

Reclaiming Shared Spaces in Public through Creative Endeavour:

**A Reflection and Contextualization of Collaborative
Community Art Projects Engaging Women and Young
Adults in Marginalised Communities in South Asia**

by Sreejata Roy

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under the supervision of

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I, *SREEJATA ROY*, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of PhD, in the Design Architecture Building Department / Dr Thea Brejzek and Dr Lawrence Wallen at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Abstract

This thesis is located within the contemporary discourse of Socially Engaged Art (SEA) and is grounded in my current SEA practice, initiated in the metropolis of Delhi, India in 2007 and continuing into the present. My qualitative research practice is undertaken with ethnically diverse marginalised communities in disenfranchised localities, through projects situated at widely separated sites across the city. Directly intervening within the challenging physical spaces of these densely populated working-class neighbourhoods, my cross-genre, cross-media, gender-focused practice focuses on how, via creative engagement, young people and women individually and collectively attempt to inscribe/reclaim personal socio-cultural spaces within their existent environments. This pushing back of traditional boundaries is audacious and difficult work, given India's conservative value systems and male-dominated public cultures nested within and valorised by historically embedded patriarchal orthodoxies.

From the outset I have followed principles of *practice-led* research in my SEA projects. This approach, unlike that of practice-based research, is not concerned with the 'improvement' of practice – it does not prioritise the inscription of 'new epistemologies of practice', or the sophisticated analysis of field data, or textual contributions to the 'intellectual or conceptual architecture of a discipline' (Haseman 2006,3). Rather, within the 'intrinsically experiential' and 'messy' frameworks of practice-led research it is the new artistic *forms* emerging through community-based creative engagement that constitute the research findings (ibid.). Stepping away from statistically anchored assertions of "fact" and "objectivity", practice-led research insists that claims to new knowledge must be made and navigated through the rich, flexible, intuitive, self-replenishing language of symbols.

My practice-led approach aligns with the conceptual domain of 'relational art' (Bourriaud 1998) wherein the 'sphere of human relations' may be seen and treated as a site of artwork; and with the open-ended schema of 'dialogical aesthetics' (Kester 2005) wherein critical focus is not on any produced art object but on the condition and character of interpersonal exchanges within/beyond SEA project frameworks. These trajectories are reinforced by/through affect-oriented feminist epistemology, ethnography and ethics that are central to my methodology.

This research delineates specific Indian and international SEA projects, including my own SEA projects, as case studies of counter-hegemonic interventions with diverse communities in diverse cultural contexts. I examine subtle/radical forms of trespass, narratives of dissent, resistance and empowerment, the complex shaping of alternative publics, the rupture/fracture of prescriptive social norms, the reversal of the gaze, and hierarchies of access and

knowledge production. I analyse the new spatial dynamics, new subjectivities, new networks, and new tropes of social inclusion/exclusion evident within the more democratic, participatory aesthetic paradigms underpinning these projects, and link these observations to my research context, research hypothesis and research questions.

This practice-led research makes a significant contribution to the nascent SEA theorisation in India, and adds a new critical voice to SEA discourse emerging from the global South.

Keyword: Public space, Gender, Feminist ethnography, Socially engaged art, South Asia

Sreejata Roy - Biography

Delhi based artist Sreejata Roy completed her Mphil from Coventry School of Art and Design, Coventry University, UK 2005.

As an artist interested in community-related projects, Sreejata has been using classical/conventional and mixed and digital media to produce various art forms, engaging the community. Roy's current art practice in Delhi (2007-present) involves working with young /women for over a decade through Socially Engaged Art practice connecting the ideas of public spaces in many sprawling and congested marginalised colonies inhabited by generations of migrants from the neighbouring rural territory.

Roy was awarded a 'Public Art' grant from the Foundation of Indian Contemporary Art (FICA) in 2008 and completed reshaping a community park in one of those marginalised neighbourhoods. Apart from FICA, she has been awarded other prestigious scholarships in India, including a National Scholarship, from the Ministry of Defence, New Delhi, 1993, Community Art Grant, Khoj for international artist Association, 2008-2009 & 2014-2016, Art-Reach India Community Art Grant 2015-2020, SEA Grant, Kiran Nadar Museum, Delhi, 2016-2020. At the international level, she was awarded Prohelvetia Swiss Cultural Scholarship to work in Basel, 2011, IASPIS, The Swedish Arts Grants, Committee's International Programme for Visual Artists, Malmo, Sweden in 2017.

She has participated in many exhibitions and workshops at the national and international levels, including Belfast, London, Zurich, and Auckland. During her art residencies (2009-2017) in the UK, Japan, Switzerland, and Sweden, she has worked on projects exploring the idea of art and public spaces.

Roy is invited as Guest Faculty in the postgraduate courses in the field of SEA in many institutions such as Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi 2016, Delhi University 2017, Ambedkar University 2015-2018, School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi, 2019 in India and in abroad Sofia University, Tokyo, Japan, 2011, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden, 2017 and University Of Highland, Shetland 2019.

She is also frequently invited to speak on her practice in seminars at the national level, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, University of Delhi, Centre for Social Development and international levels, such as Shetland, France, Berlin, Japan, China and many other places between 2011-2020. In June 2020, she was recently invited as one of the keynote speakers at the Feminist Autonomous Research Centre (FAC), Athens, to talk about her practice.

At present, she is an Adjunct faculty in the postgraduate course in the area of SEA in the Visual Art Department at Ambedkar University, Delhi. Roy is a part of Revue, an artist collective based in Delhi (2008-present) and has collaborated on various community and public art projects in India and abroad for several years. Her scholarly papers are published in many academic journals.

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Chapter Outline

Reclaiming Shared Spaces in Public through Creative Endeavour; A reflection and contextualization of collaborative community art projects engaging women and young adults in marginalised communities, New Delhi.

Chapter One: ‘Research Background and Rationale’ contains three sections following an introduction to the chapter. The three sections elaborate upon the research topic, key research questions, and methodology.

Chapter Two: ‘Developing a Framework; A Comprehensive Literature Review’. The chapter discusses the contextual framework of the research with an introduction to the section and the ‘Theoretical / Critical Resonances’ based on the current projects and related creative production influenced by the concepts theorized in SEA discourse.

Chapter Three: ‘Art in Public Space in India from 1990 into the Present’. The chapter discusses four artists and their projects in public space in the Indian context through the research analysis.

Chapter Four: ‘Socially Engaged Art Practice in India (1997-2021)’. The chapter discusses three Socially Engaged Art artists and their projects in the Indian context through the research analysis.

Chapter Five: ‘Creative Practice’ portrays my interventions on four SEA projects encompassing the background and description of each work & reflection on each project.

Chapter Six: Bibliography and appendices.

Appendix:

- 1) Select International Socially Engaged Art Projects (1992-2021). This discusses select international socially engaged art projects that are studied as secondary sources of research.
- 2) Interviews of Indian artists which constitutes the primary source.

Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

This practice-led research is positioned within Indian and international contemporary discourses of Socially Engaged Art (hereafter referred to as SEA) and Social Practice in Art, from 1990 into the present moment.

The thesis discusses select SEA projects situated in different urban and rural geographical locations and social contexts, particularly in the global South. It explores key SEA concepts (site-specificity, social/public space, collaboration/participation, dialogic and relational aesthetics, etc.) through descriptions of practitioners' creative engagements with diverse communities, and the articulation of community voices and community visions through SEA interventions. The eight Indian public art/SEA practices/projects presented here (Chapters Three and Four) are by independent artists, who occasionally combine this role with that of arts curation, arts pedagogy and arts management. From the mid-2000s onward, they have been moving beyond the protective boundaries of the private studio to directly embed their practice in natural and social public spaces, catalyzing the emergence of new, non-elite audiences and producing new, demographic forms of knowledge.

My own interventions (Chapter Fifth) involve primarily young people and women from disenfranchised, multi-ethnic migrant communities in three working-class localities (specifically, a resettlement colony¹ and two adjacent urban villages² in South Delhi and a

¹Resettlement / 'JJ' (*jhuggi-jhonpri*) colony: The Hindi term *jhuggi-jhonpri* translates as 'shack' or 'hutment', signifying a fragile, unstable, rough temporary structure. Under the rubric of 'urban development' and 'gentrification', or to accommodate the expanding metro subway system, or to acquire land to be profitably sold/rented to giant corporations, municipal authorities demolish the slums that happen to be in the way, and shift those populations to 'resettlement colonies'. Politically-sponsored mass displacement of this kind goes back to the draconian period of Emergency (1975-77) under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and was boosted in context of India hosting massive international events such as the Asian Games (1982) and the Commonwealth Games (2010). In such a cycle, resettlement colonies become new working-class clusters and home to a precarious, impoverished migrant demographic.

²'Urban Villages': Old settlements that traditionally did not fall under the jurisdiction of municipal authorities or the ambit of city master plans. Located outside the city, these villages were categorised as Lal Dora (Hindi: 'red thread', from colonial land revenue practices: officials used red ink on village maps to demarcate residential land from the surrounding agricultural land for purposes of tax collection). Post-independence, the Delhi government acquired land in many lal dora areas and declared them to be 'urban villages', exempt from certain norms of 'urban development' so that they could retain their rural identity within a modern ethos. However, under pressure of relentless construction and expansion, the city keeps ingesting its periphery; *lal dora* land continues to be acquired, and "urban villages" then by law become subject to administrative plans for gentrification/transforming Delhi into a 'global' city.

government-run shelter³ for homeless women/their children in Old Delhi⁴).

The urban spaces/sites of my SEA projects should be understood within the wider discourse of globalisation and the subsequently transformed “spatial ontology of social and political processes”, wherein space may be delineated as “absolute, relative or relational, or all together, depending on the ongoing process” (Banerjee-Guha 2011,52). In fact, there is no ontological answer “to the question of what constitutes space”, since the answer “essentially lies in human practice” (Banerjee-Guha 2011,52.). The understanding of “space” as a material and socio-political construct is becoming prominent in current discourses on “neo-imperialist strategies for controlling world regions and global resources”, and there is a need to adopt “socio-spatial approaches” in our analysis of current geopolitical frameworks and power structures on macro/micro levels (ibid.). The neoliberal ethos and ferocious policy of “competition” actively reinforced by institutional rationality undergirds capitalist and statist exploitation and devalorisation of selected spaces, their inhabitants and associated social practices. This “violence” leads to the “deformation” and “discontinuity” of local spaces and communities, and remoulds the “contours” and “topologies” of private and public spaces in accordance with neoliberal economic agendas (ibid,53.). Global capital continuously fragments and carves out newer spatial configurations through a voracious trans-territorial dynamic intent on “abolishing all spatial barriers to capital’s accumulation process, in search of cheaper raw materials, new sources of labour, new markets and new investment opportunities”; the outcome is “an essential disintegration of space and further marginalisation of peoples based on disparate levels of “development” in respective regions” (ibid,53.).

Thus, today we have “a highly strategised capitalist spatiality... accomplished through new organisational forms and technologies in production and communication... for the purpose of maximising profit” (Banerjee-Guha 2011,61). This thoroughly extractive, “belligerent” and

³The municipality’s constant attempt at gentrification and the related slum demolitions/displacement of slum-dwellers has drastically raised levels of homelessness in the city. To be without secure shelter is incredibly challenging, especially for women, who live under constant threat of predation, violence and sexual assault. Homeless single mothers and their children are particularly vulnerable. Temporary shelters, provided by the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board and managed by various NGOs, are rudimentary, unsanitary and overcrowded. The women’s shelter that was site of my SEA project *Axial Margins* consists of tin sheets forming a roof over one large room where residents sleep on the floor; there is a toilet block outside, across a littered yard. The municipality provides shelters in winter so that the homeless can escape the bitter cold, but these are few and far between, and most of the homeless continue to sleep on the streets.

⁴Old Delhi was once known as Shahjahanabad, after Shah Jahan (1592-1666), the fifth Mughal emperor, builder of the Taj Mahal and other exquisite monuments, including the Jama Masjid and the Red Fort that dominate Old Delhi and attract millions of tourists. Like the monuments, the historic wall surrounding Shahjahanabad is under custodianship of the Archaeological Survey of India, and is fairly intact despite the unchecked incursion of the ‘developing’ city through its various strategic portals. Several public art and SEA projects described in my thesis are sited in Old Delhi – a bustling commercial and transport hub, with a railway station, interstate bus terminal, small and large *havelis* (traditional homes), densely populated *mohallas* (neighbourhoods), and innumerable shops and eateries cheek by jowl in the labyrinth of narrow lanes and by-lanes in which outsiders may easily get lost. These lead into and out of large open markets dedicated to transacting different commodities and employing thousands of workers who toil from dawn to midnight.

“multi-scalar” capitalist control of global space ravages the natural environment, dispossesses communities and destroys livelihoods/local ecologies through a massive, ongoing, uninterrupted project of ensuring the territorially dispersed, outsourced, subcontracted production of goods – a project that “has brought the most powerful and the less developed countries face to face on an unequal competitive framework” (ibid,61.). Globally, spaces of “oppression and marginalisation” are reshaped according to this brutal, unforgiving calculus of inequity, underpinned by the neoliberal logic of labour and production; and this results in the projection of “a one-dimensional geography of sameness in which essentially all facets of human existence are degraded and equalised downward, hiding the fact that the premise of this equalisation rests on a strategy of dividing relative space into many absolute spaces of differential development” (ibid.).

In the case of major urban spaces across the world, fast-track gentrification and anti-poor beautification projects are implemented to attract global investment and create an image of the city congenial to the needs and aspirations of an all-powerful international elite (Banerjee-Guha 2011) – a phenomenon that holds true for India’s metropolitan cities as well for many similarly vast, historically complex, densely populated cities in the global South. The skewed and deceptive ‘development’ of Delhi is a prime example of this aspirational trajectory that in the context of the 2004 general election was embodied in the absurd slogan ‘India Shining’ and deployed by politicians to propagate the fiction of economic growth. With a population approaching 20 million, Delhi is today the world’s fifth most populous city and has one of the world’s highest population densities. The overflow of rural distress into urban districts is an outstanding characteristic of economically underdeveloped countries today (Bose 1970); and as with major cities all through the global South, India’s capital has relentlessly expanded via the influx of rural and small-town migrants who pour into the city to find work, settle and form their own communities within these areas (Govinda 2013,3). Contemporary urbanization has “always been, therefore, a class phenomena of some sort, since surpluses have been extracted from somewhere and from somebody (usually an oppressed peasantry) while the control over the disbursement of the surplus typically lies in a few hands” (Harvey 2003, 2).

Govinda observes that the globalized modern city “has always also been a city of displaced and the dispossessed, the poor and the underprivileged who have found themselves on the margins of Master Plans and middle-class consciousness” (Govinda 2013,1). This vulnerable yet resilient demographic produces its own space of precarious settlements, support systems and relational circuits, tenaciously persisting against all the odds and becoming permanent residents of the city over time and generations. In the urban space of Delhi, a constantly renewed migrant workforce is continuously absorbed into the manufacturing, service and information technology sectors, and the migrant communities in city slums and marginalised

localities have to aggressively compete for limited resources. They endure miserable living conditions, lack of infrastructure, crowding, chaotic public transport, pollution/contamination and lethal health hazards, essentially without hope of improvement or of being ensured their fundamental human rights. The daily struggle to survive is bracketed at one end by state apathy and the other by state exploitation.

This view is corroborated by Baviskar, who notes that the city's "special status and visibility as national capital has made state anxieties around the management of urban space all the more acute: Delhi *matters* because very important people live and visit there; its image reflects the image of the nation-state" (Baviskar 2003, 200). The capital has been "diligently planned" since 1962 via a series of Master Plans intended to "order Delhi's landscape in the ideal of Nehruvian socialism", with the "enlightened state" organising and controlling a massive, mixed and diverse population, including almost half a million Partition refugees as well as an ongoing flow of impoverished economic migrants from all over India. These enormous numbers are distributed over an equally enormous space: modern New Delhi, historic Old Delhi and outlying rural lands acquired by the municipal authorities as part of the "development" agenda; these last-mentioned areas were "already vivid with embodied practices", spatial overlaps and mixed usage by multi-ethnic and multi-class populations (ibid.)

Baviskar explains that administrative concerns "about the physical and social welfare of concentrated human populations were... channelled into the desire for a planned city, where they converged with the high nationalist fervour for modernisation. Fulfilling this desire seemed to be pre-eminently the responsibility of the state: the legitimacy of a national government that had the prestige of fighting for freedom added fresh power to an older development regime established by colonial capitalism that gave the state primacy in the mission of Civilisation and Improvement" (Baviskar 2003, 200). However, while the Master Plans envisioned a model city, "prosperous, hygienic and orderly", there was a complete failure to imagine, let alone accommodate, the needs of the huge numbers of the working poor who would be required for the construction and 'progress' of the city. No provision was made for this demographic, who had to find or create their own spaces wherever and however they could. Thus, the building of 'planned' Delhi was accompanied by a simultaneous growth of 'unplanned' Delhi. In the "interstices of the Master Plan's zones", the "liminal spaces" along railway tracks and on the barren wastes beyond the city perimeter, the labouring class built together their *jhuggi* settlements, sprawling shanty towns of flimsy shacks patched from whatever material could be found – mud, wood, bamboo, plastic, tin, tarpaulin, bricks, cloth, scrap metal – and lived in these, without even the basic amenities of access roads, reliable water supply, electricity, sanitation, transport, health clinics or schools. "The development of slums was, then, not a violation of the Plan; it was an essential accompaniment to it, its Siamese twin" (Baviskar

2003, 201) – a cartography inscribing millions of deprived, precarious, vulnerable ‘illegals’, targeted, exploited and criminalised, yet indispensable for the growth and functioning of the ‘legal’ city, and with “processes of their displacement written into the Master Plan”, through the state failing to provide low-cost housing, and retaining a monopoly over urban land (Baviskar 2003, 205).

This unconscionable mass erasure of the presence of the working class was “not an oversight”; rather, it was intrinsic to the production and reproduction of ‘powerful inequalities’ – a prejudicial “misrecognition” that was “wilful and systematic, an institutionally organised and guaranteed strategy” to reinforce bourgeois values and demands and firmly establish certain “relations of power between the state, spaces and subjects” (Baviskar 2003, 201). Systematically criminalised, abjected and abused, slum populations are seen as unruly and contaminated, “a monster threatening the body politic that the state has since then been trying unsuccessfully to leash” (ibid.). Their struggle includes having to repeatedly remake their homes and lives when *jhuggi* settlements are bulldozed to make way for gentrification/beautification agendas and infrastructural/commercial development schemes intended to sculpt Delhi into a paradigm of ‘India Shining’ in the hollow political pursuit of global prestige. This shaping of Delhi could not be achieved without the working class – who acquired a paradoxical strength through numbers, being a key electoral demographic for local politicians. *Jhuggi* residents are a crucial vote bank, so populist governments in charge of Delhi choose to give the ‘illegals’ a reprieve and some basic amenities such as hand-pumps, ration cards for purchase of subsidised staples, and an opportunity to build more permanent homes over time. Illegally acquired land, on which slums are built, remains a prime asset for the real-estate mafia that brokers deals with the municipal authorities to let the slums remain until it is profitable to sell the land – usually to large commercial interests. Thus, a “spectrum of unauthorised practices” has coalesced into a corrupt nexus that on one hand controls *jhuggi* populations with ongoing threats of forced demolition/eviction/relocation, and on the other hand actively distorts or nullifies bureaucratic regulations around specified land use, zoning, and other trajectories signalled by the abstract data of urban planners (Baviskar 2003, 203).

Since Delhi’s population is largely constituted by first- or second-generation migrants, those migrants who form the working class also have to negotiate the “perpetuation” of this identity that, “with its implications of belonging elsewhere, keeps the poor from being recognised as full residents of Delhi, entitled to the full complement of civic rights and social opportunities” (Baviskar 2003, 206). The propertied bourgeoisie does not have to explain its legitimacy, while the masses of “property-less”, hyper-visible yet invisible poor are denied legibility and validity. Viewing the poor as undisciplined “newly-arrived interlopers on the urban scene” is a strategy of disenfranchisement actively upheld by the privileged classes as well as the state (ibid.).

However, the poor have responded with ingenuity and innovation, creating/adopting diverse strategies of 'enterprise, compromise and resistance' (ibid.). These include empowerment through exercising their franchise as vote banks, deploying kinship networks, bargaining with politicians and employers for small and middling gains, mobilising collectively through neighbourhood welfare groups, and creating coalitions with *jhuggi* organisations, trade unions and NGOs to demand greater participation in urban planning. These "multiple practices, simultaneously spatial and social", that attempt to democratise urban governance form a strong critique of statist and class power (ibid.).

While the bourgeois gaze sees slums as disfiguring and polluting, an affront to the desired vision of 'clean and green' Delhi trumpeted in futility by the 'India Shining' campaign, for *jhuggi* dwellers their settlements, wrested and cobbled foot by foot with great struggle from seeming impossibility, represent "a tremendous investment in terms of the capital and labour that has gone into making the slum habitable" – community coordination, laying out of small plots and lanes, petitioning for taps, toilets, schools, clinics, etc. (Baviskar 2003,205). Over time, fragile impermanent shacks become solid brick-and-mortar structures, cherished and maintained by those who have little, and understand only too well what it means to have nothing. *Jhuggi* residents know that if they persist, survive municipal predation and successfully navigate their illegality, they will over time acquire strong claims for recognition and for their slum being 'regularised' (legalised by the state) or the state assigning slum occupants alternative low-cost housing in resettlement colonies on the edge of the city. For this resilient demographic, the "hope of permanence is not a foolhardy fantasy" (ibid.).

This is the broader context in which my SEA project sites are embedded, the participants belonging to Delhi's low-income and migrant demographics. Community interaction and the building of long-term relationships is both the framework and fulcrum of my practice, which rests and relies on a participatory dynamic oriented primarily towards facilitating efforts by these communities to actively recreate, redefine and reclaim their existent spaces. This is achieved through art projects directed towards infusing the communities' material and social contexts with new meanings, resonances and aspects, and enabling the creative utterance of individual and group subjectivities.

1.2 Research Topic

This research topic draws upon deep and sustained engagement as an art practitioner working and engaging with three marginalised communities that inhabits specific sites within Delhi's complex peri-urban environments. The research also investigates how public spaces within those sites can be socially, artistically and materially transformed and claimed/co-owned by

those communities. This research is a contribution to a new knowledge. The argument includes that the discourse of Socially Engaged Art (SEA) is still nascent, negligible and in broad terms practically non-existent in India, and that its value as a new aesthetic modality is mostly ignored by contemporary practitioners and overlooked by the art community. Rare instances when SEA is indeed scrutinized, it is easily subjected to secondary, mimetic analysis as modern Indian art discourse is in general still heavily reliant on Western critiques of Indian art traditions. As scholar Geeta Kapur remarks in her keynote address at the symposium “Installation Art, A Spatial Construct”, (Kapur 2019), from 1990 onwards there have undoubtedly been essential shifts in contemporary Indian art through the development of many new art practices; however, these practices remain undefined in the context of mainstream Indian art history. And as noted by scholar Nancy Adajania that in India “there is no realization of critic sociality of art. The question that is never asked: what is the ontological status of this artwork? Who is it for, what is its immediate environment? What we require most urgently is a paradigm shift in our own understanding of the sociology of the new-context media” (Adajania 2004, 91).

SEA practitioners in India also have to take into account the fact that Indian contemporary art is generally privately funded, mostly by corporate sponsors who impose specific terms and conditions concerning financial support. Another challenge being, that in India all perceptions and definitions of the terms ‘public art’ and ‘community art’ that dominate SEA critiques remain locked within and highly conditioned by the particularized and discriminative scaffolding of identity, class and tightly controlled privileged access. Besides, pervasive and unequivocal gender inequality deeply inflects the singular truth of profound socioeconomic difference that grounds all facets of Indian life despite the potent influence of globalization and its promise of radical change, including in the realm of gender.

SEA practitioners may have to confront various forms of orthodoxy that are an obstacle for female participants – for instance in suburban areas of the metropolis of Mumbai where women from conservative religious communities are subject to family-imposed prohibitions about appearing in public (Phadke, Khan & Ranade 2011). Parallel to this strand of psychological pressure runs the strand of actual physical risk and continual vulnerability that dominates how women of all ages and backgrounds experience the public spaces of Indian cities. The 2005 ‘Safe Delhi Campaign’ led by Jagori, a Delhi-based NGO working in the area of gender issues and women’s empowerment, documented a general perception that women both fear and face violence while moving around the city (*Jagori 2010*). This finding is examined by feminist writer/activist Urvashi Butalia, who observes that the problem of gender-based violence is a deeper and more complicated one than immediate questions of safety and comfort, however, both are inherently linked to the subject (Butalia 2012). Any SEA practice

in India therefore has to negotiate the tensions of differential agency, autonomy and entitlement that for centuries have been, and continue to be, socially mandated and enforced for disenfranchised demographics, and most rigorously mandated and enforced for underprivileged girls and women.

The thesis traces the conceptual underpinnings of the schema of collaborative production within the current SEA practice, which pivots upon the fulcrum of dialogic activity (Kester 2004) and polyphonic expression – a mode of free exchange and supportive mutuality, which enables conditions for self-assertion and more confident personal articulation. The mode of free exchange and mutuality is especially valuable in contexts and communities where disenfranchised and, or marginalised women are generally expected to be subordinate, passive and self-censoring about their social claims, public presence and individual voice.

Two principles of my current research trajectories are as follows. Firstly in both ethical and pragmatic terms, the regular, personalized and equitable interaction with project participants is the core of all authentic SEA art practice. Second, the fact, experientially verified over a decade of my practice, that any form of collective ‘production’ – including the micro-ecologies that may be produced within collective spaces – is intimately bonded to the layers of shifting variables which constitute collectively-generated ‘processes’. These processes cannot necessarily be distilled out and schematized over the course of the art project as a formal, empirically validated, objective ‘product’ or ‘finding’ or ‘result’ or ‘conclusion’.

The theoretical approach of this research is built on Lacy’s model of inclusion. Lacy argues in that the model of inclusion outlined in her work “takes a stance for social justice and equality” (Lacy 2010,334). This principle of inclusion is manifested through the dialogic activity and polyphonic expression at the heart of my practice, the mode of exchange and mutuality enabling a condition/platform for self-assertion and more elaborate personal articulation, especially in contexts of disenfranchised and/or marginalised women, whose experiences of public space are generally expected to be subordinate, passive and self-censoring with regard to their social claims, public presence and individual voice.

The field research draws upon my SEA projects conducted over the past decade in Dakshinpuri, Khirki/Hauz Rani and Urdu Park – three locations in densely populated working-class neighbourhoods that are home to a large and diverse migrant demographic within Delhi’s proliferating urban sprawl.

Applying qualitative methods to situate and contextualize the entire process and project outcomes within SEA discourse, the investigation includes the process of reshaping, reclaiming public spaces within these three sites through a series of linked and thoroughly

interdependent inquiries based on project collaborator narratives, strongly supported by thematic visual articulation.

1.3 Key Research Questions

In many parts across the globe, including India, it is an immense challenge to undertake any kind of gendered engagement in public space with women of any age, particularly disenfranchised women, within the highly patriarchal, chauvinistic, male-dominated culture that is the default term of reference, the social norm and, in many ways, a law unto itself. One of the core principles of my practice takes into account the fact that physical, sexual and emotional violence is both a continuous threat and reality for women in all public and private spaces in India, at all times. Any research activity, intervention in public space must be conceptualized and conducted only after prioritizing and ensuring the overall safety of all collaborators at every stage of the project.

The research addresses the following key questions –

I. In what ways can available public spaces such as streets, parks, squares, shopping centres, metro stations, etc. be used by young women for creative activities?

a. How can art interventions motivate and mobilize young women in disenfranchised communities to create their own spaces in public?

b. How does this SEA practice re-frame the descriptor “site-specific”?

c. What kind of politics are embedded in these new aesthetics?

II. How can self-sustaining public spaces evolve through collaborative creative processes?

III. What is the relationship between aesthetics and ethics within both traditional and contemporary modalities of collaborative art practices?

IV. Concerning the collective or self-sustaining group, what might be the role of a facilitator, the artist, positioning himself/herself in the creative process without intervening in the day-to-day activity of running the space, or without formally being an instructor? What is the role of the SEA practitioner in this process?

1.4 Research methodology

Overview of my research methodology:

Relevant empirical knowledge acquired and developed through my current practice and the community, as well as drawing upon through theoretical and critical frameworks of international SEA discourse, informs the creative practice. The approach is to grasp of this academic material combines historical and sociological readings with contemporary views on creative production. The methodology draws upon theoretical and critical frameworks of international SEA discourse through a detailed literature review with a focus on: New Genre Public Art, Community Engagement in Socially Engaged Art, Spectacle and the Participant-Audience Relationship, Collaborative and Dialogic Methodology as a Key Component, Co-authoring/Co-producing and De-authoring in Socially Engaged Art Processes. Secondly the methodology also links to feminist ethics based on the literature review focuses on feminist ethnography.

