the 2019 Karachi Biennale, which aimed at linking the peoples of Karachi to the ecology of the region, moving past the urban city dwelling through an experimental voice, which could echo beyond the boundaries of Pakistan.

Raqs Media Collective and Meydad Eliyahu write of their artistic practices concerning social-cultural aspects of the nations they hail from: Komu and Raqs Media Collective from India, and artist Meydad Eliyahu from Israel. Eliyahu explicates the 'Schneller Project' in Jerusalem in his article "The Schneller Order Case: site-specific art in Jerusalem as a practice of Dialogue", a site-specific work that is an example of how art can be used in Israel to soothe the existing unrest in the country. Raqs Media Collective in *Blurry Borders and Messy Realities: Reflections on the Infrastructural in the Curatorial* shares some of their select works which queries how art intersects with the "living dynamics of the world".

My interviews with Shwetal Patel (on the Kochi Muziris Biennale) and Sanjoy K Roy (as Chairperson of the FICCI Tourism and Culture Committee, and co-founder of the Jaipur Literature Festival), traces the challenges and importance of arts and culture in India from a regional perspective, and its possibilities to impact society to create new socio-cultural dynamics within the nation's unique cultural narrative.

Preeti Kathuria's article titled *Curate - Speculate: Indian Contemporary Art and the Socio-Ecological Contingency*, highlights the concerns of rural India and its farmers; her writing talks of the issues faced by India's agrarian community through select exhibitions. Considering the current political scenario in India, she speaks of art practices, which throw light on problem solving prospects, focusing on the agrarian entropy.

In *Undulating Currents: A Group Show - An Analysis into the curatorial process*, Mekhala Dave writes about her connection with water, the materiality of oceans' resources, and contemporary art's trajectory with decolonial strands from theory to praxis from the exhibition *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*, she co-curated.

Curator Carlo Rizzo shares about public art in the Middle East, specifically concerning Dubai and Riyadh. In his essay titled *Public/Art: Fluid Spaces of Belonging and Transformation*, he writes about how art is building new cultural audiences in these regions. In the article *Curating an Art Fair for the Global South: the case of Art Dubai*, Pablo Del Val, Artistic Director at Art Dubai, speaks of curating for the Global South, keeping in mind the creative economy and how the perceptions of the Global South are changing, and Art Dubai alongside it.

Curator and artist Hadas Kedar takes the reader through the exhibition titled *Destabilizing Curating: Southern Approaches to Art*, where, in the words of Kedar, "Three projects strengthen the conception of the South as a subverting power that complicates Western approaches, patterns of thought, and institutions." Here, she questions institutional practices and the formats that shaped Western cultural history and connects it to work in Israel.

In the essay *From an event to a movement: My journey with the Dhaka Art Summit*, curator Ruxmini Choudary tells us about the Dhaka Art Summit, how it evolved through the editions to include the regional culture and flavor of Bangladesh, involving local artists and the crafts of the region, and its development into a unique art event.

Lastly, I had requested curator Nicolas Bourriaud to write an article on his curatorial ideas for the Gwangju Biennale, based on his theory of Relational Aesthetics (which I refer to in my soon to be published thesis). In his essay titled "Nothing Can be Linear Anymore", Bourriaud speaks of art as "a semiotic collective production"; in his writing the dialogue between spaces, art works and artists explicate as a commune through which his curatorial ideas emerge.

Through the writings in this issue, I have aimed to offer a look into the curatorial ideas, formats, and impact in the regions of the South-East where art has been taking an avatar of a positive socio-cultural accelerator propelling new and positive ideas for societies. In relation to my thesis on the Kochi-Muziris Biennale querying its curatorial format as a possible West-driven one, the contributions of the writers here offer substantial strength on how artists and curators could consider additional alternative practices, which are more favorable to regions not of the West.

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# Flight Interrupted: Eco Leaks from the Invasion Desk

## Muhammad Zeeshan

*A loss, a towering barrier, a biorhythm interrupted...*

Likely a survival strategy born out of the perils of this world, humans evolved into social creatures early on in their trajectory, realizing that first and foremost, their strength lies in numbers. Many of the dangers faced by our human ancestors arose from the enigma that was the natural world, an unknown and even lesser understood entity. As time progressed, humans sought to achieve social order and personal security by controlling elements of nature that could be tamed. The drive to survive, coupled with intelligence and self-preservation pushed humans to exert their power over nature, and to eventually make nature subservient—at least that was the false self-promise. Living today in urban spaces, humans have grown further away from nature. This distance, unbeknownst to the earliest urbanites, was actually going to bring with it its own perils. As curator of Karachi Biennale 2019, I framed the curatorial lens through pressing factors such as the environment, its inextricable link to the social fabric, and the varying struggles of Karachi's diverse and extensive public.

Karachi has an exciting, recurrent, evolving energy. Approaching her from the sea, the coast, once the lungs of the city lined with mangroves, is now a harbinger of habitat loss and ecological turmoil. Moving inward, land that miraculously supported life on the edge of a desert has been stripped and transformed into a new sort of jungle—one of tar and concrete, ruled not by the laws of nature, but the toxins of industrial might and greed-based urban expansion. The rich and varied species of migratory birds that once flew over the coastal city annually, have altered their routes due to the surplus of high-rise buildings that obstruct their natural path. Even water, the sustenance for life, is as scarce as it is polluted. The result: human and habitat are greatly altered.

An entire body of sociological theory exists to define the struggle of urbanization. In essence, there is no *one* answer to the question of whether or not urban life is beneficial or reductive; cities are too complex a phenomenon to provide a simple answer. Cities are good; the concentration of activities and diverse populations lend themselves to creativity, giving us high culture, economic opportunities, exposure, and excitement. However, urban centers and their denizens are also plagued by their fair share of issues. Population concentrations and diversity has often lead to racism; creativity can come to stagnate in the face of conformity and impersonality; economic opportunities bring exploitations, crime, and classism; while constant exposure to various stimuli and ceaseless excitement breed a certain attitude that is blasé at best, and threatening, at its worst.

Culturally and historically, Karachi is a melting pot of languages, cuisines, and the arts. I wanted to converse with her people about what holds us all together in a common thread. This led to the idea of spreading the message of ecology within the city. For KB19, besides artists, I also invited architects, gardeners, engineers, sound technicians, theatre performers and storytellers to participate because the Biennale and its very public occurrence were not only received by artists but by everyone who dwelled in



Victorine Mueller, born in 1961 in Grenchen, Switzerland | Lives and works in Zürich, Switzerland, Supported by Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia.  
*Timeline*, 2019, Performance, PVC- foil, air, light, 30 minutes

In many cultures, the elephant is considered a cosmic animal that carries the entire world on its back. He is considered a sensitive, socially thinking being, who respects even the smallest animal. In her performance *Timeline*, Victorine Müller is inside a transparent, life-size elephant. Man is at eye level with the animal, he does not control it. The artist, sitting high up and noble in the animal, looks steadily forward - for viewers there is no eye contact, which gives the performance the impression of a concentrated and meditative tension. This is reinforced by the visible body tone of the inflated PVC elephant. Light reflections bounce off the animal's smooth skin and convey an impression of the high pressure inside the well inflated volume of the body. All this leads to the interior, in a double sense: to the human inside the animal. The work alludes to memory and something unseen but experienced; a belief in us that there can be another relationship with nature, other than the obvious one that demands common ecological responsibility.



Noorjehan Bilgrami, b. 1950, Tariq Alexander Qaiser, b. 1961, Marvi Mazhar, b. 1984, Sadia Sa Sohail Zuberi, b. 1970 Live and work in Karachi, Pakistan,  
*The Mangrove Project*, 2019, Mixed Media, Variable.

Within the complex layers of the vast urban metropolis that is Karachi, exists perhaps one of its most fragile ec for its tree cover or vegetation: along its 70 kilometer coastline, stretching from Cape Monze in the west to Port thriving in the mixed saline and fresh water of the Indus River and the Arabian Sea, are its 100,000 hectares of li hectares along the deltaic coast, which place Pakistan's mangroves amongst the fifth largest of these forests in city are profound, though greatly overlooked: from acting as a natural barrier to storms and cyclones, to the pre support, from housing hundreds of migratory birds such as pelicans and flamingos annually, to the fish, mol- lus and waters. Aesthetically too, their form is remarkable, visible in the great twisting and gnarled forms of the bla its large aerial roots visible above the water, acting as anchors within the soil beneath. these effects would be th spotted along the mangroves that were cut down to make way for the Mai Kolachi bypass along Boat Basin. Adi used in the production of coal, and also provides a source of firewood for surrounding communities.



Irfan Gul Dahri, born in 1979 in Shahdadpur, Pakistan | Lives and works in Lahore, Pakistan.  
*Picnic*, 2019, Fibreglass, plastic, enamel paint, Variable.

A herd of life size goats made of fiber glass are presented in a new light. Connotations of power, control and displacement are evoked in the placement and depiction of the distinct characters. The installation may also comment on socio-political urgencies, supplanting natural power dynamics through a satirical lens.



REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT (Martin Keil/Henrik Mayer), Martin Keil: Born in 1968 in Germany | Lives and works in Berlin, Germany, Henrik Mayer: Born in 1971 in Germany | Lives and works in Berlin, Germany. Supported by Goethe-Institut Karachi.

*Independent Electricity*, 2019, Spinning bikes, electronic paraphernalia, Variable

For their KB19 work, Keil/Mayer create a project that provides a DIY solution to producing electric energy independently from the regular supply. It utilises spinning bikes as used in a gym that are placed at Bagh Ibne Qasim, Karachi. The bikes are modified to produce electrical power. Cellular devices and electric appliances can be charged on the spot for free. During the dark hours, the spot at the park can be lit up by people riding on the stationary bikes. The four spinning bikes are modified with technical parts recycled from cars. The project points at the ecological and social aspects of energy production, and demonstrates the possibility of independence from conventional electric energy, often produced involving carbon or nuclear materials. As a micro power station, the gym also supports the idea of a decentralised energy supply on a small scale. The combined force of the four bikes produces significant energy, enough to boil 240 eggs for breakfast, to do 5½ kilos of laundry, or to toast 133 slices of bread. It is also possible to operate eight laptops with 50 watts of power.

Karachi. My vision was to include people from varying disciplines and the public, so that their differing voices and messages created a universal visual glossary to address pressing ecological concerns, in an experiential language that was global, enigmatic and far reaching. These varied voices came together and resonated with viewers differently. Despite the individualism of projects at KB19, before inviting artists to participate, I would familiarize myself with their practices as a whole. Practices that were already involved with ecology, and individuals whose work was cultivated specifically for the public arena were given close attention. In addition to local participants from Pakistan, I also visited studios of artists all over the world and then invited them to participate in KB19 because 'Ecology and Environment' is a theme that begs equal concern from any point on the globe.

As an artist myself, I recognize that the studio process is intrinsic to a body of work. It was very important to me to actively engage with the studio practice of artists, and so regardless of their locations, I made it a point to physically visit as many artist studios as possible. Some of the most memorable moments from my curatorial journey are from when I was travelling throughout Europe, engaging with artists. I would arrive at the capital city of a country and make it my mission to maximize my time there. Every day was an early start at 6 AM, when I would leave my hotel and catch a train to a nearby city, spending the day hopping from one studio to another. I would return to my hotel late every night, and the process would repeat itself the next day. These efforts resulted in 101 artists that included participants from Africa, Australia, Europe, North and South America, South and East Asia, exhibiting 99 unique projects. Out of the international artists participating in KB19, several were supported by British Council Pakistan, Goethe-Institut Pakistan, the Consulate of Italy Karachi, and Pro Helvetia New Delhi, with whom we worked closely.

Humans need nature, but fear it, and thus desire to make it subservient. As a reconciliation to this conflict that especially afflicts city-dwellers, came the proliferation of public spaces that brought nature to the cities in a sanitized manner. Kahlil Gibran beautifully encapsulates this struggle:

*"We are swept into the current of urban existence, until we forget the peaceful rhythms of simple country life, which smiles in the spring, toils in the summer, reaps in autumn, rests in winter, imitating nature in all her cycles. We are wealthier than the villagers in silver or gold, but they are richer in spirit. What we sow we reap not; they reap what they sow. We are slaves of gain, and they the children of contentment. Our draught from the cup of life is mixed with bitterness and despair, fear and weariness; but they drink the pure nectar of life's fulfilment."*

Gibran talks eloquently about the urban-pastoral living crux. The public of Karachi and that of art are two entities seldom brought together; these also create a crux that formed the basis of the KB19 curatorial mandate. With KB19, my vision was not just to invite the public to come and see the art, but instead a structure was created to go to the public that already exists in space(s). This focus created a bridge between art and the public. My mandate: instead of inviting the public into the gallery space, I would take art to the public, to areas that the public already goes to, uses, and takes ownership of. For this reason, I chose public spaces that were intrinsic to the curatorial vision, and intersected the themes of public and environment. The massive Bagh Ibne Qasim, historic Karachi Zoological Gardens, and Frere Hall served as the perfect canvas for this vision.



Every square inch of Bagh Ibne Qasim's sprawling expanse is inundated with history and culture, and the park's draw informed a lot of my earliest planning for KB19. Abutting Abdullah Shah Ghazi's Mazar, home to the historic Shree Ratneshwar Mahadev temple which contains elements in sandstone donated to the city by a prominent Parsi philanthropist and most recently was the site of land reclamation and contention, Bagh Ibne Qasim's social and geological ecosystems lent themselves to KB19 site-specific projects. Due to its sheer size, installations were divided into several clusters in the park. Both ecology and this site are synonymous with water and the sea.

The heritage Lady Lloyd Pier was a central structure for my curation at the location, as it was constructed as a walkway above the sea, but is now a harbinger of man's effect on the planet, pushing the sea a kilometer away from where it used to thrive abundant. Where there was once water was now a nine foot high space under the pier for which projects were conceived and installed. Works included those by Pakistani artists Shahid Rassam, Nuraya Sheikh & Arshad Farooqui, and Durriya Kazi, who used this space innovatively to talk about what was and what is in the city. Artists work like, for example, Colombian Juan Pablo Echeverí's consumerist and plastic related work was installed here to echo plastic pollution linked to the sea. Swiss artist Ursula Biemann's video work that evinced sights and sounds from within the ocean and coastal communities, was strategically placed at the end of this space, under Lady Lloyd Pier, as a reminder of the ocean that once occupied the very space that this artwork was installed in.

I curated several works that evoked the bizarre sanitisation of nature that is prevalent in urban centres everywhere. Works by German duo REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT used a mirror to reflect the park; Swiss duo Studer van den Berg's work was set against the backdrop of a vinyl showcasing a thick vegetation, created a juxtaposition of an indoor space that tried to emulate nature, where the works tried to subvert the actual nature that surrounded them by virtue of being in a park. At Bagh Ibne Qasim, in the absence of the sea, is manicured grass, a point underscored by Pakistani artist Seher Naveed's floating containers installed against the green background, and the late Ussman Ghori's work that depicted fish—the aquatic creature and its environment absent.

Another cluster that I curated at Bagh Ibne Qasim dealt with the ecologies of objects and environments. Folke Koebberling's video work, Susanne Kriemann's camera obscuras and Sohail Zuberi's swings made from driftwood and objects found at the beach, fit in with Bagh Ibne Qasim's evolving facade. Several works that I wanted at this public space, such as Sohail Zuberi's, were functional in a way that the layman visiting the park would be able to interact with art in a tactile manner, even if they did not recognize it as an artwork. Similarly, Basir Mahmood's video work, which I chose to install inside the historic structure of Jehangir Kothari Parade at the entrance to the park, recalled the feel of a drive-in cinema of yesteryears, and was enjoyed as such by the public. Bringing this vision of art into the public realm required the building of infrastructure to assist the public installations, in which Qasim Ali and Gallery One were instrumental.

Melding our needs for public spaces where our socialization process can manifest, we have created zoos where we take our children to witness and safely interact with the 'wild beasts'. In becoming their voyeurs, we see them as ferocious and raw, but in truth, they are as domesticated as us. We have let ourselves believe that nature-based, or 'green' consumerism or domesticating and caging birds and other animals is somehow equivalent to saving nature. Perhaps what this actually shows is that we can only



Studervandenberg: Monica Studer and Christoph van den Berg. Monica Studer, born in 1960 in Zurich, Switzerland, Christoph van den Berg, born in 1962 in Basel, Switzerland | Both live and work in Basel, Switzerland, Supported by Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia.  
*Explorer*, 2019, Multipart live cam installation, Variable.

Swiss Studervandenberg push the boundaries of our encounters with visuals, whether physical or digital. For their KB19 work, they create *Explorer*, a large, multipart live cam installation. A painted wooden platform and seating furniture is in front of a wall-sized, vinyl print, displaying three-dimensional, rendered shrubbery. The bench invites visitors to interact with the installation and to sit and look ahead at a screen. The screen then displays the individuals in a lush, green environment surrounded by bushes and shrubs - much like an explorer who is captivated by a sentient light, dancing behind the leaves. The projection immerses the visitor in a woodland location while also depicting a sense of discovery, highlighting the importance of ecological exploration and in turn, preservation as well, whilst emphasising the fact that as humans move away from nature, they also try and recreate it in varying and artificial ways.



RM Naeem, born in 1968 in Mirpurkhas, Pakistan | Lives and works in Lahore, Pakistan.  
*Open to Sky*, 2019, Fibreglass, fabric, red and green chillies, Variable.

Naeem's provocative and elaborate installation explores the history of violence and turbulence the province of Sindh has endured. The human figure has been a constant in Naeem's work, as well as notions of age, time and experience. According to the artist, although his art has always aimed to "to induce a certain sense of calm in the viewer," he sometimes feels compelled to gently provoke and alert to the "graphic and disturbing."



Khalil Chishtee, born in 1964 in Lahore, Pakistan | Lives and works in New York, USA.  
*I Am Not Your \*\*\* Anymore*, 2019, Trash bags, Variable.

Hundreds of years of colonization and then our desire to replace and imitate our masters have taken us so far away from who we were. I often wonder, what had turned the amazing inventors of Indus and Harrapan civilizations to the consumers of the present age? Pakistanis come to America and produce wonders with their hard work and determination to survive in a foreign land, but upon return to their beloved country, the same workaholic individuals turn into creatures of the "it will get done tomorrow" mindset. Of his KB19 project, Chishtee says it is an attempt to draw attention towards the apathetic problem solving mindset where one sits and waits for someone else to resolve a problem, resulting in an aggravated situation. As an artist who works with worthless unconventional materials like trash bags, I believe that instead of complaining and waiting for God sent help, if we instead begin thinking creatively about a given situation or problem, we can turn any odds to our favour; which can literally and figuratively, turn our trash into treasure.



Imran Qureshi, born in 1972 in Hyderabad, Pakistan | Lives and works in Lahore.  
*Pakistan Garden Within*, 2019, Printed sheets of Paper, Variable.

For KB19, Qureshi's work is constructed from thousands of crumpled, printed sheets, carrying images of his painted works. The work depicts the artist's mastery of the processes and devices of Mughal Miniature painting, but also the confidence with which he subverts them. Depicting green foliage in the form of motifs from Mughal miniature painting, Qureshi brings the garden that he has previously created, into this new space in Karachi, transforming one work into another. *Garden Within* alludes to *The Garden* and draws attention to the common links across faiths and cultures



Ranu Mukherjee, born in 1966 in Boston, USA | Lives and works in San Francisco, USA.  
*The Dead and the Wild*, 2018, 9 channel animation, 11 minutes.

*The Dead and the Wild* is a 9 channel animation, originally created as part of A Bright Stage, a multimedia installation commissioned by the De Young Museum, San Francisco for a publicly accessible atrium at the center of the museum. This work was created from images of nine extinct bird species. In these animations the birds are tamed upside down and are seen in the process of forming and deconstructing from fragments, repeatedly. There are abrupt shifts from static to flowing, and from creaturely confrontation to fragmented abstraction. The multiple channel installation is made by sequencing the videos to create directional motion, in turn animating the architecture and the feeling of space for the people within it. The reanimating of these birds is meant to suggest that they can continue to speak to us, and that they have something to say even after death.

enslave nature, rather than co-exist with it. On my many trips to the Karachi Zoo, previously known as Gandhi Gardens, the location prevailed as an entity in its own right. Thus, the map of the zoo informed the method of curation at this venue. When visitors went to KB19 or just to the zoo, visited and went to a particular animal's section, they would find the real and the artist's rendition simultaneously, side by side. In Ranu Mukherjee's work, for example, one cage held actual birds, the adjacent section contained screens showcasing an animation of birds. My conversations with artists exhibiting work at the zoo always kept the zoo's audience in mind, and in particular, children. For this reason, several artists took this brief in a playful manner and created work that highlighted the sanitization of animals in zoos with eccentricity, such as work by Irfan Gul Dahiri and Imran Hunzai.

In keeping with the directive of involving art in the vocabulary of the general populace, I conducted a dialogue with some artists I invited to participate in KB19, to create specific projects with the public in mind, artworks whose sensibility would thrive in this realm. As a result of this dialogue, Abdul Jabbar Gull, Hamra Abbas, Munawar Ali Syed, Nabahat Lotia and Qinza Najm & Saks Afridi created permanent installations for Bagh Ibne Qasim and Karachi Zoo that were donated to the city, forming some of the first contemporary art interventions in the Karachi scape. After the experience of KB19 and the initial interactions between the public and artworks, artists Carlo Galli, Khalil Chishtee, Mohsin Keiany, Sinta Tantra, Tamrat Gezahegne and Yassine Balbzioui also decided to donate their work, making it part of the landscape of the city. By taking art to the public, it becomes a part of living history.

Through the course of centuries, humans became closer to being more permanently settled, the nomadic way of life gave way to an agrarian way of life, from which capitalism and its subsequent consumer culture grew. Soon, in cities, the central places for socializing and engaging in consumer activities became places spouting social values and norms; it was a way to civilize people. For KB19, it was my aim to situate art and its making in the communal foray, in order to familiarize the public with it. For this reason, we kept all the KB19 locations open while installation was taking place, so that city-goers, children and students in particular would be able to see the various processes involved in this genre of exhibition making. Several KB19 projects, such as Imran Qureshi's and RM Naeem's works actively involved students during the installation process so that the artists of tomorrow could be inspired by working on the projects of today's art legends.

KB19 artworks varied in nature with some requiring indoor spaces. For this reason I chose institutional galleries and universities as locations, in order to also involve students. As was the case for work installed at the public parks, the curation at the other four locations was also in keeping with the ethos of those locations. The Alliance Française Gallery housed projects with a more delicate sensibility, including works by Abdullah M I Syed and Ali Kazim. British artist Alice Kettle's intricate but colossal work, which was made in collaboration with several communities of women embroiders across Sindh, was also installed here. Due to Kettle's penchant for working with communities, I invited her to Karachi four months prior to the opening of KB19 to also conduct a workshop for local embroiderers from rural and underprivileged communities, and kickstart this collaborative KB19 project.

The VM Art Gallery, one of the oldest galleries in the city, held an array of work including Dawit Abebe, Dutch duo Robbie Cornelissen and Karin van Dam, Indian artist Manisha Gera Baswani whose feathered installation was a siren call to echo the disappearance of low flying bird species from the KB19 Thematic, and Canadian Libby Hague, whose woodcut print installation created an ocean, all emulated the construction of an ecosystem in a white cube space. Installed at the IVS Gallery on the grounds of an educational institute, it seemed a fitting place for a project that was heavily research-based in nature. Comprising varying disciplines, each member of the group focused on mangroves as they pertained to their practice. The final KB19 location was the colonial era Exhibition Hall at NED City Campus, a state Engineering University, which included work of a more technical and public nature, relying on technology and its intersections with art. This included works by Larissa Sansour & Soren Lind, whose film combined live motion and CGI with myth, history and fact, Abdul Halik Azeez's work challenged notions of digital dualism, and James Alec Hardy's work combined a multichannel video installation where sight and sound were inextricably linked, and displayed innovatively on beams of repurposed wood.