The collaborative ethic of my current SEA practice with migrant communities in underprivileged neighbourhoods of Delhi falls within the conceptual domain of 'relational art', its primary hypothesis identifying the sphere of human relations as a site of artworks (Bourriaud 1998). The research utilizes interlinked qualitative and field-based methods that are firmly rooted in local ecologies to explore art and creativity as an alternative means of accessing urban public space. This approach foregrounds the creative dialogue of project collaborators with their material context, i.e., the locality and its public spaces; it also underscores the collaborators' relationship with each other; the collaborators' relationship with the residents/users of the locality's public spaces; and the collaborators' connection with the SEA project itself and its facilitators.

Over the past decade I have observed through the site-specific SEA projects that dialogue/discussion-based interventions in community-based art projects always push past the participants' normative consciousness of socio-material boundaries to infiltrate other realms of their experience. As posited by Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1982), through dialogue, i.e., "living conversation", not only do "various different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems for providing expressive accents, various social 'languages' come to interact with one another... at any given moment, languages of various epochs and periods of socio-ideological life cohabit with one another... Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form." For Bakhtin, language "is not a neutral medium... it is populated –

overpopulated – with the intentions of others... [the word] exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions; it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own."

The narrative "polyphony" (Bakhtin 1982) emerging from this mode of creative dialogue disseminates "rhizomatically", i.e., as a social process theorized by Deleuze and Guattari.

Deleuze and Guattari observe that as a structure, the rhizome "connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs..." (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 21). The rhizome consists "not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion." Not defined by sets of points and positions, the rhizome "is made only of lines; lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, changes in nature." These lines or "ligaments" are different from the "localizable linkages between points and positions"; and the map produced through the rhizome is "always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entranceways and exits and its own lines of flight."

The open-ended rhizomatic model and the dialogic approach is the core of my SEA work in what are known as Delhi's 'resettlement colonies' – sprawling, highly congested working-class localities that evolved through the arbitrary displacement, by civic authorities and urban planners, of large segments of underprivileged people from various parts of the city over the last five decades, under the state rubric of 'development', 'modernisation', 'beautification', 'gentrification', 'public health', etc. These uprooted communities were forced into outlying areas with poor or non-existent infrastructure, often having to build their dwellings again from the ground up with whatever material was available. The rhizomatic model/dialogic approach also applies to current SEA work in what are known as Delhi's 'urban villages', i.e., agricultural land and rural habitation that was once outside the city but is now overtaken, surrounded and assimilated into the city's expansion and 'development' that continues at an unbroken, furious, relentless pace, and continues to cause profound demographic and sociological shifts – "lines of flight" (Guattari, Deleuze, 1980)– in the affected populations, as well as in the huge numbers of rural migrants who pour into the city to find work, settle and form their own communities within these areas. (Govinda 2013)

Creative Media as a Form of Dialogue in Public Space

Keeping in mind the multifarious nature of dialogue based interventions in the current practice, the focus is always on the generation of intermediate, experimental, innovative, interactive

media forms that contextualize and augment symbolic expression within, and of, daily life. A public space such as a locality market has many entry and exit points as well as multiple focal points. There is a constant flux of users/participants, and they are scattered as well as cohesive, operating sequentially as well as synchronously. Within this larger flow are sites of inherent sociality that remain stable, such as the ubiquitous tea stalls, cigarette kiosks and *dhabas* (small eateries), street corners, barber shops, mobile repair shops, etc., where people spend time and engage in conversation everyday. Similarly, locality walls are fixed interfaces for dialogue, available to be inscribed by participants and responded to by passers-by or people working or living around those walls.

The specific mode of creative engagement in the locality depends on whether the space is public or private, open or closed. Each public space has its own possibility and limitations that allow certain kinds of engagements. In terms of time, activity and gathering, each space solicits certain kinds of rhythms and forecloses other kinds. To examine how and to what extent the space allows the manifestation of collective energy in a particular direction, the experiment follows the modes of performance to build dialogue between the young practitioners of the current SEA project and the people in the localities of Khirki and Hauz Rani. This can be achieved through site-specific creativity: for example, gender-themed wall paintings in heavily male-dominated public nodes, and through initiating conversations with people at these specific spaces. Another intervention could take the form of a low-cost production, purposive and accessible zines of narratives collected by project collaborators, that would serve as a common platform for voices that are mostly silent, censored or lost within the complex cartography and diverse demography of the locality.

This effort would be directed towards opening public space to a new usage – for sharing imagination, creative thinking and expression through dialogue, active listening and focused documentation. Locality narratives collected and compiled by project participants can be used as entry points into discussions about how public space and community areas, always favouring the convenience of men, can be actively re-shaped to be equally hospitable to both men and women. The intervention would lead eventually to the creation of a site-specific thematic performance, with the locality as the stage, thus extending the dialogue about public space out into the larger community.

The general objective of the research is to shape new art forms within given local nodes and imperatives, as well as to catalyze, release and uncover the aesthetic logic inherent and embedded in the existential matrix of community, each group with particular histories, demographics, socioeconomic patterns and cultural affiliations. The most important aspect of the current SEA research process is group participation and the rigorous yet flexible process

of regular dialogue, free sharing and active listening. No voice is undermined or relegated or negated. There are no fixed rules or formulae for this mode of collective 'learning'. Participant sessions/'lessons' are open-ended. Planning may at any time disperse into spontaneous activity. Both documentation and demonstration may take different shapes. Through creative exercises participants work towards building a relationship within the group and beyond, and in ideal terms would gain confidence to continue to engage with the public space on their own. All the possible limitations of achieving this ideal of self-sustainability will be investigated.

And from beginning to end this creative work is infused with a profound sense of paradox, because while there may be certain 'outputs' in terms of forms and activities and goals, the elusive yet evidentiary personal bonds that are the core 'outcome' of the current relational SEA practice cannot be empirically calibrated as 'proof' of the project's success.

Interrogating Site-specificity and Collaboration within SEA Praxis

For SEA scholar Grant Kester socially engaged art reflects a shift in both content and context, as well as a shift in the relationship between artwork and audience, with the artist seeking to assault the "ideological programming" of an audience through "cognitive shock or dissonance." Moreover, socially engaged art also reflects a shift from an earlier paradigm of autonomous art practice to a combination with other cultural fields such as design, urban studies, theatre, etc., facilitating "a broader, trans-disciplinary interest in collective knowledge production." Such art, with its focus on material conditions, is no longer "sequestered" in protective institutional spaces. Rather, it is produced "situationally" and contextually, and thus raises the crucial question of limits: "When does the work 'begin', and when does it 'end'? What are the boundaries of the field within which it operates, and how were they determined?" (Kester 2013, 84). Kester asserts that while socially engaged art and its "dialogical aesthetic" are defined and understood differently all over the world, the common denominator is that all such projects seek to disrupt and reconstitute "previously sovereign forms of agency and subjectivity in the work of art" through structural interventions in terms of both production and reception. Thus, the dominant idea and expression in collaborative/community-based works is "rationality", which can either be produced in a given work or be the subject matter of a given work; and these two modes may often overlap.

As critiqued in Kwon's (2002) work, the usage of the term site-specific by artists, critics and, mainstream art media always have been loosely and inaccurately defined and more recent works have gone on to replace that with a much fluid and adaptive term, 'collaborative'. In order to situate the thesis' central argument, this research examines in detail a few chosen

site-specific practices of Indian and international artists, through qualitative methods that will include thematic interviews of artists, critics, curators, art historians and theorists; audio and video recordings of relevant subject matter; and field notes. This strand of inquiry supports my ongoing study of scholarly texts and journals, art magazines and exhibition catalogues; an array of visual materials; and old and new media forms. Thus, the trajectory of 'dialogue' within the current SEA projects extends much further, wider and deeper than my direct and indirect communication with participants, the interpersonal exchanges between participants, and the layered, textured inscription of participant subjectivities, voices, relationships and material/psychological realities – in meta-narrative terms, my interest lies in documenting the space of the current research area in necessary dialogue with the larger 'public space' of critical theory/contemporary art discourse.

The Role of the Artist as Facilitator in the Participatory Creative Process

Standpoint epistemology is both “an approach to knowledge construction and a call to political action”; as a feminist philosophy of knowledge-building, it commits to “seeing and understanding the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women”, and to applying the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change (Brooks in Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007, 55). It places women at the centre of the research process, and takes women's concrete experiences as the starting point from which to build knowledge. Women's experiences are the primary source of investigation and inquiry in standpoint theory, with the goal of “granting authentic expression and representation to women's lives”, through narrating women's experiences as women themselves experience them (ibid., 56). Standpoint epistemology uncovers and excavates women's skills and knowledge “that are hidden or undervalued”, directing this towards repairing “the historical trend” of misrepresenting and excluding women from the dominant knowledge canons. “Women's concrete experience provides the ultimate criterion for credibility of these knowledge claims”, and fresh perspectives on social reality, developed by women for women, contribute to an accurate understanding of women's lives. Scholars who rely on standpoint epistemology make innovative use of research methods and develop new research techniques (ibid., 56, 57).

My research methodology pivots around four key principles of collaborative production, feminist philosophy of knowledge-building and my strategic embeddedness in-group creative processes as required by whatever is unfolding within/through each project:

In both ethical and pragmatic terms, I sustain a regular, personalized and equitable interaction with project participants, in alignment with the tenets of 'relational' art. In the dialogic practice, there was no monolithic, hegemonic, specific way of speaking, listening or responding. All the minor or major differences between a creative manifestation in the moment and its later abstraction, iteration, recursion or revision, its documentation via text or image, are noted and discussed and assimilated by project participants. Group creative processes run parallel to each other, unpick and re-stitch their seams, and often continuously overlap in a rich interplay. Through a decade of the current SEA practice, I have experienced the conceptual, aesthetical and experiential verification of the fact that any form of collective 'production' – including the micro-ecologies that may be 'produced' within collective spaces – was intimately bonded to the shifting layers of variables that constitute the collectively-generated 'process', be these harmonious or disruptive, yielding or recalcitrant, unsettled or confirmatory. The fluctuating intermediate outcomes of these unpredictable processes cannot necessarily be distilled out over the course of the art project as an objective research 'product', 'finding' or 'result' or 'conclusion'.

The current research into the way public spaces within particular sites can be creatively transformed and claimed/co-owned by local communities via SEA projects includes the argument that SEA discourse is still quite nascent, negligible and generally prone to loose, careless and casual (mis)readings in India. SEA's value as a new aesthetic paradigm is largely ignored by contemporary practitioners and overlooked by the art community. In rare instances when SEA is indeed scrutinized, it is easily subjected to derivative, mimetic analysis, much in the way that modern Indian art discourse is in general still heavily reliant on Western critiques of Indian art traditions. Given the lack of critical perspectives and of reliable, well-substantiated practice-based formulations, it is often a challenge to find adequate theoretical support for the current SEA work.

In India, all perceptions and definitions of the terms 'public art' and 'community art' remain locked within and highly conditioned by the particularized and discriminative scaffolding of identity, class and tightly controlled, privileged access. The domain of art mirrors the truth of profound inequality that still pervades all facets of Indian life, despite the potent, pervasive influence of globalization and its thus-far illusory promise of radical social change. Any SEA practice in India therefore has to rigorously negotiate the challenges of differential agency, autonomy and entitlement that for centuries have been, and continue to be, and socially mandated and enforced for various disenfranchised demographics that remain highly vulnerable to larger disruptive forces, ranging from poverty, violence and political unrest to wholesale ideological abjection and stigmatization.

The primacy of social context/community as the core of my personal practice has also brought about a significant change in my self-definition vis-à-vis the current SEA projects. Rather than considering myself an educator, instructor, pedagogue or authority of any kind, I see myself as a mediator/interlocutor, primarily a facilitator of dialogue within the participant groups, as well as of those groups' dialogue with the larger community. I position myself in the creative process consciously keeping the interventions to a minimum in the day-to-day activity within the shared creative space, in the interest of encouraging and fostering its self-sustainability. Given the nature my socio-economic privilege, outsider status and gender autonomy in relation to the groups my works with, inhabiting an enfranchised position requires a meticulous self-scrutiny that combines critical distance with deep immediate engagement as one analyses the project data, and the trajectory of the current research 'results'/'findings'/'outcomes' vis-à-vis contemporary SEA theory and critique.

As I see and experience it, in ideal terms the ethics of any cultural practitioner must be in symbiosis with her/his personal ethics. Unless one is continuously vigilant, research based on participatory practice may end up focusing on contested issues of aesthetics, authorship and production, neglecting to foreground the ethical dimensions of the project. As part of the SEA research, I explore whether it is actually possible for cultural practitioners involved in collaborative work to always refer their creative actions to their own code of best practices, especially with regard to material generated by the group – i.e., to not claim work by collaborators as one's own unique product or achievement, as one's own artistic 'property' to be further used to serve one's own interests as one thinks fit. I explore whether it is always possible for practitioners to uphold the sustained empathy and other-centredness at the heart of inclusive ethics; and she also explores whether democratic principles should always be prioritized over aesthetic quality as a first principle and primary good of collaborative work. These inquiries are based on my personal conviction that regardless of – or perhaps one should say, because of – the intractable inequalities that so starkly assert themselves at every level of life in India, the democratizing factors of mutual trust, openness, sensitivity to/acceptance of difference, consideration and genuine respect in play between artist/facilitator and project participants *must*, and should always, remain the fulcrum of any SEA commitment, conceptualization and production.

Practice-led Research

In terms of qualitative research practices “as applied to the study of meaning-making practices generally”, there are crucial differences between those practices that focus on the application of a plan/method on the ground, and those more focused on theories relating to practice *itself*

as an object of study (Haseman 2006, 2). In his discussion of the differences between *practice-based* and *practice-led* research within the category of qualitative research, Haseman offers a useful list of terms often used interchangeably in discourse about practice. *Practice-based* research is also known as reflective practice; participant research, participatory research, collaborative enquiry, and action research. Its research strategies interpret what is meant by “an original contribution to knowledge” (Haseman 2006, 3). Rather than “contributing to the intellectual or conceptual architecture of a discipline, practice-based research is concerned with “the improvement of practice” and “the new epistemologies of practice” arising from strategies applied in context / on the ground; it prioritises documentation, written outcomes, theorisation and generation of textual analysis (ibid.). By contrast, *practice-led* research, also known as creative practice *as* research and research *through* practice, pivots on the conviction that textual emphasis may in fact distort the communication process, and looks to other forms of expression as a means of delivering the research findings.

Haseman asserts that in terms of research design, practice-led methodologies set up a different relationship with the research problem driving the research study. Conventionally, the research design flows from a central research question or problem statement, or from the experiences and understandings of the population being researched in a material context; in this method identifying the core issue or problem is central to the process. However, many practice-led researchers deviate from this in two fundamental ways. First: they do not enter their project with ‘a sense of a problem’; rather, “they may be led by what is best described as ‘an enthusiasm of practice’, something which is exciting, something which may be unruly, or indeed something which may be just becoming possible as new technology or networks will allow (but of which they cannot be certain)”; they tend to “dive in”, to begin their practice with a flexible approach; they wait to “see what emerges” (Haseman 2006, 4). This open-endedness does not imply that these researchers work “without larger agendas or emancipatory aspirations”, but underscores their repudiation of the “constraints of narrow problem-setting and rigid methodological requirements” at the beginning of a project (ibid.). Second: practice-led researchers “insist that research outputs and claims to knowing must be made through the symbolic language and forms of their practice. They have little interest in trying to translate the findings and understandings of practice into the numbers (quantitative) and words (qualitative) preferred by traditional research paradigms... This insistence on reporting research through the outcomes and material forms of practice challenges traditional ways of representing knowledge claims. It also means that people who wish to evaluate research outcomes also need to experience them in direct (co-presence) or indirect (asynchronous, recorded) form” (ibid).

Haseman notes “a radical push”, first proposed by artist-researchers/creative communities of diverse practitioners, “to not only place practice within the research process, but to *lead* research through practice” (Haseman 2006, 3). Such research is “intrinsically experiential and comes to the fore when the researcher creates new artistic forms” as unique, valid embodiment/expression of the research (ibid.). Haseman notes that practice-led researchers may invent their own methods, along with utilising variants of established strategies (reflective practice, participant observation, ethnography, biographical/autobiographical/narrative inquiry, etc); and for each of these strategies, established methods are repurposed for the recording, managing and analysis of data, with data sources/forms extending to informal interviews, reflective dialogue, journals, personal/anecdotal experience, etc. (ibid., 8). The material outcomes of practice are seen as “important representations of research findings in their own right”; each symbol functions as a means to conceptualise ideas about aspects of reality” and also as a means of communicating what is known (ibid., 9).

Haseman identifies this approach as the “performance turn” within contemporary research, and acknowledges that with its emphasis on symbolic language, this mode does not appeal to all qualitative researchers – many may be uncomfortable with “the way these messy forms appear to be moving away from long-held and fundamental principles” (Haseman 2006, 4). Performative research, that “derives from relativist ontology and celebrates multiple constructed realities”, is thus both repository and conduit of “plurivocal potential” that operates through “interpretive epistemologies where the knower and the known interact, shape and interpret each other”; Haseman remarks that the widespread recognition and adopting of this third paradigm “would reassert some of the original definitional clarity to the category of qualitative research” (ibid., 7). However, the performative approach brings with it the danger that tested methodologies and their applications will be sidelined or dismissed as outdated, and that ethnography, a crucial, reliable and empirically grounded instrument of qualitative research, may be contested or simply rejected as a discipline. For Haseman, “such tensions are symptomatic of a category under strain... the many new practice-led strategies, methods of data collection and forms of reporting... incorporated under the ‘qualitative’ banner has “overstretched” the ‘qualitative research’ category to the extent that it now refers to any research that is not quantitative”, i.e., reported as numeric data (ibid., 5).

In terms of my SEA research methodology, practice is the principal research activity, and my research strategies are open-ended, flexible, and emphasise what emerges naturally, based on field observation, ethnography, auto-ethnography, narratives, interviews, reflective writing, and other personalised expression. I do not take the initiative to translate my research findings as per traditional qualitative analysis. Rather, in alignment with Haseman’s concept of practice-led research, the knowledge claims of my gender-based research projects are made

in the language of symbolic forms and must be read accordingly. Through diverse creative modes, project participants who are for the most part disenfranchised, stigmatised and abjected in different ways are able to discover themselves as 'artists', a new identity that brings self-assertion, self-belief, strength and confidence with regard to individual and group aspiration and action. These qualities are highly empowering for underprivileged women and girls in India's repressive patriarchal society rife with misogyny, carceral prohibitions on female freedom, and brutal, sometimes lethal, punishments for violating gender codes and family/community 'honour'.

The works produced by my project participants via traditional, new and hybrid media are varied and complex, and emerge from layered dialogic processes through which I connect with the participants, local communities and wider audiences. Whether it is the redesigning/repurposing an abandoned municipal park in a resettlement colony; or a community kitchen run by migrant and refugee women; or wall paintings by teenage girls in the public space of their conservative locality, or a collective painting by destitute women in a homeless shelter, the art forms, arising organically from the project context, express the participants' material realities and existential truths, as well as their self-concepts, desires, hopes and dreams. Sustained and systematic creative practice has catalyzed profound and positive shifts in participants' sense of self and identity, and enabled them to build and nurture transformative relationships not just with their material contexts, but also with their personal and collective capacity to imagine and articulate. While the participants' precarious socio-economic condition continues, their psychological horizons seem to have radically expanded, and they now affirm themselves as emerging artists with valid voices, valid perspectives, valid subjectivities, valid symbolic languages, valid skills and, above all, a valid place within a social system of unconscionable inequality.

I have come to understand through my practice-led research that SEA, especially when based on dialogic principles, cannot be evaluated, substantiated or validated through the empirical, objective parameters of concrete 'outcomes', 'changes', 'benefits' and 'products' within the community. My interventions are structured on the assumption that as a living process, dialogue itself is fully all of these. The vital, supple, resilient pulse of dialogue, with its equivocations and ambiguities, cannot be reduced to flat reiterations of prescriptive 'data', or be caged within formulaic 'findings' and 'conclusions'.

1.4.1 Research Methods⁵

My research methods draw on primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are grounded in the current SEA practice, and include a comparative analysis of the SEA practices and projects by other Indian artists. The secondary sources comprised scholarship and research literature, SEA theory and critique in the Indian and the international context.

The analysis and reflection are drawn on theorizing of the practice and field experiences in alignment with the literature review, and connecting this to broader SEA discourse.

1.4.1.1 Primary Sources

My Current Art Practice

The current SEA projects are built on multi-nodal networks of spatial and interpersonal relationships within a framework of reflective practice. A series of dialogue-based, interdependent artistic experiments are developed for project collaborators, who used a range of media and formats to create conceptual and aesthetic content reflecting their social reality. This content was then integrated into various thematic narratives with a strong visual element.

This current practice unfolded through a triadic sequence, artistic method, documentation and dissemination.

As mentioned earlier that the collaborative ethic of my current practice fell within the conceptual domain of relational art, and the principle hypothesis was the sphere of human relations as a site of artworks (Bourriaud 1998), the creative interventions were based on intense and regular conversations, discussions and workshops with collaborators on ideas arising from their work and presented to the group, channelled through research and daily writing. The artistic method also enhances the cognitive and creative ability of the collaborators that manifested through paintings, drawings, audiovisual narratives, storytelling, stitching, cooking and performance. The emphasis is on a free interpersonal dialogue between project collaborators, but the project also includes improvised, collaborative and cross-media narratives.

The general objective is to shape new art forms within given local nodes and imperatives, as well as to catalyze, release and uncover the aesthetic logic inherent and embedded in the

⁵This research methodology has been approved by the Ethics Committee at UTS.

existential matrix of community, each group with particular histories, demographics, socio-economic patterns and cultural affiliations. The most important aspect of the research process is group participation and the rigorous yet flexible method of regular dialogue, free sharing and active listening. No voice is undermined or relegated or negated. There are no fixed rules or formulae for this mode of documenting. Collaborators sessions are open-ended. Planning may at any time disperse into spontaneous activity. The entire process of formal and informal documentation by project collaborators, in different genres and narrative formats – wall-paintings, wall blogs, photographs, audio and video diaries, journals, interviews, maps, recipes and other texts – is carefully archived. On the part I as a project facilitator, documentation takes the form of field notes, photographs, sketches, audio/video recordings, blog entries and reports.

Further creative production by collaborators is disseminated within localities and communities through locality wall-paintings, zines of local narratives collected and compiled by participants, booklets, broadsheets, exhibitions, group events and performances. The sharing of narrative content may take different trajectories. Each media form has its aesthetic mandates and potential for broader circulation and is a potential instrument for building social relations within the community. The media forms arising from this engagement and their presence, parameters and effects are also contingent on the nature of the public space that is the ground of their embedment. Through creative exercises, collaborators work towards reinforcing group solidarity, and in ideal terms would gain the confidence to continue to engage with the public space on their own. It is worth noting that from beginning to end this creative work is infused with a profound sense of paradox because while there may be specific ‘outputs’ in terms of forms and activities and goals, the elusive yet evidentiary personal bonds that are the core ‘outcome’ of this current relational SEA practice cannot be empirically calibrated as ‘proof’ of the project’s success.

Interviews with selected SEA practitioners in India

The detailed inquiry into the practices and projects of other SEA practitioners in India is undertaken through interviews with selected artists and experts. The interviewees are all adult independent professional artists who have been practicing in the area of Socially Engaged Art for the past several years and have mutual respect as a colleague. There is a continuity of interaction with them through sharing ideas at conferences, seminars, workshops and other symposia. Therefore, I am well acquainted with their particular perspectives and approaches to the subject, and they are familiar with me. All the interviewees are familiar with art and curatorial discourses and are widely experienced about interview protocols.

Eight Indian experts are selected based on the connection of their practice with the research topic. Their expertise is evidenced through extensive practice and or publications in the field of Socially Engaged Art in India. In the selection, the strategy is based on gender balance, national diversity, as well as an equal distribution between practicing artists, curators, and art administrators.

The eight interviewees are:

Navjot Altaf is a sculpture and community art practitioner in Mumbai. She is one of the founder members of DIAA, an artist organization along with three tribal artists, namely Rajkumar Korram, Shantibai, Gessuram Viswakarma, from Bastar, Central India.

Jasmeen Patheja is an artist, feminist, and activist. She is the Founder/ Director of Blank Noise, a not-for-profit organization working towards women's rights and lives in Bangalore.

Sumona Chakraborty is a community art practitioner who lives and works in Kolkata. In 2014, she initiated the community art project Hamdasti in Kolkata.

Ravi Agarwal is from Delhi and an interdisciplinary artist, photographer, environmental campaigner, writer, a curator who has been engaged with social/ environmental issues for the past two decades. He is the curator of the Yamuna Elbe Public Art Festival.

Pooja Sood is the Director of Khoj International Artist's Association, New Delhi.

Sheba Chhachhi is a documentary photographer, installation artist, and activist, involved chronicling the women's movement in India. She lives and works in New Delhi.

AtulBhalla is a conceptual artist working on environmental issues, in particular water. He lives and works in Delhi.

WALA is a Delhi-based artist collective (Akansha Rastogi, Paribartana Mohanty, Sujit Das) formed in 2009. WALA has been engaged with performance art and community art projects in different marginalised sites in the peri-urban areas of Delhi.

Apart from interviews with eight selected artists and curators there are also references from Public art projects and festivals funded by nonprofit art institutes, Foundation of Indian Contemporary Art (FICA), Khoj international Artists Association and others which was undertaken through visiting exhibitions, and participating in seminars, conferences and workshops.

In order to select the experts, a consent form has been developed for the interviewees.

Firstly, an email was sent to the participants in which the research topic was described and the reason why their participation is valuable to the current research and had asked them whether they wish to participate in the research through their expert contribution. When they agree to participate, the consent form was sent to them and the interview questions and waited for the consent form till it was signed and returned with their consent for willing to participate through verbal interviews. The email also encouraged the potential interviewees to contact the researcher if they had any further questions regarding the research topic or their involvement. The researchers were requested to clarify to what extent participants or their corresponding work would be identifiable in research outputs. The researchers were requested to clearly outline this in the Participant information sheet (PIS); The researchers were requested to review the PIS for the purpose of consistency and clarity of content.

The participation information sheet (PIS) comprised the consent form and the interview questions. It stated that participants or their corresponding work were identifiable in the research output by name and position. It further stated that the participant's contribution to this research would be acknowledged.

The interview was conducted as per their selection of time and place and at their convenience, in person, by email or via Skype. Documentation happened through impressions and experience of the interview process based on my field notes and, or an audio diary.

The recorded interviews were transcribed. After preparing the transcript of each meeting from the respective audio recording, Skype recordings or email, the raw transcript were edited and send the edited transcripts to the individual interviewees for review. If they were apprehensive with any section of the interview transcript, they were free to discuss this and work through the particular discomfort if they wish. If they had made changes in the transcript, there was a rework on it to accommodate those changes. The interviewees had the final say vis-à-vis their transcript, and confirmed approval had been taken for the final text before considering the interview complete. This strategy of transparent exchange forecloses any risk of misinterpretation and misrepresentation, protecting both interviewee and interviewer. Each stage of transcript preparation was taken as an opportunity for in-depth reflection on the interview content, its relationship to the current SEA practice, and broader SEA discourse in India.

International SEA Discourse

My participation in the International SEA discourse dates back to the year 2015 and since then my presentations in several international conferences and simultaneous to them, my creative practices have been a continuous feature.

Since October 2015, I had been engaged in presenting papers in different conferences. It began with the Goethe Institute in New Delhi where the theme of the seminar was “Solo-cities: an International autonomy and representation of single women in Delhi/Mumbai/ and Shanghai, and UK” and the title of my paper was “Negotiating public space via art”.

In May 2016, I made a presentation in Zurich Kunsthalle, Switzerland on my project called “The Park” and this was in a symposium that was an extension of ‘Playground project’, the objective being to broaden the horizon by incorporating different contexts of the mega-city in an emerging country and its atypical concepts of childhood/leisure-work/public space.

In September 2017, I made a presentation in the University of Malmo, on my practice at K3 (Konts, Kultur och, Kommunikation).

In May 2019, my presentation of the paper “Street Art and every day” was in the International Conference held in the University of Tours, France and the title of the conference was “Rebel Streets: urban, space, art and social movement”.

In June 2019, I made a presentation in the workshop on “Feminist with no borders” and it was held in FAC-Research, Athens, Greece.

In June 2020, I was the keynote speaker in the workshop on “Feminist with no borders” in FAC-Research, Athens, Greece.

In July 2020, I made a presentation the title of which was “The Art of uneventful every day and this was in the online conference on Urban Creativity and Rebel streets.

These conferences have granted openings to me to engage in dialogues and discussions with the intercontinental artists, academics and connoisseurs who are from the corresponding SEA background, sharing similar research interests.

These conferences have further granted me the occasions to learn more about the contemporary practices within the orbit of SEA and also enabled me to build up a valuable network of SEA practitioners/experts/scholars at the international levels.

I participated as a keynote speaker in FAC, Athens has been appreciated widely and this precisely has granted an occasion to me to connect with the young researchers not only from Greece but also from different Art Institutions like University of Highland, Scotland, Royal Holloway, and London, England. As a corollary, I have been invited as a visiting lecturer in the University of Highland in Scotland, in the postgraduate course of Social practice.

Further, each conference has not only helped me to present my paper, but also provided a vantage point to be a part of a wider debate by publishing research papers in academic journals and books at the invitation of different academics from time to time.

The research papers that have been published are titled 'Narrating Community Vision.' "The Park project (2008-2009)" was published as a part of a research book, called "The Playground Project, Kunsthalle Zurich 2016". 'Debating Gaze via Art in Public Space' was published in journal RIDE, 2017, and recently in a peer reviewed paper titled 'Street Art and Everyday: A collaborative community art project engaging young women in an Urban Village, New Delhi' in Journal of Cultural Studies (JUC), 2020. There are more papers on the way to be published shortly.

In every conference, the feedback and comments to the papers presented have facilitated me to revisit my own research, time and again and in accordance to develop the research questions. In all these conferences, I have taken the Indian sub-continental voice beyond the border of my country, predominantly to the European and UK discourse, and much less to the US-American discourse.

The participation at the international forums has brought recognition at the national level and as a result, I have been invited as a guest lecturer in different universities, based in Delhi like, the department of Gender studies in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, the department of Social Design (postgraduation) in Ambedkar University, Delhi, and the Centre for Development Practice (MA), Ambedkar University, Delhi and the Centre for Creative Expression (MA), in Ambedkar University, Delhi.

Recently, I was invited to the Centre for Creative Expression in the Ambedkar university to design a course structure and to teach the course titled "Explorations in Concept and Media III: Community Art/Collaboration/Public Art".

1.4.1.2 Secondary Sources: Archives, Museum and Library

The secondary sources of my current research are drawn from maps, books, catalogues, offline and online journals, such as the master plan of the city, Old and New Delhi, from the archive of School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. Journals like the *SARAI Readers*, *Journal of Cultural Studies*, books on critical art and cultural theories are drawn from the library at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi. Online art journals such as *Field*, JAR (Journal for Artistic Research) are also sources of data. The sources for collecting knowledge on Public Art festival and Public Art projects beyond India

are drawn from FICA (Foundation for Contemporary Art) library Other international Public library Art projects from online UTS library, and also museums archives have been referred for further supporting details.

1.4.1.3 Methods for Analysis

The research methods of this project draw on primary and secondary sources—the primary sources ground on the current practice and the practices of eight Indian experts in the field of Socially Engaged Art. The secondary sources comprise the practices at the international level as well as scholarship, research literature, and Socially Engaged Art theory. The data analysis and reflection draws on the theorizing of field experiences in alignment with literature review and connecting this to broader Socially Engaged Art discourse.

The research data analysis is qualitative, conducted through a series of content analysis, a device to explain the text, ideas, and concepts within the given qualitative data.

Content Analysis follows two steps:

The first step is Conceptual Analysis, which identifies the concepts invoked in the overall texts generated from each data. It also reviews the study of the frequency of those concepts.

The second step is Relational Analysis, which explores the possible relation between the concepts in the texts and one which facilitates the broader idea of Socially Engaged Art. In conclusion the Final Analysis reflects the summary of the findings and links it to the research hypothesis and aim.

Phase I: Primary Data analysis

After preparing the transcript of each interview from the respective digital audio recording, the next steps followed with editing the raw transcript and sending the edited transcripts to the respective interviewees for review. The interviewees had the final say vis-à-vis their transcript and confirmed approval for the final text before considering the interview complete.

The following stages of data analysis were two folds, Conceptual and Relational . The trajectory of Conceptual Analysis was through method ‘Tagging /Coding’ and identifying the core concepts. Through tagging/coding I developed the primary features/ keywords/codes from the primary research data and connecting to the research questions. For example, the keywords were Social- Space, Site-Specific Art, Dialogic Art, Collaborative Art, New Aesthetic, Self New Audience, Ethical aspect, Sustainability, Role of the Artist. Then through identifying

the core concepts, and understanding the thematic pattern of each text by connecting it to the research questions and finding out the core concept under which the practice was categorized. The next step was tagging each text under the keyword applicable for each practitioner's practice. However, all practices could not be tagged under the same keyword, so sometimes, one practice was tagged under one or two keywords, or sometimes all keywords were relevant for a particular one practice. Therefore, each data analysis might lead to multiple interpretations based on the experiences, observations, and insights connected to the core concepts and questions raised.

Further, through Relational Analysis, the method followed an understanding of the pattern of interpretation through different concepts evolving during the content analysis; the core task here is to investigate the relationship between the individual concepts and how it facilitates the broader concepts in the Socially Engaged Art discourse.

Phase II Research Context Analysis

The Secondary data drew upon theoretical and critical frameworks of International Socially Engaged Art discourse. The approach and grasp of this academic material combined historical and sociological readings with contemporary views on creative production in the International context.

The first step of the content analysis on the secondary data was to identify the core concepts within the data collected based on the reading, observation from the literature, contemporary views in the Socially Engaged Art, connecting to the research questions. The concepts were as New Genre Public Art, Site-Specific Art, Community Art, Participatory Art, Collaborative and Dialogic Art. Each observation was interpreted and marked under the appropriate conceptual categories and their properties that constitute the concepts mentioned above. The analysis combined relevant aesthetic, historical and sociological readings with contemporary critical theory and perspectives on creative production, and connect these readings my current research questions. The observations were categorized under the areas mentioned above and examined in connection to the current research questions. The collection and compilation of data in the form of observations, and linking these to research findings as presented in scholarly articles was the next chapter.

The next step and final was testifying the findings, through a comparative understanding of the emerging concepts with that prevailing in the literature of Socially Engaged Art. The observations were noted where the data from primary research complies with the fundamental properties of the theories or not. Finally, the findings that emerged beyond the defined concepts were recorded and theorized as new concepts in the field of Socially Engaged Art.

Chapter 2: Research Context

2.1. Introduction

The theoretical and critical frameworks of international Socially Engaged Art discourse are investigated in this chapter through a detailed literature review that focuses on the following areas: New Genre Public Art, Community Engagement in Socially Engaged Art, Spectacle and the Participant-Audience Relationship, Collaborative and Dialogic Methodology as a Key Component of Socially Engaged Art, Co-authoring/Co-producing and De-authoring in Socially Engaged Art Processes, Feminist Ethnography, SEA in the Contemporary Global South and SEA in the Contemporary Indian Context. The observations are categorized under the areas mentioned above and examined in connection to the author's research questions.

2.2 New Genre Public Art

The literature review here foregrounds Suzanne Lacy's definition and understanding of what she terms "New Genre Public Art", a fresh paradigm of SEA discourse, that upholds collaboration/public participation as its central principle. This new artistic trend developed through the Dada movement that arose amidst the chaos and violence of World War 1 and inscribed an aesthetic philosophy that transgressed the boundaries of institutionalized art and directly connected with the public in the street. The trend was also reflected in other disciplines such as theatre (Bishop 2006, 10, 12), and strengthened over the next fifty years. New debates have accreted around the artistic experiments and research projects that set up innovative engagements between communities and the artist – efforts that produce new social perspectives, new kinds of "social" art (and perhaps even new modes of sociality). These efforts may also reach into the realms of art pedagogy and art activism. Nevertheless, whatever the field of application, rather than fixating on empirically quantifiable "results", "outcomes" and "products", the new methodology valorizes the unpredictable and often unsettling *process* of participatory art-making.

The generic term "Social Practice in Art" was coined in 2005, and draws upon the new social theories that scrutinize the interdependencies between individuals and groups, and groups and the larger society. It catalysed a new approach, variously termed "dialogic" (Kester 2004), "relational" (Bourriaud 1998) and "ethical" (Bishop 2012). Collaborative art-making was critically examined terms of its potential for ephemerality (short-term participatory) as well as

for longevity (built up over extended group engagement). The latter category of art process also gave rise to another category of socially engaged art: “Art of Social Cooperation” (Finkelpearl 2013).

Examining various SEA projects of the last twenty years, Nato Thompson asserts that this new form of art has shaken the foundation of art discourse and created an opportunity to share art-related objectives and approaches with other disciplines (Thompson 2012, 18, 19). According to Thompson, unlike Dada and other avant-garde movements such as Constructivism, Futurism, Situationism, Happenings and Fluxus, etc., SEA is not an ideological entity. Rather, it is a kind of cultural practice which has emerged and evolved from the granular material trajectories and textures of daily human existence within the social order. This practice challenges authorial hegemonies, prioritizes participation as a significant mode of social connection, and solicits the interweaving of aesthetic strategies from other fields, such as urban planning, community work, theatre and visual art, and generating more powerful “participation, sociality and the civic” (Ibid, 19).

Lacy observes vis-à-vis New Genre Public Art that the “source of these artworks’ structure is not exclusively visual or political information, but rather an internal necessity perceived by the audience in collaboration with his or her audience” (Lacy 1995, 19). The term “New Genre” came into circulation after the 1960s when certain kinds of art began to move from the confines of the traditional gallery and museum into public spaces, enabling direct contact with the viewership. These genres included painting, sculpture and conventional visual mediums, even while there was an increase in experimental approaches that used combinations of media forms, including performance, installations, conceptual art and mixed-media art. In the 1990s, practitioners of this genre used both traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with the broader audiences about social issues and their impact on individual and group life. New Genre Public Art thus increasingly created new audiences with each new site and context, as well as new collaborations between specialists across disciplines, with projects involving not just artists but scientists, architects, urban planners and other professionals in a creative transformation of material spaces.

Lacy also suggests that New Genre Public Art is not just about particular shifts in choice of subject matter, or just about shifts in placement or context, but also, most importantly, about the aesthetic expression of activated value systems. She quotes independent curator Mary Jane Jacob: “The new public art is not so much a movement of the nineties, a new way of working, that has found its time.” For Lacy, the democratic tenor and issue-based themes of this kind of artistic practice draws on the social experience of marginalisation, ‘Otherness’, meta-ecologies and micro-environments, the impact of technology, the influence of popular

culture, etc. She also invokes American independent curator Lyn Sowder's observations about the power relationship that endures within the process of collaborative creating: "We need to find ways not only to educate audiences for art but to build structures that share the power inherent in making culture with as many people as possible" – this is fundamental if the "disposition of exclusiveness" at the core of cultural life is to be transformed (Lacy 1995, 31).

Acknowledging the "inconclusive nature" of what she terms "the contemporary polis", Lacy observes that this "indeterminacy" itself is a "major theme" in new genre public art, i.e., art directed towards influencing the aesthetic understandings and perspectives of a broader population: "The nature of audience – in traditional art taken to be just about everyone – is now being rigorously investigated in practice and theory" (Lacy 1995, 20). She argues that the term "public" needs to be scrutinised and qualified: Is "public" the description of the place, portal, ownership or a particular audience? Is the "public" aspect of this mode of cultural production being subsumed into the primarily elitist prevalent discourse of contemporary art?

Lacy's astute descriptor of "indeterminacy" extends into the assertion that "what exists in the space between the words "public" and "art" is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may itself become the artwork" (Lacy 1995, 20). Kwon supports Lacy's situating of grassroots, artist-initiated activist groups from the 1960s (such as the Art Workers Coalition, Los Angeles Council of Women Artists, Foundation for the Community of Artists, etc.) as well as the alternative art movements of the 1970s "within the same lineage", posing art in the public interest as "a revitalisation of the historical avant-garde's efforts to integrate art and everyday life" (Kwon 2002, 105,106). We need to further study past avant-garde activism and aesthetic counter-narratives if we are to properly understand the radical parameters of New Genre Public Art and its link to contemporary SEA practices and discourses.

2.3. Site-Specificity in Socially Engaged Art

In her recommendation that the relationship between the artwork and its public placement be critically re-examined, Kwon notes the recent development of new terms within SEA discourse, such as 'site-determined', 'site-oriented', "site-referenced", "site-conscious", "site-responsive", "site-related", etc., and their usage by many artists and critics as well as their adoption by mainstream art institutions (who may tend to use the terms loosely and often inaccurately). She alleges that the term "site-specific" is misused and that the dominant culture has "domesticated" what is essentially a provocative socio-political practice, focusing on the visual elements of the site and commissioning art that will most readily fit in and, or augment the site (Kwon 2002). One such example of aforementioned site-specific art is cannons in the park in

the promenade of military weapons on the Mall in Washington DC, an instance where the display glorifies national history without considering the opinion of the general public (Lacy 1995). Artist Jeff Kelly, who castigates a habit adopted by “too many” privileged artists, namely, to “parachute” into a material space, disrupt it and the existent community dynamic with art interventions and then leave, either while or after the project, also critiques this aggressive, entitled repurposing of public space by those authorized to modify it. In these cases, the variable of site-specificity “was more like the imposition of a kind of disembodied museum zone onto what already had been very meaningful and present before that, which was the place” as Kwon has cited (Ibid, 24).

Kwon invokes the warning delivered by critic Hafthor Yngvason who points out vis-a-vis participatory/community-based art practice that we must take note of the politics involved in a critical discursive shift, with artists today increasingly preferring the term ‘collaborative’ to ‘site-specific’ as a descriptor of their work. He notes that over the past two decades, public art has emphasized “techniques of integration” – i.e., the effort is “not just to incorporate art physically into buildings and parks, but also to foster social assimilation” (Kwon 2002, 115, 116). While site-specificity is reflexively assumed to be the public form of art and has indeed served to introduce art into neighbourhoods “without the glaring irrelevance of what has been called ‘plop art’” (Ibid 115), practitioners of site-specificity continue to exercise privilege in terms of unilateral intervention, rarely scrutinizing their embedded ideas about communities. At the same time, site-specific projects offers those communities a chance to interrogate or contest art interventions that claim to represent those communities’ material and social truths.

Kwon identifies “broader shifts in advanced art practices”, with the focus moving from aesthetic concerns to social issues, from the conception of an art work primarily as an object to ephemeral processes or events, from prevalence of permanent installations to temporary interventions, from the primacy of production as source of meaning to reception as site of interpretation, and from autonomy of authorship to its multiplicitous expansion in participatory collaborations (Kwon 2017,1). These shifts in praxis have enabled greater inclusivity and democratisation in the sphere of art – for artists, art administrators, arts institutions and art audiences – but also present “the danger of a premature and uncritical embrace of ‘progressive’ art as an equivalent of ‘progressive’ politics” (ibid.). While the new socially engaged forms of art challenge prevalent artistic ideologies, they may also “capitulate” to powerful seen and unseen economic trajectories in the arts domain: “What appears to be progressive, even transgressive and radical, may in fact serve conservative if not reactionary agendas of the dominant minority” (ibid.2).

Kwon lauds the capacity of site-specific art to excavate repressed histories, support more visibility/representation of marginalised groups, and illuminate the value of ‘minor’ spaces that are overlooked by majority culture. Simultaneously, she warns that since “the current socio-economic order thrives on the (artificial) production and (mass) consumption of difference (for difference sake), the siting of art in ‘real’ places can also be a means to *extract* the social and historical dimensions out of places to variously serve the thematic drive of an artist, satisfy institutional demographic profiles, or fulfill the fiscal needs of a city” (ibid,4).

Lacy deepens her seminal observation about New Genre Public Art – that “what exists in the space between the words ‘public’ and ‘art’ is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may itself become the artwork” – via the argument that it is crucial to identify whether new genre art works as a “symbolic gesture” or a “concrete action” (Lacy1995,46). In this case, the art must be evaluated from different perspectives, to accurately gauge the impact not only on participants and their social group but, just as significantly, on the artists themselves (Kwon 2002, 19, 20). Such critique will serve to challenge the nature of art as we know it – i.e. the artwork understood not predominantly as a product but as a *process*, a linked set of philosophical tenets (an existential language), a form of ethical action, a progressive value system, and an effective strategy for positive transformation in the broader socio-cultural context. In other words, new genre public art that directly engages with vulnerable communities and their cultures is *itself* vulnerable to being appropriated as a cultural commodity by state or private actors with vested interests, capital and influence.

For Kwon, the underlying thrust of community based site-specificity is to create a work of art fully integrated (materially and in terms of symbolic language) with the site, a work that emerges organically/spontaneously from the site itself; the meaning of such work specifically links to the site in unique ways that cannot be replicated at other sites. Community based site-specificity emphasizes social integration. Here the site *itself* is considered as a social entity, a “community”, but not simply in terms of ecological or architectural design. The value of such art does not reside in the object itself (if an object is ‘produced’ via the interventions) but is developed over time through the interaction between artist and the community – a relationship that is also integral to the artwork and considered to be of equal importance as any object produced through the interventions. The central objective of community based site-specificity is that members of the community will be integral to and involved in the process of art-making. The role of these members varies from viewer/spectator, audience, and public referential subject. Second, it is important that they can recognize themselves in the work and their presence in the art making is appropriately pictured and validated, if not very significantly involved (Kwon 2002, 107, 108).

2.4. Community Engagement in Socially Engaged Art

‘Community Art’ is another standard term used to define social arts practice which is dialogic and manifested in a community setting. Within SEA discourse, the term ‘community’ is broadly associated with disenfranchised social groups “that have been systematically excluded from the political and cultural processes that affect, if not determine, their lives” (Kwon 2002, 105). These groups counter the general processes of exclusion and repression “by collectively demanding equal rights, greater social recognition, economic support, and political power” (ibid, 112). They include sexual/ethnic/racial minority groups, working-class communities, women’s groups, senior citizens’ organizations, and diverse others.

Kwon asks how, in actual practice within collaborative art projects, a group of people becomes identified as a ‘community’: who imposes the definition upon them, who decides the issues to be articulated within the project, and the roles and limits imposed by the funding organization, or sponsoring institution, or curator, or artist; and whether the community itself has agency and the power of adjudication. A key question to be examined is whether the partner community pre-exists the art project, or is produced by it and whether the partner community coincides with the intended audience. “If new public art engages the audience as active participants in the production of an artwork, which to a degree renders them subjects of the work, too, then who is the audience for this production? What criteria of success and failure are posed now, especially to the artists, in this major reconfiguration of public art that moves aesthetic practice closer to social services?” (Kwon 2002, 116).

It is also essential to focus on the specific identity/identities of the participating community and of the artist, especially in terms of class and other immediate privileges. If the community’s identity is produced through the art-making processes, does the logic equally apply to the artist?

2.5. Spectacle and the Role of Participants/Audience

Claire Bishop identifies a key twentieth-century SEA trajectory as that of the audience/spectator actively participating in the production of art, positioned against its mythical counterpart, i.e., art passively consumed by the spectator (Bishop 2012). She reiterates Boris Groys’s insistence that “art must be directed against contemplation, against spectatorship, against the passivity of the masses paralyzed by the spectacle of modern life” (Bishop 2012, 36). Whether this modality of collective alienation is created by the “dominant ideological order” – be it neoliberal capitalism, totalitarian socialism, military dictatorship,

religious majoritarianism or other forms of hegemony – the artist must aspire to activate the audience. Such participation is a form of resistance as well as a means of emancipating the ‘public’ from the profoundly damaging, existentially dissociative conditions imposed by modern consumerism. Bishop also points to Groys’ suggestion that in the age of social media, artists can use technology to ensure greater public participation in art production through efficiently creating digital spectacles, which are ceaselessly replicated for abstract spectators in distant spaces and asynchronous times. Whatever the mode and form of artistic expression, spectatorship remains a psychological necessity for all art production, especially participatory art, and all SEA artists need spectators, for it is only through this relationship that the meaning, worth, influence and relevance of *any* artistic production can be judged.

Despite being heavily critiqued by theorists such as Debord, spectacle is characteristic of modernity and has acquired a unique resonance in art history and criticism, and has strong claims to being a valid form of participatory art, with its emphasis on collaboration and inclusion. This re-humanizes public response within the sphere of art production in any society that is both overtly and subtly controlled/coerced into passive viewership by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism. Conversely, in his discussion of spectacle Baudrillard dismisses both Debord and Foucault, insisting that the era of panoptic strategies/optical control and related manipulation of social spaces has come to an end, and that we “are no longer in the society of spectacles which the Situationists talked about, nor in the specific types of alienation and repression which this implied”. Invoking McLuhan’s classic enunciation (i.e., the medium is the message), Baudrillard declares unequivocally that via spectacle the medium is no longer experienced as a singular instrument, and that there is a merging of mediums and therefore of messages; the message “is the first great formula of this new era” (Baudrillard 1983, 54).

In terms of contemporary critique, Bishop notes that “spectacle is the word self-defined by the artist in their process of the socially engaged practice which is opposed both artistically and politically by participatory art” (Bishop, *Participation and Spectacle*, 35, 36). Citing Rosalind Krauss, she reminds us that spectacle is a complex phenomenon with a wide range of attributes, very diverse in shape, size, and scale, and accommodative of ideological inputs ranging from corporate imaging to populism, thus continuously open to multiple readings (Ibid 35, 36). Bishop argues that participatory art has bypassed the conventional idea of spectatorship and evolved a new understanding of art without an audience, i.e., where the role of the audience is implicit in the production of the artwork; and while participants are both creators and spectators in the SEA process, all audiences cannot be equal participants in each artistic project.

2.6. Collaborative and Dialogic Methodology as Key SEA Component

Dialogue and collaboration are central principles in SEA processes. Kester draws on Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin for the concept of the “dialogic” qualities in literary works. In “dialogic” art practice, “the work of art can be viewed as a kind of conversation – a locus of differing meanings, interpretations and points of view” (Kester 2004, 10). In such practice there is no monolithic, hegemonic, specific way of speaking, listening or responding; rather, there is the emergence and prevalence of “living conversation” that within a given moment brings together and enables the interaction of different social languages, expressions and conceptual possibilities, and also enables these to co-exist in terms of their socio-ideological life (Bakhtin 1982)

Kester remarks that the collaborative approach has deep roots in social/cultural/art activism, and is a deep ideological influence on many contemporary artists and artist collectives across the globe. With the expansion of SEA discourse, critics infused new terminology into an analysis of the participatory method: “relational aesthetics” [Nicholas Bourriaud]; “conversational art” [Homi Bhabha]; “dialogue-based public art” [Tom Finkenpearl] (Kester 2004, 9, 10). Kester also asserts that while SEA and its “dialogical aesthetic” are defined and understood differently all over the world, the common denominator is that all such projects seek to disrupt and reconstitute “previously sovereign forms of agency and subjectivity in the work of art” through structural interventions in terms of both production and reception (Ibid 10).

Thus, the dominant idea and expression in collaborative/community-based works is ‘relationality’, which can either be produced in a given work, or be the subject matter of a given work; and these two modes may often overlap in a given work. Kester reflects upon the difference between traditional art projects that produce art ‘objects’, and dialogic projects that are open-ended and collaborative, by drawing upon educationist/philosopher Paolo Freire’s critique of the “conventional banking style of art, in which the artist deposits an expressive content onto a physical object, to be withdrawn later by the viewer” (Kester 2004, 57). In this schema, art production is unilateral, the outcome is fixed, and the viewer is the artist’s lowest priority since the terms of engagement are not open to reciprocal response. In contrast, the dialogic method rests and relies on a mode of egalitarianism, pluralism, pragmatism and empathy: “Artistic practice can no longer revolve around the construction of objects to be consumed by the passive bystander. Instead there must be an art of action, interacting with reality, taking steps – however small – to repair the social bond” (Bishop 2012, 11).

The definition of ‘community’ is also a fraught one within SEA discourse. One claim is that “the conventional models of the community are premised on the concept of centred, self-identical

subjects coming into communion through mutual recognition of a shared essence” (Kester 2004, 154). In contrast, Kester cites Jean-Luc Nancy, for instance, who claims that our identities “are always in negotiation, always in the process of being formed and re-formed through our encounters with others”. This distinguishes a dialogic encounter in which subjectivity itself is transformed, from a communicative interaction staged by fixed subjects enunciating or representing pre-existing judgments while arguing the state of “being of communication” in contrast to “subject of representation” (Ibid, 154). He gives the examples of collaborative projects by Lacy’s “Parking Garage Dialogue” Wochen Kalusur’s “Boat Colloquies” and Willats’s “Tower Block Collaborations” that are characterized by the performative modality of “being-outside-self” where the participants act or improvise or articulate beyond their prior roles and identities (Ibid, 155). This resonates with his observation that art historians and theorists are more apprehensive about analyzing dialogic projects because the participatory/collaborative method with its dynamic, recalcitrant and transient variables is not readily amenable to being calibrated and plotted on the fixed grids of critique. There is no way writers can directly witness the entire unfolding of the dialogic method or its manifestation in the artistic ‘result’. Its loosely braided, thoroughly interdependent processes do not coalesce around the physical finality of a single object/product, nor does it coerce its imaginative field, aesthetic strategies and social imprint into the conditioned funnel of a single kind of viewership.

A crucial question raised in this regard is whether SEA has the potential to reduce the violence that in the twentieth century has often been marked as social action (Kester 2004, 19). For Deleuze, this issue is directly connected to processes of representation in modern art and should be an insistent concern for any scrutiny of the ethics of the genre. His novel critical history of avant-garde art is significantly more complex and less provincial than that offered by traditional art historians and critics, thus creating a discursive pathway towards understanding dialogic art that, like the avant-garde, challenges stereotypes and fosters openness, inclusion and difference (Deleuze, 1999).

2.7. Littoral Art

The littoral artwork is a material process as well as a material product, “rooted in a discursively-mediated encounter in which the subject positions of artist and viewer or artist and subject are openly thematized and can potentially be challenged and transformed” (Kester 2000, 2). Such art is interdisciplinary, operating between discourses (for instance, between art and activism) and between institutions (gallery, museum, community spaces, public sites); it is also viewed as generating diverse types of interfaces – between practitioners, collectives/collaborators and

audiences, between different media, between and between different sources/bodies of knowledge. Due to its interdisciplinary nature, littoral art makes very different demands on practitioners, collectives/collaborators and audiences than does conventional gallery or museum-based art, and it repudiates the conventional aesthetic paradigms and critical assumptions of conventional art that tend to be identified with art specific mediums. As a discursive aesthetic, littoral art is “based on the possibility of a dialogical relationship that breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, art work and audience”, enabling the viewer to ‘speak back’ to the artist in different ways; this reply becomes in effect a part of the ‘work’ itself (ibid., 3, 4). In terms of creative cultural production, the thorough and extensive interdisciplinarity necessitates the production of meaning through multiple contexts, modes and instruments, and also necessitates the ability to systematically work through alternative/non-institutional sites. In terms of long-term practice, the littoral artist “can challenge the disabling political quietism of liberal aesthetics” by skillfully ‘interfacing’ with existing sites of political and cultural resistance (ibid.).

2.8. Co-authoring/co-producing and De-authoring in SEA Processes

Discussing the “social turn” in contemporary collaborative art, Lacy analyzes the “decisive departure” from the domain of institutionalised art to an art based on “heightened self-reflexivity” and “engagement” (Lacy 1995, 19). The latter redefines the relationship between public and private; re-frames aesthetics as well as the audience/“addressee” of art; reconstructs art history; and overall, is evidence of an activist/interventionist change in concerns (Ibid, 19). Collaborative art is thus the outcome of a shift from the representation and experience of diverse “life-worlds” to a depiction of the “other”, i.e., “communities and their social relations”, and this opens up an “interdisciplinary arena of possibilities” through the linked presence and instrumentality of art practice, criticism, theory and history (Ibid, 19).

Kester similarly notes that SEA reflects a shift in both content and context, as well as a shift in the relationship between artwork and audience, with the artist seeking to assault/disrupt the “ideological programming” of an audience through “cognitive shock or dissonance” (Kester 2004, 88). Moreover, SEA also reflects a shift from an earlier paradigm of autonomous art practice to a combination with other cultural fields, such as design, urban studies, theatre, etc., facilitating “a broader, trans-disciplinary interest in collective knowledge production” (Ibid, 88, 89). Such art, with its focus on material conditions, is no longer “sequestered” in protective institutional spaces – instead, it is produced “situationally” and contextually, and thus raises the crucial question of limits: “When does the work ‘begin’, and when does it ‘end’? What are

the boundaries of the field within which it operates, and how were they determined?" (Ibid, 88, 89).