I conceptualized certain projects that were designed to become a part of the daily lives of people and run alongside them; regardless of whether the audience viewed them as art or not, art was still being assimilated into the public sphere. For example, the KB19 Book Project that was designed with children in mind, used books as a medium for the project. I approached Abid Aslam, Adeel uz Zafar, and Rabeya Jalil, to each create a book aimed at children of varying ages. These books were printed en masse and donated to thousands of children across Karachi, who could now interact with this artwork and own it as it travelled with them in its bespoke shape and form. Another unconventional project that I envisaged was the TCS Project for KB19, which was motivated by my desire to have work in the biennial that transcended a physical space

or even city, and would come into contact with millions. With this idea in mind I invited Rashid Rana to make interventions to six of TCS Courier's packaging, where he transformed it into a traveling artwork in itself. TCS's existing network formed the perfect vehicle to spread this idea across Pakistan, from Karachi in the south, all the way to Khaplu in the north, creating a project whose audience, location, reach and impact went beyond that a physical venue to art that spread across the entire length and breadth of Pakistan.



Abid Aslam, born in 1986 in Lahore, Pakistan | Lives and works in Lahore, Pakistan.

*Is Dil Mein Bus kai Dekho, yeh Shehar Bara Purana Hai*, 2019. Book, 1500 copies.

Adeel uz Zafar and Rumana Husain

*Khoo-Khoo-Khoo - The Coughing City*, 2019, Book, 1500 copies Born in 1977 in Karachi, Pakistan | Lives and works in Karachi, Pakistan.

Rabeya Jalil, born in 1981 in Lahore, Pakistan | Lives and works in Lahore, Pakistan.

*A (Pre) Art School Activity Book*, 2019, Book, 1500 copies.

The KB19 Book project is a collaborative effort by a group of Pakistani artists and writers, with the aim of creating books for primary level schoolchildren on issues often overlooked in their schooling. Consisting of a set of three books, these artworks, with their mobile and accessible nature, have enormous reach. The books are meant to be distributed at public schools and libraries, as well as areas where Pakistan's youth have limited access to educational and cultural material. Artists Adeel uz Zafar, Abid Aslam and Rabeya Jalil have created illustrative works for the KB19 Book Project.

Human survival against the odds in this dangerous world and the subsequent domination of the planet is a tale of conquest and achievement. This conquest has been an exercise of controlling and curbing nature, be it Mother Nature or human nature. KB19 attempted to give a language to these myriad and global concerns, and presented them through ninety-nine experiences, interventions, and happenings.

*... a study to reveal the diversity, specificity and continuity of art and ecology on the people, place, time and history of this flight.*

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**Muhammad Zeeshan** is a critically acclaimed Visual Artist, Curator and Educator who received his BFA in Miniature Painting in 2003 from the prestigious National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan. He currently serves as Head of Department-Fine Arts at the Arts Council of Pakistan and Adjunct Faculty at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi. Zeeshan has several galleries, Art Fair, museum and institutional exhibitions to his credit, including exhibitions at Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University, Abbot Hall Art Gallery at Kendal, Pacific Asia Art Museum at Pasadena, Art Gallery of Mississauga, British Museum, Gemak/ Gemeente Museum, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum and Metropolitan Museum at Tokyo. He has been represented at the Dubai Art Fair, India Art Fair, Hong Kong Art Basel and Pulse Art Fair. Zeeshan's works are also a part of the permanent collection of British Museum, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Pacific Asia Art Museum at Pasadena, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Bunker art Space, USA, Easton Capitol collection, USA and Walton Family collection, USA. In 2023 he was commissioned by the Aga Khan Development Network and The Citizens Archive of Pakistan to create a painting of His Highness the Aga Khan, on the occasion of Aga Khan University's milestone 40th Anniversary. With a distinct focus on honing local talent, Zeeshan's curatorial practices heralds the dawn of a new ethos in art, one that highlights elements of concern. His curated shows are as provocative as they are evocative and they challenge the viewer to participate in unconventional ways. He has conceptualized several residencies and been a mentor to their young participants. His curatorial opus is to empower sidelined talent with opportunities and access that they may not necessarily have had access to. On this basis, Zeeshan was selected as Curator for the Karachi Biennale 2019- Pakistan's largest international contemporary art event. Zeeshan currently lives and works in Karachi, Pakistan.

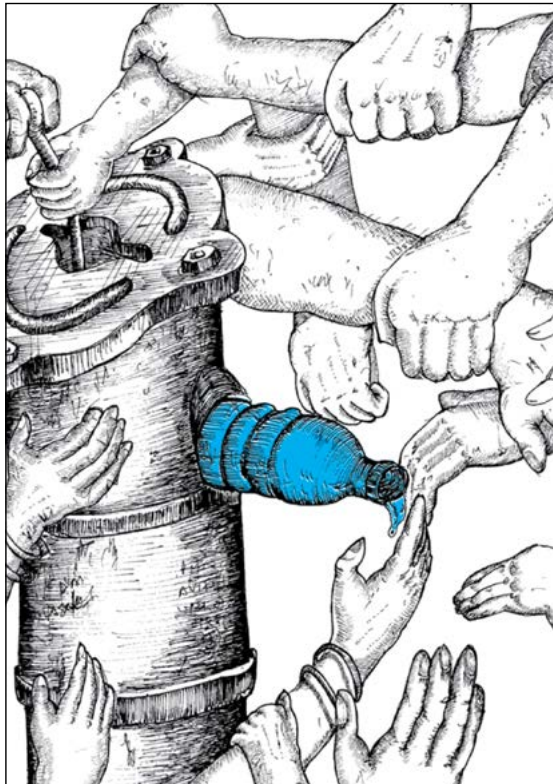
# Blurry Borders and Messy Realities: Reflections on the Infrastructural in the Curatorial

## Raqs Media Collective

### Water

In his picture book meditation on pipes, plumbing and the taste of water titled *The Water Cookbook*, Delhi-based artist Bhagwati Prasad has argued that water never reaches us in any unmediated form. It comes not from nature in any direct way, but as and with an infrastructure. It is through the complexity, collisionary force and contamination of complex infrastructures, that access to water is made easy as well as denied, lived and experienced, as daily necessity and perennial need. From street battles for water taps to long queues in front of hand-pumps; from relaxed hot showers to the repeated re-telling of riverine myths, and the annual news cyclical event of flooding drainage in the wake of the monsoons—the myriad flows of water in our lives are all entangled and enmeshed. As Prasad says, there is no one colour of water like the idyllic blue of our childhood crayons. It is many, varied, and mixed.

Similarly, a question we have been exploring for some time now is how and when does art confront and intersect with living dynamics of the world, and what is the infrastructure that makes both its congealment and its traffic possible. And how, then, does the curatorial work with this awareness?



Bhagwati Prasad, *The Water Cookbook*, 2011.



## Toxicity

In 2018, when we began our research and investigation towards making the Yokohama Triennale 2020, we were already seized by what we felt was an urgency to think about—and with—the presence of the toxic in the world and our lives. Here, by the ‘toxic’ we don’t necessarily mean something that has to be banished away from life; rather, we are interested in the ways in which life-processes, especially those that have to do with acts of care, can work in response to the inevitable toxicities that are attendant on them. How to heal and care with toxicity was a question for us. We were coming to this question because our histories, specifically, our dominant ‘Indic’ traditions, have a historic numbness and insensitivity when it comes to dealing with toxicity. It is this low ethical, aesthetic and imaginative threshold that has reproduced the phenomenon of untouchability in South Asia for thousands of years.

One of our first meetings for YT2020 was with Masaru Iwai. He spoke to us about his rigorous practice of cleaning, and the necessity of ‘deep cleaning’ in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear meltdown of 2011. Masaru worked in the cleaning team for Fukushima (and its environs) and was contemplative and critical of thinking in Japan on the issues of radioactivity and to contagion. It was with such conversations that the infrastructural grid, that produces, channels, and misshapes the flow of toxicity, besides structuring the recurring act of cleaning, emerged as a critical civilizational gambit for all.

## Care of Cleaning

A masked human with a broom sweeps empty streets and takes a photograph of the broom, the body, the street, and then uploads it onto social media, with a simple four- point set of instructions: *mask, clean, shoot, share*.



Iwai Masaru, *Broom Star*, Yokohama Triennale, 2020.

Soon, in the afterglow of the original post, there are many masks—colourful, whimsical, touching, angry— and many more acts of sweeping the streets. A tendril of care becomes a network of gestures on an expanding map of street-corners. Amidst the messy realities of a pandemic-besieged world, a moment finds its multiplication, blurring borders between what is online and what is not, between physical spaces cordoned off by politics and sanitary controls, between art and everyday life, between toxicity and care, between an instant and its perennial possibilities.

'Broom Stars' by Masaru Iwai is a meditative, solitary gesture, and an instance of social multiplication through caring and cleansing. Here, the artist's act—of embodying a masked presence that enables the multiplication of a persona and of enacting the ritual of— cleaning -- is hosted by a custodial network that gives it a home. It enables thought and inquiry about its own significance, and amplifies it to the world, thus enabling the sharing of the gesture between the artist, a public, and further, between those members of the public. Between the artist's act and its informal-institutional custodianship in time and space stands the bridge of the curatorial move. It facilitates a crossing; artists move towards publics, and publics move towards artists. The moment of the artwork, filling a present instant, moves towards the future's memory of our time. The curatorial opens out the infrastructural foundation that makes these moves possible, in all directions.

## Incidents

An incident is a fold in time—a quickened heart-beat, an epiphany, a flash of insight, an outbreak of goosebumps, a moment of excitement, an occurrence, an encounter, a sighting, a memory. An incident is anything that transforms the way we live or think, a conversation that carries a surge in its wake—an event that makes us rethink everything. Millions of incidents can populate a duration, making it come alive as an embodiment of temporal plenitude. That plenitude is a ground for making things anew.



Rajashree Goody, *Power and Pulp: A Performance*, Five Million Incidents, 2020.

A unique assembly of more than hundred artistic actions stretched over one-and-a-half years between 2019 and 2020 in Delhi. This was 'Five Million Incidents' (FMI): an artistic 'occupation of time' that punctuated twenty months in Delhi and Kolkata, from April 2019 to December 2020. Artistic actions lasted hours, days, and weeks through artworks and performative processes that renewed, investigated, interrogated and transformed terms of co-inhabitation.

### Peer-architecture

In FMI, our curatorial modality was framed by questions around the nature of artistic peer relationships. It was to produce milieus that welcome and sustain a multiplicity of practices with the comfort and confidence of durational, incremental, and layered artistic acts which would build, and cascade. The premise was to create a momentum so that an accretive density could take shape over the months. The experience was to enable a field that highlighted how artistic practices are best expressed in a perennial state, and by conjoining intensities of different modes and ways.

This intimate companionship of willing strangers crossed over personal and bodily boundaries in an atmosphere of trust, while at the same time being able to address and draw the energy of mass movements into its fold, to defend citizenship happening at the same time in the cities of the country. An arena was created, one that could speak across generations, across species, across mediums. These peer conversations nourished companionship and convergences free from performative pressure and aesthetic/occupational hierarchies.

### Pulp

FMI continued to take place even through the Covid-19 lockdown time, when the actions migrated to an active online platform. A key moment in this phase was an action undertaken by the artist Rajyashri Goody. She took the canonical compendium of caste rules defining exclusion and punishments—an ancient text of sanctions, prohibitions and punishment known as the *Manusmriti*—and on live video, shredded its printed text, and then pulped it into little balls of malleable paper-dough. It was an instance of the deliberate mangling and pulping of the cruelly ritualized protocols of hierarchy and inequality. The choice of going live, online, with this gesture, at a time when new protocols of who and what could and could not be touched, and how gatherings could or could not happen, because of the pandemic, brought the infrastructural question into sharp and poignant relief.

What would have been an ephemeral performance, faced with the challenge of a lockdown, turned a custodial question on its head: not, 'how should we postpone/cancel a planned artistic action', but 'how should we navigate the migration of performative energies from a shared presence in real space to a commitment to sharing time'. (The artist could not, as she had originally planned, get her hands dirty together with many others, to pulp the hated protocols of caste.)

### Breach

There is a need to take into cognizance the *thresholds* and forms of *breach* that allow for an entry into, and the making of, culture. Obviously, the question of the *breach* is a critical one—culture both articulates and contains the 'breach'. It attempts to escape from the breach, but equally seeks to absorb and thus attenuate it. Culture is after all a terrain of multiple intersecting cleavings—and the curatorial is situated within this.

A recent threshold that had to be crossed was the sudden impossibility of occupying a moment in physical space, and what it meant to make a mark in time through a 'live' set of instances, that would remain online, much after they were concluded by the artist.

The breach here was both an *infrastructural* as well a *conceptual* one. Rajyashri was acting as hackers would, with software. Except that the software she was hacking into was the 'code' of caste itself. Code, we know, works through firewalls and permission. Culture starts at the point of the breach or the breakdown—and the curatorial is the acute sensing and observation of the world that shapes around this cleaving.

Thus, the question that activates acts of the curatorial is: "Who does it carry along, what does it distance or repel, and what does it make in operative?" It's interesting to think through these questions when considering what it means to make space for an act of pulping the *Manusmriti*. This is the infrastructure, not just of space, but of life itself.

### Discursive Justice

In the Yokohama Triennale 2020, we initiated a process to investigate, write, and perform the aporias arising from assertions of equality. These are claims made with bodies, with words, sounds, costumes, images, instruments, and with shifting forums. This investigation draws from the insights of a minor strand in legal theory which engages with the way people have been able to transform the courtrooms as forums, and have been making the act of speech itself as the site for claims to justice. We invited an artist, archivist and a curator to work as an ensemble and build an arena around this with multiplying protagonists.

The ensemble argued,  
 "...Millions march down roads in Hong Kong. Thousands in South Africa discuss consent on Twitter. Women run households via smartphones from makeshift protest tents blocking a highway in Delhi...These brewing situations open a terrain of justice. They are intangible courts of poetic appeals, of argumentation through myths, stories, and care, and are not daunted by the Law; law is but one dialect...We call in the carnivalesque and the masquerade, draw in the middle earth of healers and shamans, play with technologies of renewal and admittance, work with appeal, apology, gratitude, and indebtedness, practice the art of counter-monuments, and pose the discursive as a site of stakes & wagers, codes & limits".

Drawing upon our invitation, the ensemble of Kabelo Malatsie, Michelle Wong and Lantian Xie created a multi-platform procedure through which they investigated and experimented with what would constitute discourse, and what makes for a site of justice.

The Discursive Justice Ensemble, as this triangulation styled itself, produced a series of events, calling upon artists to call upon artists, setting off relays of gesture, word, sound and image, discussing protocols of invitation and presence. They made merry across continental distances, staged Zoom parties, held webinar concerts and untangled knotted histories with myth and allegory. Sometimes they simply told stories that almost never ended as the night wore on.



Discursive Justice Ensemble, *Scenography for the Suspended*, Yokohama Triennale, 2020.

## 51 Personae

A step sideways and backwards in time from the Discursive Justice Ensemble in Yokohama takes us towards '51 Personae', another infrastructural exercise. The catalogue entry for the book outlining the '51 Personae' for the 11th Shanghai Biennale, 'Why Not Ask Again' (2016) in the holdings of the Asia Art Archive carries the inscription, "perennial exhibition".

For '51 Personae', we had invited a formation of young curators, researchers and artists that met in a small house in the narrow streets of the Dinghaigiao neighbourhood in Shanghai. Chen Yun, a catalyst of the Dinghaigiao Mutual Aid Society, enjoyed entering the thicket of lives in the city in which she grew up. She widened the conversation to include teachers, cultural activists, care volunteers and researchers. What emerged out of this vortex was the transformation of unrecognized life zones of the city into spaces of mutual visibility, as fifty-one personae—a cast of ordinary and exceptional characters—met, talked, performed, enacted rituals, sang, shared memories, walked, danced, cooked and ate together.

The forms that the '51 Personae' undertook ranged from the scripted to the aleatoric, from the conversational to the polemical, from the nostalgic to the prophetic, from the intimate to the impersonal. Each carried with itself its own world, its own city, its own street. The protagonists were as varied and diverse as the cast of characters in the drama of a mega-city. They included urban chroniclers, street hackers, channelers of street life and neighbourhood lore, musicians, enthusiasts, performers, aficionados, apartment building story-tellers, garage impresarios, purveyors of pavement paradoxes, merchants of street corner dreams, traffic intersection historians, public transport philosophers, busy-bodies and sharp tongues in Shanghainese and a host of other dialects of the human imagination, and a ferris wheel.

'51 Personae' is still continuing as an enmeshed practice of living in the city.



Edited by Raqs Media Collective, Power Station of Art, Chen Yun, *51 Personae*, 11th Shanghai Biennale, 2016.

### Open Infrastructures

From our engagement with free and open source software culture in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we understand that one has to write openness, design-flexibility and the capacity to modify and re-purpose into the very architecture and rhetoric of a piece of code. If it is not explicitly written in, then, as usage conditions attach to the software's presence in the world, the software adapts and grows in unidirectional and secretive ways. These matters of protocol replay the always-present collisions of bondage and freedom. Only, sometimes, the bondage becomes efficient and profitable, and freedom, like always, comes with blurry borders and messy realities.

Cultivating a curatorial sensibility of the infrastructure is both a necessity to loosen this *grip*, as well as to *find* forms of relationships that instil new histories and uncharted itineraries. It is a possibility to become hospitable to unexpected claims, and to discover a porous and perforated world.

Curation, in this sense, is a durational exercise, produced by an infrastructural mobilization of protagonists, objects, and intangible relationships. As it tames time, it opens itself to disruptions arising out of the disorder caused by untimely eruptions and obdurate presences. We begin to listen to the music of the unstated contrapuntal notes emerging across the two curatorial instances. The music is dissonant, maybe even a bit messy, but lively. Borders blur, again.

**Raqs Media Collective** (\*1992, by Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi and Shudhabrata Sengupta) finds itself at the nexus of contemporary art, historical enquiry, and philosophical speculation. In several languages, the word “raqs” denotes a state of revolution, whirling and turning into an intensified state of awareness. They interpret it as ‘kinetic contemplation’- a restless and energetic entanglement with the world and time. Raqs practices across several media; making installation, sculpture, video, performance, text, lexica, and curation.

# The Schneller Order Case: Site-specific Art in Jerusalem as a Practice of Dialogue

## Meydad Eliyahu

In these times of war and instability that we are facing, in Israel and the Middle East since 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023, it's hard to write about the region we live in. Yet, I share here a case of artists' intervention, from a few years ago, in one of Jerusalem's iconic sites, the Schneller Compound, which may bring hope for an alternative reality.

In 2019, I was invited to create and curate an artistic intervention in the Schneller historic compound, one of the most legendary sites in Jerusalem, as part of the city's Open House festival (see <https://batim.itraveljerusalem.com/all-tours-2/>), a festival which is based on creating opportunities for the public to visit and learn about the history of sites that are usually closed to the public. Founded as an orphanage for Syrian refugees in 1860 by Ludwig Schneller and his wife Magdalena, German-Swiss Lutheran missionaries, the place was built on the foundations of the 1856 Schneller House, one of the first European settlements outside of Jerusalem old city walls.

In the next decades, the orphanage, directed by the Schneller family and its descendants, grew and added lands and properties. By the beginning of the 20th century the compound was a local "empire" with a roof-tile factory, a carpentry workshop, a print workshop, a bakery, schools, and in the heart of it all, workshops led by master craftsmen from Germany who came to the orphanage. These workshops (see <https://gideonofrat.wordpress.com/2016/06/20/%d7%a9-%d7%a0-%d7%9c-%d7%a8-%d7%90%d7%95%d7%9e%d7%a0%d7%95%d7%aa-%d7%95%d7%90%d7%9e%d7%a0%d7%95%d7%aa/>) which included thirteen different art and crafts specialties, amongst them shoe-making, tailoring, carpentry, stone carving, weaving, blacksmithing, book binding, pottery and more, attracted Jerusalem's elite students, bringing to it Muslim, Jewish and Christian students alike.

Due to the compound's large scale of 600 dunam and its expanded facilities, it was taken over by the Turkish, German and Austrian militaries in the First World War. During the Second World War, when all German citizens in the country were deported, the British military took over the premises.

Later, in 1948, after the British abandoned the compound, Israeli military took over and eventually the compound was nationalized by the state under the Absentee Property Law to serve as an army base and a clinic for over sixty years. The space's elegant European interiors were used for mundane, administrative purposes. But when the army left the building in 2008 in order to allow the Jerusalem Municipality to build on the compound's lands, new luxurious buildings were planned, besides commissioning the preservation work of the eight main historical buildings.

It's important to mention that originally, the Schneller compound was geographically a lone settlement on a hill. In 2019, the situation was dramatically different when it came to be situated in the heart of one of the most radical ultra-orthodox Jewish



Schneller compound main building, the courtyard. Photo: Shai Halevi

Hasidic communities' neighborhoods. As a Christian missionary institute, Schneller was charged with symbols and remains of murals and religious European architecture.

The plan to transform the central building in the compound into a museum and a visitors' center by the Kehilot Israel Orthodox Jewish Institute was initiated with the restoration works undertaken later in 2019.<sup>1</sup> It was around this time of the restoration work, that I received the invitation to create a temporary, site-specific artwork in the Schneller Compound. As an artist and curator, the invitation to create the project was a rare opportunity to work between institutional and independent approaches, to move between spaces and stages of authority, and to preserve a multi-cultural life in the otherwise socially wounded city of Jerusalem.

Both Idan Avidani, the project producer whom I met when in 2011 at the Social Justice Protest in Israel<sup>2</sup>, and I felt it was a once in a life time opportunity to open Schneller to the public through art intervention that permitted us to rethink and recreate the place.<sup>3</sup>

The process of selecting artists came next and it was clear to me that we would work with Jerusalem-based artist friends who have an understanding and a passion for the historical structures and the experience of working in tough conditions pertaining to abandoned sites.

The selected ensemble of Itai Ron Gilboa, Michal Harada, Noa Arad Yairi, Nomi Bruckmann and Kobi Vogman, all work in a variety of mediums and materials and have different trainings and backgrounds, and were at different stages of their artistic careers.

The artists created a new site-specific intervention, and in addition, some other works inspired by Schneller were selected and installed eventually on-site.





Visitors in the main exhibition space – the historical church.  
Photo: Shai Halevi



General view of the exhibition; Ktura Manor and Rotem Manor's video art (in the center).



Visitors in front of Kobi Vogman's works.  
Photo: Shai Halevi



Visitors at the main exhibition space; a sculpture by Noa Arad Yairi (in the center). Photo: Shai Halevi

Historical photos from the 1970s by artist Aviv Itzhaky, were shown for the first time alongside works by artists Ktura and Rotem Manor, and Shlomo Serry, who had researched the place as part of the 2016 exhibition *The Schneller Case*. This exhibition was curated by Tami Manor-Friedam and shown in the Jerusalem Artists House, inviting different artists to create works inspired by the Schneller compound.

Since the site was partly destroyed, having been abandoned for many years, we took a decision to recreate the facilities of the space like benches for visitors from wood and metal that we found on-site.

Our artistic research began with reading and understanding the Schneller compound's layered history. As in the case of the Sala-Manca collective<sup>4</sup> model, used in the Hearart Shulaym site-specific art events, a historical file was opened.

The file was based on historical research by architect Gil Gordon, allowing the artists to have an accessible online source of historic cases about the site during their artistic process, and an opportunity to find cases and narratives that they might choose to



A look at Meydad Eliyahu's painted stained glass.  
Photo: Shai Halevi



A look at Michal Harada's installation.  
Photo: Shai Halevi

relate to in their own artworks. A version of the historical file was also curated into the exhibition by the writer as an additional informative historic exhibition on site.