With regard to the crucial issue of authorship, Bishop observes that while dialogic processes primarily offer possibilities of equality and democratic relationship, its strategy of multiple inputs from multiple sources/participants is often underscored by risk and aesthetic unpredictability. She comments that while within SEA discourse the idea of the collective has been variously investigated/interrogated by theorists, they are in consensus about one fact – that SEA is fundamentally a collective endeavour, even in cases of SEA projects where the core ideation remains decisively individual. There is one person who motivates and facilitates, sets the trajectory, and determines the nature of the aesthetic, the interpersonal collaboration and the material production. The SEA mode of participation and involvement differs from other apparently egalitarian performative media formats such as rigorously directed, globally telecast reality shows, for instance, where audience engagement is consciously solicited, and viewers are directly or indirectly a core element in the production, valued within this art-making process as indispensable co-creators/co-authors (Bishop 2002, 12).

From the 1990s onwards, and irrespective of geographical location, SEA has aimed at inverting the conventional relationship between art object, artist and audience. The artist is no longer the individual producer of a distinct object but is instead a collaborator or producer of a mutating, proliferating context, a node of relationships that serve as both receptacle and mirror of the artist's intent. The work of art – once a portable, commodifiable object – has been re-envisioned as a long-term ongoing project with an undefined beginning and end. The audience – once conceived as separate from the work and in the role of close or distant viewer/passive consumer – is now actively embedded within it as co-producer/participant. The singular aim of this dynamic "de-authored lineage" is to "embrace collective creativity" (Finkenpearl 2013, 4). Mey draws on Lacy's critique to affirm that SEA "takes a stance for social justice and equality" through creative engagement that puts forward "persuasive agreements for different cultural and ethical value hierarchies" (Mey 2010).

Finkenpearl agrees with Bishop's collation of existent descriptors for the genre, including 'socially engaged art', 'community-based art', 'experimental communities', 'dialogic art', 'littoral art', 'participatory art', 'interventionist art', 'research-based art', 'collaborative art', eventually preferring neither the term 'social cooperation' nor 'social collaboration' (Finkenpearl 2013, 5). He argues that collaboration "is simply too far-reaching a claim to make; not all of the participants are equally authors of these projects, especially in the initiation and conceptualization. Cooperation, on the other hand, simply implies that people have worked together on a project. Even the projects on the 'de-authored' side of the spectrum involve a

self-identified artist who can claim the title of initiator or orchestrator of the cooperative venture, including the projects in which little or none of the final product is by his or her own hand. Second, calling a work cooperative situates the practice in the intellectual zone of human cooperation” (Ibid, 5, 6).

In SEA contexts, the core principle of inclusion/collaboration, as described above, is manifested through dialogic activity and polyphonic expression. This mode of exchange and mutuality is an enabling condition for self-assertion and more confident personal articulation, especially within a radically stratified, unequal, male-dominated socio-cultural context. Within its patriarchal ethos, women and girls, as well as historically disenfranchised and marginalised communities in general (and in particular, women and girls from such communities), are generally expected to be subordinate, passive and self-censoring with regard to their personal and social claims, public presence, autonomy, mobility, and individual voice.

2.9. Feminist Ethnography

Earlier associated with qualitative research in the social sciences, primarily anthropology and sociology, ethnography has today broadened into interdisciplinary explorations, including different aspects of feminism and feminist projects, and is deployed as a methodological pivot across different fields. The use of ethnography in feminist research developed between the early 1960s and early 1980s, during the second wave of the Western feminist movement when there was an urgency to develop women’s scholarship on gendered experience, the theorizing of which was dominated by men’s perspectives and understandings of women’s realities (Davis and Craven 2016, 7). The various linked strands of feminist epistemology and feminist ethics that have shaped and transformed feminist ethnography over the last four decades continue to be a focus of critique across social science and the humanities, including the arts and media arts.

Fremlova argues that “positionality and reflexivity” have a central impact on all aspects of feminist qualitative social science research; she recommends that researchers challenge the presumed neutrality and objectivity of research, and instead question the ‘assumed stability and coherence of the ethnographic self’ (Fremlova 2018, 100, 101). She defines positionality as the researcher’s “situatedness” in the social world of the participants vis-à-vis “power relations that are often asymmetrical and exist in inequitable ways”. Positionality is relational, unstable, context-contingent, and can shift over time and over the course of the research; it “reflects the ontological and epistemological values and worldviews into which the researcher – the main orchestrator of collecting, collating, analysing and interpreting data – is discursively

embedded and enmeshed” (101, 102). Positionality assimilates a range of intersecting and interlocking variables that constitute the researcher’s multiple identities (ethnicity, race, religious faith, gender/gender identity, sexuality, socioeconomic status, class, education, dis/ability, political views). These identities are “reiterated performativities” that are “relationally constituted” and “(re)created” through modes of engagement in the participants’ social world, and require explicit, ongoing scrutiny. The interdependent variables influence the “contemplative eye” of the researcher and, taken together, mean “that very little – if any – qualitative research is or can be value-free” (ibid.)

As Fremlova warns against assimilating the canonised insider/outsider binary of the researcher’s position, and urges vigilance against “neopositivist empiricism”, an epistemology which “specifies a strict dichotomy between subject and object as a prerequisite for objectivity and is supported by methods that position the researcher outside the researched worlds” (Fremlova 2018, 106). This stance reduces engagement, views it as a possible threat to objectivity, and posits distance, impartiality and detachment as criteria for good research. The researcher is presented as “a carefully constructed public self” and a “neutral collector of facts”, while the researched “are objectified as a malleable and passive mere mine of information to be exploited” (ibid.) In contrast, feminist research across disciplines is based on the acknowledgment of “a politics of location”, arguing that “a view from nowhere” does not exist. Hence, it is crucial that academics, “especially those who are members of dominant social groups and/or cultures, and who engage in researching minority and/or marginalised groups... be aware of and reflect on their positionality and privilege, all the more so since doing research that highlights difference may contribute to the further marginalization and/or stigmatization of the research participants and their communities” (ibid, 102, 104).

Lahman et al (2011) declare that “ethics are larger than research” and are “an embodiment of who the researcher essentially tries to be”; these scholars posit “CRRRE” (Culturally Responsive Relational Reflexive Ethics) as the “three Rs” / desirable key underpinnings of feminist projects (1400). *Responsive* implies ‘carefully testing assumptions and open-mindedly revising one’s understanding in the light of new information’, and mandates the explicit recognition, affirmation and exploration of cultural difference. A responsive approach validates participants’ world-views; explores power differentials and acknowledges that “non-traditional research methods may work better with participants of differing cultural values”; and is attentive to individual conceptions of culture that are “embedded in the political, socioeconomic and structural institutions of the society in which the participants have been socialized”. Responsiveness includes the “use of appropriate and judicious self-disclosure” on the researcher’s part, as well as checking at each stage that subjects still want to participate in the research. *Relational* implies “holding relational concerns as high as research”; building

participant trust and respecting any “healthy mistrust” exhibited by participants; seeking “the good”; and attempting “a stance of care”. *Reflexive* signifies a “thoughtful, self-aware analysis of the intersubjective dynamics between the researcher and researched”, and continuous “critical self-reflection of the ways in which researchers’ social backgrounds, assumptions, positioning and behaviour” influence the research process (ibid., 1401-03).

Skeggs notes that feminist research “as a prescriptive ethic of care... created its own problems by reproducing a form of biological and cultural essentialism, which assumed that women were predisposed to care” (Skeggs in Atkinson et al, 2001, 433). The fundamental questions to which all feminist researchers must always pay attention are: “does the analysis re-inscribe the researched into powerlessness, pathologised, without agency?”, and “in whose interests?” She recommends “studying crisis or ruptures in the pattern of normality, so that the pathology of the normal may be perceived” (ibid., 434, 437), She points out that researchers cannot easily renounce the “economic and cultural baggage, discursive access and the traces of positioning and history that they embody; and in fact “may not even know that much” about themselves (ibid., 434). Amid pragmatic questions – such as whether researchers should find ways to reciprocate/compensate the researched for the time they give to the projects, and to what extent the researched should control the outcome of the research/researchers cede authority – Skeggs makes the fascinating observation that “the need to make friends with strangers (the basis of most ethnography) works, in terms of relationality and dialogue, to conceal the operation of an epistemic division within the process of becoming more intimate with one who has already been designated as strange” (ibid., 435). She also notes that feminist ethnography has the potential to become “a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation” precisely *because* it rests on empathetic engagement and emotional attachment, thus puts the researched at risk of feeling deeply manipulated and betrayed by the researcher if the research relationship fractures (ibid.).

Discussing the “dilemmas” faced by critical ethnographers (those who use feminist, anti-racist or social justice approaches), McQueeney and Lavelle assert that like most jobs “that involve attentiveness to others” qualitative research requires consistent “emotional labour”, i.e., “the process by which workers summon certain feelings (and not others) in themselves, their colleagues and their clients”; this effort is “a hidden work requirement in both low-status and high-status service occupations” (McQueeney and Lavelle 2015, 1, 5). Ethnographers’ emotional labour is “under-studied”, and “typically framed as personal accounts of fieldwork” rather than perceived as “a generic process” that is a “basic component of critical methodology” (ibid., 5, 6). However, emotions can be reframed and deployed as epistemological tools in analysis, and qualitative researchers “should move beyond notions of emotional labour as ‘personal’ to embrace its larger sociological potential” – i.e., link personal

lives to the wider historical and socioeconomic relationships and networks in which these lives are enmeshed (ibid., 21). The authors remark that while novice ethnographers quickly learn how to build empathetic relationships and practice an ethic of care in the field, they are rarely trained in effective “emotion management”. Hence critical ethnographers usually learn only via the often disruptive exigencies of fieldwork how to connect deeply and appropriately with the researched but not be “overly sympathetic” lest they start viewing their work as biased or unfocused or lacking rigour. Methodological training should “move beyond a mere recognition that emotions inform ethnographic work to offer strategies to deal with emotions in the field, and, more broadly, acknowledge how emotions contribute to knowledge production”; one such strategy is emotional reflexivity, recommended by feminist research across disciplines, which is not a form of solipsistic “navel-gazing” but is “vital to an honest and ethically mature research practice” (ibid., 21). The quality of the research, as well as the well-being of both the researcher and the researched, benefit from the skilful management/deployment of emotional labour in field engagements, in data collection processes, and in writing the research narrative (ibid., 3).

For Lo Bosco, the strength of feminist research is its interpretation of emotions as “a form of embodied experience” inextricably linked to “relational life”, and its treatment of emotions as “culturally informed expressions of the self” (Lo Bosco 2021, 9). She discusses emotional labour as central to the “affective turn” in fieldwork wherein emotions are considered as “forces changing one’s capacity to think and act”, and have an “epistemic value” (ibid, 13, 14). She regrets that the emotional labour of fieldwork – including “difficult decisions, joyful moments, problematic encounters and different emotional states” – is rarely featured in academic writing (ibid,3). In fact, emotions are a powerful instrument of connection in the field; intersubjectivity and emotional relationships are a means of collaborative knowledge production with the researched; and there is value and potentiality in the researcher being emotionally vulnerable in the research context. Lo Bosco advises researchers to “throw a critical spotlight” on their own affective realms, and to consider always “embracing the unexpected” while in the field, as there is “no kind of pre-field training that can make us ‘safe’ from emotions” (ibid, 13, 14).

In her scrutiny of the wider assumptions underpinning the relationship between identity and knowledge production, Allen points to the post-structuralist differentiation between positivist researchers, who present social reality as “objectively knowable and comprising essential truths that exist beyond the researcher”, and interpretive researchers who “dispute the possibility that ‘truths’ about the world can be objectively accessed” (Allen 2010, 150). For ethnographers of the latter persuasion, social reality is “contextually contingent and subsequently contestable” because researchers are conditioned by their own social location and intersecting structures (class, gender, age, ability, ethnicity, etc.), which influence how

they perceive the world of the researched, thereby “rendering knowledge necessarily subjective” (ibid.). Knowledge produced by researchers also depends on “features of context” such as the researcher/researched relationship, and the subject positions of the researcher and the researched. Allen warns against reductive assumptions in the field, for instance the researcher assuming that personal “shared identity” with the researched leads to the “generation of better knowledge” (ibid, 151, 152). She also remarks that the “insider status” of any researcher vis-à-vis the researched can be “fractured/fleeting”, and that (within post-structuralist ethnographic praxis) identity is understood “as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions”. Therefore, if identity is “a perpetually moving target, that is repeatedly negotiated and fluid, how can a relationship with knowledge be characterised or even affirmed?” (ibid.). Identity categories are limited – “they symbolize, but do not always represent, collectivity and unity”; they can be “exclusionary, cementing and regulating normative modes of being” within the social experience that ethnographers seek to inscribe (ibid,152).

Skeggs comments on the privileging of “experience” within feminist ethnography, developed via the logic that knowledge springs from experience; women’s experience carries with it special knowledge; this knowledge is necessary to challenge oppression; and some knowledges “offer more scope and explanatory power for understanding oppression than others” (Skeggs in Atkinson et al, 435). She also remarks on the risks involved in the ethnographer’s commitment to “giving voice” (to the marginalised research subject), which “deflects attention from all the institutional power relations involved in actually producing a text”; another danger is that researchers may take as “self-evident” the identities of those whose experience is being documented, i.e., “they are already assumed to be classed, raced and gendered in specific ways as they are allotted to categories. This always leads to the reproduction of those categories intact” (ibid, 432). When both categories (giving voice and allocated identity categories) are deployed in ethnographic knowledge production, “location is ignored, and priority is given to experience itself. It is to assume that ontology is the ground of epistemology, that what I am determines what I know. But how do I know what I am? In historicism the answer is easy: I am my differences, which have been given to me by history. We are thus left with a constant defining descriptor, and all that changes are the descriptions which are sometimes squeezed to fit” (ibid.).

For Skeggs, “all ethnography involves irreconcilable conflicts” – and it is the way feminists “use their knowledge to resolve dilemmas” which produces a particular feminist ethnography, characterised by highly critical reflexivity, ethical sensitivity and “the epistemological recognition that all knowledge is situated, partial, contingent and interpretative” (Skeggs in Atkinson et al, 431, 432). Fremlova offers the reminder that ethnography is “methodologically

untidy”, and advises us to “abandon the search for objectivity in favour of critical provisional analysis based on plurality of (temporally and spatially) situated voices and silences” (Fremlova 2018, 111, 106). These complexities are beautifully summed up in Allen’s conviction, vis-à-vis the “politics of position”, that a researcher’s biography is not inconsequential to the research process and relationship with the researched, but “who we are does not determine what knowledge we produce” (2010, 150, 161).

Along a postmodernist trajectory, Manesi offers a radical feminist critique of the standard ethnographic research narrative, the researcher’s authority and the frames of knowledge production through an intense personal essay (“if I can call it so”) in which “there are no research participants in the strict sense of the term but rather instants of being or better yet presences that account for the fragmentary character of being, a feminine perpetual displacement in relation to the self and to the other” (Manesi, n.d., 2). She theorises her ethnographic process as “a poetic journey to crafting a feminine authorial voice, a coming-out story, a troubled encounter with multiple others” that shaped her “anthropological self in profound ways, a semi-fictional poetic ethnography in becoming that lacks character, plot and telos... an experiment with form and representation, an inquiry into the self-other relation as it was experienced through ethnographic fieldwork” (ibid., 1). Her text is a counter-narrative, i.e., “the other of academic language that opens up to possessing me by dispossessing me of my self”; it is a reaction to the experience of academic language speaking to the ethnographer “to the point of exhaustion” (ibid, 2, 3).

Manesi seeks to challenge and audaciously disrupt the customary modes of representation in ethnographic writing; she supports “personalised narratives “that talk about emotion and vulnerability... a kind of writing that breaks your heart by locating the trail of longings, desires, and unfulfilled expectations that we anthropologists leave behind in those upon whom we descend” (ibid, 4). Part of her research effort is her “quest for non-conventional forms of writing”, provoked by her “struggle with the formulation of an authorial feminine ‘I’” (ibid, 5). She points out that from academic perspectives “the worst sin one can commit” as a qualitative researcher is to be ‘too personal’; the writing of personal stories and the genre of auto-ethnography has been critiqued for confessional self-absorption” that often erodes the researcher’s “professional armour”. Her “discomfort” and “difficulty” with shaping the authorial ‘I’ that she was “asked to construct” (i.e., under academic coercion) was rooted in her “uneasiness with conventional ethnographic representation imbued with linearity, male gazes and thick descriptions of persons, places and rituals”, where the ethnographer appears in the text only to illumine the differences between self and other, but “refuses to dismantle himself in front of his readership” (ibid, 6, 7).

Manesi's "perplexity" with such representation leads her to interrogate the formulaic principles of ethnographic writing that she finds rigid and claustrophobic. "How are the boundaries between self and other played out and what forms of writing serve better to reflect them? What does it mean to lose and find yourself through the other? What does it mean to lose and find yourself and the other in the text? [...] How can I write in ways that stay true to myself? [...] Why doesn't anthropology question textual form despite the reflexive turn of the 1980s?" (ibid, 7). Manesi describes her inner world – "my unconscious, my psyche, the other's world, the space between us" – as a "fieldsite" of diverse emotional engagements and relationships, with the ethnographic interview setting transformed into a "healing space" entered by researcher and participant to "bridge self and other". The ethnographic narrative should "talk back" to the normative culture, and the researcher's inscription of the "journey towards self-awareness" through the "labyrinth" of relationship requires the deployment of alternative textual paradigms, rhetorical strategies and representations. "I approach writing like walking towards an entrance. I walk like writing a letter to the academic other within me [...] in the midst of a reality that exceeds my previous psychic arrangements", she declares vis-à-vis her commitment to the discursive inclusion of lyricism, subjectivity, intimacy and polyphony (ibid, 5, 6, 8, 9).

While reflecting on these and other feminist ethnographic perspectives in relation to my own site-specific participatory SEA praxis, I also pay particular attention to the issues raised in Foster's influential critique of what he terms the left-oriented, "quasi-anthropological" role of the "artist as ethnographer" and the "ethnographic self-fashioning" it enables (Foster 1995, 302, 304). While this role contests "at least in part the bourgeois institution of autonomous art and its exclusionary definitions of art, audience and identity", the assumptions of the "old productivist model" continue to prevail in the contemporary moment. The artist-ethnographer focuses on the oppressed postcolonial or proletarian 'other', taking alterity to be "the primary point of subversion of dominant culture" – an assumption and approach that risks "ideological patronage" of the social, cultural and ethnic 'other' "in whose name the artist often struggles" (ibid, 302). Foster warns of the artist-ethnographer's "automatic coding of apparent difference as manifest identity and of otherness as outsidership", and of the "cultural politics of marginality" that emerge from such positioning. He points out that in the ethos of globalisation "a pure outside can no longer be presupposed [and] a strategic sense of complex imbrications is more pertinent to our postcolonial situation than a romantic proposal of simple opposition" (ibid, 304). And in terms of internal effects, i.e., the psychological, as alterity "becomes always imbricated within our unconscious, its effect may be to 'other' the self more than to 'serve' the other [and this mode of] self-othering easily passes into self-absorption, in which the project of 'ethnographic self-fashioning' becomes the project of philosophical narcissism". While such reflexivity has indeed disrupted standard assumptions about subject positions, it has also led

to a “vogue for confessional testimony” and “a vogue for pseudo-ethnographic reports in art that are sometimes disguised travelogues from the world art market... new forms of *flânerie*” (ibid.).

Foster points to the phenomenon of “a kind of “artist-envy” seen in anthropology, cultural studies and new historicism, involving “a projection of a particular ideal ego”, i.e., the social scientist/critic/historian “as collagist, semiologist, avant gardist”; this self-idealization may extend to the cultural ‘other’ who reflects/corroborates the idealized image of the practitioner or scholar or researcher. However, this envy is reciprocal: “a kind of ethnographer-envy consumes artists” (Foster 1995, 304, 305). Foster astutely probes the reasons for “the particular prestige” of anthropology in the realm of contemporary art, and concludes it is because: a) anthropology is valued as the science of alterity; b) since anthropology explores culture, it has a desirably expansive field of reference in relation to other disciplines; c) ethnography, a mainstay of anthropology, is contextual (i.e., grounded in the ‘real’, it offers ‘truth’); d) anthropology has interdisciplinary authority; e) the “self-critique” of anthropology seduces through inviting “a reflexivity at the centre” while preserving “a romanticism of the margins” (ibid., 305). The ethnographic mapping of particular institutions or communities has become the primary form of site-specific art, and in these “pseudo-ethnographic critiques... values like authenticity, originality and singularity, banished under critical taboo from postmodernist art, return as properties of the site, neighbourhood or community engaged by the artist” (ibid, 306).

Foster acknowledges that in some cases socially engaged artists have worked innovatively with communities, excavated suppressed histories, documented new genealogies, facilitated new representations, etc. However, the “pseudo-ethnographic role” provided for or assumed by the artist “can promote a presumption of ethnographic authority as much as a questioning of it, an evasion of institutional critique as often as an elaboration of it ... Almost naturally the focus wanders from collaborative investigation to ‘ethnographic self-fashioning’, in which the artist is not decentred so much as the other is fashioned in artistic guise”; this is evident in other practices that assume, “covertly or otherwise”, an ethnographic model (ibid, 307). Foster also warns that while the socially committed artist-ethnographer may have the “best motives of political engagement and institutional transgression” in his/her work with sited/‘other’/marginalised communities, the work may move beyond his/her control and be interpreted/treated differently if it is “recoded by its sponsors as social outreach, economic development, public relations... or art” (ibid, 303).

2.10. SEA in the Contemporary Global South

There has been a steady rise in migration since 1990, with migrants moving from low and middle-income countries, escaping poverty, political persecution, environmental disasters and wars, towards the world's wealthier nations, where for many reasons they are often not welcome. Increased migration is one of the most notable consequences of globalisation. Violent political unrest in several parts of the world too has contributed to population transfer or resettling – the post-9/11 US invasion/occupation of Afghanistan turned millions of people into refugees, as did the 2003 US invasion/occupation of Iraq; a decade of the Syrian civil resulted in an overwhelming migration into Jordan, Turkey and the West. Many thousands of migrants fleeing extreme cartel violence, economic collapse and poverty in the Caribbean, South and Central America and Mexico wait in despair and hope at the US-Mexico border in US southern states, while the US administration changes its policies of detention, admission and deportation. The rise of Islamophobia across the world, following the predations of the Al-Qaida, the Taliban, Islamic State and numerous affiliated or independent smaller jihadi groups in many countries, is also a factor in forced migration. The phenomenon of Brexit is a good example of the cocktail of nativist sentiment, nationalist populism and generic xenophobia expressed via open, active hostility towards migrants along with hostility towards government, and support for right-wing politicians seeking office. Often the new arrivals are seen as potential rivals for scarce available jobs in countries such as Argentina, Spain, Greece and Ireland where social welfare programmes have failed, where citizen protests are ignored by the state, and where local populations feel increasingly precarious (Castle and Miller 2014, 8).

Part of the global South, Latin America has also seen significant political and economic shifts since 1990. On the one hand, Latin American countries have experienced the inequities of neoliberal mandates via NAFTA; and on the other, have witnessed uprisings such as the Zapatista movement in Mexico that resisted neoliberalism and introduced a new model of grassroots revolution (Kelly and Kester 2017, 6). This political landscape of evolving forms of struggle has provided a backdrop for several artistic experiments across the globe from the 1990s onwards. New and diverse modes of artistic production have challenged conventional aesthetics and redefined the language of art, which is now undergirded by an overlap of different cultural fields such as urbanism, environmentalism, activism, radical pedagogy and other disciplines (Kelly and Kester, 2017, 3).

The shift in art practices may be linked to the rise of neoliberalism, privatisation of public sector enterprises and drastic changes in economic policies, which eventually led to decreased government intervention and accountability. A spectrum of collaborative work is also seen in new media, protest-based practices induced by the present anti-war, anti-globalisation

movements in both the global South and global North (Kester 2011, 9). Bishop suggests that the fall of Communism in 1989 was a pivotal rupture that led to the rise of participatory art across Western Europe in the 1990s (Bishop 2012, 3). However, contemporary art production that has a collaborative basis is also ascribed a lower commercial value than artworks by individual art practitioners. The success of conceptually and technologically hybrid practices is evaluated through socio-cultural indices instead of traditional criteria of personalised self-expression or fidelity to the aesthetic canon (Bishop as cited by Thompson 2012).

These hybrid practices are evident in the SEA projects from Global South discussed extensively by scholar Kester and Kelly in the book, 'Collective Situations, Reading Contemporary Latin American Art' reliant on dialogue, consensus, collective action and civic engagement directed towards effecting forms of social change.

2.11. SEA in the Contemporary Indian Context

The pre-Independence narrative of mainstream Indian art was energised through the urgency of nationalism. During this period, Indian artists focused on political (anti-imperialist/nativist) forms of identity, expressed through art. The project of nation-making was facilitated by a spectrum of artists, art historians, arts administrators and pedagogues such as E.B. Havell, Sister Nivedita, Sri Aurobindo, Abanindranath Tagore and Rabindranath Tagore, who shaped the Calcutta school of art, pioneered modern Indian aesthetics, underpinned with concepts of nationhood, a clear shift away from "Western values" (Panikkar et al 2004, 50). This art movement spread across the country, continuously supported by Havell (who first served as Superintendent of the Madras School of Art and then of the Government School of Art, Calcutta); his position differed starkly from that of "disdainful Eurocentric art historians who applied inappropriate European standards to denigrate it" (Osman 1997, 3,19).

Mitter notes that 1910 could be considered as "the great watershed" in Indian art as the enthralled acceptance of Indian art in Europe began to surge; this was the moment when Indian art could be said to have arrived "with its rehabilitation complete with the powerful affirmation of its aesthetic and not merely archaeological significance" (Mitter 1977, 270). The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed the work of scholars such as Ananda Coomarswamy in Ceylon, artists such as Abanindranath and Rabindranath Tagore in Shantiniketan, and powerful modernists such as Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij and Binodebehari Mukherjee. In the 1930s Jamini Roy used modernist techniques to raise through his art the question of the appropriation and commodification of folk iconography by urban artists. A unique Indian

woman modernist of the time, who developed a characteristic style, was the elite, Western-trained Amrita Sher-Gil (Kapoor 2000).

Post-Independence, after decades of colonial censorship, suppression and manipulation, Indian modernist art struggled towards a new identity through the cultural framework of postcolonial theory, disseminated by intellectuals such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha and others, including the renowned scholars of the Subaltern Studies group (Bhabra 2000). Delineating this emergence, Kapur asserts that “modernism, as it develops in postcolonial cultures, has the oddest retroactive trajectories” that constitute “a parallel aesthetics”; it is “an incomplete historical process” and is delayed in its proclamations (Kapur 2000, 297, 298). She notes that Western political geography of world culture is based on the orthodox Marxist base-superstructure model, wherein advanced industrial societies establish the centre and postcolonial or underdeveloped societies shape the periphery. She questions the ongoing lack of critical arts discourses in third-world cultures that are encumbered with their nationalisms and positioned in the “centre-periphery model of international modernism” (Ibid 284). Modernism is also “seen as culminating an international style and turning on a logic of art for art’s sake is not crucial to India” (Ibid, 287).

Kapur identifies new secular and social forms of identity-making in postcolonial Indian art, including its use of incredibly diverse and ‘timeless’ folk and local art forms which had remained undistorted by colonialism, and have now countered, and sometimes even undermined, the forceful narrative of modernity in specific ways (Kapur 2000). With its diverse ethnic cultures spread across vast territory, India has an ancient living tradition of folk/tribal art as well as *deshaja* art, forms of very localized narrative art, that continue to hold their own over all other kinds of art produced in the subcontinent. This timeless traditional art, collectively practiced by local communities, remained relatively unscathed within the colonial canon. Folk art manifests in non-narrative forms, i.e., channelled through rituals, as well as narrative forms that are not based on ritual-dependent; and the aesthetics of these narrative forms, whatever be the source of the narratives, are intimately linked to the mediums used by the artists. In the 1970 and ‘80s, urban artists began to involve themselves in folk art after artist J. Swaminathan created the arts institute of Bharat Bhavan in the city of Bhopal in central India, building a creative affinity between folk/tribal art and Indian modernism, and retaining an emphasis on formalism by prioritizing the aesthetic aspect of tribal arts over the ethnographic (Jain 2018, 18). This paradigm continues in the work of Indian contemporary artist Navjot Altaf’s work with Adivasi tribal artists and Adivasi communities in Bastar in central India, discussed later in this thesis. Since the late 1980s, through her socially engaged projects she has been documenting

how Adivasi artists realign their traditional aesthetic practices within their engagements with modernity (Panikkar et al 2004, 56).

Kapur claims that the lessons offered by Meera Mukherjee (inspired by traditional Bastar sculpture), K.G. Subramanyan (involved with various forms of terracotta art and pata/Bengal scroll painting), and J. Swaminathan (engagement with Gond tribal art and artists), are original and unique. Each practitioner indicates that modern artists must explore folk sources, try to decipher the living traditions of 'vernacular' cultures and enunciate them in material terms, as these diverse domains are immensely rich in artistic techniques, skills and iconographies (Kapur 2000, 369). In this context, art historian/curator Jyotindra Jain has worked within the schema of 'high art' to abolish conventional hierarchies between individual artistic expression and the collective imaginary of folk and tribal artists. Panikkar et al argue that despite Jain making a successful case for the forces of modernity enabling these artists to be brought onto an equal platform with artists from elite backgrounds, the project of appointing individual "masters" associated with the domain of high art to work with "timeless" folk/tribal artists sidesteps the significance and repercussions of plucking the latter out of their communitarian and historical context (Panikkar et al 2004, 53).

However, despite these concerted, serious and well-intentioned efforts to accommodate the 'indigenous' in different ways into the modernist imaginary, Indian contemporary art was always, and still is, deeply influenced by the aesthetics and politics of Western conceptual art of the 1960s. From 1990 onwards, with the arrival of the internet in India and a concurrent shift from Nehruvian socialism to neoliberal economic policies, contemporary Indian art – a fluctuating, evolving, pluralistic field that consistently problematises cherished archetypes of 'Indianness' and challenges formalist 'tradition' – has been increasingly accepted in the global market, creating a high market value in the linked and hyperlinked international art circuits. Today, Indian art is associated with global venues such as exhibitions and art fairs that serving as an effective entry point into the neoliberal art market. (Ciotti 2012, 637).

Given the lack of SEA scholarship and limited available documentation of SEA practices in India, it has been an ongoing challenge to find substantive resource materials for my thesis. We urgently need more theorisation and critique of Indian contemporary art by Indian and international scholars, practitioners, curators, pedagogues, arts/cultural institutions, etc., especially from the global South. This lack of critique remains a serious problem, despite the increased visibility and commercial success of contemporary Indian art in the global market, and despite the fact that from the late 1990s onwards, many Indian artists have gone beyond traditional studio practice and attempted to explore art production in the social realm, through

a range of interdisciplinary, cross-media and technologically enabled modes. This expanded context of SEA practice in India is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

2.12 Theoretical / Critical Resonances

My projects and related creative production described in my thesis are influenced by the following concepts theorised in SEA discourse:

2.12.1 Relational Practices

Relational practices are known by many names – socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory art, interventionist art, collaborative art, research-based art. Constituting an “expanded field” of contemporary art, these practices “are less interested in a relational aesthetic than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity – whether in the form of pre-existing communities or establishing one’s own interdisciplinary network” (Bishop 2006,1). The goals and the productions of different groups involved in relational practices are very diverse, but all connect to “a belief in the empowering creativity of collective action and shared ideas” (ibid.) Relational practices produce work that is open-ended, interactive, resistant to closure, and often featured as ‘work-in-progress’ rather than a finished object. “This seems to be a “creative misreading of poststructuralist theory: rather than the interpretations of a work of art being open to continual reassessment, the work of art itself is argued to be in perpetual flux” (Bishop 2004, 52). Such art seeks to build literal or potential intersubjective encounters in which there is a collective elaboration of meaning. “Rather than a discrete, portable, autonomous work of art that transcends its context, relational art is entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience. Moreover, this audience is envisaged as a community: rather than a one-to-one relationship between work of art and viewer, relational art sets up situations in which viewers are not just addressed as a collective social entity, but are actually given the wherewithal to create a community, however temporary or utopian that might be” (Bishop 2004, 54).

Bishop notes that the identity of such artwork is “wilfully unstable”, and it is “unclear” as to what the viewer is supposed to “garner” from the experience of shared creativity/collaboration, but in general terms direct or indirect participation is the heartbeat of relational practice. She gives the example of British artist Liam Gillick who insists that the presence of an audience is essential to his art: “My work is like the light in a fridge, it only works when there are people

there to open the fridge door. Without people, it's not art – it's something else – stuff in a room” (ibid., 61).

2.12.2 Affect and Connected Knowing

The term ‘affect’ can be defined as “an inter-corporeal intensity that is related to, and yet distinct from, emotions and feelings. It describes the passage from one experiential state of the body to another, implying an augmentation in that body’s capacity to act. Affects are often perceived as surprising or somehow beyond the will and conscious intention of the affected body. This definition... differs from the general meaning of the term (a subjective feeling in response to a thought, stimulus, mood or emotion)” (Sayal-Bennett 2018,1).

Bishop offers a useful definition in terms of personal response: affect is “more about the total meaning of the work, and in this regard it doesn’t matter if I’m looking at something live in front of me or a document from the past. It’s a matter of what the whole thing (gesture, context, documentation) amounts to, and whether the idea and its realisation somehow moves me... The projects I like best are the ones that prompt in me an affective response, rather than a rational sense of ‘that’s worthy’ or ‘what a good solution to that problem’... This is not a question of visual pleasure but of there needing to be some kind of punctum (rather than just a studium), to use Barthes’ terms”. A work of art needs to be engaged with on its own terms, without the viewer making up his/her mind before seeing or experiencing it. “I want to get away from focusing on the work’s functional outcome. We can leave that approach to the sociologists; what is important artistically is that something happens in a certain time and place” (Bishop, 2015).

Affect is central to feminist research praxis that interprets emotions as “a form of embodied experience” inextricably linked to “relational life”, and that treats emotions as “culturally informed expressions of the self”. Such praxis rests on the “affective turn” in fieldwork wherein emotions have an “epistemic value” and are considered to be “forces changing one’s capacity to think and act (Lo Bosco 2021, 9, 13, 14).

Affect is also central feminist epistemologies that value “connected knowing” – a form of knowledge based not on the oppositional exchange of arguments/counter-arguments, but an informal methodology wherein each interlocutor tries to identify with the views of the other/s. This “procedural” form of knowledge rests on “recognising the social imbeddedness and context within which others speak, judge and act” (Kester 2005, 1). Instead of holding interlocutors “accountable to some ideal or generalized standard”, connected knowing “attempts to situate given discursive utterance in the specific material conditions of the speaker”; it acknowledges the speaker’s history and position vis-à-vis modes of social, economic and cultural power

within and outside the discursive situation (“thus acknowledging the operative force of...oppression and inequality”). Connected knowing is only possible through empathetic identification with other/s, requiring the reining in of affective opinions, judgements and representations. Through empathy “we learn not simply to suppress self-interest [that arises] through identification with some putatively universal perspective, or through the irresistible compulsion of logical argument, but to literally re-define self: to both know and feel our connectedness with others” (ibid., 2).

2.12.3 Dialogical Aesthetics

Kester identifies two “registers” within his theorisation of the “dialogical aesthetics” deployed in SEA practice and production. One is the “overlap” between artistic production and cross-disciplinary input drawn from different domains – a kind of “transversal dialogue” that is always taking place. The other “has to do with the relationship of the work of art to the viewer” (Kester/Krenn 2013). Traditional art practices uphold the centrality/sovereignty of the artist, who “serves as an external agent of critique or destabilization, who occupies a clearly differentiated cognitive field”, while the viewer is assumed as subordinate to a deep and erroneous conditioning “that requires the experience of destabilization which the artist can provide” through the work (ibid.). However, in dialogical practices “this set of cognitive differentiations is more fluid”; the artist is not considered the singular creator of aesthetic effects; and participants/viewers are able to produce his/her own “transformative knowledge” through interfacing with the artwork, and through shifts in subject position and modes of agency (ibid.). In traditional exchanges enabled by aesthetic experience, each subject is a “fixed enunciative agent who merely makes use of discourse to express the a priori ‘content’ of their internal being” (Kester 1999/2000, 6). By contrast, within the flexible schemas of dialogical aesthetics the artist is viewed primarily “as a collaborator rather than as an expressive agent”. Meaning is located ‘outside’ the self, via discourse or other modes of communication between subjects; the process of dialogical exchange causes the subjects’ identities, that “are not entirely set”, to be “formed and transformed”, and the subject is “literally produced” in and through this mode of intersubjectivity (ibid.)

Kester suggests that the since the evaluative framework for SEA art is no longer pinned to the material product, the “new locus of judgement ... can be found in the condition and character of dialogical exchange itself” (Kester 1999/2000, 5). His delineation of the dialogic basis of Navjot Altaf’s *Nalpar* and *Pilla Gudi* projects with tribal women in central India (discussed in Chapter 4) is worth quoting in full: “I interviewed people, I had conversations – but a lot of my time was spent trying to be aware as possible, on a kind of a phenomenological level, of not just what people said but how they said it, their bodily gestures, the inflections of speech, the haptic experience of the space and the aesthetic organization of the water pumps and temples.

What did it mean for the women in the village to actually inhabit the water pump site on a daily basis? How did they relate to other people as they moved through and around it? There is a whole domain of somatic framing going on in this project that isn't recognized by most people as 'art'. But I think it is fundamentally aesthetic in its nature. Because it goes to the question of how the self relates to the other in the world, and how semi-permeable spaces emerge that are both connected to the broader world and also discontinuous with it. That's really at the core of the dialogic aesthetic [...] It is important to foreground power differences, and that was a key part of my own interpretation, but it is also important to have a very broad understanding of the nature of inter-subjective exchange: verbal, nonverbal, physical, and gestural. It requires close attention to all of these levels to determine, even partially, what's taking place" (Kester/Krenn 2013).

2.12.4. Itinerancies and the "Ethnoscape"

In his discussion of modern global flows that coerce humans into multiple modes of deterritorialisation, uprooting and resettlement, Arjun Appadurai presents the concept of the "ethnoscape" – "the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers and other moving groups and persons" (Appadurai 1990, 297). The ethnoscape constitutes an "essential feature" of the world, influencing international politics and exchanges "to a hitherto unprecedented degree" Stable communities (networks of kinship, friendship, work, leisure, etc.) do exist, as do other "filiative forms" (birthplace, residence, etc). However, "the warp of these stabilities is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion, as more and more persons deal with the realities of having to move, or the fantasies of wanting to move... And as international capital shifts its needs, and as production and technology generate different needs, as nation-states shift their policies on refugee populations, these moving groups can never afford to let their imaginations rest too long" (ibid.).

To this we may add another migrating figure relevant to my research context, who regularly traverses the contemporary ethnoscape, and for whom privileged itinerancy is a way of life – the 'global' artist subject to the conditions of contemporary art patronage and production, who produces 'global' artwork that moves between 'global' venues such as biennales, art fairs and other major/spectacular international art events. More locally, while SEA requires sustained engagement with sites and communities, its practitioners may find themselves adopting modes of itinerancy vis-à-vis their art projects if they earn their living via professional jobs and have to spend time away from their chosen sites and communities. Additionally, artist itinerancy is reinforced when cultural institutions that support SEA usually invite a practitioner

to create/complete a community-based, site-specific project within a limited period of time – such various mechanisms of support function to strengthen the view of a given community/participant constituency “as an instrumentalized and fictively monolithic entity to be ‘serviced’ by the visiting artist” (Kester 1999/2000, 5).

2.12.5. The “Pedagogy of Presence” and “Quiet Activism”

Theorising her experience of creating and facilitating an open studio for homeless and impoverished women in New England, Bourgault discusses the complications that arise from SEA praxis “co-existing in [or, one might say, migrating between] various ontological sets of properties” (art/social work/education/ethnography, etc.), wherein the practitioner inhabits/performs a “shapeshifting role” (artist/researcher/facilitator/critical pedagogue, etc.), identifying as an art worker/artist outsider “whose modus operandi operates outside the artworld’s system of legitimation” (Bourgault 2022, 102, 105).

Bourgault practices what she refers to as a “pedagogy of presence”, defined in broad terms as “a disposition to lifelong and experiential learning” well beyond the framework of the space itself. This pedagogy is built via an “attuned, emergent and responsive” relationship with participants, with the studio, a “grounded space” that accommodates silences as well as diverse modes of communication, serving as a stable yet flexible environment of shared creative possibility that offsets the ongoing “precarity” of the participants’ lives. The artist’s presence is “diffuse”, and she follows a “non-teaching approach” in which everyone can learn from the knowledge brought by everyone else, drawn from their material realities, family and kinship structures, cultural traditions and life events. The project is the site for the emergence of forms of selfhood and intelligence that are always evolving; project benefits “accrue over time and are determined by the participants” (Bourgault 2022, 105, 107, 108).

The “quiet activism” embodied in such praxis inherently “trusts” participants’ creativity and capacity to find their own voices, and is marked by a “reluctance” to actively seek to empower participants, since this would clearly engender a power relationship. Instead it focuses on the “small acts” of building interpersonal relationships and social networks. Quiet activism is concerned with the “affective, emotional and embodied dimensions of ‘making’” that invoke and intersect with social critique. The cultivated pedagogy of presence “allows participants to experience for themselves how small gestures of a creative nature can translate into the mindful recognition that agency exists at our living core and that the possibilities of personal self-advocacy and social activism emerge from that inner sense of agency” (Bourgault 2022, 106). The open studio or similar SEA spaces that uphold “quietness and lack of outcome-oriented efficiency” offer a kind of “resistance to the external pressures of contemporary life

that expect optimised productivity with everything we do” – i.e., cultural work rooted in quiet activism offers freedom from what has been aptly termed “the tyranny of the deliverables” (ibid.)

Chapter 3: Art in Public Space in India from 1990 into the Present

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses art projects in public space in India from 1990 onwards. I preface the discussion with a synoptic history of art practices and art interventions in Indian public/social spaces over the last century, from the 1930s and 1940s into post-Independence modernism and then into the digitally-driven contemporary moment. I then discuss *48°C Public.Art.Ecology* (2008), the first-ever large-scale, site-specific, themed public art festival in India, independently curated by Pooja Sood. I draw on my detailed interview with Sood (2020), as well as a documentary film on the festival [*48°C Public.Art.Ecology* (2008) by Delhi Green Ewafarence Duration: 14 min 23 sec; available for viewing at the archive of Khoj International Artist Association, New Delhi]. This is followed by my discussion of art projects in public space by four contemporary artists (Ravi Agarwal, Sheba Chhachhi, Atul Bhalla and the collective WALA / Akansha Rastogi, Sujit Das, Paribartana Mohanty).⁶ The discussions are based on my interviews with these practitioners conducted in person and online through email and Skype.

I selected these particular experts (curator and artists) as their works are among the earliest projects in public spaces in India and are among the first to involve engagement with local communities; and because from the 1990s into the present, they have continued to innovate and to extend their practices beyond the conventional boundaries of art studios, galleries, museums and cultural institutions. The consistency of their work in this regard serves as a stable reference point, helping me to trace the chronological development of SEA practice in India, and to validate my own SEA practice in terms of the evolving and scripting of conceptual and aesthetic counter-narratives within current Indian art discourse.

⁶ **Pooja Sood** is a curator, arts management consultant and director of Khoj International Artist's Association, an autonomous artist-led cultural initiative [<https://khojworkshop.org/>].

Ravi Agarwal is a Delhi-based photographer and interdisciplinary artist, environmental activist, writer, curator and founder of the environmental NGO Toxics Link [<https://www.raviagarwal.com/>; <https://www.toxicslink.org/>].

Sheba Chhachhi is a Delhi-based photographer/interdisciplinary artist, documentary filmmaker and gender rights activist.

Atul Bhalla is a Delhi-based interdisciplinary conceptual artist focusing on environmental issues [<http://www.atulbhalla.com/>].

WALA (Akansha Rastogi, Sujit Das, Paribartana Mohanty) are a Delhi-based artist collective focusing on community art and performance art in public spaces. The name derives from the Hindustani word *wala* a gendered suffix attached to manual professions and vending, e.g., *kabadiwala* (recycler), *chaiwala* (tea seller). *Wala* refers to men; *wali* to women [<https://walacollective.wordpress.com/about/>].

I channel my analysis through the key concepts in my practitioner-interview questions.⁷ The interviews constitute part of my primary data, falling within the broad theoretical categories of Collaborative / Dialogic / Participatory Practice, Site-Specific Art and New Genre Public Art. My analysis will map the concepts emerging from the primary data onto the broader formulations of SEA discourse in order to frame SEA in India – a jagged, complex, and rapidly mutating field that regrettably remains under-documented and under-studied, and about which very little research/resource material is publicly available even today. I conclude this chapter through the analysis of how these practitioners have used diverse methodologies to move out of conventional studio/institutional spaces and directly engage with communities in public space.

3.2 Historical Background

As observed by Kapur, post-Independence Indian art is characterized by two trends. On one hand ‘there is a sustained attempt to give regard to indigenous, living traditions and to dovetail the tradition/modernity aspects of contemporary culture through a typically Postcolonial eclecticism’; and on the other hand ‘there is a desire to engage from overarching politics of the national by reclusive attention to formal choices that seemingly transcend both cultural and subjective particularities and enter a modernist framework’ (Kapur 2000, 365). Pre-Independence Indian art tended to be deeply political, influenced significantly by Left politics as well as the ongoing nationalist struggle against British rule. Art in public/social spaces took varied forms and had a critical function, both as an instrument/platform for political and social dissent, and a method of uniting people across the country through urging resistance to the colonial adversary. A leading and very active group in this anti-imperialist cultural movement was the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) that played a substantial role in engaging the urban and rural working classes through presenting a range of themes, from land rights to

⁷My arguments in this chapter are broadly based on the selected interviewees’ responses to the following questions:

- a. How do you understand site-specificity through your work?
- b. What is the relationship between the artwork and its public placement?
- c. How do your art interventions motivate and mobilize people, particularly women, from different backgrounds, around the site of the artwork?
- d. How do you create new audiences through your practice?

social injustices and political oppression. Through IPTA, groups of singers, dancers, actors, artists and pedagogues travelled to every corner of India, infusing novelty and experimentation into all fields of creative practice and substantially building solidarity nationwide (Kapur 2012, 28). The IPTA-dominated decades are considered the dawn of art as a public/social practice in India, and IPTA remains ‘the most valorized movement of “revolutionary” artists to this day’ (Kapur 2012, 27).

Post-Independence, IPTA’s influence began to wane and declined steeply after 1950; but as a cultural organization it successfully catalysed the birth of progressive amateur theatre in India. From the 1950s through the 1980s, many groups were motivated to produce work foregrounding social and political issues. This is exemplified by Bahurupée, Nandikar and People’s Theatre (active in Bengal) and Prithvi Theatre (active in Bombay). Prominent dramatists such as Habib Tanvir (a former IPTA member) and Badal Sircar (member of the CPIML/Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist) were pivotal in taking traditional and experimental theatre arts/performance to public urban and rural settings. Tanvir, who founded the Naya Theatre Company in Bhopal (Central India), is known for his paradigmatic reworking of traditional folk forms through sustained engagement with indigenous communities in the tribal region of Chhattisgarh in Central India. Sircar, founder of the troupe Satabdi and author of the groundbreaking play *Ebong Indrajit* (And Indrajit), took drama from the proscenium to the street. Equally influential was the young director-actor Safdar Hashmi (member of CPI/Communist Party of India Marxist and founder of the IPTA-inspired theatre troupe Jan Natya Manch). Hashmi was noted for radical street theatre, with its dialogic possibilities magnified through adept spatial usage. In terms of method, both Sircar and Hashmi deliberately reduced the gap between performers and audience – reaching back to Brechtian drama, a form that ‘compels the spectator to take up a position towards this action’ (Bishop 2006, 11). The artist collective Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (Sahmat) was founded in his memory, with a mission to generate public discourses on art as a regular socio-political practice, and on the function of art as a platform for the enunciation of dissent when democratic rights are threatened. Artists, journalists and academics from all over India organized mobile exhibitions and performances in urban public spaces, with a commitment raising socio-political awareness through a spectrum of art practices. To this day, for practitioners across the arts spectrum in India Hashmi remains a potent symbol of passionate conviction and anti-authoritarian courage (Achar and Panikkar 2012, 32, 33).

The 1990s saw a new turn with regard to cultural expression in public space, chiefly manifesting through contemporary visual art in metro cities, created by artists influenced by what Kapur describes as new and secular modes of postcolonial identity-making that are inclusive of exceptionally diverse and ancient folk and local art forms. Undistorted by the

colonial cultural imprint, these 'timeless' forms, through their intrinsic strength, have in specific ways countered, and sometimes even undermined, the forceful narrative of modernity (Kapur 2000). Through their ephemeral, site-specific, mixed-media and cross-genre works in public spaces – for instance Vivan Sundaram's *Structures for Memory* (1998), Subodh Gupta's *Untitled* (1999), M.S. Umesh's *Earth-Work* (1996), N.N. Rhizome's *Far Away from One Hundred and Eight Feet* (1995) – artists excavated and projected 'the fetish in magic, art and commodity' (Kapur 2000, 404). Contemporary performance, visual and installation art by practitioners such as Subodh Gupta, Inder Salim, Sonia Khurana and Nikhil Chopra (Delhi), N. Pushpamala (Bangalore), Open Circle Group and Shilpa Gupta (Mumbai) further changed the narrative through environmental critique and interrogation of urban socio-political issues (Kapur 2000, 405).

From 2000 onwards, continuously active, non-profit, cultural and arts-management organizations and spaces enabled through mixed funding sources have emerged in the Indian metros. Perhaps the most prominent example is Khoj International [<https://khojworkshop.org/>], is a non-profit art organization that aims to connect creative practitioners engaging in interdisciplinary collaboration and experimentation to create new possibilities for art-making. Initiated in 1997 by Pooja Sood and a group of artists, it has been highly successful from inception onward into the present day. (Ravi Agarwal, Atul Bhalla and Sheba Chhachhi, three of the eight SEA practitioners interviewed for my thesis, have been recipients of Khoj support). Sarai [www.sarai.net/], a programme of CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi), was initiated in 2000, and focuses on new media, the public domain and the politics of information. FICA / Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art [<https://ficart.org/>] facilitates the work of individual artists

(WALAS Collective interviewed for my thesis, have been recipients of FICA Public Art Grant). The last two decades have also seen the emergence of practitioner-based partnerships and larger collectives, for instance CAMP / artists Shaina Anand and Ashoke Shukumaran, [<https://studio.camp/>], and Cybermohalla [<https://sarai.net/projects/cybermohalla/>], a collaborative project of Sarai and the NGO Ankur Society of Alternatives in Education [<https://ankureducation.net/>].

These larger, well-funded arts organizations/arts management spaces have inspired collectives such as 1 Shanti Road [<http://1shanthiroad.com/>] and IFA / Indian Foundation for the Arts [<https://indiaifa.org/>] (Bangalore); CASP (Centre for Arts and Social Practice) [<http://psusocialpractice.org/program-report-centre-for-art-and-social-practice/>], Mumbai which has chapters in different metro cities; Dharavi Art Room [<https://artroom.mystrikingly.com>] and Mohile Parikh [www.mohileparikhcentre.org] in

Mumbai; art entrepreneurs such as Art-Reach India [<http://www.artreachindia.org/>] and SandBox [<https://sandbox.is/history.html>] (Delhi), and numerous smaller art foundations which today fund SEA projects across the country. In parallel, individual practitioners such as Navjot Altaf have consistently oriented their SEA practices towards building long-term, stable, self-sustaining participatory/collaborative projects with specific marginalised and underprivileged communities in peri-urban and rural areas.

3.3 48°C: A Public Art Festival In New Delhi (2008)

The independently curated paradigmatic public art festival *48°C Public.Art.Ecology* (2008) (Figure1) was the first opportunity for Indian artists to present their artworks in urban public spaces, and to directly connect with a general public that does not have access to city galleries or art museums. Participating Indian and international artists created works specific to themes of environment and ecology. Maintaining a broad scope, the festival included nature walks, film screenings, and symposia on environmental/ecological issues, urban space and public art. The festival radically thrust contemporary art out of the conventional, protective boundaries of studios, galleries and museums into the rough, dense, disorienting space of India's cosmopolitan capital city and its enormously varied 'public' of nearly 17 million inhabitants (at that time; the numbers have since grown). This demographic has never been exposed to the concepts, aesthetics and material forms of such art.

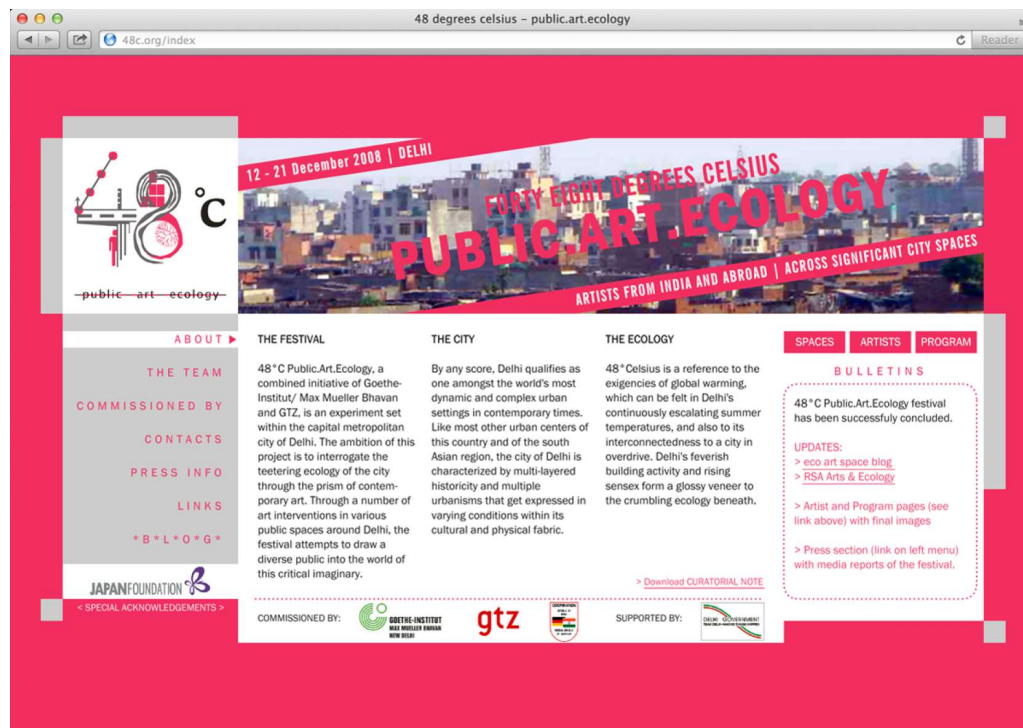


Figure 1: 48°C Public Art Festival, New Delhi, 2008

Source: FrisoWitten_48°Public_Art_Ecology

In this section I draw on my extensive interview with festival curator Pooja Sood (2020) to examine how 48°C influenced SEA practice in India and helped me to understand my own practice in the context of the core SEA elements underpinning each installation at the festival.

In response to my question about her understanding of the term 'site-specific', one such core element, Sood clarified that she intended to use the city's diverse material environment to build awareness about global climate change and ongoing environmental crisis through the presentation of themed artworks in public space. Hence the festival installations were intentionally positioned at sites conveniently accessible via the Delhi metro, specifically the subway system's Yellow Line, a route that traverses New Delhi, Central Delhi, and Old Delhi, i.e., linking the modern city with its colonial and historical areas (the line has since been extended much further in both directions).

Sood emphasised three installations in Central Delhi that directly presented the theme of the destruction of nature in the city. At the Mandi House roundabout, which faces the Natural History Museum at one end of Barakhamba Road, Ravi Agarwal's installation *Extinct* (Figure 2) in the form of a light box narrated the near-extinction of the Indian vulture population, primarily as a result of the birds feeding on carcasses of cattle that had been treated with Diclofenac, a common anti-inflammatory drug lethally toxic to vultures (it is now officially banned for veterinary use in India, Nepal, and Pakistan). Barakhamba Road, a major road leading off the Mandi House roundabout, was the site of Krishnaraj Chonat's installation *Crane+Tree* (Figure 3) on the theme of deforestation in relation to urbanism. Placed next to a large, deserted, decaying colonial bungalow, the installation consisted of a dead tree suspended from a construction crane. Pointing to the fact that many imposing old trees along Barakhamba Road had been cut down to make space for the Delhi metro rail, it signified the enormity of irreparable, irreversible loss as well as other violent changes – the rapid sale of private properties of historic value for exorbitant prices, combined with the brutal felling of thousands of trees, some over a century old, in Delhi in the name of 'development'; the claiming or clearing of open/green spaces all over the city for the laying out of metro tracks; and the municipal eviction/bulldozing of slums in order to accommodate construction of skyscrapers, high-rise apartments, technology zones, business centres and other commercial projects. The other end of Barakhamba Road opens into the ever-busy major business hub of Connaught Place that embeds Palika Bazar Park, a large open space embedded within the wide orbit of colonial-era shopping arcades. The park was the site of Navjot Altaf's work *Barakhamba* (Figure 4) that presented the debate of ecology versus 'development' through a set of three large video installations, showing members of the public in conversation with the artist. Generally critical of what they experienced as short-sighted policies of urban

planning and architectural design, people shared their views, visions and anxieties vis-à-vis the changing city spaces, and the effect of these changes on their lives, livelihoods, localities and the city's environment.