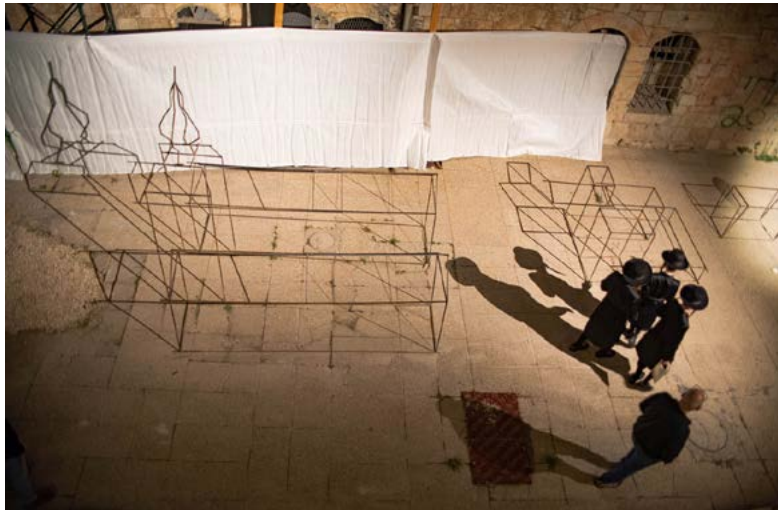
Considering this, within the context of the tension between different religious sectors in Jerusalem and the secular creators's team that we were working with in an ultra-orthodox Jewish neighborhood, we had to create trust and understanding regarding our intentions and work with residents of the area. The same was true for the Kehilot Israel Institute who hosted our project in the Schneller main building.

The first stage, in order to build trust, was to share artists' sketches and drawings, and kinds of interventions that were being planned through them. These allowed us to create transparency, and was important since an orthodox Jewish religious organization was hosting us. The visual idea of the artworks was used as an informal agreement to help us keep a common understanding.

Therefore, the sensibility created around the project was not only to the site heritage but also to find ways to communicate with the local communities; it was a way to open the gates to its neighboring compound.

We, the organizers and artists, took a decision to communicate with the visitors and neighbors as much as possible, both in the days before the opening, as well as during the days of the exhibition.

By the unique clothing that we wore, of blue workers shirts with handmade golden logos of our project, we could be recognized immediately as the exhibition team. A series of guided tours with the artists and researchers was an additional aspect of opening the Schneller compound publicly.



Itai Ron Gilboas's installation in the main building courtyard. Photo: Shai Halevi

At one point – we, the organizers and the artists – suspected that we were being pawned in a bigger political game of creating a new reality in the urban landscape and that the exhibition was the first attempt of establishing the new museum by Kehilot Israel Institute. We saw that none of the supporters' logos were set on the different publications and invitations, so that the exhibition won't be associate with the Open House festival or the Kehilot Israel Institute directly.

On the day of the exhibition opening there was tension in the air, especially when a group of teenage visitors came running in to the exhibition space, examining the artworks as fast as they could. But unexpectedly, it was a sign that the Schneller neighbors were slowly beginning to approve the visit as acceptable in terms of restrictions around religious and public behavior.

Within three days of the project The Schneller Order opening, hundreds of visitors from the orthodox communities around Schneller, as well as several others, visited the project while maintaining a decorum and respect to the site, each having a dialogue with one another regarding Schneller, the history, and the art.

One of the participatory aspects of the exhibition was creating a public archive as part of the historic informative exhibition, memories from Schneller tracing back more than 50 years, were collected.<sup>5</sup>

It was not the first time that a site-specific art intervention took place at a historical site in Jerusalem. Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, artist collectives from Jerusalem like Zik<sup>6</sup> and Sala-Manca<sup>7</sup>, had created art events in historical sites. Later on, in the first decade of 2000, younger artists collectives like Muslala<sup>8</sup> and Empty House<sup>9</sup> were founded. They established a new kind of artist run institute in the city, which have constant dialogue with the history of their urban spaces. One of them is HaMiffal Art Center<sup>10</sup>, in which the writer was the curator and co-founder of the gallery.

It's hard to say if the layered urban characteristics of Jerusalem with its unique historical spaces, the independent character of the city art scene, or the lack of exhibition spaces thirty years ago, pushed artists to create a tradition of dialogue with the place. Gidon Ofrat, an art historian and the main researcher on the arts that had developed in Jerusalem, points to a turning point in the mid 2000s<sup>11</sup> where the founding of three

institutional platforms changed the art scene in the city into a more institutional direction. They were the Manofim contemporary art festival<sup>12</sup>, the Jerusalem Season of Culture Festival<sup>13</sup>, and the Jerusalem Biennale<sup>14</sup>.

These temporary annual or biennial art platforms filled an existing vacuum of more flexible and experimental and institutional approach in the Jerusalem art scene which is based mainly on museum and art centers. There is no doubt that with these initiatives, the growth of number of platforms and productions budgets, more artists were able to take part in the cultural scene in Jerusalem. However, at the same time, much of the independent spirit of creation has lost its presence, power and influence and more and more creators became part of the institutes in one way or another, with less development of new independent initiatives.

From my own personal experience, I can share that the artistic climate of working site-specifically is both rewarding and challenging for artists today. The Schneller Order was no different. It created a bond between the artists, the audience, and the site. The dust, the crumbling walls, and the lack of basic working conditions on site required new challenging modes of action and tools to create the artworks. It threw open opportunities for feedback and opened up discussions, much more often than what was possible in a studio, offering a more organic and holistic creative evolution.

The artists and organizers in a site-specific temporary art event like The Schneller Order were, without deliberate intention, educating the public. It threw open the doors for discussing its history, understanding hidden layers of its memories, which constituted the place, doing exactly what a site-specific work intends to do.

Besides, when art and culture are today often seen to serve and to promote political and economic interests, site specific artworks in historical sites offers a short-term opportunity, an effective alternative space for conversation and dialogue.

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## Notes

**1** You can read more about the plans here: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/museum-about-jews-planned-for-jeruselems-schneller-orphanage-turned-army-base/>

**2** “The 2011 Israeli social justice protests were a series of demonstrations in Israel beginning in July 2011 involving thousands of protesters from a variety of socio-economic and religious backgrounds opposing the continuing rise in the cost of living (particularly housing) and the deterioration of public services such as health and education.” Wikipedia, last modified January 27th 2025., [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011\\_Israeli\\_social\\_justice\\_protests](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Israeli_social_justice_protests).

**3** After being locked up for many years, and never being really open to the public, the Schneller compound brought a curiosity in people as to what its interiors were like, so also the use of the structure through the years. The first visits on site revealed spaces which were half destroyed and in the process of restoration, some that were dramatically changed over the years and others unscathed. Under the heavy layers of dust that covered every corner, there was a surreal ambience created from various objects and remnants of the past.

**4** Lea Mauas & Diego Rotman are the artists behind Sala-Manca collective which curated HEARAT SHULAYM, a series of site-specific art events in Jerusalem from 2001 to 2007. From 2013 their art and research center Mamuta is based in Jerusalem Hanssen House historic compound. For more information here: <https://mamuta.org/>

**5** More about The Schneller Order exhibition you can see here 3-d scan of the main exhibition: <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=qW4QqauyQKQ>.

A short video documentary about the project - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPujmlqR9Fg>

**6** Zik collective of artists was founded in Jerusalem in 1985, and since then, mainly in the 1990s and 2000s, they created interdisciplinary outdoor and indoor art happenings. More information here: <https://jerusalemfoundation.org/old-project/zik-group/>

**7** See footnote no. 5

**8** Muslala creative collective was founded in Musrara neighborhood in 2009, and since 2016 the collective is based in Klal center and activated few more centers in the Jerusalem. More details here: <https://muslala.org/en/>

**9** Empty House Artist collective created from 2011 to 2014 huge temporary art event in Jerusalem historical sites. In 2016 members of the collective founded HaMiffal art center. See more here: <http://www.emptyhouse.co.il/>

**10** Founded in 2016, by members of the Empty House artists collective, among them the writer, HaMiffal is an art and community center based in the former Lorenzo Seraphim house in the heart of Jerusalem. More details here: <https://mamuta.org/>

**11** G. Ofrat, *Jerusalem-Tel Aviv: Art in Urban Conflict* (Ofer Lewin foundation press: 2016).

**12** Manofim contemporary art festival started as an annual initiative by The Jerusalem Foundation and Art Cube Artists' Studios, Jerusalem in 2008. More details here: <https://manofim.org/en/>

**13** Founded in 2010, the Jerusalem Season of culture started as a culture festival and later rebranded itself as Mekudeshet. Currently it's based at Abu Tor neighborhood. For more details: <https://en.mekudeshet.com/about-us/>

**14** The Jerusalem Biennale founded by Rami Ozeri in 2013, the biennale shows exhibition by both Israelis and international artists. For more here: <https://jerusalem-biennale.org/>

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**Meydad Eliyahu** (b.1983, Mesilat Zion, Israel) is an artist, curator, and educator who lives and works in Jerusalem. Among the collectives and art initiatives that Eliyahu has co-founded in Jerusalem are the Kra drawing and poetry collective, Katamona-library and gallery in the public space. In the years 2020-23, Eliyahu was the co-founder and curator of Hamiffal Art Center Gallery and residency program. He curated in various additional institutes as the Jerusalem Artists House, The Jerusalem Print Workshop, Barbur Gallery, Jerusalem and at the Jewish Culture Festival, Krakow, Poland.

# Kochi Muziris Biennale: Complexities of a locally embedded Biennale Organisation

## Shwetal A Patel interviewed by Tanya Abraham

**Tanya:** Please provide an overview of Kochi-Muziris Biennale for those who are not familiar with the project.

**Shwetal:** Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB) was initiated in 2012 and its organising body, Kochi Biennale Foundation, in August 2010. The foundation was spearheaded by two Mumbai-based Malayali artists, Bose Krishnamachari (b. 1963 Angamaly, India) and Riyas Komu (b. 1971 Thrissur, India).

Since its first edition in 2012, KMB has become one of the largest art and culture platforms in Asia. The foundation's mandate is to foster art education amongst all age groups, cultivate new audiences, generate artistic and cultural awareness.

The inaugural edition of the KMB was held in 2012 in Fort Kochi and Ernakulam, and has now successfully hosted five editions attracting millions of physical visitors and several million more in online engagement. KMB is known as the *People's Biennale* for its egalitarian and popular appeal and includes international artist group exhibitions held across multiple venues such as the Students' Biennale, Art By Children (Learning and Development) Program, Invitations Exhibitions and Public Programs comprising of talks, academic conferences, film screenings, theatre and musical performances, amongst other cultural activities.

**Tanya:** How is the Kochi Biennale Foundation primarily funded?

**Shwetal:** As a public charitable trust, the organization depends on the philanthropy of like-minded foundations, corporations and individuals to support their year-round efforts to showcase art and culture in the region. The government of Kerala is a founding partner of the Biennale, and provides the trust with an annual financial grant.

**Tanya:** The first edition really captured the attention of both locals and visitors—what was it like for you, especially as the founding executive officer?

**Shwetal:** The first edition of KMB was co-curated by the founding artists, Krishnamachari and Komu, and the large-scale group exhibition didn't have a curatorial title, but instead used the Foundation's mission statement as a guiding principle<sup>1</sup>. The mission statement was published in 2011 and remains a foundational text about the need, purpose and potential of an art biennial-like event in Kerala. I believe that the creation of this type of event was also, in part, a response to the lack of platforms for South Asian artists to show site-specific, conceptually rigorous, and ambitious work. The biennial provided artists an opportunity to respond to the socio-political realities of our times. In this sense, it can be summed up as an artist-led, artist-curated, public/private funded initiative.

The first edition brought together more than 89 artists from Kerala and around the world. The artworks were presented across a number of venues in Fort Kochi, primarily Aspinwall House, a 130-year-old building that was the former trading premises of J. H. Aspinwall. The Scottish-Indian trading company moved its operations in the 1990s when it relocated to new warehouses in Willingdon Island, as the original site was deemed insufficient. Since then the building lay empty, in danger of falling down. Other venues such as Durbar Hall and Pepper House were also diligently restored and renovated in the lead up to the first edition of KMB, adding to a sense of growing arts investment in the local community. Initially, the KMB project was welcomed in Kerala, but later encountered some minor controversies with a group of Kerala-based artists. Overall, it has enjoyed the moral and financial support of both the main political parties that operate in the state, a unique occurrence in India<sup>2</sup>. Most importantly it has become synonymous with Kochi's modern identity, especially Fort Kochi.

**Tanya: The first edition was delayed by a year?**

**Shwetal:** Initially, the first edition was planned to open in November 2011. However, after a change in government during elections in early-2011, the opening was postponed and eventually took place on 12th December 2012. This was a very difficult year as we were still trying to convince people in government and potential sponsors to support this fledgling, yet to be released, dream. The public in Kochi were curious and after word spread over several months; artists began visiting and working in Fort Kochi throughout the year. There was a great deal of interest and local participation, and what stood out in the first edition was the complex makeup of the audience. The audience was made up of diverse groups of people—local, regional, and international. It felt like many had come to Fort Kochi on the promise that they would experience art unlike anything they'd seen before on the subcontinent. Although the Indian government had launched a visual art 'triennial' in the late 1960s, the project floundered by the 1990s and was later discontinued.<sup>3</sup>

**Tanya: During the period when KMB launched, the only other major art event in India was the art fair in New Delhi?**

**Shwetal:** In 2008, an Indian entrepreneur launched the India Art Summit (now India Art Fair) in New Delhi. The commercial trade fair included pavilions by galleries and exhibited solo projects by leading artists. This new commercial trade fair and a thriving gallery scene meant that there was a gap in the arts ecosystem of the subcontinent that artists could address and fill.

**Tanya: KMB is known as an artist-initiated biennial. Please can you tell us a bit more about how this has functioned?**

**Shwetal:** KMB was conceptualised as an artist-curated and artist-managed non-profit platform that prioritised artists and artistic practices. Each subsequent edition since 2012 has been curated by an artist. As an artist-initiated concept, the organisers felt that artists working in tandem with curators, were perhaps best placed to navigate the complexities of the field. Besides having an innate understanding of the challenges of artistic practice and the heterogeneity of audiences in South Asia, artists were considered best placed to make creative connections across the region and the international art world, whilst proposing new and innovative exhibition formats and public programs.

The KMB organisers prioritised artists within this paradigm and a great deal of the work at the first edition of the Biennale, more than seventy percent, was new site-specific work that responded to the spaces in which they were shown and the communities that live there. The venues included spice warehouses, abandoned buildings, public parks, museum galleries and historic sites dotting Fort Kochi, Mattancherry and Ernakulam.

Many sites were long forgotten, when the port of Cochin moved to Willingdon Island. Artists responded to these spaces in unusual and interesting ways. One memorable project from the first edition was Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto's, *Life Is a River* (2012), made locally using cotton fabric, polyamide fabrics and pungent spices. Made in Kochi with local craftspeople, the work was placed in the attic of an old building which has since been demolished and has a hotel in its place. The venue also hosted works by other artists, including Zakir Husain. Another memorable work from the first edition was Angelica Mesiti's *Citizens Band*—again, housed in a derelict, dilapidated but functioning building close to Neto. Mesiti's four-channel video work created an eerie experience for visitors, as it combined music, sound and film from different continents.

In contrast, the India Triennale had primarily used institutional venues in Delhi, such as the Lalit Kala Academy and other white-cube spaces.<sup>4</sup> Looking back, I think KMB created many new spaces for art, and artists in turn responded in ambitious and unexpected ways. Audiences were thrilled to see art in unusual venues, such as Aspinwall House, which had been private property for decades.

**Tanya: A venue that was very prominent in the first edition was Durbar Hall. How did this become such an important space for KMB?**

**Shwetal:** Durbar Hall, the former Maharaja of Travancore's Durbar or *court*, is now a Lalit Kala Academy arts center.<sup>5</sup> Durbar Hall was restored and renovated by the Kochi Biennale Foundation in 2011 as a primary venue for KMB. Out of an initial grant of Five Crore Rupees from the government of Kerala, for the creation of the biennial, more than Two Crore Rupees was spent on renovating Durbar Hall into an international-quality exhibition space. The award-winning architect Vikas Dilawri, a UNESCO Gold Award recipient, was entrusted with the renovation and he completed the project in November 2011. The renovated galleries are installed with state-of-the-art lighting and climate con-

trol, with more exhibition space and areas for video-based artworks and performance. This successful renovation was an early sign of the future of the project and its 'Biennale Effect', a term coined by academics, Professor Robert E. de Souza and Professor Sunil Manghani in their book, 'India's Biennale Effect' (Routledge 2014).

**Tanya: Can you explain the key themes and aspects for each edition of KMB?**

**Shwetal:** The second edition, which opened on 12th December 2014, was helmed by Jitish Kallat, a prominent Indian contemporary artist. Kallat is of Malayali origin and, like the two co-founders, based in Mumbai. His Biennale, titled, "Whorled Explorations", looked at the mathematical history of Kerala and its geographical position in the Indian Ocean, working with themes at the intersection of science, history, movement and time. The maritime trade links of Kochi were also an inspiration and the biennial included more than 90 artists from over 25 countries.

Jitish Kallat, like Krishnamachari and Komu, had conducted extensive national and international curatorial research. A part of the process of commissioning artists was also an invitation to visit the site several months before the opening. In this way, artists were able to survey and research the local context and visit different sites. In conversation with the curators, artists were able to select a site that they felt was suitable for their work. I think this lends KMB a rootedness, which I think is sometimes missing in more white cube biennial experiences around the world.

The third edition, which opened on 12th December 2016, was curated by another Mumbai-based contemporary artist, Sudarshan Shetty. *Forming in the pupil of an eye* was the title lent by Shetty, and included over 90 artists and collectives from India and around the world. Shetty explored themes including the dichotomy between traditional and contemporary art forms, and the syncretic relationship between literature, visual arts, performance, music and cinema and included practitioners that are often overlooked in contemporary art exhibitions. The motif of the edition was Raul Zurita's site-specific *Sea of Pain* (2012), a large water- and text-based installation that responded to the unimaginable tragedies unfolding in the Mediterranean Sea that year.

The fourth edition which opened on 12th December 2018 was curated by Anita Dube and was titled *Possibilities for a Non-Alienated Life*. Dube's exhibition fore-

grounded often marginalised Global Majority artists and art histories and also included several community-based projects that included cooking, educational workshops and gatherings. A large pavilion was commissioned by KBF and Dube selected Anagram Architects to design the temporary space which served as an important forum for dialogue, meetings and performance.

Originally supposed to be held on the 12th of December 2020, the fifth edition was delayed by two years due to COVID, and was finally inaugurated on 12th December 2022, though not all venues were open to the public until 23rd December 2022. Curated by artist and writer Shubigi Rao, the exhibition was titled *In Our Veins Flows Ink and Fire*. Rao invited over 90 artists and collectives to explore themes including protest, dissent and how the power of collective action can stimulate societal change and art's transformative nature.

Alongside each edition of the Biennale, the Foundation organizes programs which include conferences, film festivals, musical performances, theatre, dance and popular music. Since the third edition, the pavilion has been located in Cabral Yard, an adjacent site to Aspinwall House.

**Tanya: Each edition of the Biennale has had an inimitable characteristic. What is it like setting up a new biennial and how did it come to be known as the People's Biennale?**

**Shwetal:** The term "People's Biennale" emerged in 2014. I believe this slogan has its roots in the political history of Kerala and the various people's movements that have impacted the state's socio-political journey. But I think that it also speaks to the diversity of the audience that attends the biennial and the fact that it is either free or relatively cheap to visit and experience KMB.

Kerala is famed as having almost hundred per cent literacy and has prioritized education, healthcare, women's rights and the environment for several decades. The Biennale is, therefore, I believe a product of this socio-economic soil, and the moniker People's Biennale, along with Biennale City, emerged in the second edition. It has now widely come to be known as the People's Biennale and this reflects the egalitarian approach and accessible feel of the event. I think it also reflects the participation of people from diverse backgrounds who come and engage with the Biennale on their own terms. The organisers always maintained that they didn't want



to create a popular event that dumbed down the artworks for mass consumption, but rather create an event that allowed visitors to engage with complex ideas and artworks on their own terms.

In my own experience, and through my personal research over the years, I have found this to be a successful strategy. Surveys I conducted in 2014 and 2015, included a series of twenty questions for different audience types. I interviewed a range of people over several months of the Biennale, eliciting interesting and quite unexpectedly sophisticated responses as to how people read and processed the artworks on display.

Another facet of the Biennale's idea is the way in which, anecdotally, rickshaw drivers and local people have engaged with what are quite complex artworks and how they have created their own meanings. In many cases, seemingly lay audiences have created their own conceptual frameworks for understanding artworks, revealing overlooked readings. So when you walk around Fort Kochi a lot of local people you meet all have their own memories and stories to tell about what they've seen and what they've experienced at the Biennale over the years. The stories can be fascinating, and people, very knowledgeable. This aspect, I think, is quite unique in my experience as compared to other biennials that exist today in the international art world. Another aspect of the Biennale is that the Kerala government has been the founding and primary funding partner of the Kochi Biennale Foundation, and therefore it's the taxpayers, the citizens of Kerala, that are directly responsible for the sustenance of the Biennale. I believe this adds another dimension to the idea of a People's Biennale.

**Tanya: It is a mammoth task creating such an event in Kerala for numerous reasons, with funding being an important one. Funding is essential for the creation and sustainability of any art event and that is also true of Kochi. How has the foundation managed to fund the Biennale?**

**Shwetal:** Fundraising beyond the core grant provided by the government of Kerala is a perennial challenge for the organisers of the Biennale and one that in hindsight has managed to navigate fairly well from the beginning. Sponsors such as BMW, Lulu, South Indian Bank and several other corporates including CSR funds have gone towards supporting the Biennale. Additionally, a diverse group of patrons and philanthropists, private foundations and international arts councils have all helped to sustain the project and its running costs.

This matrix of funding has also been a source of strength for the KBF because it has been able to diversify its income and mitigate the challenges that are inherent in creating and sustaining such large-scale projects. There are several challenges that the foundation has faced. I mentioned the resistance towards the founding of the biennial in some quarters, but also its detractors in government and elsewhere. I think that today most people in Kerala would agree that the KMB has been a positive addition to the state's cultural offer to India and the world.

Scepticism, particularly in certain intellectual circles, still question whether Kochi is the most appropriate site for what is now a nationally and internationally important event. Later, there were other questions, principally around the allocation of and utilization of funds. Despite these challenges, the KBF has maintained extremely high legal and financial compliance standards and has been transparent in its accounting.

I see the strength of the Biennale in its ability to communicate across socioeconomic groups and to serve as an important event locally, but also regionally, and internationally. So, whilst the challenges have been immense, I believe the successes have been remarkable also in many ways.

**Tanya: Can you tell us how the artist-curators were chosen for each edition?**

**Shwetal:** The first edition, as I mentioned, was co-curated by the two co-founders of the Kochi Biennale Foundation. Subsequent curators were selected through a selection committee process, much like other biennials, whereby a group of independent external members are invited to select a curator.

The board of KBF and the founders felt that artists may offer a unique viewpoint and could offer some fresh and out-of-the-box thinking in an increasingly homogenised art system. Typically biennials are helmed by a group of high-profile curators seemingly applying similar concepts around the world. Instead artist-curators for KMB could perhaps bring a new toolkit of approaches and concepts, but also, promisingly, some new figures to prominence.

**Tanya: Kochi, for the first time, was introduced to contemporary art at such a scale?**

**Shwetal:** Kerala has a long tradition of translating foreign language books into Indian languages, and foreign language films are very popular. So there has been an appetite for international intellectual output, visual art, film, literature, music. Cinema has another major role to play here. The well-known passion of Malayali audiences for film festivals, but also book clubs, music recitals, libraries, I think, have all contributed to the atmosphere that made the Biennale and its unique offering attractive to local audiences.

**Tanya: You have talked about the Biennale as a site of knowledge production, please can you elaborate on this notion?**

**Shwetal:** I think we can consider the Biennale primarily as a site of knowledge production, and therefore, a site of education. Not education in the didactic sense, where the Biennale artworks are curated to teach people something, but certainly one can view the Biennale as a site of knowledge production where different forms of knowledge are produced through, for instance, dance, music, poetry, visual arts, performance and through discursive and pedagogic exchanges.

I believe that this art event can be seen as a site where different kinds of knowledge can be consumed, understood and disseminated. For instance, to share some examples, the Biennale always displays wall texts and the Biennale's short guide in both English and Malayalam. I believe this has allowed local audiences who were not familiar with contemporary art language, or who perhaps didn't have English as their first language, to engage with complex ideas in their own mother tongue.