Figure 2: *Extinct*, Ravi Agarwal, 48°C Public Art Ecology, New Delhi, 2008

Source: www.raviagarwal.com



Figure 3: *Crain+Tree*, Krishnaraj Chonat, 48°C Public Art Ecology, New Delhi, 2008

Source: www.khojstudios.org

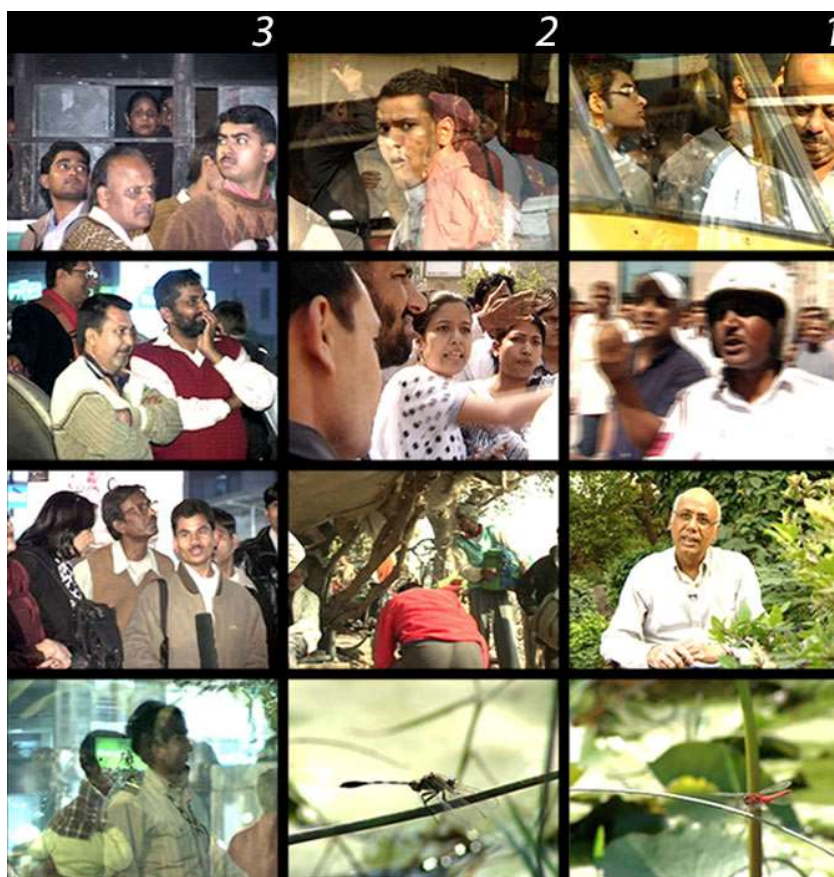


Figure 4: *Barakhamba*, Navjot Altaf, 48°C Public Art Ecology, New Delhi, 2008

Source: www.navjotaltaf.com

The festival's two interactive water-themed installations were located in historic Old Delhi at Chandni Chowk and Kashmere Gate. For centuries both sites have been associated with the river Yamuna, the main source of the city's water supply, and now highly polluted with raw sewage, industrial effluents and other dumped toxic waste⁸.

Sheba Chhachhi's installation *The Water Diviner* (Figure 5) was located at the old public library in Chandni Chowk, opposite the Old Delhi Railway Station. The artist was inspired by an 1850 city map that provoked her to research the water history of the area. The map indicated that the Yamuna once flowed right across the road from the site, and Chhachhi conceptualized the installation as an immersive experience that was simultaneously a layered material archive of the site. *The Water Diviner* consisted of a light box showing the 1850 map with roads and

⁸ The river Yamuna flows through the city of Delhi and its banks are an abode for the thousands of migrant workers from the small towns and villages of the different provinces of India. Unlike many other rivers in the country, the social space on the bank of Yamuna is made up of many settlements, which bunch around it, primarily illegal. Over time these settlements have also suffered the pain of demolition under the name of beautification and urban reformation. However, despite so much violence under the state rubric, life on the riverbank is always thriving. There is an unusual kind of energy pulsating there. The city connects the river through its routine activity of everyday life, both culturally and ritualistically (Baviskar 2006).

railway tracks superimposed upon the now obliterated Yamuna waterways. Divination is the technical term for the practice of intuitively sensing and locating a hidden or underground water source; here Chhachhi the ‘water diviner’ symbolically excavates and re-inscribes a river that has retreated over the past four centuries, exposing a vast flood plain – open land that supports many underprivileged communities engaged in subsistence agriculture/other precarious livelihoods, and that is now being assiduously ‘developed’ into varied forms of real estate and other commercial mega-projects. The installation was augmented by thousands of old discarded library books and other documents that had been tossed into a disused colonial-era swimming pool under the library. A silent three-minute video loop based on photographs by Umeed Mistry projected mythological stories about water. Through using the river to invoke imperial genealogy, the past and present city, and its diverse past and present communities, the artist wove together layers of cultural memories around the subject of water, its natural and artificial repositories, its current usage and exploitation.



Figure 5: *Water Diviner*, Sheba Chhachhi, 48°C Public Art Ecology, New Delhi, 2008

Source: www.knma.in

Sited at Kashmere Gate, Atul Bhalla's installation *Chabeel* (Figure 6) consisted of a large white vessel shaped like a jerrycan, sculpted from sand, cement, ceramic tiles, plywood and recycled paper, with video projected on its surface. Bhalla intended to invoke the fact that a few centuries ago the Yamuna, now a few kilometers distant, flowed by the Kashmere Gate

itself. Displaying stickers with the Hindi text *aap ne kabhi yamuna to dekha hai? aap ne kabhi yamuna to chhua hai?* (Have you ever seen the river? Have you ever touched the river?), *Chabeel* aimed at reminding the viewers that the water in city taps, indispensable and taken completely for granted, is drawn from a river shockingly polluted and degraded. During the festival the vessel was also repurposed as a kiosk, serving the public with sweetened water and lassi in the manner of the traditional street rite that marks religious celebrations in North India. The drinks were served in small glasses sculpted from the same materials as the large vessel. This mode of physically engaging viewers enabled the artist to transform his static installation into a dynamic participatory performance.



Figure 6: *Chabeel*, Atul Bhalla, 48°C Public Art Ecology, New Delhi, 2008

Source: www.atulbhalla.com

Sood noted that the project *Motornama Roshanara* (Figure 7) by CAMP (Shaina Anand and Ashok Sukumaran) rested on a different reading of site-specificity. Here the artists recovered the lost micro-history of the once-thriving industrial belt at Roshanara Road in North Delhi through direct engagement with the local community of cycle-rickshaw pullers. The area includes the green space of Roshanara Bagh, a Mughal-era garden that is today one of Delhi's biggest public parks. It was laid out in 1650 by the second daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan, princess Roshanara Begum, whose tomb at the site lies within an ornate heritage pavilion that was retained in its original form when the rest of the park was re-landscaped and 'modernized' during colonial rule. Roshanara Road flourished for decades post-Independence, this commercial prosperity resting on a large base of labour underpinning the local economy. Upper classes frequented the markets and restaurants and the Palace Cinema. The People from all walks of life were a part of a vibrant culture which disintegrated after the government's

forcible shutdown of all the local industries, including motor repairing factories, flour mills and the important seed market, under an 'anti-pollution' law passed by the court.



Figure 7: Motornama, CAMP, 48°C Public Art Ecology, New Delhi, 2008

Source: pad.ma

A significant demographic shift occurred after the industrial shutdown. While licensing cases and other long-drawn litigations between the state and factory owners continued in the courts, a large community of migrant cycle-rickshaw pullers took up residence in the area, confronting the daily reality of police violence and the local resident association's opposition to their presence. But the community stayed on and expanded, from around 20,000 in the early 1980s to about 90,000 in the current moment. The cycle-rickshaw pullers, symbolic of the pre-industrial/non-motorized era, had no permanent homes in the locality; they slept on the street or in front of shuttered shops and industrial units sealed by the municipal corporation.

For their project (<https://studio.camp/projects/motornama/>), Shaina and Ashoke selected twenty-five cycle-rickshaw pullers who lived around the seed market on Roshanara Road. Over two months of planned workshops, the artists trained the group to serve as narrators for guided tours of the area. During these tours the cycle-rickshaw pullers described their experience of manual labour, their physically arduous and risky work, and other aspects of local history and landscape. The tour included houses in the shadow of the new metro rail network expanding through the city, the hundred-year-old ice factory, tea-stalls, a derelict cinema hall, defunct motor repairing shops, an old printing press from Lahore (Pakistan), and the famous Ghanta Ghar (Clock Tower). The tour culminated in the open natural space of

Roshanara Bagh. Underscoring local perspectives on urban change, the project invoked the need for an active repurposing and renewal of a historical green area being systemically destroyed by illegible policies of 'development'.

It has been argued that site-specific art can be read as either 'interruptive' or 'assimilative', depending on whether it is determined by the site itself in the context of the environmental settings and the situating of the artwork (Kwon 2002, 11). Hence in any SEA project the logic of placement needs to be thoroughly scrutinized. The methodology underlying 48°C raises the core question of whether the festival's installation art was truly 'site-specific', i.e., authentically engaged with the material context that embeds the works, or whether the projects were transient superimpositions on the chosen locales, and while seemingly connected, were in fact essentially dissociated from the surroundings. As Sood clarified, 48°C was spread across distinct and often widely separated sites, selected according to their accessibility via the Delhi metro, still in its early stage of development and offering limited routes. She acknowledged that the artists became involved in the settings of the installations much later, i.e., after the sites had already been chosen, and so could not really experience their physical environs and local imperatives/public prior to the process of assembling and placing their works. There is no denying that the artists did not get adequate time to interact with the site and its associated communities. However, the artists were helped in their decisions via a comprehensive site map developed through a year of research by the Urban Research Group, which identified the kind of social settings traversed by the metro's Yellow Line: areas that have been traditionally inhabited by certain communities over a long period of time. The artists relied on this purposive cartography to plan their installations and negotiate challenges on the ground.

In this regard it seems that the festival organizers laid more emphasis on the artists' creative expression, autonomy, and processes rather than on depth of engagement with the material surroundings/fluctuating audiences. The artists treated the sites as convenient external interfaces, instruments and conduits for the artworks – i.e., the artworks did not organically emerge *through* the innate properties and expressive potential of each site. This approach clearly deviates from the general logic of site-specific SEA work, which 'focuses on establishing a complex, indivisible relationship between the work and its site'; additionally, it demands the viewer's physical presence to complete the work' (Kwon 2002, 11).

Delineating the different levels of collaboration and dialogue involved in the site-specific works, Sood acknowledged that twelve days was indeed too short a time to develop depth of interaction with local communities around the different sites. On the level of organization and management, as an independent curator Sood formally collaborated with the Goethe Institute/Max Mueller Bhavan, the School of Planning and Architecture, the Urban Research

Group and other essential stakeholders such as the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, Delhi Development Authority, and Delhi Police in relation to permissions and regulations vis-à-vis the sites of the artworks. This level of institutional collaboration took some effort but was eventually accomplished. However, there was very limited dialogue between the artists and local communities at the installation sites, and even less direct active collaboration. Sood's remarked candidly that spectacle was the only way to attract a naïve public to contemporary artworks; hence she hoped that the scale, diversity and unusual forms of the installations would impress the viewers enough to elicit all kinds of reactions.

Guy Debord notes that 'spectacle-based approaches exempt/reduce spectator responses, thus are opposite to dialogue' (Debord 2002, 143). This seems to hold true in the context of 48°C – while viewers were indeed curious about the unfamiliar aesthetic of conceptual works, they were generally too mesmerised, estranged, puzzled, unsettled and/or disoriented by the spectacle to engage in any systematic communication with the artists or with each other. Two projects stood out as exceptions. As mentioned earlier, with *Chabee!* Atul Bhalla transformed passive viewers/bystanders into active and engaged participants through offering them flavoured water from his sculpture, his work thus shifting from static spectacle to dynamic performance. With *Motornama Roshanara*, CAMP directly involved cycle-rickshaw pullers, working in person for several weeks with this community to facilitate their taking on the role of area guides and narrators of lost local micro-histories. Both projects successfully embodied the dialogic principle central to SEA practice as defined by Kester (2013, 125), for whom 'talking to people face to face, on the given context and at a given site is the important and integral aspect of the socially interactive collaborative work' – i.e., participants directly sharing ideas, understandings, reactions and decisions with each other and with the artist.

As a constellation of independent micro-projects presented by mature and experienced artists, the chosen outdoor sites did enable artists to create large sculptural works, and hence, scale was inherent in the aesthetic logic; scale also served to create a spectacle in order to draw in the crowds. It was the very first time such a massive public art event had taken place in Delhi; it was conceptually 'new'; held for only twelve days, and was concluded before the works could be actually become familiar, comprehended and assimilated by the viewing public. This logic of aesthetics of creating spectacle is just opposite of what Rancière has remarked that it is an experience of the ordinary world (Rancière 2016). In 48°C the curator's aim was that the scale and diversity and immediacy of the artworks should elicit all kinds of responses from various kinds of spectators and Sood calls the art installations in the festival dismissively 'Plop Art'. On the other hand Bishop has pointed this kind of art in public space as 'an elitist realm of the seduction idea of spectacle, which defines the aesthetics' (Bishop 2012, 26).

However, seen in terms of a new paradigm in contemporary Indian art, the 48°C did radically enable and expand viewership. Spread over multiple urban public sites, tapping into an already existent and permanent spectator pool of local people going about their daily life, the installations undoubtedly created a massive spectacle in the city for a brief duration, and at most of the sites viewers responded energetically to the artworks. Sood gives the example of Krishnaraj Chonat's artwork, a dead tree suspended from a crane, illuminated at night and creating a dramatic effect. People could be seen clicking photos; autorickshaw drivers stopped next to it, one exclaiming, "My God, what is the municipal corporation doing!" and another commenting that the suspended tree symbolized government oppression that was "hanging us by the neck". The disruptive quality of the artwork induced a strong reaction in the general audience unfamiliar with such art; their supposed 'passivity' was 'transmuted into activity through the directness and force of the response' (Rancière 2012). Modes of such raw, unfiltered, "authentic" response are rarely noted in relation to works within the protective, elite enclosures of the museum and gallery. These too are designated 'public spaces', but are accessible only to the very privileged few, and managed via strict protocols of viewer compliance and decorum.

The festival introduced a new form of art sited beyond gallery, museum and artist studios. The festival also initiated a new relation in art production between the artists and the waged workers. The ideas were conceptualized by the artists and executed by the waged workers on the site. Thus the process of art production is alienated from the process of art conceptualization. In this way, the art shifted from the artisanal form to the industrial form.

3.4 Independent Art Projects in Public Space

1. SITE-SPECIFICITY

Artists: Ravi Agarwal, Sheba Chhachhi, Atul Bhalla, WALA (Sujit Mallick, Akansha Rastogi, Paribartana Mohanty)

Site-specificity is integral to the SEA projects of these four artists, whose work draws on personal creative experience as well as wider perspectives on art in relationship to public and community spaces, ecological, historical and cultural contexts, and socio-political issues.

For some SEA theorists, 'the environmental context of the location of the art has become significant and is formally determined and directed by the site itself' (Kwon 2002, 11). This may be observed in the case of Ravi Agarwal (2020) who considers his works to be site-specific in that each work emerges from a specific topography, and articulates a clearly

identified locale and community (he qualifies this with the statement that he also considers his works *not* site-specific in that they always transcend their location, i.e., open out and connect to larger questions). He follows a research methodology that first explicitly defines his subject and then deeply mines it for the necessary materials. He prefers his work to be concretely rooted, and this preference facilitates a certain kind of local interaction with community. The work is thus contextually embedded but may lead off into more abstract directions; very occasionally there is a reversal of method, with the work germinating from an abstract idea which is then materially rendered in a particular location. This process may be observed, for instance, in Agarwal's Yamuna Project, a river-based series of photographic works, films, installations (Figure 8), and ongoing engagements, initiated in 2004 and continuing for the next four years. His more recent water-themed work includes the multi-faceted *Else All Will Be Still* (2013-2015) (Figure 9), based on engagement with a fishing community in a village on the coast of the Bay of Bengal, near Pondicherry in South India. First visiting the area as a tourist, Agarwal was drawn to the local ecology as well as to the community's life and their deep relationship to the ocean. He returned to the site several times, gradually developing a relationship with the community and also researching the wider changes – environmental, social and economic – affecting their lives and livelihood.



Figure 8: *Yamuna Project*, Ravi Agarwal, 2004

Source: www.raviagarwal.com

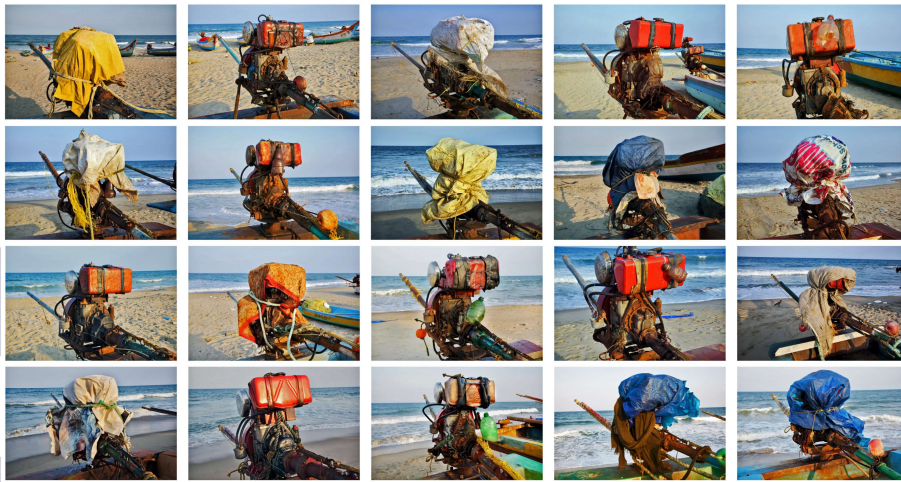


Figure 9: *Else all will be still*, Ravi Agarwal, 2013-2015

Source: www.raviagarwal.com

Scholars point out that site-specific work which focuses on ‘establishing a complex indivisible relationship between the work and its site also demands the viewer’s physical presence to complete the work’ – i.e., viewers (passive and/or active) are indispensable to the process of the artwork’s materialisation (Kwon 2002,107). For Agarwal, the rootedness of a work in a particular site bestows it with a kind of authenticity; this rootedness enables authentic relationships with the local community; and their continuing presence becomes essential to his creative process. While he interacts with the community at his site-specific projects with regard to his ideas, his processes and his intentions, and while the community may be witnesses to the manifesting of his artwork, community presence remains a variable in his research methodology, a source of information and insight, but is not essential or participatory at the time of creating the artwork, nor embedded as a material element in the artwork itself. In contrast, Bhalla (2020) fuses the elements of site-specificity and community presence in the conceptualizations of some of his public art projects. He revisits particular sites inhabited by particular communities, and uses them repeatedly in different works over a period of time, so these particular spaces gain visibility; and the transformation of these sites and their communities over time also becomes more visible. Such sites, for instance the bank of the Yamuna at Jagatpur village on the outskirts of Delhi, thus acquire symbolic weight in Bhalla’s works (Figure 10), and continue to be essential and inspirational for the artist.



Figure 10: River crossing I [Jagatpur], Atul Bhalla, 2008

Source: www.atulbhalla.com

The elision of site-specificity and active community presence is evident in Bhalla's work *Mashq* (2006) (Figure 11), part of *Dilli Dur Ast*,⁹ a month-long art residency in Old Delhi that focused on spaces within the Walled City, which has a large Muslim population. Bhalla and two other artists stayed for the duration at Al Noor Hotel in the congested environs of Chitli Qabar Bazar, creating their works in response to or in collaboration with local people, and exhibiting the finished works on the hotel terrace at the end of the residency. *Mashq* invoked the near-disappearance of the *bhishti* community, who traditionally sell water that they carry around in a *mashq*, a large leather sack made primarily from the skins of goats, sheep and cattle. Bhalla wanted a new *mashq* to be made for the work; he tried unsuccessfully to find someone who would slaughter a goat for him in the *halal* manner prescribed in Islam and rigorously observed as a dietary mandate in Muslim communities worldwide. Local butchers were unwilling. Eventually Bhalla had to slaughter the animal himself, following step-by-step instructions from a local man with *halal* expertise. One of Bhalla's friends filmed the artist's 'performance' on video; the camera focused only on Bhalla's face, not on his hands or on the knife as he undertook the action. He kept his face expressionless throughout, revealing just a flicker of

⁹ The Farsi proverb *dilli dur ast* ('Delhi is distant'), in its full form is *hanooz dilli dur ast* ('Delhi is still distant'). The saying, today used colloquially to imply that it may take a long time to achieve a goal, is attributed to the revered Sufi saint of the Chishti order, Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya (1238-1325), whose tomb in South Delhi has been a major pilgrimage site for centuries.

emotion at the moment the animal died. This video recording, along with a series of still photographs, became the core of *Mashq*.



Figure 11: *Mashq*, Atul Bhalla, 2006

Source: www.atulbhalla.com

The elision of site-specificity and community presence is also evident in Bhalla's installation *Chabeel* (2008, part of the above-discussed 48°C public art festival) (Figure 12) at Kashmere Gate. The work was not situated at the portal itself, as the Mughal-era gate is a protected heritage structure under custodianship of the Archaeological Society of India, and public access to it is controlled. Bhalla installed *Chabeel* on the open green verge by the busy road that goes through the gate's double arches and he wanted to attract viewers unaware of the site's rich history. His method was the purposive creation of spectacular visual dissonance, setting his contemporary sculpture against elegant architecture that simultaneously invokes Mughal imperialism and colonialism. Both projects exemplify how a site *itself* can successfully catalyse what Bishop (2006) describes as the transformation of passive viewer participation into active viewer engagement – through interacting with the public in relation to a particular religio-cultural rite (*Mashq*) and through offering the public flavoured water to drink, which also draws on a religio-cultural rite (*Chabeel*).



Figure 12: *Chabeel*, Atul Bhalla, 2008

Source: Christiane Brosius, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Heidelberg

For Sheba Chhachhi (2019), site-specificity is an important aspect of 'public' art as it offers the artist the chance of direct engagement with a 'public'/viewership, normatively present at the location, through their passive/active participation in the work; and it also offers the community the chance to be integral to the art-making process/contributors to the final product,

whatever be its form. A good example of such engagement is Chhachhi's public art project *Bhogi Rogi* ('Consumption/Disease', 2010) (Figure 13), a site-specific large interactive installation was located in a popular South Delhi shopping mall. The artist used a performance method and tried to keep the work as low-tech and low-cost as possible. The work took the form of a room with a two-way screen at one end; curious members of the public entered that space, and images of them were superimposed via a camera onto images relating to the work's theme [overproduction/excesses of capitalism] that were already projected onto the screen; thus enmeshed, the two sets of images continually transformed into new visuals. As Chhachhi (2000) remarked: 'The interactive technology allows the viewer to play with the images, and actually it is quite a lot of fun.' Each viewer/performer generated a brief, spontaneous relationship with the pre-projected images, enabling the work to further develop; and the work was completed only when the last participant had exited the room.



Figure 13: *Bhogi Rogi*, Sheba Chhachhi, 2010

Source: www.khojstudio.org

Site-specificity is a central aspect of WALA's performance-based interactive SEA engagements. I focus here on their public performance *Kachra Seth Observatory* (2010). (Figure 14) The Hindustani word *kachra* translates as 'trash, garbage, filth, detritus'. It has particular metaphorical resonance, since Indian society is rigidly stratified from top to bottom through millennia-old, complex caste hierarchies. Combined with brutal class discrimination, this ensures that the disenfranchised lower strata are thoroughly objectified by the privileged upper strata, viewed and treated as less worthy, less valuable, less desirable in every way -- i.e., viewed and treated as no more/no less than human *kachra*. *Seth*, a traditional formal title, generally means a rich upper-class businessman, but is also used casually or ironically as a

familiar term of address. These two antithetical descriptors were melded into 'Kachra Seth', a fictional character who as part of WALA's projects in urban public space appeared and vanished in different guises in different parts of the city, performing different selves and personae and simultaneously serving as a repository for audience reactions. *Kachra Seth Observatory* was performed in the lanes of a ragpickers' settlement in Seemapuri, on the East Delhi border with Ghaziabad district of the neighbouring state. The WALA studio was located here; the artists were familiar with the area, spent much time there and had a deep informal daily relationship with the inhabitants. WALA artist Sujit Das created a dramatic disruption at the site via a performative walk in the robes of a Mughal emperor, drawing a range of responses from onlookers. Here the practitioners did not orchestrate the event according a pre-planned template, but instead followed a methodology of responding to whatever spontaneously unfolded at the site during the performance, letting the act take new form from moment to moment. This approach is an example of 'alternative strategies of adopting existing urban forms as sites of artistic intervention' (Kwon, 2006).



Figure 14: *Kachra Seth Observatory*, Wala Collective, 2010

Source: www.walacollective.wordpress.com

2. CREATION OF NEW AUDIENCE

New sets of audiences and new configurations of spectatorship emerge through the varying methodologies applied in the SEA projects *Mashq* (Atul Bhalla), *Bhogi/Rogi* (Sheba Chhachhi) and *Kachra Seth Observatory* (WALA) undertaken in diverse urban public spaces.

Mashq (2006) (Figure 15), in the form of a series of still photographs and a video recording, featured in the exhibition of final works shown on the terrace of the Al Noor Hotel at the

conclusion of the *Dilli Dur Ast* residency. Along with the city's artist community, the local public was invited to the exhibition; many residents and their families visited the exhibition, a very unusual event in a community unfamiliar with the concepts and aesthetics of contemporary art. However, since they strictly observe *halal* they were able to directly connect with *Mashq*. Some male viewers initiated a discussion with Bhalla, commenting that he was obviously untrained in the rite. They pointed out his mistakes: for instance, he was not holding the knife correctly, and that the exhibited images did not show blood, an essential aspect of ritual slaughter.



Figure 15: *Mashq*, Atul Bhalla, 2006

Source: <https://theblackyellowarrow.blogspot.com>

Bhogi/Rogi (2010) (Figure 16), an interactive video installation set in popular South Delhi shopping mall, was aimed at visually creating public awareness in the public about the relationship between health, commodification, consumerism and global consumption of genetically modified foods. Interactive technology enabled viewers to play with and manipulate images – their own figures superimposed on a screen began distorting, shrinking, filling up with food processed from GM crops, demonstrating that our bodies are literally one with what we eat, including foods considered bio-ethically and agriculturally suspect. About 10,000 mall visitors to the mall actively participated in this installation, and in a sense were co-creators of the virtual dimension of the work. This aligns with critical observations that participatory

art/SEA articulates the desire to activate the audience and simultaneously put into motion a drive to emancipate from the alienation of ideology of the capitalism and state repression (Bishop 2006). *Bhogi/Rogi* successfully compelled a naïve public, i.e., not familiar with contemporary art, public art or installation art, nor concerned with the relationship between consumerism and the relentless corporate profiteering achieved through economic coercion and environmental damage.



Figure 16: *Bhogi Rogi*, Sheba Chhachhi, 2010

Source: www.khojworkshop.org

Kachra Seth Observatory (2010), a WALA performance in a ragpickers' settlement on the Delhi-Ghaziabad border at the eastern edge of the city created a stir among the residents at the particular site as well as casual onlookers and passersby. 'Kachra Seth' (Sujit) (Figure 17) walked through the impoverished locality in Mughal costume, holding a rose (a gesture familiar from the depictions of royalty and nobility in Mughal miniature painting, and symbolic of refined courtly ethos) – a bizarre, mysterious, astonishing, disorienting figure. As he slowly and silently navigated the garbage-strewn streets, large numbers of intrigued, bemused people began following him; a festive mood began to build up at the site. WALA intended to purposively create a sudden and radical public disruption, relying purely on visual spectacle, and without offering the public a chance to dialogue with the artists. Rather, they focused on observing reactions provoked by Kachra Seth: the suspense, mystification, bemusement, wonder. The mute figure was so jarring that after a while some youngsters began poking the performer,

goading him to speak. Soon the unease translated into overt aggression as the crowd pulled at the actor's arms and accessories; finally he had to be rescued, ending the performance.