These texts were very important to the curators of each edition and they all felt that the text should reflect upon the artworks but should not necessarily spell out what the artworks were about. This approach therefore left room for interpretation in a way that perhaps is unusual when one is trying to describe an artwork or trying to perhaps convey certain ideas.

The early partnership between Google Arts & Culture and KMB are also examples of how knowledge can be created and shared during and after the Biennale.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, major programming and educational initiatives like the Students' Biennale are an attempt to promote art education and to provide opportunities for younger

practitioners to not only research and learn, but also to exhibit their art alongside a major exhibition such as the KMB.

Later in 2014-25, the ABC (Art by Children) program was initiated. The artist-led program took art curriculum, art training classes and teaching workshops directly into local schools. The Students Biennale, ABC program, Master Artist Workshops, Residencies, and other initiatives of the Kochi Biennale Foundation have all had an impact locally and regionally.

**Tanya: Can you share what more is possible, assuming funding is streamlined?**

**Shwetal:** Perhaps the largest positive impact on society, has been providing a platform for artists from the region to show their work alongside some of the most important artists working in the world today, also the Biennale has helped place Kochi on the national and international cultural calendar,

In the 2014 edition, Anish Kapoor exhibited alongside local and regional artists. This 'levelling of the playing field' by showing regional art alongside leading international art (on Indian soil), I think, has been a very positive development. Not just for understanding artistic practice from this South Indian region, but also platforming practices and giving voice to what has largely been marginalized through a process of globalization. Additionally, museums, curators, collectors, private foundations, embassies and arts councils have all started to regularly visit Kochi every two years to experience the Biennale. Of course, the art market has followed and several new galleries have established themselves, but I think this is good for artists who can now live and work in Kochi.

**Tanya: Is there an impediment to the vision of the Biennale because of the challenge of funding?**

**Shwetal:** I think the challenge of funding is something widespread and common around the art world and is not unique to Kochi. I think that the funding of non-profit art is complicated and it is something that I have conducted research on for the OnCurating.org issue 58 "Speculations: Funding and Financing Non-Profit Art" (2024) which explores many of these questions. I think that the challenges of funding are certainly an impediment to the non-profit arts, but I think with the appropriate frameworks and nimbler approaches, some of these challenges can be mitigated.

**Tanya: Can you share how this Biennale has stood apart from others in the world?**

**Shwetal:** I will come back here to the idea of the People's Biennale, the diversity of audiences, the site specificity, the local history, the fact that Kochi is part of a thriving local community and has a very rich, secular, multicultural history and has gone through phases of colonialism and yet has maintained its inherent character. I think all of these aspects come to play out when one wanders the streets and by-lanes of Fort Kochi.

Not only was it possible, but it was absolutely necessary if, as Dr. Thomas Isaac, the finance minister who first sanctioned the funding for the Kochi Biennale Foundation, said in an interview, that as Kerala becomes a middle income economy, that consumerism and consumption led growth had to be augmented by a strong cultural offering. Dr. Issac strongly favoured the idea that art, culture and education were strong factors when considering the growth strategy of a state like Kerala, a theoretical extension of the famed Kerala Model. And indeed, this argument can be extrapolated to the rest of India. Whilst India is a booming economy, it can be argued that it lacks adequate arts infrastructure and arts education opportunities. Without a strong and vibrant creative sector, some of the economic gains may be undermined if society was purely driven by consumerism.

**Tanya: Why do you think introduction to curatorial studies, art education, and so on could be the answer? Would you be able to share your perspective on this?**

**Shwetal:** Art education is incredibly important. Educational opportunities for the visual arts, cinema, music, performing arts, fashion, architecture, gaming etc. are incredibly important for a thriving and progressive economy.

Artists take risks. Artists speak truth to power. Artists, perhaps also, are more attuned to the direction in which society is going. Artists are able to poetically and imaginatively respond to these constant changes and help us see and perceive the world in new ways. There is ample evidence to support this view, both within the history of the subcontinent, but also internationally. I believe in the power of art and I think the arts can help us address and alleviate many of the humanist conditions that we see surfacing in the world today.

**Tanya: Kochi cannot be imagined without KMB. In regards to the struggles that you are currently facing, do you feel a new curatorial format or public engagement ideas could work in its favour?**

**Shwetal:** Kochi is essentially an experimental artist-led project. I think if one examines all the editions, there has been quite substantial and significant evolution in the model from each edition to the next. I believe that evolution has never really stopped and the organizers of the Biennale are cognizant that whilst educational and discursive trends have emerged and new standards adopted, the Biennale must evolve if it is to stay relevant. Kochi today is synonymous with the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, and indeed there's a lot of local anticipation leading up to each edition, but also nationally and within the region there's a great deal of anticipation around each new offering of the Biennale.

The Students Biennale is continuously evolving and affords young artists from across the country an opportunity to extend their practices and to gain experience within the field. And I'm sure that upcoming editions of the Biennale will also evolve, and new curatorial formats, programmes, and ways of engaging the public will emerge.

I think institutional self-critique is absolutely vital and the Biennale should continuously question its role and relevance in the field. The Biennale should be a place that provides the context for healthy dissent and discussion in which people from different ideological and socioeconomic backgrounds can sit around the table and have constructive debate and arguments. It is a site of debate, resistance, protest, learning and sharing, imagination and creativity. But I think first and foremost, it is a site of knowledge production. And if we view the Biennale as a site of knowledge production, then I believe this is a constructive foundation on which to extend people's understanding, not only about artworks, but also about themselves.

Art should allow us to not only reflect on the world around us, but also ultimately reflect on who we are, what we believe in, and what can inspire transformation within us. Hopefully the arts can also bring us closer together. Although people may not all always agree with each other, we hope that the Biennale is a site where diverse groups can come together, debate, and engage with Art.

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## Notes

**1** Kochi Biennale Foundation Mission Statement (2011).

<https://www.kochimuzirisbiennale.org>

**2** Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Indian National Congress. Kerala's major political parties are aligned under two coalitions, namely the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) since the late 1970s.

**3** See: First Triennale India in New Delhi (11 Feb – 31 Mar 1968)

**4** National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi and Rabindra Bhavan Galleries, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, India

**5** Lalit Kala Akademi is founded by Govt. of India and is a national network of visual art centres.

**6** Google Arts and Culture, accessed on 28 March 2024, <https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/kochi-biennale>.

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# India: Possibilities of a Nation of Culture and Colour

Sanjoy K Roy interviewed by Tanya Abraham

**Tanya:** As chairman of Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry's (FICCI) national culture committee and co-founder of the Jaipur Literature Festival, amongst your many other roles invested in the arts/culture of India, it is important for us to get a view on how you perceive India's eclectic culture pertaining to its many local regions, its peoples, and their significance as a whole.

**Sanjoy:** I have just returned from a trip to Assam in the Northeast of India, where we visited an island called Majuli, the largest riverine island in the world. It was interesting to see its culture, where bamboo is the main medium of (renewable) consumption. Not just in architecture across the strata of society, but also in food, fabric, mask-making, and so on. Now, these are not puppet-masks, but masks worn by the people on a daily basis made of bamboo on which they plaster 20% mud and 80% cow dung mixed with water from the Brahmaputra River, very different from the paper-maché masks found in New Delhi. The diversity of culture found in India is rarely found in any other part of the world. Across the length and breadth of the country, every hundred miles things change. Be it food, weaving techniques, or dressing styles etc. The point is that Indian traditional culture continues very significantly to date. It is not just alive but alive and kicking, from cradle to grave. In many of the places (such as Africa, for example) survival of cultural traditions depend on subsidies from the government. In India, it is different, it sustains as a part of everyday living, and is passed on from generation to the next, irrespective of whether it maybe the lower, middle, or high income strata of society. Also, when one looks at the very large Indian diaspora across the world, they have been maintaining traditions and techniques over time. It is not the gurus of yore who maintain them, but the young of India— be it a classical form or a contemporary derivative of it, the youth are deeply immersed in traditional culture, and thus, it is handed down the generations.

**Tanya:** The Jaipur Literature Festival has been a grand success, and is famed across the globe. Within literature and the arts—of Indian writers and artists—how do you see the juxtaposition of these within the Indian and global scenarios?

**Sanjoy:** John and Faith Singh, founders of the textile block printing company called Anokhi, were involved in the restoration and preservation of old buildings, gateways, havelis, and so on. They were invested in the built and cultural heritage of the city of Jaipur. In 2001, they had visited the Edinburgh Festival where they saw that most shows were held in repurposed heritage buildings. They felt it was a great way to show how the arts could create a value proposition for built heritage. They asked us to set up The Jaipur Virasat Heritage Festival, which ran for a couple of years, but did not go far because of financial issues. It had a literature wing, and when asked to continue running it, we split it. We had no five-year plan. No one envisaged it would become the world's largest literary gathering. But people came for the heritage of the city, the historical palaces with its sense of romance, valour, and untold stories, the hospitality and its unique food, the retail therapy (because of its furniture, block printing, gem stones etc.), its unique art forms... All these together plus the required infrastructure made things successful.

When one looks at International festivals, there is an understanding of the creative sector and its possibility of creating jobs. JLF gave a huge impetus to 300 other festivals, in India and internationally. It also provided a platform for local, nuanced voices—it created a cultural plethora of the written word. While the main stay is the literature component, we don't see a difference between art forms as we carry them all in our festival. The Kochi Biennale, a contemporary art festival, is a juxtaposition of various art forms involving a plethora of art as well as the sciences.

**Tanya:** You have been speaking of creative economies as a crucial aspect of local economies, starting from traditional arts and crafts, to others. Can you share with

the readers the uniqueness of India in this regard, how intricately webbed art is to the land and the lives of its peoples?

**Sanjoy:** Our arts in India have never been confined to an opera house or a theatre venue. Take the Ramlila tradition for example—every street will have a production of the Ramlila playing. It is done by the community and for the community, it is very localised.<sup>1</sup> Every tradition in India has its own New Year celebrations too, within these too one differs from the other. Rice, for example, is used to create floor designs because it eventually became food for the ants. The linkages link our traditions to our environment, to our heritage. In every part of India, the animistic form (Lord Shiva for example, or any of the Shakti traditions, which come from a religious iconography) is at some level connected to the environment. We have the sacred tree, the sacred animal, the sacred bird, the peacock feather... All of these are celebrated in some way or the other. Indian culture is not born out of isolation but born out of integration. And because it is integrated into everyday life and living, its culture still exists even today. Look at Varanasi. It epitomises everyday heritage. One sees yoga being performed, the evening *aarti*, bodies being consumed to the flame and ashes let into the Ganges. People come out of the Benaras Hindu Hospital to die at the two cremation ghats<sup>2</sup> in order to attain *moksha*<sup>3</sup>. In addition, there are the transgender folk, the Kabir mat which flings mud at these traditions... each of these are culturally specific but all of these are integrated into what we call India. Indian philosophy is not confined to scripture or the written form, instead it has evolved through the ages, and in its evolution it has been being very specific of using culture to keep its traditions alive. Be it the Mahabharata, Ramayana, the Panchatantra, they make sure it is kept alive and its representation is seen through its *gharanas* and traditional forms.

**Tanya:** The struggle for funding and the need for policy change, these are aspects which you have time and again stressed upon. Where do you see the position the private sector currently holds? What needs to be reorganised and realigned?

**Sanjoy:** The interesting thing is unlike France or the UK, for example, where the performing and visual art sectors are highly subsidised, in India this is not true. Although some funding comes from the government, much of the successful expositions are supported by the private sector. And this is not new. If one looks into the past, we see the maharajahs or the bureaucrats of yore,

who supported the arts. Akbar's court, for example, saw hundreds of painters from across the traditions creating wonderful folios, this has pretty much been the essence of India's cultural renaissance.<sup>4</sup> This patronage came to be replaced by corporate houses and there to be there has been a resurgence and an understanding by corporate houses in the last fifteen odd years that this is not about a feel good factor or vanity projects but about branding. The Mahindra Group run nine festivals, each associated with a specific brand of theirs. Today, they are one of India's most trusted brands, where their involvement with the arts have proven to be a significant contributor to it.

There is a new understanding of the arts in India, what needs to be changed is policy. Tax breaks are not necessarily available if invested in the arts. If a million dollars is invested in the arts, one is able to create ninety-nine to a hundred and one jobs. The same money if invested in built economy creates as few as nine to eleven jobs. Government bodies need to recognize this potential and how look at they can collaborate with corporates to make it happen.

**Tanya:** What about contemporary art practices in a culturally strong country like India? Can you share how you see it placed, and its future in India? Are you envisaging a specific position for it?

**Sanjoy:** In the earlier times, all the way to the early 1970s, there was the Baroda School, JJ School of Art, and so on. As India emerged as an economic power and new money started coming in, it gave birth to a lot of visual representation—decorative art is how I would call it. Today, things have changed, from the Kochi Biennale to the many galleries and museums, conceptual art has become central to India's visual arts world. In Kochi, many warehouses have been restored and turned into gallery spaces. As I had mentioned, JLF is very linked to the tradition and culture of the city of Jaipur. India's treasure trove of heritage structures offers possibilities for unique festivals. However, what is lacking is a need for education and awareness, citizens being instructed in the value of the arts.

**Tanya:** Where do you position curators in art and culture? I understand there is a dearth of good curators who can envisage through their imagination and intellect new possibilities. Do you recognize curatorial education and exposure an answer to create new democratic and socially inclusive meeting points?

**Sanjoy:** To cut a good story in film, we need a good editor. Similarly, we need curators for the arts. Where the value of talent is recognised and is responsible for the creation and curation of an artist's work across a period of time. Especially with new emerging artists, so that they are given a platform to showcase their work. India has so many traditional art forms and being able to recognise exceptional artists is important. Traditional art forms like Gond, Madhubani, and so on involve families creating art together, who have generational knowledge of the skill. Well-trained, educated curators are missing in India, those who understand tradition and form. Village after village we have painters. How are we going to recognize the talented artist but through education in the art form. India is missing curators who are well-versed in theory, practice, and an awareness of what is out there. Art projects are unfortunately seen largely as vanity projects.

the inner city of Delhi where over 1,30,000 children have benefited from education, training and residential services. Roy is the Co-chair of the Art and Culture Committee of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry and former President of Event and Entertainment Management Association. He lectures at and works in collaboration with leading universities across the world and has been conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of the University honoris causa by University of York, UK, in recognition of his outstanding contributions to the arts and society.

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### Notes

**1** Ramlila enacts the life of Lord Ram, according to the Hindu epic Ramayana. A dramatic reenactment of dances and plays, it is staged during the festival of Navaratri in India commemorating the winning of good over evil.

**2** Varanasi has eighty-four ghats; ghats refer to the steps leading to the holy river Ganges. Most of the ghats are puja and bathing ghats, while Manikarnika and Hrishchandra are cremation sites. Thousands of believers come to die at Varanasi, cremated in an unending fire which is said to have been burning for centuries. Wikipedia Contributors. 2019, "Ghats in Varanasi." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. Last modified October 29, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghats\\_in\\_Varanasi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghats_in_Varanasi).

**3** *Moksha* in Hinduism and Buddhism refers to the liberation of the soul on death, complete freedom from the cycle of life and death, to enlightenment.

**4** Akbar was a Mughal emperor of India who ruled from 1565-1605 AD, one of the most powerful emperors of the Indian subcontinent.

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**Sanjoy K. Roy**, an entrepreneur of the arts, is Managing Director of Teamwork Arts, which produces over 33 festivals in 42 cities and 17 countries, including the world's largest literary gathering — the Jaipur Literature Festival and international editions of JLF. He is a founder-trustee of Salaam Baalak Trust, working to provide support services for street and working children in

# ***Undulating Currents: A Group Show*** **– An Analysis into the Curatorial Process** **Mekhala Dave**

Water has been a spiritual guide and relational element from my lived experiences. As long as I remember, water has been my gateway to think and reflect about life. Water offers me stillness and remedies. Water serves my higher state of being—biologically, cognitively and bodily. Swims in water bodies are strokes of joys, nurturing and healing. Sea salt, riverine musk or indigo lake, I float in wild submerges. Water is a part of me and I am a part of water. As the Earth rotates around its axis, the clump of water is blissfully prominent in the starry glitters of the universe. Such is the magnitude and the profound effect of water. As living, sentient beings, we are the land dwellers that are rooted firmly to the ground, who live alongside water. However, our ancestral history is potent with watery worlds that surround us in a magnificent wave of glory. Water connects us all with the Ocean. The rim of the Ocean is known to us, but its mysteries run deep. The stories of the Ocean and its inhabitants are known to us and these stories are compelling in the way that they tease us about the Ocean's expanse, offering us so much more than we can even begin to imagine. If we begin to think with the Ocean, the Ocean whispers to us about revelations. But how do we relate to the Ocean, and who gets to tell their stories? Who speaks for the Ocean?

With massive outbursts of wars, scarcity of water, overconsumption, population increase, capitalist commodification, resources extraction, negation of multispecies and vulnerable communities, and climate change impacts, one cannot help but think about how one can begin to grasp this magnificent whirlpool of climate change and its impact on the intricacy of the global networks and systems. As I explore my sense of being—inhabiting spaces and own position as a thinker, lawyer, writer, scholar, activist and daughter of the Ocean, through my practice—I have been fortunate to exchange meaningful experiences and conversations with those from the Global South. This includes researchers, artists, legal and policy experts, Indigenous leaders from the Pacific and Caribbean, marine biologists, environmentalists, activists and scholars. I am increasingly concerned with how humanity continues to plunge forward in restless moves, causing damage to the ocean, yet, marvelling at attempts for micro gestures of resistance movements for ocean stewardship. This article unveils from the materiality of ocean's resources and contemporary art's trajectory with decolonial strands from theory to praxis in the exhibition *Undulating Currents: A Group Show*. The exhibition was co-curated by the curator Brooklyn J. Pakathi, myself as an ocean law and policy researcher, with the exhibition designer Maria Rudokova at the University of Applied Arts Vienna at the University gallery Sala Terrena in Vienna that opened in November 2023.

In the *October* Journal (2009), the scholar Julia Bryan Wilson writes a polemic inquiry about contemporary art that offers “vibrant sense of inclusion, fostering collaborations between historians, scientists, policy makers, activists, and artists, as well as admitting all kinds of objects (canonical, mass-media, and otherwise)”. She further states, “[...] More to the point, contemporary art history, because it is always in formation, necessarily admits its own instabilities, its own fissures and holes, it cannot presume singular meanings, etched in stone as it were.” The scholar Grant Kester writes that



contemporary art has “unregulated and multiple claims of interpretative authority”; the art historian Joshua Shannon emphasizes contemporary art that “serves as a function of critique” for “its power to show us where our politics fail”. Departing from foundations of contemporary art discussed among the scholars as part of the *October* Journal series, is the touchstone of formulations that provide spatial and temporal reflections on sites, networks and modes that traverse across borders, people, multi-species and hybridity of movements. Setting the scene of a global turn in contemporary art in her article, Professor of Global Art History and Art Criticism, Anna Maria Guasch addresses the burgeoning of circularity of spaces, markets, events and exhibitions and



Daniel Bratheaite-Shirley, *Pirating Blackness*, 2023.



Minia Biabiany, *Musa*, 2020.



Curated books on Black art and history on metallic shelves, alongside short curatorial text within the exhibition space, highlighting the emphasis of the research of the exhibition inspired by the scholar Édouard Glissant. Photo: Maria Belova

communication foreclosing the gap between the local and the global, emphasizing identity through cosmopolitanism, and thus, responding to a globalized order in contemporary art in the recent years.

Curator Okwui Enwezor's *Documenta 11*, in particular, was instrumental in visiting a postcolonial process from a timely period of the global turn, which created a deliberate balance between them, within what he described as 'proximities' and 'platforms' by enlarging the spatial and temporal dimension of the exhibition in different localities, trusting a cluster of collaborative curators with overarching themes, concepts and motifs from diverse artistic practices. He raised the powerful statement, "The postcolonial today is a world of proximities. It is a world of nearness, not an elsewhere," envisioned as a response to the limit and expanse to the global discourse across the range of social, political and economic networks. In other words, he explains globalization within the history of the avant-garde. Further, he emphasized on the exhibition set out to "examine and question", rather than arrive or form overarching conclusions, and most of all, to speculate on Documenta's institutional form and parameters independent from institutional support, which Enwezor argues, reveals a history of the avant-garde. He further stated that, "To understand what constitutes avant-garde today, one must begin not in the field of contemporary art but in the field of culture and politics, as well as in the economic field governing all relations that have come under the overwhelming hegemony of capital... If the avant-garde of the past [...] anticipated a changing order, that of today is to make impermanence [...] the principal order of today's uncertainties, instability and insecurity." The 'postcolonial', in interpreting Enwezor, is not just a territorial independence in case of sovereignty with recycles of

nationalist imaginaries, but a multi-curious, collective, deliberate critique and responsive approach that earmarks de-territorialization within the territories of knowledge, sites of production, artistic practices, exhibition-making of contemporary art, and thus, the grooming of contemporary art within its absorbed, expanded, interconnected networks.

Furthermore, the art historian T.J. Demos has written extensively on the relationship between politics, art and ecology, drawing from the earlier works of the art historian Timothy Morton's "nature and ecology" entanglement. Here, Demos takes it further to undertake the task to "decolonize nature" to mean "[...] Forms of contemporary art practices are most crucial in their self-reflexivity and commitment to 'postcolonial ethico-political praxis'" as well as the interaction between local activities to global formations in his purview that climate change crisis is a political crisis. Whether the term decolonize or postcolonial is used is a matter of scholarly debate, and there are many discourses for the use of the terms anti-colonial, decolonial or post-colonial among a wide range of scholars. All the terms have their own departures, arrivals and legitimacies for their use, discourse and application. However, the term 'decolonial', furthermore, is fleshed from the thinker Walter D. Mignolo who unfolded the etymology of the term 'de-colonize' from a geopolitical and 'border thinking' context, giving rise to the Third world of power, knowledge and being, in his explanation.

In these considerations, the exhibition *Undulating Currents: A Group Show* emerged as a labor of love and endeavor between the curator Brooklyn J. Pakathi, exhibition designer Maria Rudokova and myself, that brought thinkers, artists and praxis of the black diaspora to speculate on the materiality of oil and water, two distinct elements and most exploited resources that have dangerous impacts from climate change. Sociologist and Cultural Studies scholar Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic' in the analogy of a 'slave ship' and relationship to the ocean, reclaimed the emblematic event of the Slave trade journey across the Atlantic Ocean as a way of a new force to position the Black identity as multifaceted Black bodies and movements across cultures and nations as "micro systems of linguistic and political hybridity". As a heuristic inquiry, Gilroy saw this movement as "shifting of places" to unpack creolisation, in theory and praxis, within the 'image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion'—as the circulation of ideas and knowledge. Leaping from the scholar Édouard Glissant's interpretation of the world in a non-linear, archipelagic, and into the abyss in order to terrifyingly embrace uncertainty from journeying the ocean by black bodies as a reference point, the exhibition focused on eight artists from eco-feminist, queer and indigenous practices, namely Tshepiso Morapa, Ava Binta Giallo, Minia Biabiany, Tabita Rezaire, Eric Asamoah, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirely, OzHopé Collective, and Eburn Sodipo. The exhibition was simulated in the color black serving neutrality between the materiality of oil and water and the way in which they interact and emanate in spatial and temporal constructs, *undulating* from Glissant's non-linearity resulted in forms of displays at different heights, horizontally as well as off the exhibition walls.

The curatorial methodology had three approaches for a decolonial framework: visual, in-dialogue and commons gathering that ranged from digital and media forms works of contemporary art. Namely these were with Brathwaite-Shirley's interactive game, Binta Giallo's elemental sculptural installations, video works by Biabiany, Sodipo and Rezaire, photo montages by Asamoah, and commissioned print and video work from Morapa. The backdrop of textual cues on the walls served as curatorial methodological reveals, and metallic designs mounted bookshelves to expand on the University

library's book collection on Black art and history between the spatial, works of contemporary art and the audience. From the exhibition and research, the University library's books that were loaned for the exhibition rose from five to forty and counting; books on black art and history created an expanded access to the otherwise limits of the University's resources.