Figure 17: Kachra Seth, Wala Collective, 2010

Source: www.walacollective.wordpress.com

3. POLITICS OF SOCIAL SPACE

It has been argued that “the term ‘space’ refers to complex construction and production of an environment – both real and imagined; influenced by sociopolitical processes, cultural norms, and institutional arrangements which provoke different ways of being, belonging, and inhabiting” (Phadke 2012, 53). In India one must continuously consider the complexities of social spaces that reiterate the absolute co-existence and interdependence of different classes within the socio-economic structure. Universally, different classes of people use social space differently; and social spaces, both private and public, are hierarchically ordered through various exclusions and inclusions (Phadke 2012). In India, unlike the middle, upper-middle and upper classes, the lower-middle and working classes spend a much larger proportion of their time on the streets, rely on street networks, resources and groupings, and use public transport and other public systems to a much larger extent than the privileged strata.

Agarwal and Bhalla focus on the Yamuna riverbank as an existent natural space that, for decades, has been under huge and continuous pressure from ‘development’ policies and powerful real estate lobbies, and is now appallingly degraded through destructive usage and government apathy towards such destruction. The Yamuna is a major tributary of the river Ganga, and inhabitants of the densely populated plains of North India depend on these two rivers for domestic and agricultural water supply. Devout Hindus have a profound symbolic relationship with the river, since both the Ganga and the Yamuna are goddesses in Indian classical mythology, have been worshipped for millennia, and are part of Hindu collective consciousness in both life and death – after cremation, the ashes of the deceased are ritually immersed in the waters of these and other sacred Indian rivers. However, the Ganga and Yamuna, while literally nourishing an enormous catchment area, are also among the most polluted rivers in the world. Despite the ongoing destruction of these rivers and various inept government initiatives to ‘save’ them, their banks and floodplains continue to serve as a cultural node/instrument/repository for millions of people, and are an invaluable source of livelihood for diverse local communities.¹⁰

Agarwal has had a long relationship with the Yamuna from his youth onwards, visiting the riverbank many times year after year, first as a bird-watcher and environmental activist, and then as an artist. He describes his attraction to the river as indefinable, constant, powerful, occupying not just his mind but his entire being. Such immersion and internalization, and extensive time spent at the river, enabled him to think deeply about visuality and aesthetics in relation to that particular terrain, and influenced his river-based series of photographic works, films, installations and ongoing engagements that actively began in 2004 (Figure 18). In terms of his process, with the river, as with any other chosen site, he does not know and cannot predict his responses – he does not impose an agenda, but trusts himself to be present and to hold his thoughts about that particular space. His project in coastal Tamil Nadu (Figure 19), emerged from his interest in the fishing communities being impacted by state policies regarding their livelihood, conservation and coastal ‘development’; he also drew on the community’s complex relationship to the ocean. With regard to both coastal and river projects, he is not interested in exploring the idea of water separately from exploring the human aspect and political and social hierarchies.

¹⁰With the advent of the neoliberal economy, the Yamuna River became the lucrative space for redevelopment that were settled in and inhabited by squatters. The lands that the urban poor could live on forcibly incorporated into the profit economy and fulfilled the aspiration of a world class city, 100,000 people were forcibly relocated to another part of Delhi by cleaning up the banks. The freshwater that was taken out for drinking water was replaced with untreated sewage and industrial discharge, leaving the river full of filth, a sluggish stream of dirt for most of the year (Baviskar 2006, 12).



Figure 18: Yamuna Bank Photograph, Ravi Agarwal, 2007

Source: www.raviagarwal.com

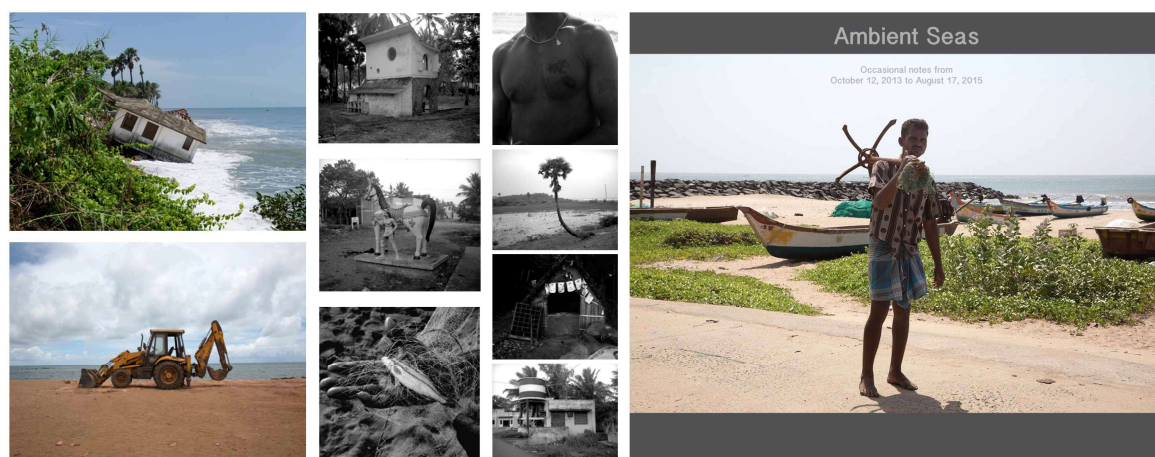


Figure 19: Coastal Project Tamil Nadu, Ravi Agarwal, 2013

Source: www.raviagarwal.com

Bhalla's practice is informed by the deep contradictions – the coexistence of the pure/contaminated, the sacred/secular, the traditional/contemporary, and the public/private – that influence social behaviour and environmental policies in relation to the Yamuna. He has focused on conceptualizing such dichotomies in one form or the other. His water-themed artistic journey began in 2004 with his first performance works on the riverbank, a culmination of regular visits where he spent long hours observing people bathing, performing religious

rituals and myriad other activities. He sets up an intimate trajectory in *Death, the River and Me* (2005) (Figure 20), a series of sixty-three photographs of his performance act in which he is a passive object of the viewer's gaze, seated with his eyes closed while the camera moves around him documenting a hand with a sharp razor shaving his head, moustache and beard, a rite of mourning practiced in many Hindu communities. During the *Dilli Dur Ast* residency Bhalla photographed water storage tanks visible on the terraces of the homes in Chitli Qabar bazaar, and these images later formed part of his photo-series on *piaus* (traditional small kiosks/stands with free drinking water set up by Hindu, Jain and Muslim communities, often with someone present to serve the water) in the lanes of Old Delhi. This series explores the relationship between this public sharing/dispensing of water through micro-sites that simultaneously invoke spiritual and civic virtue, and the way water is shared/dispensed in the more privileged, better 'developed' spaces of the city, where one does not find *piaus* (though on streets all over Delhi, especially in summer, one finds sets of *matkas*, large round earthen vessels filled with drinking water, set out for free public use). Bhalla's wider ecological concerns and critique of urban 'development' are also evident in his gallery installation *PIAU* (2009) (Figure 21), consisting of a sink and two taps from which water flowed (it was collected and recycled), with an audio track providing the sound of splashing. This is a comment on the 'developed' modern lifestyle that takes continuous water supply for granted. The city's upper classes in the city's 'developed' areas, accustomed to continual availability, access and excess, have quite a different relationship to water than the innumerable underprivileged communities in crowded localities with poor infrastructure/civic amenities. Here, water might come into taps at a fixed time for just one or two hours, and it is a daily struggle to collect and store this precious resource for drinking, cooking/kitchen work, bathing, cleaning, washing clothes, and multiple other household uses.



Figure 20: *Death, the River and Me*, Atul Bhalla, 2005

Source: www.atulbhalla.com

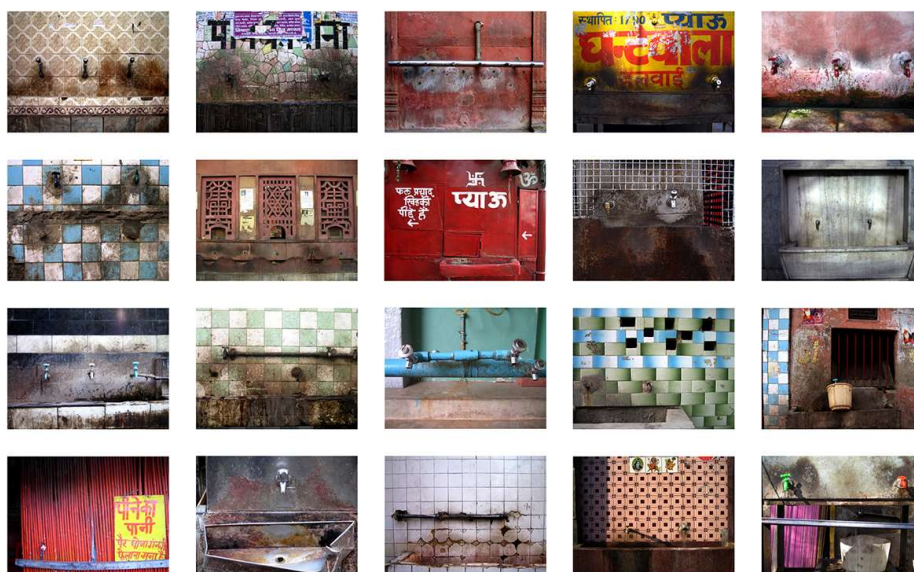


Figure 21: Piau, Atul Bhalla, 2009

Source: www.atulbhalla.com

Sheba Chhachhi and WALA situate their environmental projects in built and crowded urban public spaces. Chhachhi had earlier explored non-traditional exhibition sites, such as the spaces of *bastis* (densely inhabited slums), for her feminist artwork, and her interest in depicting social power relationships finds expression in her SEA work. As discussed earlier, her installation *Bhogi/Rogi* (2010) was set in a lively, popular up-market South Delhi shopping mall, signifying that such spaces epitomize the heart of urban consumption – of food, of luxury items, of all kinds of commodities that comprise the glittering seductions of the global retail economy. WALA situates their art practice in Delhi's peri-urban working-class localities tightly packed on the land of hundreds of outlying villages that were gradually and irrevocably subsumed / reshaped as the city expanded to accommodate millions of economic migrants from neighbouring states, rural areas and small towns in other parts of India.

4. ROLE OF GENDER IN ART PROCESSES

Of the four interviewees discussed in this chapter, Sheba Chhachhi is the only practitioner centrally influenced by feminism, and retaining a gender focus in her creative work. Chhachhi became involved in the women's movement in 1980, and over the next decade built up a photographic history of feminist activism in both urban and rural areas of North India. From the 1990s onwards she developed an alternative way of visually representing women, a counter-narrative to mainstream media depictions which tended to project the figure of woman-as-victim or woman-as-consumerist/housewife. She continued to explore alternative

modes of representation when aesthetic and conceptual shifts compelled her to expand her trajectory into mixed-media and installation art.

Seven Lives and a Dream (1998) (Figure 22) was the first work of art where these collaborators were all intimate friends and fellow travellers on her long journey as a feminist/gender activist. Chhachhi invited them to experiment with self-representation, identity and ingrained self-concept, deploying a new theatricality, very unusual in documentary photography at the time, but quite normative within current imaging practices. Each woman chose a different public space in the city for the conscious construction and staging of her own image, a tableau which Chhachhi then photographed. Through props and posture, each woman projected her subjectivity and told her story – thus invoking the theme of personal agency and articulation, of control over how one appears to the world, the ambivalent elisions between who one is, who one seems to be, or who one is reflexively, or judgmentally, assumed to be.



Figure 22: *Seven lives and a dream*, Sheba Chhachhi, 1991

Courtesy: Tate Collection

During the process Chhachhi found that her working-class subjects were comfortable with having to perform their selfhood in this way, since they connected the staging with the established custom of commercial studio photography where customers are posed against

backdrops. She spent a great deal of time with each participant, and constantly questioned her own social privilege and the unequal relationship between herself-as-photographer and her working-class subjects. Though the participants in *Seven Lives and a Dream* embraced and enjoyed the autonomy of choice vis-à-vis props, space and postures, Chhachhi was always aware that since she was behind the camera, she would always be the more empowered entity in any photographic context.

In all its varied forms, Chhachhi's practice recuperates and amplifies micro-histories, adds layers and refines meanings in terms of women's experience. Her gender-focused artwork offers temporary spaces of imagination that women may inhabit, and where they find their concerns reflected, and her creative engagements in the realm of SEA rest on the same principles of inclusion that have always guided her activism. Chhachhi affirms that the women's movement has motivated women to claim, occupy, and maintain their material spaces, and successfully convinced women that they can be active decision-makers and contributors to civic life at different levels, including areas such as urban planning that are not traditionally considered 'women's issues'. Such experiences of empowerment and social recognition have crucial resonance in cultures where girls and women from disenfranchised communities are generally expected to be subordinate, passive, and self-censoring with regard to their social claims, public presence, and individual voice.

3.5 Conclusion

Drawing on my observations of the public art festival and the four projects discussed in this chapter, I have traced how the aforementioned practitioners conceptualised or visualised their work beyond the purview of conventional studios and institutional spaces, and were able to successfully realise their work in social spaces such as streets, parks, riverbanks, quasi-institutional spaces, public libraries, historical monuments, hotels as well as shopping malls through diverse methodologies.

The large-scale transient sculptures, installations and video projections of *48°C*, presented in the public spaces of the capital, were fabricated in different locations/ studios and then installed at specific festival sites as per the curator and artists' plan. This first of its kind public art exhibition harboured the potential to attract, through spectacle, a heterogeneous audience/group of viewers hitherto unfamiliar with contemporary art. While participatory projects such as Navjot Altaf's *Barakhamba Road* facilitated a dialogue with the public, CAMP's *Motornama Roshanara* trained rickshaw pullers to instruct the strategy of operation in their locality. WALA directly interposed themselves into the city's marginalised settlements through performance.

Ravi Agarwal, Sheba Chhachhi and Atul Bhalla have a consistent presence as artists in the social/ public space; they have built relationships with certain marginalised communities in certain marginalised spaces, and through these relationships are able to harvest material for their artworks. However, the final artworks are often taken back to conventional / institutional art spaces for purposes of formal exhibition. But the overall conceptualization or execution process remains the artist's singular prerogative in the projects by Agarwal, Chhachhi and Bhalla.

However, members of communities these artists engage with do not actively participate in the process of artmaking or its execution. Most of these artworks have not evolved through collaboration or a dialogic process that involves the resident community of the site. Some works of Bhalla and Chhachhi mark an exception as they have, on occasion, created and installed their works on-site and invited local communities to participate in the public event.

The works included in the festival or the independent projects of the artists discussed in this chapter certainly advance the frontiers by making art accessible to an uninitiated public. These works, specifically conceptualised for the public space, offer a platform for spontaneous interaction and dialogue to the non-art audience.

In contrast, the three projects discussed in the next chapter fall directly within the SEA category, with the practitioners primarily using collaborative and dialogic methods in their work with disenfranchised/communities to recreate and reclaim these communities' existent social/public spaces.

Chapter 4: Socially Engaged Art Projects in India, 1990-2021

4.1 Introduction

This chapter uses three case studies of ongoing Socially Engaged Art projects in diverse locations in India to illustrate the development of SEA in India between 1990 and 2021. In contrast to the previous chapter, which discusses SEA projects in public spaces and considers the beginning of SEA in India, this chapter delineates specific participatory initiatives that began as focused individual efforts and developed over time into an organization, a trust and a collective, respectively. All three projects – one rural- and two urban-based -- were founded by women artists in an effort to claim/reclaim public spaces, usually not hospitable/often openly hostile and precarious for women, as sites for creative engagement. The three artists use feminist perspectives as they engage, interpret and materially transform the site, permanently or briefly, partially or wholly. Such transformation is quite radical, for traditional Indian culture is so heavily infused with patriarchal privilege and overt/subtle misogyny that and women in general, particularly underprivileged women, are rarely supported when they choose to assert autonomy or agency in male-dominated public spaces. DIAA (Dialogue Interactive Artists Association), founded in 1997 by Mumbai-based artist Navjot Altaf, is located in the tribal region of Bastar in the state of Chhattisgarh in Central India. Through this organisation Altaf has initiated collaborations between tribal artists and visiting international artists through workshops at the Shilpi Gram studio in Bastar (DIAA Dialogue 2021). <https://www.dialoguebastar.com>

Hamdasti ('partnership' in Persian), founded in 2014 by Kolkata-based artist-curator Sumana Chakrabarty, works in the locality of Chitpur Road in Old Kolkata. This project aims to document the site's micro-histories, share neighbourhood stories and enable under-heard community voices through multi-faceted participatory interventions (Hamdasti 2021). (<https://www.hamdasti.com/>)

Blank Noise, founded in 2003 by Bangalore-based multimedia artist/photographer/feminist activist Jasmeen Patheja as part of her undergraduate degree course in art and design, evolves and presents gender-focused performance-art interventions in the city's public spaces, documents women's experiences and promotes gender-based digital activism through a website and blog. (<http://blanknoise.org>)

Though these three projects differ sharply in terms of trajectory, structure, method and community relations, they hold in common two major concepts upon which their work is built:

(1) site-specificity; (2) a collaborative and dialogic engagement that reframes conventional notions of the artist-author's role in the process of creating the artwork with and within the community.

Four reasons underpinned my choice to use DIAA, Hamdasti, and Blank Noise as case studies of SEA in India. First, these are all long-term/ongoing projects to which the artists have remained committed over an extended period. Second, these are all process-based, each with a distinctive participatory approach that engages local communities. Third, rather than considering themselves an educator, instructor, pedagogue or authority of any kind, the founders of these three projects see themselves as mediators and interlocutors, and primarily as facilitators of a dialogue within participant groups and the larger community. Fourth, all three projects reframe the variable of 'site-specificity' that is pivotal to SEA – these projects originate from their respective sites in terms of social, environmental, and community context, and cannot be transferred or extracted from their sites and resituated in any other space. Daily or frequent face-to-face interaction between artists and participants at the site is the fulcrum of each project. Through such engagement with site, artist and fellow-participants, members of the community gradually become collaborators, co-creators/co-authors of the overall project.

My analysis is based on extensive interviews undertaken with Altaf, Chakraborty and Patheja in 2020-21. My close readings of interview data delineate how the three artists, themselves from privileged backgrounds, embed their SEA practice in social, material and artistic terms at the chosen sites, and how they negotiate the socio-economic precariousness and vulnerability of the communities involved in their projects. I also discuss how the three artists navigate the complex socio-cultural codes that simultaneously bind and separate diverse communities inhabiting the same public spaces.

4.2 Contextual Background

All social entities necessarily *produce* their own space, a manifestation of their actual/perceived realities, fixed/fluctuating self-concepts, and ways of doing/being. Socially produced space is not a mere aggregate of people and objects. Rather, it is a mode of production – it continuously generates and transforms relationships, meanings, discourses and ideologies; it is both repository and instrument of externalized thought and action; it is a semiotic cache, a diffracted field of signs and symbols. Conceptual, social and cultural space, whether produced by the entitled or the disenfranchised, ultimately acquires a political

character since groups can directly/indirectly use the space to inscribe and replicate forms of social dominance, or to resist them.

Most private and public spaces in India are hierarchically ordered through various exclusion and inclusions, and the experience of public space is quite different for women and for men. The geographical and architectural elements of public space are arranged to restrict and control women's access. Socially constructed "gendered space" (Phadke 2012, 52) impacts and inscribes social relationships, and reinforces the normative overt manifestation of male socio-economic power and privilege. Critical scrutiny of the broad concepts of 'public' and 'private' affirms that Indian social spaces are rigorously gendered, with women's place in the house, and men's place in the world outside it (Butalia, 2012). Across class, all women are expected to submit to patriarchal custom, subject themselves directly/indirectly to direct/indirect forms of male control and custodianship, and unquestioningly participate in scripting a family narrative within the security of the home. Women who through choice or circumstance or exigency shape their own destinies outside this framework are seen and judged as a 'problem', and risk being penalized, stigmatised and/or ostracized by family, community, and society at large. Within this seemingly intractable ethos of gender discrimination, underprivileged women are disproportionately affected, enduring economic hardship as well as physical and sexual harassment, abuse and violence.

More generally, scholars have pointed to the overwhelming "multiplicity" Massey (2005) that characterises the social spaces of urban India, and their ongoing transformation under larger socio-economic pressures as the nation grinds through the politically imposed, ecologically violent, tortuous edict of further 'development' that will apparently one day nudge India out of the 'third world'. Urban public spaces have organically expanded and diversified through migrant presence. Major cities in India, as elsewhere in the global South, face the constant influx of millions of impoverished rural and small-town migrants seeking employment and opportunities for a better life. Everywhere, most poor migrants live in large illegal or quasi-legal slums that are complex, highly gendered, multilayered spaces with people of different classes, castes, ethnicities and religions packed together in squalid conditions (Baviskar 2006, 1, 2). These sprawling, struggling settlements are always in flux, and always under threat of eviction/demolition by municipal authorities who view migrants as trespassers whose marginalised spaces are to be arbitrarily controlled under the rubric of public health, civic order, or of the ongoing 'development' and 'beautification' of Delhi as a 'global' city.

Contextualising the emergence of new art practices in India in the 1990s, Geeta Kapur argues that the "recognizing of the new forms of marginalization, promoted by the hegemonic combination of the national and the global has sharpened the language of art" (Kapur 2009,

175). This chapter will demonstrate how the three SEA projects discussed here have attempted to inscribe women's experiences of public space and transform the gendered usage of public space in contemporary India, and in the process created new modes of women's empowerment as well as new iconographies and a new symbolic grammar.

4.3 SEA Art Projects in Three Different Locations in India (1990 into the Present)

4.3.1 CASE STUDY 1

FOUNDING ARTIST / FACILITATOR: NAVJOT ALTAF

PROJECT: DIAA (DIALOGUE INTERACTIVE ARTISTS ASSOCIATION)

LOCATION: VILLAGES IN BASTAR DISTRICT, CHHATTISGARH, CENTRAL INDIA

DURATION: 2000 - PRESENT

WORKS DISCUSSED: *NALPAR* (2001); *PILLA GUDI* (2000)

The Bastar region is the traditional home of the Adivasis, an ancient aboriginal/indigenous/tribal community that has inhabited the region for millennia. The local economy is dominated by agriculture; for a long time the area had been known as India's "rice bowl" as Kester has mentioned while he was there in the site.(Kester 2011).This has since changed, as the tribal population is under constantly renewed threat of forced displacement with their cultivable land now being appropriated by the state and large corporations wanting to mine the rich lodes of minerals in Bastar. This is opposed by local communities, and their social spaces have become nodes of mobilization against larger forces. The Adivasis have a history of collective resistance, from the colonial era into the post-Independence period (after 1947). The latter was marked by Adivasi struggles against caste discrimination as well as against policies of economic and national 'development'. The conflict has intensified from the 1990s onwards, within the profiteering ethos of neo-liberalisation and globalisation (Kapoor 2009, 56). Altaf (2020) notes that the communities involved in her Bastar projects are therefore generally perceptive with regard to the politics of dissent, and to the use of social spaces to re-inscribe and reinforce strategies of dissent, including through the medium of art.

Having stepped out of privileged dominant urban culture in order to engage for the long term with a disenfranchised minority in a 'backward' rural region, for all aspects of her Bastar work Altaf relies on the trust she has earned through her deep and multi-faceted relationship with a particularly vulnerable minority population that mainstream prejudice continues to delineate, neglect and abject as 'backward' and 'uncivilised'.

NALPAR (2001)

In the late 1990s, DIAA negotiated a strategy with neighbourhood communities to explore collaboration with village women as an experimental model for the *Nalpar* project. Altaf's first intervention was in 2001 at a site in the Bandapara neighbourhood of Kondagaon village in Bastar. It took the form of a *nalpar*, a circular wall erected in the space around the public hand-pump, a main source of household water for the community (Figure 23). Since women and children primarily do the arduous daily chore of fetching water, the intervention took the form of a wall specially designed wall that created a private enclosure for women congregating at the hand-pumps. The intention was to create a protective, democratic space for women within a hierarchical and patriarchal ethos wherein the mandated division of labour enables men to continually and closely watch, monitor and control the movements of the women in their families as Kester has observed when he visited Bastar (Kester 2011, 79).



Figure 23: *Nalpar*, Navjot Altaf, 2001

Source: www.dialoguebastar.com

The structure was conceptualized by three local artists (Rajkumar Korram, Shantibai and Gessuram Viswakarma members of DIAA) in collaboration with village women who, through workshops with Altaf, developed a unique aesthetic of signs and symbols intrinsic to tribal spiritual life; these were incorporated into the *nalpar* design and decoration. Thus collaboratively rendered, and authentically reflecting the tribal imaginary, the new structure served two vital functions. First, it had a platform at a convenient height so that women could place their full vessels and buckets there before lifting these onto their heads – breaking the strenuous upward action in this way offset the back strain and muscular-skeletal problems that women developed through the customary practice of lifting heavy vessels directly onto the head from the ground. Second, the structure ensured privacy, providing women with an

experience of collective socialization and group solidarity in a manner “occluded from the sovereign male gaze” (Adajania 2016, 243).

The first *nalpar* was followed by three similar structures in Kondagaon (2004-2005) and four in the neighbouring villages of Sambalpur (2005) and Kondgoannaka (2013).

PILLA GUDI (2000)

DIAA’s second intervention in Bastar was *Pilla Gudi* (‘Temples for Children’), which took the form of alternative spaces where Adivasi children and youth can gather to play and learn outside the traditional schooling framework (Figure 24). Travelling to *balwadis* (local schools) and public meeting places such as temples and village community centres, the artist group (Rajkumar Korram, Shantibai and Gessuram Viswakarma) had extended conversations with villagers about how mainstream education strategies in the tribal areas, while presented as an instrument of wider social ‘progress’, are also experienced by locals as form of cultural indoctrination and forced assimilation, and are suppressing and erasing indigenous knowledge. Through dialogue with young people from tribal and Dalit communities, the artists realised that the next generation were becoming more and more ignorant of their culture and history. Hence the need and the significance of building a space of alternative pedagogies, where the young people could be exposed to the politics of knowledge, cultural differences, indigenous practices and mythology; as also to the realities of marginalization, social struggles, and tactical survival in what is viewed, neglected and dismissed by the mainstream as a ‘backward’ part of India inhabited by ‘backward’ populations.



Figure 24: *Pilla Gudi*, Navjot Altaf, 2000

Source: www.dialoguebastar.com

Artist Rajkumar designed the first *pilla gudi* in Kusuma village, 150 kilometres outside Kondagaon, repurposing a temple of the Mother Goddess ‘Matanar’, a venerated tribal deity, into a space for learning. The temple ceiling was carved with deities gazing downwards at the worshippers below. Rajkumar replaced these sculptures with an overhead mirror, so that when people looked upwards they would see themselves – i.e., the real, rather than the mythological. DIAA used these spaces to develop workshops with local children. Altaf designed the second *pilla gudi* at Shilpi Gram, an open-air studio-cum-amphitheatre established by the famous Adivasi artist Jaidev Baghel. The functions as a meeting and performance space; a tiered circular seating arrangement surrounds a stage with a floor of sand. Altaf, Shantibai and Raj Kumar collaboratively designed the third *pilla gudi*, working with children from Kopaweda village. That space transformed into a meeting place playground as suggested by the children (Kester 2011).

Discussion

The site, a cardinal variable within SEA, has been defined as “not simply a geographical or an architectural setting, but a network of social relations, a community”, with the artist and his/her sponsors envisioning the artwork “as an integral extension of the community rather than an intrusive contribution from elsewhere” (Kwon 2002, 6). Discussing how DIAA practices reframe site-specificity, Altaf (2020) reiterates that her work in Bastar with the artist group of Rajkumar Korram, Shantibai and Gessuram Viswakarma is “context-sensitive”; is inclusive of the participation of people from specific areas; and remains focused on processes of human interaction and social discourse. Altaf also states that community-based site-specific practice involves a methodology quite distinct from practice within a studio. Altaf’s work falls under the category of “community-based site-specificity” (Kwon 2002), wherein sites themselves are generative, with creative work materialising extemporaneously from the site itself, and materially integrated with it, freighting it with signifiers, implication and resonance. The site of production of the artwork cannot be separated from the site of its reception, and the experience of production is elided with the experience of reception.

In the Bastar projects, the action of art-making is undertaken as a collaboration between the local community and the four DIAA artists (Altaf, Korram, Shantibai and Viswakarma) through a process which involves discussion on strategies among the artists themselves and, simultaneously, dialogue with the community. In order to understand the area’s social networks, dialogue extends from the immediate neighbourhood and community to adjoining villages. The artists document community articulations around fundamental issues regarding

human dignity and respect for Adivasi culture. The artists consider it crucial to learn from the lived knowledge and experience of local communities. They also inquire into how to challenge / bridge the gap between learner and teacher, and how both make efforts to be equally vulnerable and open in the knowledge relationship. In the context of *Nalpar*, there was a meshing of the two modes of collaboration: the artist group interacting with the local people in order to study the nuances of the indigenous social space; and Altaf engaging specifically with the local women in order to learn about Adivasi symbols and other aspects of their traditional knowledge that could be assimilated into project aesthetics.