In Brathwaite-Shieley's *Pirating Blackness* game, by direct participation the audience followed a journey of questions generated from the game to reveal undocumented archives of trans bodies lost at sea, whilst Sodipo's *Celeste* differently conjured archives from pop culture and gay club media in times of segregation where she situates her own fluid trans body for contemplation. Morapa's *Selekana and the River God* collage print and video work told the story of a little girl in a village in South Africa, in the vernacular, who encounters a river goddess who bequeaths her with gifts, thus, transforming her life, in the colonial era of British and Dutch. And Rezaire's *Deep Down Tidal* draws from popular culture, textual, spiritual and humorous transpiring images that recollects the ocean itself as a body of communication of submerged hidden black bodies and colonial infrastructure of fiber optic cables that carries a colonial legacy. Giallo's *Water Surface* for an abstract interpretation of water as source draws on elemental soil, ceramics and glass that contain water, whilst OzHopé Collective's *Row* glides with performative commentary from canoes and fisherfolk communities in response to oil extractivism in Malawi's local rivers. Biabiany's video essay *Musa* refreshes the narrative on France and Guadeloupe's relations in monocultures of banana plantation and pesticide controls introduced by France in the region, that infiltrated poison in the water system and effected local communities. Asamoah's photo-montages of his ancestral town in Ghana rejoices his own musings on boyhood reflected in the country's own historical independence and the local boys coming of age. Each of the works with different conjectures had powerful overlaps in navigating a



Tshepiso Moropa, *Selekana le Modimo wa Noka*, 2023.



Ava Binta Giallo, *Water's Skin*, 2024),  
Photo: Maria Belova

sense of Black joy, encounters within discomfort, curiosity, subversiveness and pivotal moments that broke down hierarchies in curatorial undertakings, transparency, knowledge sharing and speculation and the gaze of the eye of the viewer.

The audience were invited into the dense space to experience a breakdown in aquatic blackness, encouraging interaction with the works of art, books as conduits of knowledge, four reading sessions from books by black theorists, authors and writers for the general public and BIPOC communities that were complimented by curatorial guided tours.

In a review by *Falter*, the exhibition was claimed to be a unique engagement for the audience in the city of Vienna. Thus, the exhibition transformed as a vehicle for experiential form to move away from the grand narratives of Western knowledge forms of sharing and exchange to maintain a balance between theory and praxis, ocean law and policy research, cutting through academic and artistic institutional spaces and curatorial decisions, with spatial transformation of the exhibition. From the contemporaneity of place-based responses in the exhibition, relationalities with the non-human and the essence of a spiritual realm emerged, weaving past, present, and future together. It encapsulated a bedrock of social critique from the region that crystallized instances of resistance as a form of discomfort, confrontation, and disruption that attempts to flow towards a collective healing.

*Images of Undulating Currents: A Group Show*

© image credits Maria Belova

This exhibition was co-conceived with curator Brooklyn J. Pakathi and exhibition designer Maria Rudokova

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**Mekhala Dave** is a lawyer and art academic based in Vienna. She is the ocean law and policy analyst/legal researcher at TBA21–Academy and a doctoral researcher in contemporary art history and theory at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. In her past and current work in legal practice, as well as in her PhD research, she advocates for a social turn in artistic practices and explores encounters located across knowledge spheres and communities in the Global South at the intersection of activism and newly shaping ocean policy. From her lived experiences across borders, she draws inspiration and spiritual guidance from water to the questions of historicity and the search for emerging "new" relations of identity and belonging.

# Fluid spaces of belonging and transformation

## Carlo Rizzo



Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993. Photo: Matthew Caldwell.

The first ever image that I was shown as an impressionable art history student, at Birkbeck College in 2005, was a photo of Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1993). Our lecturer wanted us to reflect on the graffiti on it and ponder the age-old question of what can be considered 'art'. I later learned how those graffiti came to symbolize so much more—the heated debate around the demolition of the artwork, a divided community, the praise of critics, the loathing of local politicians, and the circus of art prizes. That year, Whiteread won both the Turner Prize for best artist and the K Foundation's prize for worst artist, worth twice the money. It was just the perfect case study. Leaving aside the question of 'what is art', in that moment, I caught the first glimpse of the disruptive power of Public Art—the power to spark debates you can't control. The kind of power at play when you willingly slide your head under the guillotine of media outlets, official statements, and passersby. No museum walls are there to protect you, no turnstiles to check who comes in and out, no security at night. East London in the early 90s was a space undertaking radical social transformation. Whiteread hit a sensitive spot. Her installation became a black hole swallowing the past and spitting out a dire, beautiful, yet unusable and confusing version of the future. People were being evicted from that street and new (wealthier) people were about to move in. The memories of World War II bombings were only one generation away, in some minds as fresh as the stupor at the new high rises being built not far, in Canary Wharf, to house a new and shiny financial district. Like it or not, Whiteread and her commissioner Art Angel were, at the very least, showing a lot of courage.

Public Art can be many things—a medium, a dream, a policy framework, a community initiative, colorful dressing on urban greens, or sometimes just "that thing on the roundabout". In the nebulous constellation of art makers, thinkers, funders, and facilitators,

the term takes a vast array of different meanings. Is it about the public? Is it about the art? Both? Neither? Surely, it doesn't just happen. Or you might disagree—what about murals, spontaneous performances, speaking corners, buskers, or street portraitists? True, impromptu stages of tarmac and tiles are full of precious moments of creative expression. And yes, you can certainly feel the pulse of society when you witness or participate in those moments. Here, however, I want to look more specifically at instances that fall under a slightly more serpentine definition—interventions for the public realm planned by politicians, conceived by artists, and produced with institutional support. A much more intricate affair, and an area in which we are witnessing unprecedented efforts, especially in Gulf countries, from where I write.

Specifically, in this article I'd like to offer a reflection on two initiatives: Dubai Public Art and Riyadh Art, the flagship public art initiatives currently active in both cities. There are a few reasons for this choice. It is not common to see Public Art so high on governments' agenda. Both cities are advancing rapidly with programs initiated from scratch only a few years ago. Also, in both cases, these were introduced as key pillars of a new long-term vision to build a stronger cultural infrastructure, facilitated by large investments of government resources and, most importantly, embedded in the wider context of staggeringly fast urban and social change. These common traits make them two unique and comparable case studies, despite their 'operational' differences (and financial, considering Riyadh's budgets are of a different magnitude). If their promises are fulfilled, they will change the landscape of Public Art commissioning well beyond the Gulf.

'Belonging' and 'transformation' are the lenses through which I invite you to look at the two cities. As general concepts, I believe they have sustained the aspirations and conundrums of most public art initiatives around the world in recent decades, especially since the beginning of the century when the global competition amongst cultural capitals moved markedly beyond the Western world. Here, more specifically, Public Art dynamically shapes ideas of what it means to belong to a cultural space, whilst affecting its transformation firsthand. Complex questions of identity, social mobility, immigration, and cultural diplomacy are woven into unsettled dust from revolutionary urban planning, rapid transformations of the relationships between co-existing, yet segregated, communities, and evolution in the status of artists who feel a sense of belonging to some of these communities. The combination of speed and complexity of such transformations in Dubai and Riyadh—more than anywhere else—makes this framework the most productive in order to understand (and to a certain extent, speculate about) the impact these initiatives will have on the two cities, their opportunities as well as their limitations.

In sharing this story, I am assisted by four individuals who, in different capacities, sit at the very heart of it all in both cities. They are: Sarah Brahim, one of the most talented Saudi multidisciplinary artists, who has gained significant prominence on the international scene over the last two years, and who in 2022 produced one of the most ambitious public installations ever seen in the country, for the Noor Riyadh Festival (a part of Riyadh Art); Christina Lessa, Senior Advisor to The Royal Commission for Riyadh City, who played a crucial role in launching Riyadh Art and continues to be a trusted guide shaping the future of the program today; Benedetta Ghione, the Executive Director of the Art Dubai Fair, currently the leading commissioning entity for Dubai Public Art; and Dr. Saeed Mubarak Kharbash Al Marri, CEO for Arts & Literature for Dubai Culture & Arts Authority, the senior government official responsible for Dubai Public Art. I am immensely grateful for the many fruitful conversations with all of them, which have added much-needed color and perspective to this discussion.



**This is for you**

Sarah Brahim, *De Anima*, 2022,  
at the Noor Riyadh Festival 2022.  
Courtesy of the Artist.

“It was five days after the opening and I was going there every night to see how people were engaging with the work. The location of the installation is near an area where people like to gather on weekends. The space under the bridge itself is not a very popular spot, you may find some people there fishing in the wadi, especially in winter. Usually, the area is quite popular with families, it’s very peaceful and safe. For me, it’s always been somewhat a sacred space, a sort of brutalist cathedral. It was very special, which is why I chose this location for the piece. One evening these kids came, alone, they were very little, five or six of them I think. They sat there for around one hour—I guess that means they must have watched the film five times on a loop! I was nearby doing other things, and then someone told me they wanted to meet me and take pictures with me. I couldn’t believe they were still there, it was late, maybe around midnight. They had just been sitting there waiting, they were so shy and small. The oldest one started asking me questions, he seemed curious to know how I got to the place where I am, and then at one point he said “We are proud of you”...Can you imagine? It was really unexpected. I told him “I am the one who’s proud of you—this is for you, in fact. This is your city, these are your spaces, you can do anything you want here, you can play music, you can dance.” The juxtaposition of the scale of the installation and their bodies was something that struck me. The opportunity for them to be there in a place that is so unusual in a way, and experiencing it in such an unusual way, to fathom the possibility of something like this happening, it’s so meaningful. And something that just didn’t happen in

Riyadh until a few years ago. In the US I might stumble upon something like that and it's also beautiful, spontaneous and rare, but in Riyadh the associations we make with those spaces are different. There are family memories, but also a sense of how the possibilities of public space were restricted until now. To be under a highway bridge and see music and dancing it's something you just wouldn't expect."

This is the story that Brahim shared when I asked her about the public reaction to her installation, *De Anima* (2022), commissioned for the Noor Riyadh festival. It is a poignant example, I believe, of what it means to witness radical transformation, whilst seeking to imagine your future self in the experience of an artwork. The piece—writes Brahim—is about “building bridges between different aspects of the self as well as ourselves and the environment surrounding us. [It is] a gateway from the external to the internal self, from public to individual.” This relationship between the public self and the individual self sits at the center of any yearning to belong. To create a space of belonging means to create new connections between these two sides of the self. Brahim’s installation unlocked new possibilities for a fragment of the urban landscape that until that point was overlooked and limited in its function. Allowing children to re-imagine such space means to expand the horizon of possibilities that the city can offer. To participate in this experience gives them a new opportunity to own a space just revealed with their imagination—to project their bodies and ideas into this expanded realm.

Much like Whiteread and Art Angel did in London in the early 90s, Brahim and her commissioners at Noor Riyadh disrupted the urban and social fabric of the Saudi capital through an art intervention that was unprecedented. To understand the pace of transformation and the way in which social reforms have enabled this in a staggeringly short span of time, Lessa reminds me that as recently as 2015, when she started working on Art in Transit (one of the earliest programs of Riyadh Art), “contemporary music and art as public expressions of creativity were actionable (unlawful).” Brahim, from her perspective, argues that, in the wake of current social reforms, such opportunities inevitably “increase the sense of responsibility” for artists based in the country who are called to contribute. They need to quickly learn how to deal with the complexity of working in unusual locations, all under the careful scrutiny of the press, critics, and an enthusiastic and curious local public. To Brahim, “this generation are paving the way for new artists to continue to work in public spaces in the future and will be recognized as the pioneers of creativity in a moment of deep historical transition.” The same can be said about their audiences, since many of those experiencing this new wave of creativity are witnessing public artworks of this nature and scale for the first time in their lives.

Building new cultural audiences is at the heart of these programs. In Dubai, Ghione suggests that Public Art serves as an “entry point into the visual arts—it sparks debate and discussion, opening conversations and creating bridges between different communities and cultures.” The UAE’s creative capital may have a longer history of public sculptures and art festivals than Riyadh, but it is also experiencing a new wave of government-funded public commissions for the first time, that will create what the Art Dubai director describes as a “city-wide gallery that is experiential and accessible to all.”

As with the example of Noor Riyadh and *De Anima*, the choice of location and artists for the first Dubai Public Art commission is also highly significant. The piece, aptly titled *Union of Artists*, was unveiled in late-February 2024 and is now located directly opposite the country’s Union House (the birthplace of the United Arab Emirates) and

the Etihad Museum, arguably the most prominent architectural emblems of national identity in the UAE. Initially, the competition was meant to produce a single winner, but the symbolic value of the location inspired the group of shortlisted artists (Afra Al Dhaheri, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Shaikha Al Mazrou, Khalid Albanna, and Asma Belhamar, all UAE nationals) to unite and propose a single, co-produced artwork. The statement embodied in this 'creative union' forms a strong identity anchor for the first commission. Their choice to transcend both the competitive nature of public art commissions and the differences in their own respective practices shows a desire to expand the impact of public artworks in the city and evoke a sense of shared belonging. The emphasis on national identity is also crucial in a city where UAE nationals remain a minority amidst an increasingly multicultural population. The relationship with the international community in the city is gradually becoming less transactional. "More and more people are coming [to Dubai] to build their lives and raise families," Ghione notes, and with this comes "an increasing appetite for culture and cultural programming". How local audiences will relate to these new public commissions remains to be seen. It will depend largely on how commissioning models evolve to reflect the diverse demographics and narratives that make up the cultural dialogue of the city, and on how artists tasked with representing it can capture and steer it in new directions.

### The view from above

Rapid transformation points to possibilities, but it is equally fraught with unpredictability—new spaces, young institutions, and large, risky investments of time, money, and social capital. New buildings, parks, and roads are popping up in a matter of months. The rituals that regulate the interaction between communities and their public spaces are still being established. In government circles, the sense of urgency is palpable. A lot is expected from public art initiatives, often perceived as merely a category in the international pageant for 'best art destination'. From the purist front of the international art world, 'top-down' initiatives like Riyadh Art and Dubai Public Art are sometimes dismissed as tools to achieve other policy goals, whether in international diplomacy, economic development, or tourism. This is a somewhat simplistic view, even though many Western capitals have shown that their public art programs are designed with exactly those collateral benefits in mind.



Afra Al Dhaheri, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Shaikha Al Mazrou, Khalid Albanna, and Asma Belhamar, *Union of Artists*, 2024. Installed in Al Hudaiba with the Etihad Museum in the background. Image courtesy of Art Dubai Group

In Riyadh and Dubai, public art programs are being crafted as catalysts for broader cultural sector development and as channels for more progressive and integrated city administration. I sought Lessa's insights on this, particularly regarding the cultural sector, and she underscored the significance of its impact on the younger generations—a sentiment Brahim had already shared. “Adaptability, responsibility, entrepreneurship, and community; these traits are becoming synonymous within the global arts scene [...] The creative economy has ushered in a new era of politics, education, and innovation. Although it's challenging and somewhat presumptuous to lump all artistic endeavors under the ‘creative economy’ label, it's not challenging to promote and support arts education through this lens.” In her view, the role of Public Art is tightly woven with that of arts education, creating far-reaching effects. “These effects,” she continues, “are crucial for self-awareness and cultivating the cultural intelligence necessary for future generations to not only foster a collective sense of humanity and originality but also to forge careers with added value in this emerging creative economy.” This circles back to the critical need to support a new wave of artists who are deeply embedded in their communities, capable of crafting narratives that can underpin an expanded, more progressive form of creative education. Until recently relegated to the periphery of a Western-dominated discourse, these artists are now actively shaping new visions for their communities and sparking important conversations through the articulation of their complex artistic identities. Programs facilitating this shift like Dubai Public Art or Riyadh Art are not aiming to conform or cater to a dominant narrative, merely to gain acceptance in some international club for art destinations. Instead, they strive to establish robust alternative curatorial frameworks, with the potential to replace the reductive, regionalist perspectives still prevalent among many Western institutions and curators active in the region.

Going beyond the cultural sector, the intricate behind-the-scenes work that enables Public Art commissions to take place also indicates that these programs are sparking new dialogues for city administrators. When I discussed the impact of Dubai Public Art with Dr. Kharbash, he mentioned five recurring themes in his conversations with colleagues from other government entities: beauty, creativity, safety, the economy, and community. There is a complex and extensive debate ongoing, involving numerous government entities at different stages throughout the life cycle of all public art commissions. Multiple intentions converge here: providing opportunities for artists, building an attractive city with a high quality of life, inspiring young people, enhancing safety and accessibility, and redistributing crowds away from the city's most congested areas. However, according to Kharbash, the overarching objective is straightforward, “Urban development in Dubai has progressed rapidly, yet strong community ties take time to develop. Public art must become a common ground—both literally and figuratively—where the needs and desires of diverse communities can meet.” For him and his team, initiating a Public Art program has raised the profile of the entire cultural sector in government discussions and propelled it closer to the top of the administrative agenda. Unlike other initiatives such as exhibitions, gallery shows, fairs, and festivals, Public Art significantly increases the involvement of other government actors in the production process. Due to its multidisciplinary, cross-institutional nature, it has emerged as a new embodiment of the strong connection between cultural development and broader socioeconomic progress.

Just like the community ties Kharbash referred to, the impact of these programs also won't be seen overnight. While a central enabler has the advantage of being able to gather all the necessary resources to make projects happen, a major capital's desirable public art landscape, like that of Riyadh or Dubai, requires more independent initia-

tives. Dubai Public Art was already launched following an arm's length principle of disbursement. In this approach, government funding was not offered directly to artists and contractors, but rather, to commissioning entities chosen from established cultural organizations already active in the city. This is a crucial principle that needs to be reinforced and more widely adopted. It empowers cultural operators who are already engrained in the country's social fabric, and who are invested in, and therefore motivated to, involve the communities affected by their projects.

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This may all sound very promising, but I wonder if it is fair, or even possible, to place so much responsibility on Public Art. From my perspective, it is clear that institutionalization, branding, and bureaucracy are not introduced merely for tourism and entertainment, but are essential components in constructing a legacy. As pillars of new, sophisticated cultural infrastructures, Public Art programs must support a new form of creative education, enhanced social integration, greater freedom of expression, and fair international recognition for the creative spirit of the cities that host them. If they deviate from this path, they will fail. In the Gulf context, Public Art can provide a crucial interpretation of what transformation means. It serves as a marker of a city's multi-layered identity, retaining value beyond its status as 'monument' for the way it mobilizes several communities. Curating Public Art in this context means guiding a transformative process, while nurturing a sense of belonging. Making it a reality is a shared challenge, necessitating a common language and the capacity to disagree. Perhaps this is also why its disruptive power remains as strong today as it was three decades ago.

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# Curating an Art Fair for the Global South: The Case of Art Dubai

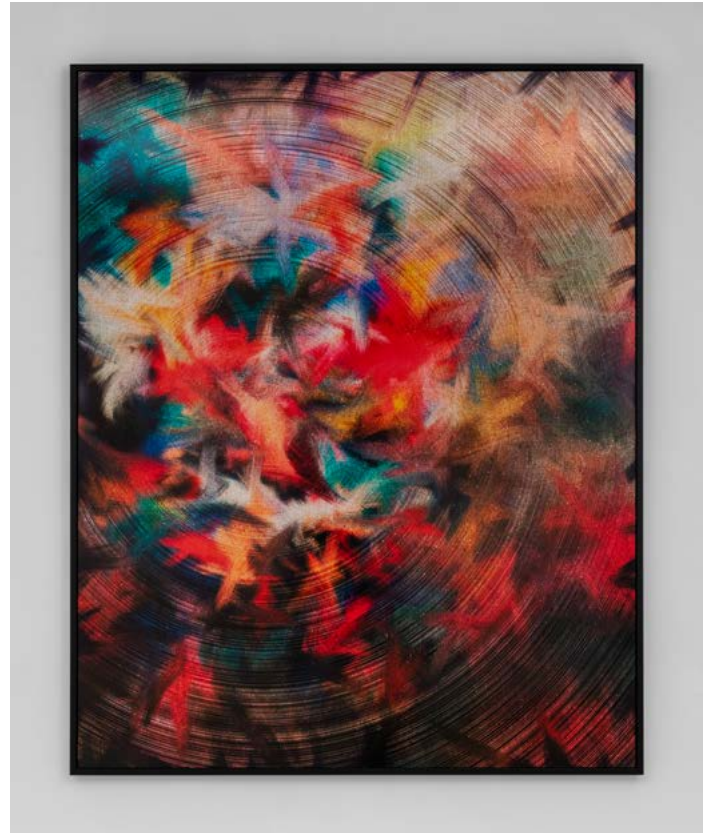
## Pablo Del Val

When Art Dubai first launched in 2007, it was recognized as the ‘leading international fair for the Middle East and South Asia’. Over the past seventeen years, however, it has expanded in scale and scope, evolving into the most prominent art fair for a much larger region. It showcases artists and galleries from a wider remit than first anticipated, mirroring the rapid growth and development of its home city, Dubai, a meeting point for the so-called “Global South”—a complex term, the meaning of which I will address further in this essay.

A fundamental tenet of the fair has always been to contribute to the development of the country’s cultural economy. When the fair began in 2007, the art scene in Dubai—and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as a whole—was in its infancy. Much of this stemmed from a wide range of curated programming at the fair, primarily led by not-for-profit organizations, that has brought together thought leaders, creatives and organizations, to produce events, talks and artworks at the fair.

Over the years, Art Dubai has become increasingly curated—not only carefully selecting the best galleries of the region, but also using the expertise of specialist external curators to address issues within the field or shed light on lesser known artists, practices and geographies. This is essential work for the region of the Global South that the fair covers, which is collectively understudied and has, until recently, been side-lined in art history.

In quantitative terms, the success of Art Dubai is self-evident: the 2023 edition of the Fair saw 34,000 local and international visitors, and had a direct economic impact of 142.9 million AED (US\$38.9 million) for the city of Dubai. Unravelling the ways in which the curated programming has contributed to the art scene in Dubai and the Global South at large, is much more complex. For example, Art Dubai has always been considered a ‘fair for discoveries’—the place to see artists who will go on to feature in major exhibitions and biennials—before they become internationally famous, alongside many who have already reached acclaim. This essay aims to explain how Art Dubai came to focus on the Global



Melissa Wiederrecht showed works at Art Dubai Digital 2024 with Gazelli Art House. [*Cosmic Rays #887*, 2023. Algorithmic Generative Art, Javascript code with p5.js and GLSL. Accompanied with physical print 152.4 x 177.8 cm 60 x 70 in. Courtesy of Gazelli Art House]

South, how its curated sections and programming aim to contribute to the creative economy of the region, and how notions of the Global South are changing—along with the scope of Art Dubai.

### Challenging the Traditional Fair Model

Just as the size and scope of Art Dubai has changed since 2007, so has the focus and programming. Art Dubai was born during the rise of the “mega-galleries”. While it is hard to pinpoint the exact moment, possibly in the early 2000s, that this term was coined, a cursory search online highlights an article in *The Art Newspaper* from 2004 titled: “The globalization of the art market, the rise of mega galleries and proliferation of art fairs is putting strain on young artists, even while they reap



Samuel Kakaire's works were on show in the Art Dubai Modern 2024 section with Afriart Gallery. [*Warriors, Mask and Cow*, 1997, Oil on Board, 52x27cm, Courtesy of Afriart Gallery and the Artist]

the rewards”.<sup>1</sup> (Incidentally, it was written by Marc Spiegler, who worked as an art journalist before going on to run the world's biggest art fair brand and home to mega-galleries, Art Basel, for 15 years.) In 2013, the New York-based art critic Jerry Saltz described “the four behemoths”—Gagosian, Hauser & Wirth, David Zwirner and Pace—as the “bull elephants of the field, galleries that galumph everywhere all the time, hoovering up artists and money and monopolising attention. With their enormous spaces, multiple branches, well-oiled business models, massive staffs, PR networks, market power and endless capitalization, they are overwhelmingly present.”<sup>2</sup> At the same time, major art fair brands Art Basel and Frieze were expanding to other cities—from

Miami and New York to Hong Kong—and taking their staple mega-galleries with them. For this reason, there was a large emphasis in the early years on bringing in Western mega-galleries to Art Dubai. It was an unspoken rule—and still is for many—that for an art fair to be successful, it had to have these blue-chip galleries participating year on year.

In 2011, Art Dubai introduced the Marker section, which was a not-for-profit initiative that brought together a curated programme of galleries and art spaces focused on a particular geography outside of the fair's Middle East and South Asia remit. During its tenure (until 2016) it featured Indonesia, West Africa and Latin America, among others. The boundless creativity of Marker's so-called “periphery” geographies soon spilled out into the main fair and slowly became a part of Art Dubai's orbit. Simultaneously, Western blue-chip galleries became less of a focus.

In 2016, Art Dubai's team decided to formalize this repositioning, creating a description of the fair that better reflected its participating galleries and the DNA of Dubai. Today in the Emirate, 88% of the more than 10 million population are expats. Art Dubai wanted to serve, and reflect, this community and make them its focus. Selecting a succinct description that captured the uniquely global nature of the city was difficult and was heavily debated within the Art Dubai team. We settled on the term Global South, which we believed to encapsulate the kinds of South-South and East-East co-operations, cross-cultural and economic exchanges that proliferate in Dubai. In 2024, 65% of the galleries at Art Dubai were from the Global South.

As Dr Christianna Bonin, Assistant Professor of Art History at the American University of Sharjah and the Curator of Art Dubai Modern in 2024, says, the term Global South “allows us to identify commonalities between diverse communities” and “has become a way to refer to developing communities who have a shared experience of subjugation during the colonial era, and more recently, under global capitalism. Linking practitioners from those contexts can strengthen self-definition and efforts to tackle current injustices.”

Art Dubai clearly had not been the only organization in the region grappling with a reorientation of the art world. Within months of the fair choosing to reformulate its position, other cultural groups and initiatives announced their plans under the remit of “Global South”, too. Today, almost a decade later, the term is



Debashish Paul was included in the Bawwaba 2024 section with Emami Art. *Me with My Pet, 9*, Archival print on 350 gsm Hahnemuhle paper 8 x 12 in. (20 x 30.5 cm.) 2022-23, Varanasi Unsigned Edition - 1\_10 + 1 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Emami Art.



Wael Shawky's works were on show with Sfeir Semler Gallery in the Contemporary section. *Amphora with lid*, 2023, Ceramic, 60x60x80cm, Exhibition view Sfeir-Semler Karantina, Beirut, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut Hamburg.

widely used within the field. The Venice Biennale, considered the pinnacle of the Western art calendar, was organized by the Brazilian curator Adriano Pedrosa in 2024, and he described his proposition as focusing on artists “who are themselves foreigners, immigrants, expatriates, diasporic, émigrés, exiled and refugees – especially those who have moved between the Global South and the Global North”.

That being said, the team at Art Dubai have always been aware of its complexity as a concept. The geographies it covers are not well defined and there are negative con-

notations attributed to the term Global South, given that it is often conflated with the stigmatizing expressions “Third World” or “Under Developed Countries”. Dr Bonin argues that, like any concept, the Global South “always needs to be nuanced with discussion of the specifics of ethnicities, religions, political allegiances, languages, and so on”. Just as the term Global South has morphed over the decades it has been in use, it continues to do so today. Pedrosa’s expansion of the term to include diasporic communities is an important development, which will be further discussed in the conclusion to this essay.



## Curating an Art Fair

Art fairs are, in principle, commercially focused. Art Dubai is managed by the Art Dubai Group, a commercial public/private partnership established in 2007. But Art Dubai, especially in its early years, was genuinely more about contributing to the building of an arts ecosystem in Dubai, and there has always been an emphasis on non-commercial programming, such as the aforementioned Marker section. The Global Art Forum, the fair's flagship talks and thought-leadership programme, has grown alongside the fair since 2007, promoting critical discourse and conversation from a distinctly Global South point of view. Today, the fair's non-profit initiatives have expanded further to include Art Dubai Commissions, a platform that invites artists to produce site-specific works; the A.R.M. Holding Children's Programme, which brings together artists and designers to closely collaborate with local schools through bespoke workshops; Campus Art Dubai, a year-round programme that aims to provide existing and aspiring members of the region's cultural and creative community with educational and professional opportunities; and Art Salon, aimed at engaging and nurturing a new generation of collecting audiences in the UAE, among others. The

group also works closely with government entities to develop new ideas that positively contribute to Dubai's cultural landscape, including Dubai Collection—the first institutional collection for the city of Dubai, inviting patrons to loan works to the city; and Dubai Public Art, which sees the city's top institutions working with local artists on new works for the public realm.

The A.R.M. Holding Children's Programme, for example, has its roots in the Sheikha Manal Little Artists Programme that was initiated in 2012. This program aimed to engage younger audiences in the world of art through workshops developed and led by local and international artists, fostering creative thinking and expression. Today, the program has grown into the largest such cultural education programme in the UAE, expanding to over 100 public, private and special education need schools across all seven Emirates, reaching at least 15,000 students each year. From the innovative approach of Kenyan artist Cyrus Kabiru and Swedish artist Jacob Dahlgren—who taught children how to transform everyday mundane objects into works of art—to the creative guidance provided by Studio Sain and led by designer duo Namuun Zimmermann and



General view, Art Dubai 2023, Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Photo by Spark Media for Art Dubai.



General view, Art Dubai 2023, Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Photo by Spark Media for Art Dubai.



Refik Anadol, *Glacier Dreams*, Julius Baer Lounge at Art Dubai 2023.

Martin Rigtgers, who inspired young minds to invent and explore sustainable solutions, the program has seen influential creative thinkers share their passion with participants. In 2024, the Indian artist Sahil Naik engaged young children to envision better cities through workshops, inculcating a sense of critical thinking and social responsibility—all values we hold close to our heart. In the decades to come, we believe that we will see the fruits of this investment in the country's younger generation, with greater numbers participating in the arts and perhaps even becoming artists themselves.

As for the fair itself, there are different levels of curation involved in the different sections. As with all fairs, the offering each year, to some extent, depends on who applies to take part. That being said, it is a year-round effort to build relationships with galleries and encourage them to apply. I choose the final gallery line up with guidance from other senior Art Dubai team members, a selection committee and the section curators. The decisions are based on many factors such as commerciality, booth proposal, and how one presentation may speak to



Collector Talks at the A.R.M. Majlis, Art Dubai 2023, Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Photo by Spark Media for Art Dubai.



Stems Gallery, Julien Boudet, *Pressure*, 2023, Art Dubai 2023, Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Photo by Spark Media for Art Dubai.

another. As the Artistic Director, I see the themes and patterns that will emerge in each year's fair based on the proposals we receive early on. There is a much tighter curation in the special recurring sections at Art Dubai: Modern, Bawwaba and Art Dubai Digital, which we launched in 2022 to bridge the gap between the traditional gallery and rapidly developing digital art landscapes.

### **Art Dubai Modern: Curation and Scholarship**

Art Dubai is committed to rewriting and challenging the widely accepted, Western-centric art history canon by telling the stories of art and artists from regions that have been overlooked or understudied. Comprising between ten and fifteen galleries, the Modern section features presentations by the Global South's Modern masters. Previous iterations of the section, and its accompanying symposium programme, have focused on 20th-century Modern masters from the Middle East and North Africa and their importance today; cultural hubs of the Global South, such as Baghdad, Beirut, Dakar and Lahore; and Modern art in the Gulf.



Christianna Bonin, Curator, Art Dubai Modern 2024

The 2024 presentation was perhaps the most curated to date: it was organized by Dr. Christianna Bonin, who is an expert in Cold War-era cultures and global modernisms. It looked at some of the artists from the Middle East, Africa and South Asia who took part in cultural exchange programmes with the Soviet Union and how the experience shaped their works and careers. While much scholarship has been focused on the artistic movements of America and Europe (or so-called “West”) during this post-WWII period, much less has been written about the “East” or “South”, and even less on the international artists who visited as part of public initiatives. The section shone a light on these untold but significant histories and shared artistic experiences, which played a pivotal role in shaping the forming of today’s Global South.

“Curating an art fair brings both challenges and opportunities particular to the format,” says Dr. Bonin. “A curated art fair can communicate a focused idea to audiences, conveying meaning that might otherwise get lost among the glamorous hubbub of the marketplace and the thrill of sales.” Dr. Bonin also describes the balancing act of curating for a commercial fair: “I was conscious that both the galleries and the fair organizers have financial investments and desired outcomes,” she says. “For example, an artist might fit into my curatorial framework but it may not be the gallery’s bestseller.” But she argues that this is one of the reasons why curated sections are so important at fairs: “They add symbolic and historical value to the market context, as well as a chance to discover artists who have otherwise remained



Auronda Scalera and Alfredo Cramerotti, Co-Curators, Art Dubai Digital 2024

on the side-lines of the market and/or art history,” she says. “Many regulars to art fairs worldwide (myself included) will complain about the increasing flatness and sameness among them. But if there is one thing the art world can agree upon, it’s the shared love of novelty. Novelty is what the curated section of a fair can offer.”

The Modern section in 2024 demonstrated perfectly what curated art fairs can offer: the ability to bring in academic expertise; to showcase under-exhibited artists and regions; to contribute to understudied areas of art historical scholarship; to collaborate with local and regional institutions; and to bring all of them within the remit of the art market.

### **Art Dubai Digital: Curation and Diversity**

In response to a growing Web3 community in Dubai and the wider Global South, Art Dubai launched its Digital section in 2022, aiming to navigate and interpret the digital art wave that had by then become a global phenomenon. Art Dubai was the first fair to take this leap into the future and expand the definition and understanding of contemporary art by presenting some of the

most exciting and innovative artists working in the digital space today, selected by expert curators. In 2024, the curators were Alfredo Cramerotti and Auronda Scalera, co-directors of IAM-Infinity Art Museum in the metaverse and Multiplicity-XXNFT curatorial and publishing platform. They carefully organized the section to challenge one of the main issues in this field: the predominance of male artists. While this is not a problem limited to the realm of digital art, it is more keenly felt in a medium that is comparatively new. “It has been a constant thread in our work, and we work hard to ensure that there is a balanced representation of women artists in our exhibitions. As in other parts of art history, there can be a tendency towards the promotion of white, Western, male artists and so we actively work to bring in diversity in the digital art field,” Cramerotti and Scalera say. There were a number of galleries in Art Dubai Digital 2024 who showed only women artists.

### **Bawwaba: Curation and Introspection**

The Bawwaba section, which means “gateway” in Arabic, was created in 2019 to shed light on artist interrogations of the notion of the Global South and it spotlights artists from the Middle East, Africa, Central and South Asia, and Latin America. The Mumbai-based cultural theorist Nancy Adajania, who curated the section in 2020, astutely described it: “[The word Bawwaba] suggests acts of traversal and kinesis, of welcoming an interplay of familiarity and surprise. Its symbolism does away with the fixities of the centre-periphery model—which retains a phantom presence in the global art world, despite having been dethroned by Okwui Enwezor’s Documenta 11 (2002), with its emphasis on post-colonial ‘off-sites’ of contemporary art-making and nomadic discursive platforms, a breakthrough moment in global exhibition history [...] This is why I was intrigued by the promise of Bawwaba to bear witness to the ‘off-sites’ without creating an implicit binary between artistic positions from the West and the so-called ‘non-West.’” In 2024, the section was curated by Emiliano Valdés, the chief curator of the Museum of Modern Art, Medellín. The ten solo presentations showcased artists from the Global South who think of art as a place of reckoning and healing, confronting social and political issues, engaging in critical dialogue, and creating a sense of community and belonging. In many ways, Bawwaba was the start of Art Dubai’s own interrogations and self-reflection on the term ‘Global South’.



Emiliano Valdés, Curator, Bawwaba at Art Dubai 2024

### **The Global South is Everywhere**

At Art Dubai, we are constantly innovating. We are responding to the changes that we are witnessing in the region and the art scene and, therefore, are debating whether the term Global South is still the right way to frame our cultural community. “I find that conversations are shifting more towards regions and networks, rather than a category like Global South, which is almost becoming unwieldy in the amount of histories, cultures, and economies that it encompasses,” Bonin agrees. More and more, we are experiencing the same expansion of communities that Pedrosa describes in his curatorial statement for the Venice Biennale 2024. In amongst the geographies of Global South, how do we represent the “foreigners, immigrants, expatriates, diasporic, émigrés, exiled, and refugees” who, alarmingly, are growing in number every year? The Global South is a constant site of conflict and displacement. When artists move and settle outside of this region, do they no longer qualify as belonging to the concept that once supported them and brought them together? As Dubai itself becomes the long-term country of residence for many migrants, this feels all the more pertinent.

Increasingly, I see proposals from young artists who, for example, are North Africans living on the outskirts of Paris or second generation immigrant artists who are still tied to the heritage of their parents. What about in California, which is home to so many national groups—Indian, Bangladeshi, Iranian—who are aspiring to “make it” in Los Angeles? Do these communities—the “diaspora” as we call them—belong to the Global South?



Pablo del Val, Artistic Director, Art Dubai,  
Image Courtesy Augustine Paredes

Some of the most exciting work in contemporary art is coming from these kinds of artists, but the limitations of a geographic term may be preventing us from knowing them, or showing them.

We don't yet know how to articulate this borderless concept, or if there is a way to redefine the term Global South to be more inclusive of our migratory world. But the team at Art Dubai will continue to grapple with it, just as our fair will continue to use curation as a tool to highlight underappreciated artists and practices, to promote and improve creative education and career opportunities; and ultimately, challenge Western-centric art history.

*Art Dubai 2025 will take place from 18 to 20 April, 2025 (Preview Days on Wednesday, 16 and Thursday, 17 April).*

## Notes

**1** Marc Spiegler, "The globalisation of the art market, the rise of mega galleries and proliferation of art fairs is putting strain on young artists, even while they reap the rewards", *The Art Newspaper*, 1 February 2004, accessed

20 December 2023, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2004/02/01/the-globalisation-of-the-art-market-the-rise-of-mega-galleries-and-proliferation-of-art-fairs-is-putting-strain-on-young-artists-even-while-they-reap-the-rewards>

**2** Jerry Saltz, "Saltz on the Trouble With Mega-Galleries", *Vulture*, 13 October 2013, accessed 20 December 2023, <https://www.vulture.com/2013/10/trouble-with-mega-art-galleries.html>

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**Pablo del Val** is the artistic director at Art Dubai and has decades of experience as a cultural manager, curator, and director of contemporary art galleries around the world. He has lived and worked in countries including Spain and Mexico, before he moved to Dubai in 2015 to work with the Art Dubai team. Del Val oversees the curatorial vision of the fair and the international collector's programme. Del Val's career has taken him all over the world, managing and directing multiple galleries and art fairs. He was instrumental in the launch of La Conservera as Founder, Director, and Curator, where he curated exhibitions by Loris Gréaud, Mickalene Thomas, Valentin Carron, Eva Rothschild, Lily van der Stokker, Diana Al-Hadid, Matthew Ronay and Xavierr Veihlan among others. Del Val was Director at international art fairs such as Expoarte Guadalajara, sparking the internationalisation of Mexico as a contemporary art hub. Following this, he held the position of artist director at Zona Maco for five years, before moving to Dubai.

# Curate — Speculate: Indian Contemporary Art and the Socio-Ecological Contingency

## Preeti Kathuria

There are a range of art practices that document, address, thematize and/or respond to a matrix of socio-ecological issues. The dyadic relationship between conditions of chronic precarity and its transference into art and its visibility is layered, twisted and inherently complex. Many curatorial interventions are a generative attempt to redress this imbalance and enable meaningful engagement and experiences. However, there are cases when the curative control denatures the individual stances in the process of fine-tuning a collective voice. Are artistic practices and curating adding layers of structure and civility to our understanding of the hinterland, or are they actually creating an awareness about the hinterland surrounded by a hyper-stimulated civilization? A large percentage of India's population lives in the rural areas and is dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. According to the 2011 census, 69 percent of the population derives its sustenance from farming<sup>1</sup>. Indian agriculture is heavily dependent on the monsoon and the unforeseen vagaries of nature make the farmers extremely vulnerable to debt traps. Climate crisis therefore, is one of the major contributors to agrarian crisis, and adds agency to eco-sustainability issues.

Rooted in regional, topographical and material realities, artists along with curators, serve as connectors and catalysts in voicing matters of socio-ecological contingency. Two recent exhibitions that opened simultaneously in Delhi offered a rather wide and entangled spectrum of artistic practices that were irreverent and interrogative in spirit, but lumbered in their own precautions and excesses—the inherent dilemma of negotiations. The first exhibition *Sustaina India*—organized by artist duo Thukral & Tagra along with curator Srinivas Aditya Mopidevi—opened at Bikaner House, central Delhi, strategically overlapping with the India Art Fair earlier this year. The exhibition was conceptualized by a sustainability think tank, Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), and stemmed from 'the urgency to catalyze pollinations across art, science and policy-making. *Sustaina India* mobilized creators to integrate decentralized climate awareness and sustainability conversations into the cultural fabric of India and beyond<sup>2</sup>. Hosting artistic interventions of eleven artists the space not only offered immersive, sensory and tactile experiences, but also served itself as a derivative of sustainable solutions to exhibition-making, by employing display panels made from crop-residue, soy-based inks and eco-friendly paints. In the present times, when most contemporary art exhibitions are emblematic of theatricalizing issues of social awareness, the *Sustaina India* exhibition chose to problematize their own position in relation to material entanglement and uncover potential solutions.

With an elaborate spread of horizontal installations, documentary-based artworks, edible archives and climate recipes, the exhibition toggled back and forth to activate purpose, aesthetics, materiality, performance and engagement in good balance. The project *Climate Recipes* originated in Goa and is based on Srinivas Mangipudi and Srinivas Aditya Mopidevi's dialogic conversations with environmentalists, historians, academicians, urban planners, architects, poets, chefs, farmers and scientists, to generate

new knowledge in the wake of climate adversity. Punctuated with thought-provoking anecdotes such as “we need to bring back the leisure of tea” or “in sustainable architectural practice the termite mound is an invaluable reference, a natural way to keep homes cool” or the “imported daal (lentil) - practices of food consumption and production”<sup>3</sup> were not just ways to sensitize the viewer but also opened points for further research. This compendium of local knowledge became an archive of wisdom that nurtured a gradual shift in pre-existing notions of adaptability to climate change.

Pallav Saikia’s work *Rahmaria Archive* presented a series of five photographs framed in a bamboo structure, as a documentation of the transition of his village’s landscape as it is gradually getting submerged into the Brahmaputra River. *Living with the Land*, a sculptural installation by architect Debasmita Ghosh, highlighted the vernacular architectural practices of the *Khonds*, few remaining *Adivasi* (tribal) communities of Odisha’s Rayagada district. Spatially the exhibition was dominated by a spiraling fabric installation titled *Kaalchakra* presented by fashion designer Gaurav Jai Gupta. Working at the interstices of craft and technology, Gupta used air pollution residue particles as a colorant for this artwork. Several other artworks came together to present a microcosm of magical possibilities that were a source for reflection and regeneration. The construct of this exhibition established the site as generative of its critical function, where protocols were both reinforced and destabilized in order to amplify agency and alternatives.



*Sustaina India* Exhibition, Installation shots, Bikaner House, Delhi, 2024

At about the same time, Delhi saw another exhibition revolving around a similar theme, hosted by NIV Art Centre titled *Mumkin Zameen/Possible Lands*. The exhibition was a fruition of a ten-day winter residency awarded to eleven artists to explore the idea of land in context with the Aravalli belt region in south Delhi, amidst the larger discourse of ecological crises and its subsequent socio-political effects. According to the curator Kamayani Sharma, the exhibition builds, "...grounds for hope, which are necessary for us to reorient ourselves along axes of danger. Whether it is the encroachment of *adivasi* (tribal) *jal* (water), *jangal* (forest), *jameen* (land), the settlement of property disputes in favor of majoritarian actors, the metabolisms of rural-urban ecosystems or the migrations across borderlands within and without, land is the organizing (or disorganizing) principle of life-worlds". In this exhibition, two artists from Odisha presented artworks that strongly aligned with the ongoing agrarian crisis; Bhikari Pradhan's mixed media installation titled *Interdependency* was a modernist grid structure built from his childhood memory of a fence meant to protect agricultural land and farms in Odisha, and Sitikanta Samantasinghar work *Hidden Areas III* questioned and commented upon the unsustainable supply chain of agricultural material. Both installations had a strong defining presence like the realistic figurines of farm families in Pradhan's work, and sickles hanging above a questionable patch of land symbolizing peasant movements, migration and how land gets detached from its roots and original soil, in the work of Samantasinghar.

Three more artists could be integrated into the premise but with sufficient aesthetic contemplation of inherent differences. Inspired by the farming culture of her native town in Tripura, artist Gopa Roy employed a variety of natural material like straw pulp, jute, thread, tree bark and rice paper to depict the dichotomy of her rural roots against the urban sprawl of Delhi. Preksha Golchha's interactive installation mediated between sound and image, bringing awareness upon displacement and encroachment of village land in the name of development. She used patched jute suspensions along with the sounds of a bustling neighborhood to recreate a multi-sensory experience for the visitor. Sapna Kuniyal created a series of two paintings titled *Pungad* (Garhwali word meaning 'farming land'), reflecting upon the agricultural anthropology of her native state Uttarakhand. The paintings encased an asymmetric pattern of farming tools and circular breads showing the microcosm of the farming community that grows for all and feeds unconditionally. An uncanny coexistence of six more artists in this exhibition highlighted their individual, deep rooted entanglements with land, in synchronicity with the spirit of the master narrative of the show.

The premise of building an exhibition through a relational framework of engagement and exchange in a residency can privilege tactile conversations and connections. For a viewer, the exhibition format could not embrace and deliver these connections and only fulfilled its curricular role of display. On critical reflection, one may argue that the exhibition situated itself in a paradoxical space which hovered between a thematic exhibition and the presentation of geographically diverse positions of artists who are not very visible in Delhi. Even though the artworks were intrinsically charged, their coming together did not clearly expose those inherent tensions. Conceptually the exhibition was suggestive of civic engagement but the actual parameters of exchange were rather delusional. The artists and the exhibition held together the national with the subjective local in a seamless stance, nevertheless coping with constraint and collaboration, nostalgia and conservative radicality all in the same vein. The exhibition, lined with social advocacy, built up questions which were of wider significance than mere whispers of terrestriality pan-India.



*Through dialogue with fine art, film, literature and fashion, the contributions here draw attention to the power relations implicated in and upset by claims of visibility. They show how visual culture and cultural industries are today complicated by geopolitics of location and mobility, inscribed with tensions between knowledge and perception.<sup>4</sup>*

Taking a cue from Zeena Feldman's engaging writing on the theme of visibility, it is essential to say that seeing something is different from knowing it, especially when the contemporary art arena serves raking diagonals and dense cross-hatches of meaning. Bringing art, film, literature and fashion together, visual art exhibitions emerge as collaborative spaces but should they always assimilate and homogenize a singular narrative as a sanitized projection? Or maybe one should ask - how should an exhibition responsibly handle diversity without endangering its purpose? The two exhibitions discussed here are distinct curatorial models that in their own curative-speculative ways were embedded in reappraising an optimistic stance in an unfavorable ecological reality. Both the shows had a fairly similar spatial and temporal expanse, similar number of artists, same city, but the reach and resonance were distinct. These two containers of contemporary visual culture were two ideational possibilities of positioning a cause and bringing presence to what is absent.



*Mumkin Zameen/Possible Lands. The exhibition, Installation shots, NIV Arts Centre, Delhi, 2024*

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## Notes

- 1** Venkatesh B Athreya, R V Bhavani, A Narayanamoorthy, R Sujatha, and M.S Swaminathan, *Whither Rural India: Political Economy of Agrarian Transformation in Contemporary India: A Festschrift for Venkatesh B. Athreya* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2019)
  - 2** Srinivas Aditya Mopidevi, Thukral and Tagra, *Sustaina India*, New Delhi, India 2024.
  - 3** Srinivas Mangipudi, Srinivas Aditya Mopidevi, *Climate Recipes*. Goa, India 2023
  - 4** Zeena Feldman, *Art and the Politics of Visibility: Contesting the Global, Local and the in-Between*. (London: 2017), p.3.
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# Destabilizing Curating: Southern Approaches to Art Hadas Kedar

The point of departure of the prospective exhibition 'South as a State of Mind' is the conception of the South as a destabilizing force that questions the approaches, patterns of thought, and institutions that shaped the cultural history of the West. The South is brought here as a response or a mental state that breathes erratic and unstable creativity into the Western sphere.

Nikos Papastergiadis, Director of the Research Unit in Public Cultures at the University of Melbourne and co-editor of *Third Text*, conceives of the South as a defense mechanism against Northern hegemony. The South, according to Papastergiadis, is a sphere where people meet in order to imagine alternative ways of being in the world; a space for the establishment of a "little public sphere" in which strangers meet and construct through dialogue new forms of exchange and mutual understanding<sup>1</sup>.

In light of Papastergiadis's conception of the South and following my work as founder and curator of an artists' residency program and of an art center in the Negev desert in the south of Israel – the exhibition is based on insights from my period in the south of Israel and presents three possibilities for artistic and environmental expressions of the Southern state of mind.

The first takes place within an exhibition of historical artefacts at a Western museum and serves a defense mechanism against the dominance of a Western cultural narrative by acknowledging its origins in the Mediterranean Basin; the second surprisingly looks at the far North as a manifestation of the Southern state of mind, observing how a "little public sphere" in the far North creates an environment to imagine alternative ways of being that cope with human intervention in the landscape and global warming; the third presents a science-based agricultural-educational project that serves as a Southern model of production, organization, preservation, and dissemination of situated knowledges<sup>2</sup> of the Negev desert.

## **"I Feel Nothing": A Southern Female Body in the West**

Jumana Emil Abboud (b. 1971) who was born in Palestine and grew up in Canada, returned to Palestine/Israel in her twenties. She completed her studies in Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem in the mid-1990s and has since developed a deepening interest in Palestinian culture, specifically in the knowledge that accumulated in defiance of colonialist-driven cultural erosion.

*I Feel Nothing* (2012), a series of paintings, drawings, and video, is the result of Emil Abboud's years-long investigation into local culture, specifically into Palestinian oral tradition of tales and legends. One of these legends, whose protagonist is a girl whose hands have been violently amputated, prompted a creative process in Emil Abboud's work whereby hands and their absence became a central feature.



Jumana Emil Abboud, *I Feel Nothing*, 9:10., stills from video, 2012.

In a powerful scene of the video installation titled *I Feel Nothing*, that incorporates footage of hands caressing, plucking and touching, the artist's hands are filmed caressing a series of exhibits from ancient Rome and Greece in the Museum of Classical Archaeology at Cambridge.

The hands gently reveal themselves from behind the statue of a man, fondling and caressing his marble body parts. As they disturb the silence shrouding the statues, Emil Abboud's hands violate the public code of museums. By challenging its "do not touch" policy, Abboud undermines the fundamental property of art collections in institutions of culture and art, which exclude the observer's body.

By resonating the tale of the handless girl, the artist's hands appear as autonomous agents that present forms of knowledges that are not quite at home inside a Western museum. By implanting her embodied presence in the Cambridge collection, the artist calls into question Western methods of collection, classification and organization of knowledge that have dominated global art collections and are not necessarily inept to preserve and exhibit non-object-based cultural forms such as oral traditions.

Nonetheless, *I Feel Nothing* does not suffice with only disturbing Western curatorial traditions. It also leads the viewers to recognize the irony folded into the Western cultural narrative. While the Western marble collection is made up of artefacts acquired through colonialist conquests that displaced from the Mediterranean Basin, the original culture of the region is diminishing. The movement of cultural artifacts from the Mediterranean to the West points to how colonial procedures affect local cultures.

Emil Abboud's embodied presence within a Western historical art collection turns the audience's attention to the urgency embedded in preserving local cultures, including Palestinian culture. As a woman and as a Palestinian artist tracing her diminishing



The New Mineral Collective, *Hollow Earth*, 22:27, stills from video, 2013

culture, the artist's diverged presence amidst the white marbles stresses her alienation towards the collection.

*I Feel Nothing* serves as a defense mechanism toward the curatorial approaches of Western cultural institutions that shape their cultural narrative on a distorted history. By drawing her viewer's attention to how a seemingly innocent collection of Greek and Roman marbles in a Cambridge collection is part of a much larger and complex process of cultural erasure, Emil Abboud's operates a defense mechanism to the continuous elimination of Palestinian culture in Western contexts.

### **The New Mineral Collective: Southern Art in the North**

At around the same time Emil Abboud explored the Southern origins of the collection at Cambridge, the New Mineral Collective (NMC) explored their place of residence in the North Pole. The collective, that was founded in 2012 by Canadian artist Tanya Busse and Lithuanian artist Emilija Škarnulytė, responds to the altering landscape of the far North in face of accelerated human intervention and climate change.

Unlike landscape art experiments conducted in the mid-twentieth century by artists such as Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt in the southern US who conceptually understood southern land as a neutral space for artistic experimentation, NMC regard their surroundings in a very concrete manner. Their artworks sketch out the far-reaching transformation of the Northern landscape due to accelerated human intervention and climate change.

The title of the video work *Hollow Earth* (2013) hints to the massive mining operations and accelerated climate change that occasionally cause massive collapses of the icy landscape into the belly of the land. *Hollow Earth* is filmed at the meeting point between Norway, Sweden, and Russia, and serves as a meticulous examination of the remaining living presence in the area.

Pointing to the dwindling number of enduring creatures' struggle for survival in their natural habitat, the artwork summons a comparison with countless representations of post-human landscapes in film and television. Nonetheless, in contrast with film crews flying in helicopters from afar to document climate change and to present it to the world, *Hollow Earth* offers the point of view of those on the ground.



Wadi Attir, *March 2021*. Photos: Yuval Chen

Recording a series of everyday moments in their surroundings that include a rear view of the head of a helicopter pilot hovering above empty stretches of land, a herd of deer crossing the screen with bright serial numbers displayed on their fur, hollow silhouettes maneuvering heavy engineering gear at the heart of a quarry—the work delicately outlines the mechanics of landscape transformation.

*Hollow Earth* serves as a defense mechanism to the accelerated Western approach to climate change that documents them from helicopters in the air. Instead, it is an audio-visual meditation from the perspective of those that closely experience climate change and the destructive human interference in the landscape. Due to its slow pace and its concentration on details, *Hollow Earth* contends Western representations of climate change that concentrate on massive changes but miss the humane perspective.

*Hollow Earth* accommodates the instability of life at the most northern parts of the globe. Through the creative and sensitive eyes of Busse and Škarnulytė, one may imagine how human and non-human beings may create alternative forms of exchange and mutual understandings in the landscapes of the future.

### **Wadi Attir: Southern Situated Knowledges**

Since it is not an artwork, the third facet of the (imagined) exhibition ‘South as a State of Mind’, poses a challenge to the exhibition that presents artworks. Wadi Attir is a project of sustainable farming that makes use of ancient agricultural traditions for growing crops and keeping farm animals of the region. Roughly 100-acres large, Wadi Attir is located twenty minutes outside of Be’er-Sheva, the main metropole of the Negev desert.

The project was founded in 2007 by Muhammad Al-Nabari, former mayor of Hura, and Michael Ben-Eli, an architect who founded the Sustainability Laboratory in New York, an American non-profit that manifests a communal and interdisciplinary approach to research, development, and education. Committed to educational, social and environmental conditions of the region, founders Al-Nabari and Ben-Eli based the project on their inventive instincts.

Al-Nabari, a doctor of organic chemistry who has twelve patents under his name, and was the mayor of Hura when the farm was established, is known for his leadership skills and the impressive results he brought to the city during his term. Following his

work in the local government, Al-Nabari founded a number of non-profits in the Negev dedicated to the advancement of the Arab-Bedouin population in areas such as public health, economic development, and local government.

Al-Nabari's partner, Ben-Eli, brings to the project his innovative approach to architecture by creating living environments. As an architecture student, Ben-Eli worked with American architect, inventor, and futurist Richard Buckminster Fuller. Fuller is known for the development of the geodesic dome, an efficient building technique for temporary dome-like structures composed of triangles. This technique became known in the 1960s and remained highly popular throughout the rest of the century. Fuller trained Ben-Eli in this technique, and Ben-Eli made use of it to plan temporary structures for housing the homeless on the streets of New York. Ben-Eli leveraged Fuller's utopist building technique as an ideological approach to architecture committed to collective action for positive change.

The principles that led Al-Nabari and Ben-Eli to establish Wadi Attir recall the principles of avant-garde artists from the previous century, particularly artists whose work were socially and politically driven, such as Joseph Beuys, who was a member of the avant-garde group Fluxus.

Including Wadi Attir in an exhibition challenges the logic behind its curation and summons a curatorial concept that copes with this curatorial experiment. Exploring the project in terms of community-based Israeli art and heritage brings one to the prominent discussion led by the Israeli art critic and theorist Sara Chinski in the mid-twentieth century.

The discussion into the role of social or community-based art in Israeli is rooted in ideas articulated by Chinski, specifically in 'Silence of the Fish: The Local and the Universal in Israeli Art Discourse'<sup>3</sup>. The text explores the history of Israeli social art and its affinity to nature and community in Israel. In the significant text, Chinski criticizes the attempt to translate global social art into local terms. She bases her argument on the fact that the fundamental principles of the Western avant-garde – action, totality, and commitment – had failed locally.

Chinski pinpointed precisely how these principles were distorted in the local ethos of social or community-based Israeli art. Claiming that not only did social or community-based art defy its purpose, but it unwittingly affirmed, even reinforced, a colonialist worldview.

To reinforce her argument, Chinski named artist Avital Geva's *The Ecological Greenhouse* as an example for this standpoint. The social-environmental project, which was initially created in a kibbutz in 1977 as an educational platform for agricultural experiments, was exhibited by the curator Gideon Ofrat in the Venice Biennale in 1993.

As argued by Chinski, Geva's project demonstrates the danger of social or community-based projects to unintentionally reinforce a colonialist Zionist worldview. A perspective that sanctifies the supposed ultimate connection between the Jew and the land, even at the price of Jews occupying territories and displacing the local population.

In line with Chinski's critique of Avital Geva's *The Ecological Greenhouse*, the strength of the inclusion of Wadi Attir in the exhibition *South as a State of Mind*, lies in its liberation from the deadlock that Chinski presented. By reconstructing the living conditions

of ancient communities that have populated the Negev desert for generations and re-enacting its situated knowledges, the project does not fall into the trope of a colonial perspective on the connection between the desert resident and the land.

Wadi Attir is a local initiative that provides employment to the Arab Bedouin residents of the region, with an emphasis on the employment of Arab Bedouin women who suffer from higher unemployment rates. In its approach to the local natural environment,



Wadi Attir, *March 2021*. Photos: Yuval Chen



it recreates ancient ways of life and preserves Arab-Bedouin agricultural methods. Wadi Attir is a social and educational project that (re-)teaches the Arab Bedouin community its traditional agricultural techniques. Introducing methods of collecting, sorting, cataloguing, preserving, and disseminating situated knowledges, the project advances modes of the curatorial that are not practiced by regional cultural institutions.<sup>4</sup> Not only is the project not in need of an artistic framing, but it also proposes new terms and frames of thought for the contemporary art discourse to consider in terms of developing a southern state of the curatorial.

As a defense mechanism against the hegemony of Western cultural canon that is applied by many of the cultural institution in the region and that inadvertently obliterate the local culture of the desert, Wadi Attir proposes an advanced form of the curatorial that do not displace local artifacts and exhibit them far away from their roots, but rather preserves and exhibits situated knowledges on site. Wadi Attir is a southern “little public sphere” in which people can imagine alternative ways of being in the world that are not destructive but rather construct new forms of exchange and mutual understandings between living and non-living beings.

### Summary

The exchanges and affinities between *I Feel Nothing*, *Hollow Earth* and Wadi Attir is the raison d’être of the exhibition *South as a State of Mind*. Each of the three projects strengthen the conception of the South as a subverting power that complicates Western approaches, patterns of thought, and institutions.

*I Feel Nothing*, presents one of the core elements of the Southern state of mind, and that is the south as a defense mechanism against Western cultural dominance. Amidst the West’s cultural confinements, Emil Abboud conjures a momentary platform inside a Western cultural institution for obliterated Southern cultural traditions and situated knowledges to appear.

The creation of a mise-en-scène that (re-) introduces Southern culture into a Western institutional setting is reminiscent of how *Hollow Earth* creates a “little public sphere” in the Northern climate-change-stricken landscape. *Hollow Earth* documents how humans and non-humans create alternative ways of being and survival tactics in a world that must adapt to an increasingly hostile environment.

Like *Hollow Earth*, Wadi Attir creates a southern “little public sphere”. But in contrast to NNC’s artwork that is presented as a video piece, Wadi Attir is documented through a series of photographs as a continuous, live, community-based action, based on local research and a Jewish-Arab partnership. Although it is not presented as an artwork but rather as documentation of a process-based project, Wadi Attir serves a curatorial model for the future of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting situated knowledges, especially in Southern regions, for non-object-based artifacts such as oral traditions, agricultural procedures and living organisms.

The affinities between the three projects, piece together a mental state that creates an antidote to Western cultural traditions that continue to obliterate valuable situated knowledges from the South.

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## Notes

**1** Papastergiadis, Nikos, 2011. *South Remembers: What is the South?*, South as a State of Mind, Melbourne, 2011, <https://southasastateofmind.com/south-remembers-south-nikos-papastergiadis/>

**2** The term 'situated knowledge' was coined by American feminist studies scholar Donna Haraway in order to convey a critical and reflective approach that acknowledges power dynamics in the production of knowledge.

**3** Sara Chinski, "Silence of the Fish: the Local and the Universal in Israeli Art Discourse" (Hebrew) in *Theory and Criticism 4* (Place: Publisher, 1993), 122-105.

**4** A telling example is the Joe Alon Center for Bedouin Heritage, the largest museum in the world dedicated to Arab-Bedouin culture, which exhibits artifacts of traditional nature but does not collect non-object-based artifacts such as traditional songs or oral history.

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**Hadas Kedar** is a curator and researcher based in the Negev desert. She received her PhD from the Research Platform for Curatorial and Cross-disciplinary Studies, University of Reading (UK) with the Postgraduate Programme in Curating (Zurich). Kedar is a faculty member at The Mandel Center for Leadership in the Negev where she co-manages a program dedicated to the Arab Bedouin community of the Negev desert. She is also a lecturer in the Visual and Material Culture Department, Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem where she focuses on community-led artistic projects.

Kedar established *Arad Art and Architecture* (f.2014) residency program and *Arad Contemporary Art Center* (f.2016) in the Negev desert where she developed her focus on desert communities' art and culture. She is also a freelance curator that has organized exhibitions in the UK, Germany and Israel. Kedar is the winner of the first Israeli Art House grant for curatorial research for an under-represented female artist (2023). Among her curatorial endeavors: *OrLa*, Artists' House, Jerusalem (2025); *Israeli Shots*, Asperger Gallery, Berlin (2010); *The Door to the Secret Garden*, Herzlia Museum of Art (2022); *Woman Resources*, Arad Contemporary Art Center (2016).

Kedar's main research fields include Participatory Practices, Social Change, Indigenous Thought. Her PhD title: *Keeping the Edges Open: Towards a Curatorial Horizon in the Negev Desert*.

# Reframing Dhaka Art Summit through my personal journey

## Ruxmini Choudhury

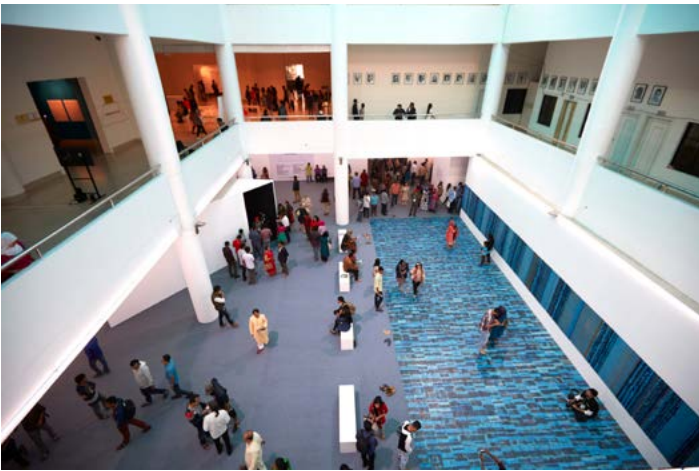
My journey with the Dhaka Art Summit commenced in 2014, a time when youthful skepticism almost kept me away. Influenced by a friend's negativity about the summit being a trashy art fair, I reluctantly stepped into the National Gallery of Fine Arts at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, half-expecting to find reasons to protest against what felt like an ambitious intrusion into Bangladesh's art scene. Yet, as I wandered through the halls, something shifted within me. The Summit wasn't just an event—it was a revelation.

Back then, I was an undergraduate student, shaped by limited exposure to art beyond Dhaka and online spaces. The Summit became my gateway to a world of artistic richness I hadn't fathomed. From the very start, it challenged my assumptions of what art means. What I initially perceived as an intrusion of Western practice turned out to be an indispensable addition to our artistic landscape.

Moving forward to late-2014 when I found myself working with the Samdani Art Foundation, it was then that my connection with the Dhaka Art Summit deepened. It was not just about attending an event—it was about becoming part of a movement, a living, breathing entity that learned and grew with each passing edition. Foundation's Artistic Director Diana Campbell's words, "Dhaka Art Summit is not an event but a movement," echoed through every edition I have worked in. The Summit, far from being a static event, operates as a dynamic organism, learning and growing from each edition to the next.

In 2023 we completed our 6th edition of the Dhaka Art Summit under the theme বন্যা (Bonna), or 'flood' in English. However, the Bangla term carries a profound significance beyond the mere natural disaster denoted by the English word 'flood'. As a riverine country with agriculture being the primary source of income/living, floods here were never seen as only a disaster. There is a love-hate relationship with the water and the human in this delta land. There are women named Bonna here. No one names their children after a disaster. In this Summit we wanted to play with the word itself and find common ground with the rest of the world without translating it into another language that would take away its true feeling.

Before I explain how we decided the name for the 2023 Summit (*Bonna*), I need to backtrack a little bit. The Summit started quite differently than what it is now. The 2012 summit was just a regular exhibition of Bangladeshi artists with great intentions. Samdani Art Foundation's co-founders Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani wanted to promote Bangladeshi artists to the world's art scene. At the time, we would only know of a few Bangladeshi contemporary artists making it to the important biennales and art institutions in the world. They appointed Diana Campbell for the 2014 Dhaka Art Summit, as they wanted to bring in a South Asian context to a well-curated event. Diana, with whom I have been working for more than ten years now, has been the key person to experiment with the Summit. When I first started, the Summit had a format of Solo Art Projects and several curated group exhibitions.



Sandeep Mukherjee, *The Sky Remains*, 2016, Solo Art Project of DAS 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Project 88. Photograph by Jenni Carter



Ayesha Sultana, *A Space Between Things*, 2015-2016. Commissioned for Solo Art Project by the Samdani Art Foundation for DAS 2016. Courtesy of the artist, Samdani Art Foundation and Experimenter. Photography by Noor Photoface

Although I studied Art History at the University of Dhaka and explored contemporary art practices, those learnings were nothing compared to what I learned in my first year of working at the Summit. It was an experience for me to understand and see how artists found inspiration to create their works. I remember Sandeep Mukherjee was amazed by the rusty and mossy green-blue ceiling of Shilpakala Academy's South Plaza, and his floor piece became the reflection of the ceiling in his work *The Sky Remains* (2016). It was also my first time to experience a work that played with technology, which changed our perception of sound, light, space, and time through Haroon Mirza's work *The National Pavilion of Then and Now* (2011). Through the volunteers stationed in each project, I heard the stories of audiences trying to understand how and why these are considered art and what they mean. These audiences were local and came from diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, this Summit brought a lot of attention to us, making it internationally well-known. Journalist Michael Snyder in *Scroll* had written, "The world doesn't identify Bangladesh with contemporary art and design, but the Dhaka Art Summit might just change that."<sup>1</sup> We hosted talk programs and Critical Writing Ensembles (curated by Katya García-Antón, Antonio Cataldo, Diana Campbell, Chandrika Grover and Bhavna Kakar) which brought in a lot of international artists, writers, curators, museum directors and art collectors.

After the 2016 summit, we sat down to discuss what was successful and what needed to be improved. Although we showed works of Bangladeshi artists such as Munem Wasif's *Land of Undefined Territory* (2016) a three-channel video and photographs of an undefined land that questions the relation between land and its identity through the concept of the nation-state, or Ayesha Sultana's *A Space Between Things* (2015-2016), a room sculpted with found and reclaimed objects, in the Solo Projects section, we felt that we missed showing a lot more artists. We also started to question ourselves, "What can we offer, so that the world will be interested in Bangladesh?" So, for the DAS 2018 Diana put Bangladesh at the center of its cartography rather than at the periphery of someone else's, recalibrating how we think about art in South Asia by focusing on the increased inclusion of minority positions and conflicted terrains. The Solo Projects section of the Dhaka Art Summit was replaced with Bearing Points. This new initiative comprised large-scale thematic presentations from artists and architects, orienting the viewer towards lesser-explored transcultural histories of the region.

During this period, we made a strategic decision to cultivate lasting connections and transform the summit from a one-time event into a continuous process, aligning the Samdani Art Foundation's endeavors with the Summit. Recognizing the importance of inclusivity, we sought ways to foster stronger ties with Bangladeshi artists, moving beyond collaborating with individual artists to supporting broader initiatives. This led to the establishment of the Samdani Artists'-led Initiatives Forum in 2017, a result of a thorough research conducted throughout Bangladesh. The initiatives themselves play a vital role in cultivating young artists as well as working with a diverse group of people. Our goal was to create a bridge between them and to the international art audience. At the same time, I wanted to create a dialogue between art and the local audience. We launched an Art Mediation program with Rachel Mader and Lena Eriksson, supported by Pro-Helvetia, and trained twenty-five individuals coming from diverse backgrounds.

We also undertook the challenge of organizing a museum-quality exhibition featuring Raqib Shaw. We successfully curated an exhibition that met museum standards, borrowing 19th-century Ukiyo prints from Whitworth Gallery and a ceremonial chair, (along with some other items) belonging to the Dinajpur Maharaja, from the National Museum of Bangladesh. The exhibition was a success but it threw light on the repercussions of it, which aided us to shift the curatorial format. We realized that the logistical challenges of managing shipment and insurance for the Dhaka Art Summit were substantial. We recognized that the time and energy invested in transporting artworks contributed to carbon footprints. Besides, it did not foster a meaningful exchange with the artists or the people of Bangladesh.



From left: Raqib Shaw, *The Adoration (After Jan Gossaert)* (2015-2016), courtesy of the artist and *White Cube*; Chair (used for ceremony-from The Palace of Dinajpur Maharaja, 19th Century, from the collection of the Bangladesh National Museum); and Kashmiri Shawl (from the collection of Raqib Shaw) at the Raqib Shaw exhibition, co-curated by Diana Campbell Betancourt and Dr. Maria Balshaw and the artist. Photographer: Noor Photoface.

## Seismic Movements

Dhaka Art Summit 2020 marked the beginning of our journey with the themed edition, where our focus delved into the intricate connection of people, geography, history, and ideas. Our focus thus shifted from displaying artworks to prioritizing people, to facilitate meaningful conversations and exchanges. Through my research on collective practices in Bangladesh and Kathryn Weir and Diana Campbell's curation, we invited more than twenty artist-led initiatives from Bangladesh and all over the world for the *Collective Body* exhibition to create dialogues between them. Akaliko, a Bangladesh-based electronic music group, collaborated with the Indonesia-based Jatiwangi Art Factory, where music was created using clay-based instruments. Throughout the Summit, they engaged in live sessions, fostering connections through their unique musical expression. RAW Material Company curated the symposium, 'Condition Report 4 - Stepping out of line; Art Collectives and Trans-local Parallelism,' exploring the transformative potential of collective action. 'Condition Report 4' delved into the rich history and current realities of cooperative efforts, with a special focus on the crucial role played by artistic, physical, and social interventions within art collectives.

The National Art Gallery of the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy where we have been hosting the Summit has open spaces that we always boxed up to create white cube rooms. However, for 2020, we wanted to change how we use the space. Through the project *Srijan-Abartan* we worked with architects, exhibition designers and creatives to find more sustainable ways to design exhibitions. Nina Paim (former design researcher at common-interest, Switzerland) helped us to look at the building in a new light.



View of Geographies of Imagination by SAVVY and Jothashilpa, Khela-Ramer Khel by BACK Art and puppets of Gidree Bawlee from DAS 2020. Photographer: Noor Photoface



DAS 2018 Art Mediator is giving a tour to the school students, at the *Bearing Point 4* exhibition. Photographer: Noor Photoface



Installation view of *Nobody Told Me There Would be Days Like These* curated by Mustafa Zaman at DAS 2020. Photographer: Noor Photoface



Miet Warlop, *Chant For Hope*, 2022-2023. Commissioned by Samdani Art Foundation in partnership with KANAL-Centre Pompidou, Brussels with support from the Flemish Region of Belgium and EUNIC and Beximco. Photographer: Shahrear Kabir Heemel



Bhasha Chakrabarti, নরম অতিক্রমণ (*Tender Transgressions*), 2022-2023. Commissioned and Produced by Samdani Art Foundation with support from EMK Center, Dhaka Courtesy of the artist and Experimenter. Photographer: Farhad Rahman

She showed us the potential of the building and how we can use open spaces. With the help of architect Inteza Shahriar and our production team members, we designed a space in the open plaza of Shilpakala using jute dividers which simultaneously was an artwork and a surface to hold works. Bangladesh-based initiative Jothashilpa, in collaboration with Berlin-based SAVVY Contemporary and Master Artist of Cinema Banner Painting Mohammad Shoaib and his disciples to realize a timeline that contains exhibitions about collectivity within, grounding us in solidarities of the past and imagining solidarities of the future. The jute divider worked as the painting surface which wrapped around the plaza creating spaces where discussion sessions, performances, and puppet shows were held. On the other side of the space displayed the exhibition *Nobody Told Me There Would be Days Like These* curated by Mustafa Zaman (present Director of Fine Art Department, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy) which mapped the history of Bangladeshi groups that laid the ground for art and theatre, film and literary movements in the 1980s.



Sanjoy Chakraborty, *Shades of Flowers*, 2022-2023 from Very Small Feelings exhibition at DAS 2023. Co-commissioned by Samdani Art Foundation and Kiran Nadar Museum of Art. Photographer: Shadman Sakib



Neha Choksi and Rachele Rojany, *Swing for friends* (used in *Faith in friction*), 2017 from Very Small Feelings exhibition at DAS 2023 from Samdani Art Foundation Collection. Photographer: Shadman Sakib

Reflecting on the lessons learned from the 2020 Dhaka Art Summit, DAS 2023 took a deeply personal approach. It passionately encouraged artists to embark on a journey with local materials and to forge connections with local artisans, infusing their creations with a touch of community. We aimed to unravel the beauty of local wisdom and its unique interpretations, to intimately connect with hearts globally. Enid Tsui's description of the DAS 2023 is etched in my mind as "...an inspiration for the world with its focus on local communities and accumulated learnings"<sup>2</sup>. This was our goal for the Summit and we managed to foster it through collaborations and contributions from people who believe in this platform. From the massive Minecraft-inspired ant-hill in the middle of the atrium by Afrah Shafiq, Bhasha Chakrabarti's nine feminine structures, Sumayya Vally's clay pot pillars, to 2.5km of bamboo into Antony Gormley's drawing in space, were only made possible because of the collaboration between the artists and the Bangladeshi artisans. Miet Warlop's project *Board II* was a dynamic collaboration with Bangladeshi garment workers who performed wearing the pants they made, challenging preconceptions of "who wears the pants" in society. Her other project *Chant for Hope* brought in a choreographer, musician, sculptor, performers, a rapper, and a whole lot of crowds!

*Very Small Feelings*, co-curated by Akansha Rastogi, Diana Campbell and me, never failed to bring out the inner child in all the visitors regardless of their ages. The exhibition was designed to look, ponder, and engage with the artworks and the artists. From the performance of Joydeb Roaja and his son, Sanjoy Chakraborty's participatory research-based work on the children's magazine from 1950s-1970s and combining them with children's live drawing sessions in the space, Neha Choksi and Rachele Rojany's swings, Afrah Shafiq's interactive game on Soviet Union books from 1980s, Aditya Novali and his sister Ade Dianita's interactive projection to Marzia Farhana's collaborative project with 270 school children, the exhibition carried height of collaboration and connection.

What makes the Dhaka Art Summit truly unique is the immense engagement it cultivates. This lured in folks from all strata of society, curious from social media posts and the attention it created, the exciting part is that they repeat their visits and come back again with their friends and families, making it a community event.



The 6th edition of the Dhaka Art Summit in 2023, witnessed an incredible milestone, welcoming over half a million visitors in just nine days. This surge in attendance not only underscores the growing popularity of the Summit but also highlights its enduring appeal to a broad audience. They initiate conversations, offer insights, and transform art from a distant spectacle into a shared experience. It's this intimate interaction that turns a casual observer into an engaged participant, making the Dhaka Art Summit not just an exhibition, but a communal celebration of creativity. In Diana's words, "...There's collaboration between artists and interaction with the audience. I think that's where Dhaka Art Summit has been most successful."<sup>3</sup> Every time I navigated through the vibrant crowds and diverse conversations during the Summit, I became more aware that audience engagement is not just a byproduct; it's a fundamental element of the Dhaka Art Summit's success.

As we prepare for the next chapter of the foundation, I reflect on my initial skepticism back in 2014, it's incredible to see how my journey with the Dhaka Art Summit has mirrored the evolution of this extraordinary movement. From questioning its existence to being an active participant in its growth, I've come to realize that the Summit isn't just an event—it's a part of my story, an integral chapter in the narrative of Bangladeshi art, and a force that continues to shape our creative identity on a global scale.

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## Notes

**1** February 19, 2016, "The world doesn't identify Bangladesh with contemporary art and design, but the Dhaka Art Summit might just change that", Michael Snyder, Scroll.

in <https://scroll.in/article/803702/the-world-doesnt-identify-bangladesh-with-contemporary-art-and-design-but-the-dhaka-art-summit-might-just-change-that>

**2** February 18, 2023, "Why Bangladesh's Dhaka Art Summit is an inspiration for the world with its focus on local communities and accumulated learnings", Enid Tsui, South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/article/3210385/why-bangladeshs-dhaka-art-summit-inspiration-world-its-focus-local-communities-and-accumulated>

**3** February 08, 2023, "How a heartbreak story inspired the next Dhaka Art Summit theme", Karim Waheed, United News of Bangladesh <https://unb.com.bd/category/Entertainment/how-a-heartbreak-story-inspired-the-next-dhaka-art-summit-theme/109738>

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**Ruxmini Choudhury** is a curator, art writer, researcher, and bilingual translator based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She has been working at the Samdani Art Foundation since 2014. Among the many initiatives she has introduced and developed for the Samdani Art Foundation are its art mediation program and the Samdani Artist Led Initiatives Forum, which are part of her ongoing interest in exploring ways to make art more approachable and interactive for the public. Her research has supported the growth of curatorial knowledge about Bangladesh through her collaborations assisting many international curators on shows in Dhaka, such as the Dhaka Art Summit, as well as in Hong Kong, India, Austria, Norway, Dubai, among others.

# Nothing Can Be Linear Anymore

## Nicolas Bourriaud

Nothing can be linear anymore. There is no possible ‘ecological thinking’ based on linearity or binary notions, which could be defined as pave stones for a *monocultural* approach of reality. Anna Tsing analyzes those ‘disturbance-based ecologies’, typical of the Anthropocene, that form ‘new assemblages’ and ‘unexpected alliances’ between species cohabiting among precarious environments, entangled together. This is the seedbed of a new narrative, whose leading principle would be: addressing complexity.

The last chapter of my essay *Inclusions. Aesthetics of the Capitalocene* was devoted to an ‘Expanded relational aesthetics’ including non-human forms of life. This move is based on what I call ‘inclusive thought’. Its first basic principle is acknowledging that we are immersed in a finite world, admitting that we are neither facing nor overlooking an environment, but evolving *within* a complex ecosystem. Wouldn’t you think that this impacts our ways of feeling or reasoning? Our representations? Our ways of doing, our reading grids? Contemporary anthropology made us more aware of other ways of thinking —incidentally, the very same ways that capitalism has tried, and is still trying, to eliminate. For a person living in the Amazonian forest, what the western people call “environment” rather appears as a gigantic *semiosis*: the trees, the wind, the clouds and the animals “produce meaning” (to quote Eduardo Koch) as much as any human being. Art represents to me another kind of forest—it is also a *semiosis*, a semiotic collective production. Within any exhibition we visit, we are placed in a dialogue mode, just as an Achuar Indian is in their forest. Exhibitions and forests are two relational *milieus*: Philippe Descola described animals as the ‘social partners’ of the Amazonian Indians, and when we experience an exhibition, we are placed in a similar *state of encounter*: the Achuar forest, saturated with *emissions*, is recreated there at a smaller scale. In the art world, which extends through time (we encounter signs from the past) and space (we get to meet with distant realities), all the minds gather together, just as with the Achuar Indians after dark. Feeling immersed in the world (or being obliged to do so due to the looming disaster), is first and foremost forgoing the frame of mind that generates all the dualisms which constituted and supported western capitalism (male/female, nature/culture, civilized/savage, citizen/slave, etc.).

What does it mean in terms of curating? Any curator works by organizing webs of relationships between protagonists (artists and artworks), thus forming a ‘field of subjectivation’, a notion that was developed both by Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. But individuals are assembled from a variety of natural and cultural elements, made of things that grow and others that die, of patches—and almost *geological* foundations. We all are landscapes. Deleuze, again, said that when we encounter someone, we unfold the landscape carried by that person—their history, geography and ‘climate’, another word for psychology. If human beings are landscapes, we cannot continue asking artists to produce in the same way factories do: we have to let them cultivate and grow their forms, manufacture their *milieu*, prepare or heal their ecosystem. Formerly, artists would *expel* and *produce*. Nowadays, they *guide* things to their formal destination, they plug them together. Art has been considered as superimposed on nature; now, artists view their work as a framing exercise on their *milieu*—which includes objects, beings, and everything in between.



Impressions from Gwangju, Photo: Dorothee Richter

That was the theoretical ground upon which I built the Gwangju biennale 2024. *Space* will be the main topic. It apparently is a very vague notion: most artworks address space, produce a *formal thought* that develops within a space. But I am convinced that this notion is a key to apprehend the Capitalocene, as it is the dimension of life that is violently and radically disrupted by climate change. Deleuze saw the beginnings of art, not in impression or shaping, as most philosophers do, but in the notion of *territory*. According to him, art starts with an articulation between color, line, and song — the constitution of a territory, a mental ecosystem. Animals are constantly ‘on the alert’ in their ecosystems, and there lies what they have in common with artists, who are vigilant in scanning their surroundings, using urban fragments or visual marks to constitute a parallel order of things. Non-human species do this for their very survival; human artists, to feed their projection. Having antennae is more important than having hands. From an anthropological point of view, art also helps us adjust to our *milieu*, to learn how to integrate in our ecosystems. Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote that Impressionism, after the immense natural landscapes of the previous centuries, was actually acclimatizing human beings to a suburban environment made of gardens and panoramas always surrounded by buildings. Cubism tightened the focus even more, leaving only café tables and human artefacts to be seen. Lévi-Strauss stopped there, but we could see in abstraction a willingness, or the necessity, to break free from shared spatial coordinates; or perhaps, from the very first incursion of artists into the tiny and the immense, as all abstract paintings end up looking as if they depicted something viewed from a plane or a microscope.



Entrance to the Gwangju Biennale 2024. Photo: Dorothee Richter.

Twenty-first century art, with its interspecies processes and its collapsed spaces, seems to be preparing the human minds to a world that will be soon emptied of any *others* (animal or vegetal), to a lethal entanglement, to this ‘disturbance-based ecology’ that Anna Tsing writes about. An expanded relational aesthetics has to deal with those entanglements and disturbances. Most of the artists I wrote about in *Relational Aesthetics* in 1998, let’s say the generation which appeared in the nineties, are nowadays caught in a much broader dynamics: from inter-human relations, they moved to establishing relations with the whole sphere of the living, as social sphere is now clearly including non-human worlds. New short-circuits and new vicinities are appearing, every distance is being reconfigured. Art is a sustainable energy: it reveals the principles that organize space within a society, how knowledge is transmitted, how signs circulate. Covid-19 epidemic, by making “social distancing” the global watchword, facilitated the control of our relational space and was even likely to reshape contemporary cities according to its logic. In 2014, I started a cycle of exhibitions to address the Anthropocene. *The Great Acceleration* (Taipei Biennial) mapped the interwinings between human, vegetal, mineral and mechanic spheres. *The 7th Continent* (Istanbul Biennial 2019) approached it from the image of the floating garbage patches in the oceans. In the world of industrial hyper-production, where waste accumulates, overload becomes a crucial element: knowing that thinking implies generalizing, and therefore choosing to forget: how do artists invent new ways of thinking in a saturated space-time? The third part of this trilogy, *Planet B: Climate Change and the New Sublime* (Venice 2022) acknowledged the return of an old aesthetic notion, the *sublime*, as the most adequate to describe the *immersive* reality we are living in, its mix of threat and loss of control. We now know that a virus from the other end of the world can modify our daily life, that the Nutella we have for breakfast has an impact on the Malaysian forest. The world has strangely shrunk and distance does not determine human spaces anymore, as we all are living within a huge network of interconnections. What interests me is to see how artists represent the world according to this new situation: saturation, promiscuity, loops... Or, at the opposite, a quest for an *outdoor*.



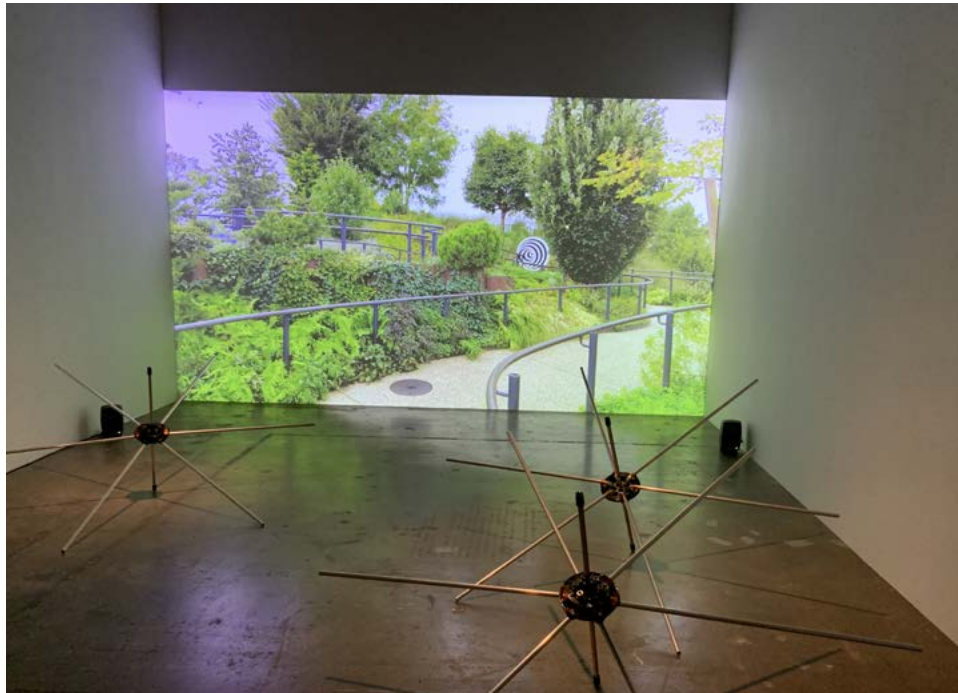
Cheng Xinhao, *Stratums and Erratics*, 2023-2024. Gwangju Biennale, 2024. Single-channel video, color, sound, 71 min 58 sec, Section: *Polyphony*, Gwangju Exhibition Hall Gallery 3. The *Polyphony* section displays works of artists focusing on multi-layered and multi-focused perspectives. The "Polyphony" section displays works of artists focusing on multi-layered and multi-focused perspectives. Photo: Dorothee Richter.

From Taipei biennial to Gwangju, I have the feeling I got rid of my own anthropocentrism, including the need to focus on *identity*, which represents, for me, a somehow ambiguous notion. Identity is always an ongoing construction, not a state. Anyway, who would start a psychoanalysis on the Titanic? Art comes from an *analysis of a milieu* and exacerbates the *faculty to transform it*. Nothing distinguishes the humans from their milieu, nature being their biological framework: from stones to the human brain, and from bacteria to an artwork, the world is indivisible. Human art is a natural production, like the fruit of a tree. Focusing on art as coming from a specific region called "culture" seems quite naïve to me. Colonization is about space (conquered), pollution is about space (exploited), apartheid and patriarchy are about space (allocated). *A room of one's own...*, the text by Virginia Woolf, written in 1927, is still relevant today, it could even be expanded.

I always start an exhibition with an image to be reached, an image that the exhibition is supposed to make appear. For *The 7th Continent*, it was a view from the *Pacific garbage patch*, floating plastic debris on the oceans. For Gwangju Biennale, it is the image of a Pansori female singer exercising on the top of a hill, vocalizing towards the landscape, taken from a Im Kwon Taek movie, *The Pansori singer (Seopyeonje)*. Pansori is a musical genre created in Korea in the 18th century, originally accompanying shamanistic rituals. It could be translated as the sound (*sori*) of the market place (*pan*): but also, as *the voice of the subalterns*. The exhibition will address contemporary spatial issues through the metaphor of sound, from the social space we inhabit to the way artists are exploring new outdoors with the microscopic and the cosmic. Noise and form will intertwine — only vibrations, wavelengths. The politics of wavelengths... And how they constitute, determine and assign us to specific spaces. Feedback effect signals a lack of distance, saturated space; polyphony is a democracy of sound; and the primordial sound, the original emission, points at the infinite, either the infinitely small or the cosmic immensity. The exhibition will be organized according to those three sounds, but they won't be displayed to the visitor. Only the formal itinerary provides the meaning — because curating is a grammar of its own. The exhibition is elaborated like a *film*:

both a movie, constituted of distinct sequences, and a kind of *mental ribbon* upon which signs are inscribed. *Pansori* is subtitled *A Soundscape of the 21st century*, because the exhibition always keeps the sound in mind; like in Chladni figures, designed out of the powders submitted to vibrations, it translates sonic waves into shapes, and forms into music.

If the three sounds will be invisible in the Biennale, I mean not signaled as such, they will appear in the structure of the exhibition, as building elements. The exhibition space, in the biennale building, will be constructed from the projects, around them, starting from empty halls. It will start with a large corridor, a kind of tunnel where visitors will hear a sound piece by Emeka Ogboh, recorded in the streets of Lagos, Nigeria. This extreme density (the *feedback effect*) will inhabit the whole first floor of the exhibition, involving the omnipresence of the human figure (Matthias Groebel, Frida Orubapo, David Noonan, Gaëlle Choisne...) within a context of oppression (Choi Haneyl on queer culture in Korea, Sung Tieu and immigration bureaucracy...). The saturated space will be prolonged on the next floor, through projects addressing the artificialization of nature and the colonial plantation system. Noel Anderson's work will mark the transition between those two floors, pointing at police call up as a spatial structure, bodies caught into an oppressive order. Third floor will be about saturated landscapes, nature as caught in the capitalist system — *plantation* being the appropriate metaphor. The fourth floor will show intertwinings between human and non-human spheres: interactions between vegetal, machinic and social layers that constitute the world. The last two galleries will have more open spaces, only a few walls, and they will gather artists looking for an *outdoor* beyond the common space: either into shamanistic rituals (Tabita Rezaire, Jura Shust, Marguerite Humeau...), then artists practising what I call



Dora Budor, *Passive Recreation*, 2024. Single-channel video, rotational grazing wheel fencing, electronics, Dimensions variable, 7 min. 48 sec. Courtesy of Antenna space and Galerie Molitor Commissioned by Nottingham Contemporary Projector sponsored by LG. Section: *Feedback Effect*, Gwangju Exhibition Hall Gallery 2. The *Feedback Effect* section shows the sound image of a planet, saturated with human activities, where relationships between humans and species have become dense and the space they inhabit, an echo chamber where everything is contiguous, contagious and immediate.

*molecular anthropology*, i.e a critical depiction of the world at its molecular level, the traceability of our social environment. From oppression to a feeling of liberation from the spatial coordinates we live in, the five floors of the exhibition will correspond to five steps.

As the French film director Jacques Rivette once said, every movie is a documentary on the way it was made. First, I always pay attention to the contact with the artists. A biennale is also an occasion to meet many people, and more than half of the list here is constituted by artists I had never met personally beforehand. I remember Harald Szeemann confessed to me, in the nineties, that every exhibition he curated, when it came to choose the artists, implied the same relational formula: One-third confirmed artists, one-third emerging artists, one-third friends. More or less consciously, I always stuck to that lesson. As every city offers different settings, opportunities and organization, there is no system to be applied to create a biennale: you have to reset every time, adjust your way of thinking, adapt to the cultural environment. That is why what I call the 'Law of Rivette' is so important for curating: it tells the story of an encounter, a collective meeting between a territory and the participating artists. And here the dominant model will be cartography, an intimate cartography based on investigations and a personal experience of *space*. For example, Na Mira is working on the memories of the wall separating the US military base from the rest of Seoul; Sâadane Afif, on the former police station that was implemented to control the students in Gwangju; Kwon Hyewon, on deep caves near Jeju Island whose shape can only be determined with sonic equipments; Kandis Williams, on the history of the Afro-American soldiers who remained in Korea after the war... I also asked the Korean writer Han Kang to write a contemporary *pansori*, interpreted on stage by the Seoul band We Mu, which will be the backbone of an opera, programmed on the opening day, gathering performances and musical pieces by the participating artists into a coherent 45-minutes unit. In the same spirit, rather than multiplying the venues all over the city, I have chosen to divide the biennale in only two distinct parts: beyond the biennale building, the exhibition will spread in a specific neighbourhood, Yang Nim, where a dozen places (an abandoned house, a garage, an artist's studio, a gallery...) will shelter solo presentations linked with the city.

And the relational formula applied here would be the following one. The Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro describes the modern world as "an opera with a unique microphone on, the other musicians having been slowly shut down throughout history". *Pansori* intends to be an opera with all microphones on, more of a social generator than a magnet.

### **PANSORI, a soundscape of the 21st century**

15th Gwangju Biennale, 7 September – 1 December 2024, Gwangju, Republic of Korea

Artistic director: Nicolas Bourriaud

Curatorial team: Barbara Lagié, Kuralay Abdukhalikova, Sophia Park,

Jade Barget, Euna Lee

72 artists

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French art critic, theoretician, and curator **Nicolas Bourriaud** was Cofounder and Codirector of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Gulbenkian Curator for Contemporary Art at Tate Britain, and Director of the l'École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Bourriaud was one of the co-curators of the "Aperto" section of the 1993 Venice Biennale. He is the author of the *Relational Aesthetics*, first published in 1998 and widely referred to by many artists, curators, and art professionals globally. He has been appointed the artistic director of the 15th Gwangju Biennale, to take place in 2024.



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Redefined and new artistic practices based on local regions speak of how fresh dynamics of dialogues emerge with audiences. Locally embedded ideas emerge to create new ways of understanding and viewing art, throwing light on how regional influences bring forth the occurrence of unique formats of art production. The articles in this issue consider the practice of artists and curators of the South East. Together they weave a perspective of how art takes upon new roles and positions, impacting their respective societies in myriad ways. Through the eyes of curators are seen the emergence of community-oriented and society-centered curatorial ideas, whilst artists explain how their works have been influenced by local culture and impacts local narratives. The two interviews offer possibilities and nuances of art/culture in India.