For Altaf (2020), the most striking part of a genuinely collaborative process is that as participants go deeper into the project, insights emerge that may be unexpected, dissonant, disruptive and in fact may transform, subvert or reverse the group's previous ideas and decisions. Authentic collaboration thus mandates flexibility, even while dialogic practice also needs a "discursive framework" that organises the participants' sharing understandings, reactions, decisions, and thoughts (Kester 2004). The *nalpar* sites are radical interventions in that they were collaboratively created; for the first time, in that particular context, local women had a unique, secure, desired social space to inhabit amidst their arduous daily routine.

The aesthetics of Altaf's Bastar projects have emerged entirely from her collaborative practice and are intimately linked with the politics of inclusion. Collaborative practice has made her more keenly aware of how art systems can so easily function as forms of a power structure built on particular aesthetic values and judgements. As mentioned earlier, the *nalpar* structures were decorated with the prehistoric signifiers of water and earthen pots, which are still used by Adivasis in their traditional patterns, in contrast to the modern signifiers for water taps and handpumps that are today also used as election symbols by political parties. It took many days of working together with the community to visualize the design of the wall. The aesthetic evolved through ongoing dialogue with the participants and derives from their traditions and cultural experience. The aesthetic reflects a conscious agreement among the artists and the community to reject the idea of any aesthetic hierarchy and aesthetic judgement, and to advocate for remaining open to experimentation. This creative ideology invokes a system of equal aesthetic rights for artworks, artists and craftspeople, whatever the context, circumstance and level of enfranchisement. Altaf's objective was not to look at Adivasi art merely in terms of form and symbolic idiom but to understand it in relation to the historical and cultural context within which the indigenous works are produced, and also to examine the self-'Other' / insider-outsider dynamic. She intended to engage with the visual field from a premise informed by progressive politics, just as she had observed and studied contemporary art practices in other locations.

Altaf is also interested in studying the processes of creating and securing cultural spaces such that provide opportunities for critical reflection and for the application of critical thinking. In the Bastar projects she at first she had a purely creative role, visualizing the artworks and initiating the communication/collaboration with local artists and the local community. Later she enabled the expansion of art practices through people's participation in creative dialogue, and by inviting artists from outside the region, as well as international artists, to work with local communities. Her role has now transformed into that of a facilitator, and includes negotiating the socio-cultural differences and aesthetic frictions that can manifest in discussions and on the ground between urban and Adivasi artists, between the artists and the Adivasi community, and between Indian and international artists. She very strongly feels that the marginalised and underprivileged people/artists/communities whose contributions are integral to public art projects and SEA initiatives should not be treated as raw material, i.e., commodities to be used by artists, curators, arts organizers, the cultural establishment, etc. Yet repeatedly we see such people/artists/communities being objectified, muted, excluded, manipulated and denied their due place within the realm of these socially-oriented and apparently democratic genres.

4.3.2 CASE STUDY 2

FOUNDING ARTIST / FACILITATOR: SUMANA CHAKRABORTY

PROJECT: HAMDASTI COLLECTIVE

LOCATION: CHITPUR ROAD, KOLKATA, WEST BENGAL

DURATION: 2014 – PRESENT

WORK DISCUSSED: *CHITPUR LOCAL* (2014-2017)

Hamdasti was founded by art practitioner Sumana Chakraborty in 2013. Returning to India with a small grant after completing her master's degree in art and design at Harvard University, she used the money to initiate the collective's first interventions in the locality of Chitpur (Figure 25) Situated in Old Kolkata, Chitpur is a microcosm of the city, a place where many different communities coexist in diverse kinds of relationships. The turbid Hooghly river runs along one side of Chitpur, an early printing hub that was also once famous as a haunt of travelling folk theatre (*jatra*) companies. It is a dense and cluttered space, with derelict buildings, artisan workshops, a bustling wholesale market, pavement vendors and decaying old mansions with courtyards still used for performances and rehearsals. Chitpur is a generally conservative area and women are not very visible in its public spaces. It is now home to a diverse migrant demographic, but the native Bengali middle-class families, who have lived here for generations and shaped the local culture, still dominate the neighbourhood ethos.

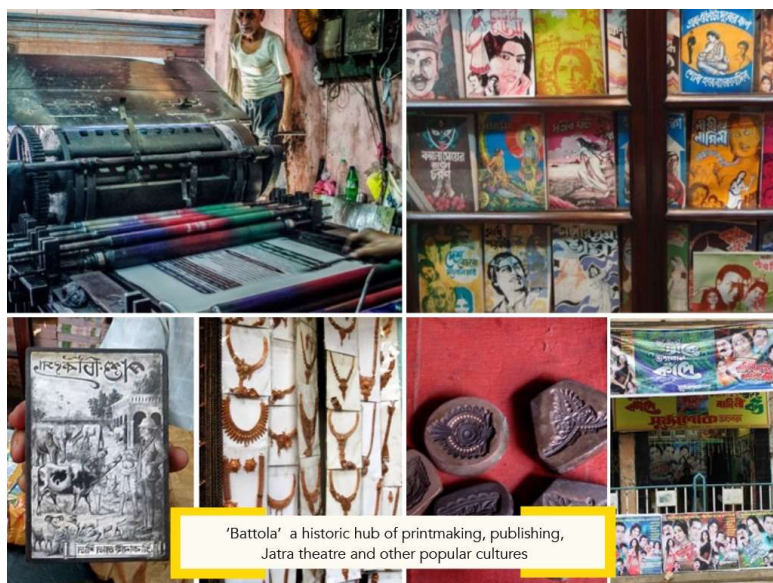


Figure 25: Chitpur: Locally Crafted Traditional Products/Media Objects, 2014

Source: www.hamdasti.com

Hamdasti's focus is on community-based art, and it provides fellowships to city artists for long-term engagement with communities, focusing on points of friction or conflicts of opinion between clearly defined social groups. Chakraborty clarifies that the site-specific art interventions were structured not just to accommodate the formal aspects of the built environment "but also to find that edge to play with" (Chakraborty 2000). This is also the fulcrum of her individual practice that she continues in parallel with the Hamdasti work: "I always try to find a point of discomfort, take it forward till I hit a nerve ending. As soon as I find myself becoming comfortable, I look for another point of discomfort, provoke myself with another edge so that I can keep pushing the inquiry to its furthest extent" (Chakraborty 2000).

The project *Chitpur Local* (2014-2017) took the shape of two public art festivals: *Chitpur Local I* and *Chitpur Local II*. In both phases the area became a place for participatory creative experiments, beginning with local school students and reaching out to neighbourhood residents, shopkeepers and craftspeople, who were initially reluctant to participate but became curious and responsive after noticing the students' keen involvement. The festivals were well attended, helped to deepen and strengthen community networks, and brought Chitpur to the notice of the city's art establishments and cultural organizations. The project enabled both the artists and local people to recalibrate their established relationships to the neighbourhood, once a creative hub, but which over time has lost this vibrant energy. The project also allowed residents to engage with outsiders (artists) and experience something fresh, different from mundane daily life, within their habitual spaces.

CHITPUR LOCAL I

Preparatory work for Chitpur Local I began six months before the event. Chakraborty and a group of three artists (Nilanjan Das, Manas Acharya, and Avijna Bhattacharya) held after-hours creative workshops with students aged ten to fourteen in Oriental Seminary, a local heritage school for boys (Figure 26). The school's teachers were Hamdasti's first collaborators during the four workshops held each month. Workshop participants established new relationships with their environment (Figure 27), recuperating meta-histories of the neighbourhood spaces through conversations with residents, gradually learning about the craft traditions of the locality, connecting with people at shops, libraries, photography studios and courtyards while documenting diverse paths from their home to the school. Mentored by the four artists, workshop participants mapped the locality in terms of residents' stories, spatial positions, points of tension, points of encounter, points of misconnection, and much more. There was a changing flow of mentors and participants, but this mapping project has continued into the present.



Figure 26: Chitpur Local 1: Participants from Oriental Seminary, 2014-15

Source: www.hamdasti.com

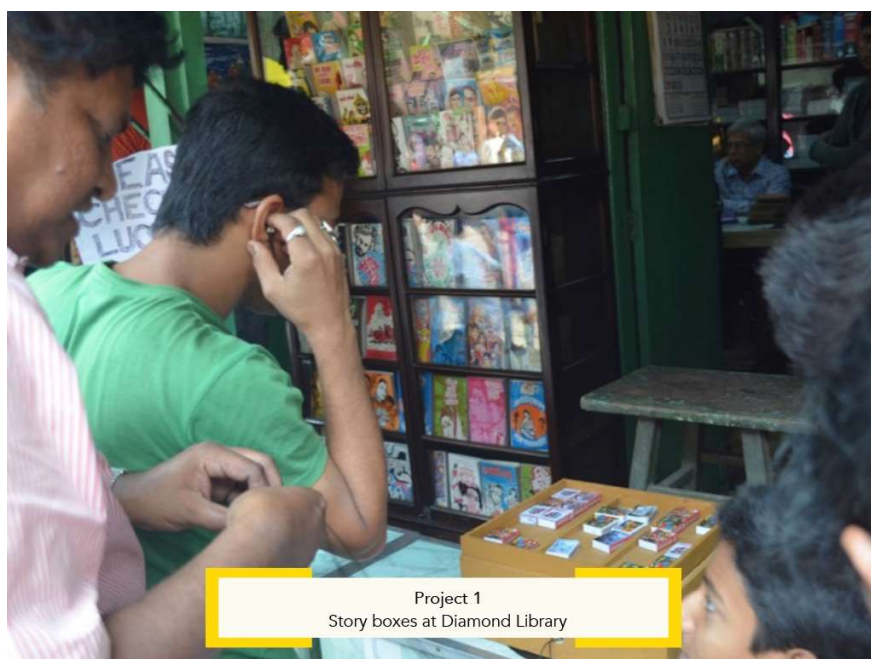


Figure 27: Chitpur Local 1: Diamond Library, 2014-15

Source: www.hamdasti.com

The four artists also began going into the locality themselves, interviewing people and generally talking with residents, which helped to draw the larger community into festival's ambit. Initially, the artists and the community engaged with the art interventions through different entry points, which created some discomfort, but along the way they were able to develop a mutual understanding. One example is the case of local art teacher Chayanika Dey who lived with her family in the lane adjacent to Diamond Library, a century-old bookshop. Dey ran a private art class at her home, and the artists began a joint mapping project with the art-class pupils and the school students, creating a bridge across the social differences between the two groups. This generated a new social synergy amongst the youngsters, each group providing the other with a new perspective on the experience of their familiar neighbourhood.

For *Chitpur Local I*, Hamdasti was meticulous in keeping the spaces of intervention relatively closed in order to avoid the exoticisation that can quickly happen when underprivileged and marginalised communities participate in public cultural practice, and in order that the works should primarily reflect local realities delineated by local participants. But in order to receive objective feedback, the collective did invite a few outsiders to the festival to view the works.

CHITPUR LOCAL II

For the next edition of the festival the collective put out an open call for city cultural practitioners to collaborate with Hamdasti in conceptualizing and rendering new interventions

in Chitpur. The selected group -- Suhasini Kejriwal (visual artist), Dipaman Kar (sculptor), Ruchira Das (curator), Srota Dutta (writer), Anuradha Pathak (printmaker/installation artist), Varshita Khaitan (graphic designer), and Nilanjan Das (printmaker) – brought their own ideas of art and social practice to the collaboration, and accepted the challenge of switching disciplines, working outside their area of expertise and in a different medium or context. For instance, a visual artist worked with rubber-stamp makers; a curator worked with schools on their art education curriculum; a sculptor worked with local clubs; an art critic worked with old photography studios; graphic designers, installation artists, and printmakers all involved themselves as educators, combining traditional technologies with multifaceted demonstrations of contemporary arts. The collaborative work was often undertaken in the different *dalans* (courtyards) of Chitpur's old mansions, in earlier times used for rehearsals, musical concerts, theatre performances, and other cultural events. The present occupants of these houses were interested in the collective's documentation of the *dalans*, and amenable to their courtyards being used for cultural activities. Hence through the festival these private spaces were temporarily converted into community spaces (Figure 28).



Figure 28: Chitpur Local II: *Dalans* (Courtyards), 2016-17

Source: www.hamdasti.com

The project's art interventions in Chitpur added something significant to the local environment by excavating the area's meta-histories, based on Kolkata's larger social narrative that is strongly associated with classical arts practices as well as subaltern popular cultures. Practitioners within the area's hybrid earlier arts realm included the virtuoso printmakers of Battala, performers of *jatra* (Bengali folk theatre), *kabials* (street poets/singers), *nautch*

(dancing) girls, courtesans, prostitutes and actresses; patrons and connoisseurs included the modish-yet -traditional *babu* and *bibi* (nineteenth-century male and female Bengali elites). This social idiom eventually dissolved into the graphic arts of woodcuts and engravings and was subsequently replaced by cheap lithographs and oleographic prints that flooded into the markets of Calcutta in the first half of the twentieth century (Jain, 1999). Hamdasti enabled the city's artists as well as local people to re-establish relationships to this neighbourhood, once so culturally active and dynamic, but depleted over time. The project also allowed residents to engage with outsiders (artists) and experience something fresh, different from mundane daily life, within their habitual spaces.

Hamdasti's efforts culminated in *Peers of Chitpur* (2015), a two-day festival spread over twelve venues in the locality, attended by about 800 people from all over the city. Events included heritage walks, film screenings, discussions, talks, small exhibitions. "Organising all this was a kind of madness in logistical terms, but it was also very stimulating and rewarding," commented Chakraborty (2020). She explained that the festival was structured "so that so that audiences could not be passive spectators, they had to engage one another, have conversations"; and that the "ecosystem" of neighbourhood collaborators worked efficiently. Students did all the legwork; teachers and parents worked as volunteers; residents served as festival guides, taking visitors through Chitpur's streets and by-lanes.

Discussion

Hamdasti's intent has expanded from an initial drive to revitalize and conserve the heritage of Chitpur. "Local people have understood that our intervention is not about conservation, but about articulating local realities. Heritage is an elite concept, but very often residents on the fringes of or within heritage areas actually live in poor conditions," says Chakraborty (2020). The project is now directed towards the facilitating of encounters which, ideally, would take local people outside their zones of familiarity push the boundaries of their imaginations, nudging them towards a shift in self-perception and perception of the community.

The two phases of *Chitpur Local* embedded creative collaborators on the ground; new community networks offered distinctive contributions to the festival's structure, initiating dialogue and activities in the different private and public spaces. The early participants later returned in the role of guides and mentors, while the artists became more deeply immersed in sharing cross-disciplinary practices and new aesthetic vocabularies. Creative usage of the various locality spaces was part of building a shared understanding, working towards a shared goal, affiliating with a shared value system. Various site-specific art interventions led to the creation of new local craft products and business opportunities. The project also invited

sponsorships for supporting the school, and Hamdasti's presence in the area led to other beneficial pragmatic outcomes. All the artists used local materials, tapped local skills, used local labour, and worked in close collaboration with local craftspeople (Figure 29).

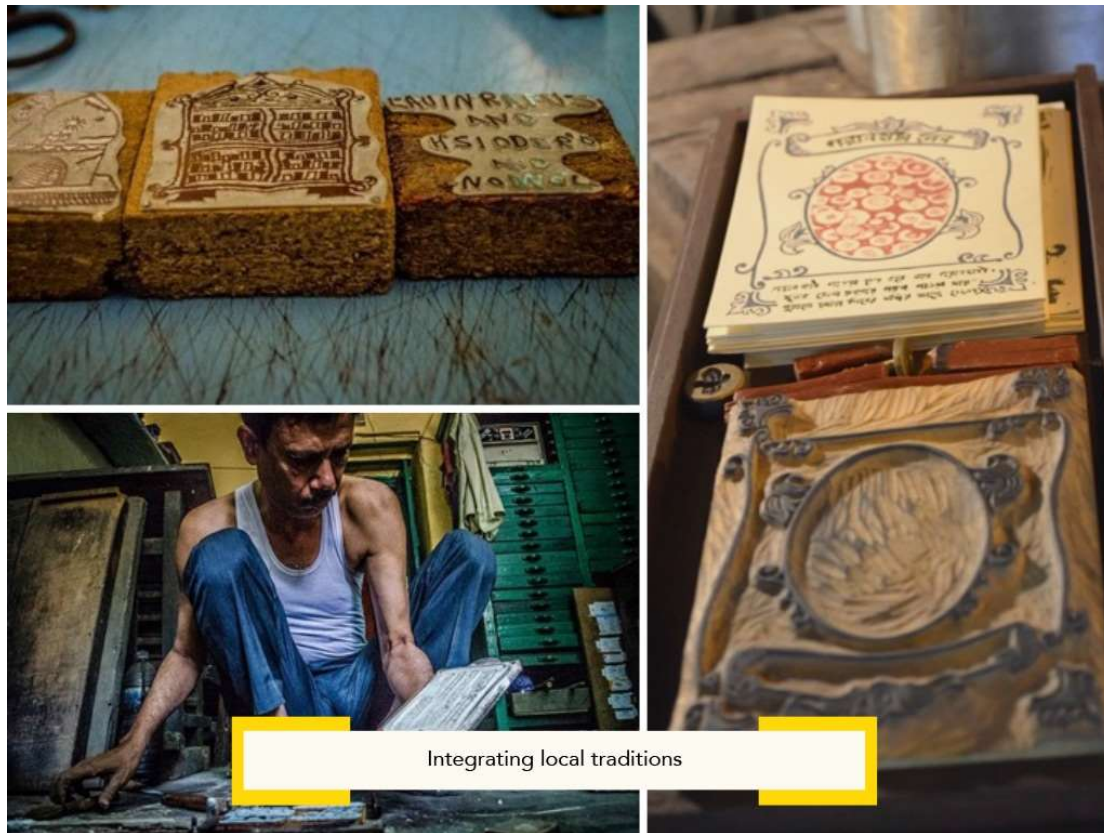


Figure 29: Chitpur Local 1: Connecting with Local Artisans, 2014-15

Source: www.hamdasti.com

At the same time, the site-specificity in project Hamdasti emphasizes the social integration of the community, which also comes under the category of community-based site-specificity. The project located in Chitpur was one such instance where social networking was directed towards rediscovering and rejuvenating the locality by involving residents and the city's artist community in exploring local history and public spaces. In this context, I recognize that this should be the fundamental intent of the community-based site-specificity where the members from the community will be labyrinthine in the process of art-making.

Hamdasti does not explicitly focus on gender, but some of their interventions are based on feminist concerns. Bengali culture and urban middle-class public life includes *adda*, i.e., informal gatherings for open conversation, leisurely or animated discussions in public spaces – a social practice that is predominantly male in its modern form (Chakraborty 2000, 181). Women from this class follow the custom of meeting and socializing together in their own

“gendered spaces” (Phadke 2012, 53) within the house. The force of gender segregation became apparent to Srota Dutta when *for Chitpur Local II* she explored how women are imaged in the pre-wedding photographs taken in locality studios. These photographs display women as prospective brides to families seeking matrimonial matches. Dutta identified local photo studios keen to participate in this project; some of these had been operating in Chitpur for almost a century. She facilitated interactive sessions between the male photographers and their female subjects and collected narratives from families involved in the complexities of seeking and offering brides in this manner for traditional arranged marriages. Dutta used these studio photographs in a public talk on gender issues; she also hosted three related public events at different venues – a local home, a local library, and a local photo studio – attended by the neighbourhood women, local photographers and interested residents (Figure 30,31). While the intervention was successful, Dutta had initially struggled to find participants through casual encounters as women were rarely visible in public, and most local men refused to tell her where and how to meet them. Later through in-depth conversations with local shopkeepers, she learned that Chitpur’s middle-class women are not often seen on the streets.



Figure 30: Local II: Connecting with Local Women, 2016-17

Source: www.hamdasti.com



Figure 31: Public Event Exploring Narratives about Arranged Marriage Collected from Local Families, 2016-17

Source: www.hamdasti.com

Through regular workshops, residencies, community events, festivals, open houses, exhibitions, public talks, etc., Hamdasti strengthened its core strategy of networking as widely as possible to make its presence felt; to make its creative work more and more familiar to the local public; to reiterate its commitment to the locality; and to expand the projects incrementally to direct and indirectly involve more people as well as the wider artist community. During *Chitpur Local 1*, Hamdasti had three interventions ongoing simultaneously, all within a 100-metre stretch of Chitpur Road. The student participants were divided into groups, but they could move between interventions if they wished. The projects were the *Story Box* created by at Diamond Library and the *Memory Game* created by Nilanjan Das and a small pop-up museum in Chayanika Dey's courtyard, created by Varshita Khaitan who involved students and assigned them to go around the community and ask people what they thought a Chitpur museum should contain. As part of the intervention, the students visited Jorashako Thakur Bari, the ancestral home of the Tagore family, which is now a heritage building. They had never visited a museum before, so this was part of their learning – to experience a museum in material terms and understand why museums are necessary. Khaitan worked with local bamboo craftspeople to make shelves for the pop-up museum; when it was ready, people brought objects to set on the shelves and narrated stories around the objects to the local audience. After initial suspicion and hesitation on the part of the residents, and the need for intensive persuasion by Hamdasti, over time the locals became to a great degree the co-

creators of each intervention and eager to share responsibility for decisions, enactments, and outcomes.

The community also began to create room for the artists who introduced new practices and aesthetic vocabularies in the second phase of the project. In this phase the open interaction became central in the creative process that denies the formal method of art-making (Kester 2004). For instance, Anuradha Pathak was invited to use the *dalans* of local homes as community spaces for cultural activities, such as carom tournaments and workshops for making paper lanterns. Each intervention in its way attempted to facilitate encounters with the unfamiliar, and to alter the participants' perceptions of themselves and their habitual relationships to the locality, and the festival format allowed people to participate together.

For Chakraborty, aesthetics are not just about form or philosophy, but about the granular truths of lived experiences that shape perception and visualization. The public art festivals were efforts in community building, but also attempted to change people's perceptions about art, and about what was possible through art, including the possibility that a neighbourhood could actually see the reflection and transformation of itself through art interventions. "There was no singular narrative, no unifying theme; the interventions are a means to enable different points of view" (Chakraborty 2020). She remarks that it is more important to question hierarchies – i.e., who has formal 'training' as an artist, who is seen as 'skilled' or as 'unskilled'; who is a 'legitimate' artist/who is not; what is deemed 'good' art/what is not, etc. "Form should be a means by which people encounter the unfamiliar, engage with their familiar context or with familiar others in a different way; and through this new engagement find themselves in a new relationship to the context and to others, for a moment"; unconventional use of form refutes and resists typical ideas "about the creation of art *and* about creators of art"; and it is "very refreshing to see what emerges through creativity of 'untrained' people. The result might not be 'beautiful' in the traditional sense but it is powerful because it has arisen due to, and through, the defiance of aesthetic expectations, including normative expectations of form" (Chakraborty 2020).

Chakraborty has been central to the project right from its inception, and her initial role as an artist has evolved to now include project management, fundraising, and creating new spaces for engagement. Another essential function is to engage with the larger community of artists in the city and link them to the collective in different ways. Hamdasti is collaborating with artists across disciplines and genres, as well as a range of civil society actors including local clubs, the Kolkata police, human rights activists, and NGOs interested in working with artists "not only as part of social awareness campaigns but also for the sake of the arts, to support the artist community and practitioners who do socially engaged creative work" (Chakraborty

2020). Her concept of community art involves reaching as many people as possible by expanding the projects into the different areas of the locality, utilizing different media, and ensuring the participation of a broad demographic. She reiterates that dialogue about art practice is very important, and that community input about the project must always be taken into account so that Hamdasti can attract new participants and deepen its understanding of ground realities.

4.3.3 CASE STUDY 3

Founding Artist / Facilitator: Jasmeen Patheja

PROJECT: BLANK NOISE

LOCATION: BANGALORE, KARNATAKA; ONLINE VIA THE BLANK NOISE BLOG

DURATION: 2003 – PRESENT

WORKS DISCUSSED: WHY ARE YOU LOOKING AT ME (2006); MARCH IN THE CITY (2006);

TALK TO ME (2012); MEET TO SLEEP (2016, 2017, 2018)

Located in Bangalore, one of India's largest and most influential technology hubs, Blank Noise is a feminist activist project founded in 2003 by Jasmeen Patheja in response to her personal experience of street harassment, (depressingly referred to by the absurd archaic descriptor 'eve-teasing') during her undergraduate studies in art and design in that city. The project opposes all forms of gender discrimination and violence against women and supports the assertion of multiple forms of gender identity/orientation, and mobilizes women towards self-affirmation, towards confronting their fears and taking steps to protect themselves. Blank Noise activists use public spaces in different cities to stage protests, to perform, and to campaign against sexual assault, victim blame, domestic violence, street, workplace and campus harassment, misogyny and other forms of gendered abuse.

Interventions in the digital realm take place through a website and through a blog co-created by activists, journalists, writers, and cultural practitioners. An important contribution to gender discourse, the blog is an effort to raise public awareness and bring about a substantial alteration in prevalent social prejudices, attitudes and behaviour that humiliate, harm and traumatise women. The blog documents issues around gender violence and channels voices against gender injustice by collecting testimonials from women who have experienced abuse; the platform is also used for strategizing, collaborating and building activist alliances. The Blank Noise website affirms the act of empathetic witnessing through themed podcasts, and

offers group solidarity through interventions such as ‘listening circles’ in different locations, as well as multiple ways of activist connection and participation.

The medium of intervention in public space “is the body, a repository of memory, emotion, bearing the direct imprint of experience. Bodies are diverse, but through the intervention they become a collective instrument for bringing together the personal, the social and the political” (Blank Noise 2021). Embodied intervention means direct presence in public space for a particular articulation, taking on the challenges of such enactment in Indian public spaces that are inherently full of physical and psychological risk for all women, across age, class and ability. The ‘art’ that is created emerges *through* this social process of mobilization and enactment in a particular time and space. It is an organic, dynamic, fully embodied practice, so the public action/art ‘product’, cannot exist without its ‘producers’, the physical community of activists; nor can it exist without the public, the physical community of viewers.

Volunteers are motivated to join Blank Noise not because they want to ‘help’ the collective but because such activist articulation is important to them, an affirmation of what they have witnessed and experienced. “This is not the traditional logic of volunteering, and it is not easy,” comments Patheja, explaining that volunteers come to Blank Noise “primarily because something about our activism has strong resonance in *their* lives, and has acquired enough significance that they want to support, with their bodies, our way of demanding gender equity, gender justice, social inclusion, social change. They commit their bodies to this work not because the issues we engage with are important to *us*, but because these issues are important to *them*” (Blank Noise 2021).

Blank Noise interventions, referred to as ‘actions’, in public space are underpinned by an explicit rhetoric of empowerment, agency, autonomy, self-affirmation and self-belief: “May we never have to carry that weight of silence, shame, blame for experiencing sexual and gender-based violence. We are done defending.” Activists are called ‘sheroes’ / ‘theyroes’ / ‘heroes’, and group solidarity is clearly enunciated in their manifesto: “I feel safe when I am heard. I feel safe when I am not judged. I feel safe when I don’t have to justify myself over and over again. I, Action Shero, am your safe space, as you are mine. I Never Ask For It. An Action Shero builds capacity for difficult conversations. The Action Shero/Theyro/Hero is willing to be self-confrontational in walking towards their ideal feminist self” (<https://www.blanknoise.org/home>).

WHY ARE YOU LOOKING AT ME? (2006) took the form of activists standing idle at traffic signals and railings on the streets with letters of the alphabet taped to their chests; when the activists stood next to each other, the letters became the sentence *Why Are You Looking at Me?* Volunteers were mobilized through word of mouth, and this action was repeated each

weekend, simultaneously, in the cities of Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata, Delhi, Patna, and Hyderabad.

MARCH IN THE CITY (2006), proposed by a volunteer, took the form of a blogathon on 8 March to mark International Women's Day. Hundreds of people took part in this digital event, some using the blog to disclose incidents of street harassment and other kinds of violence they had been subjected to even decades earlier but had never spoken about to anyone. The blogathon was picked up as a news item both in the national and international media. People even wrote in from all parts of India and from other countries, saying they wanted to start chapters of Blank Noise in their own locations.

Talk to Me was held in a lane outside the Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Bangalore; and Blank Noise volunteers included women studying there (Figure 32,33). This project focused on the acute problem Srishti's women students faced almost daily while negotiating a particular public space lane (referred to as 'Rapist Lane') outside the Institute – a lonely dark alley that was unsafe due to the presence of men, sometimes drunk, who often loitered there for the purpose of harassing the women walking through it. The activists placed tables in the lane, inviting the men to sit down with the women they were harassing and have an empathetic conversation over tea and snacks, listen to one another, and try to understand each other. Following the session, the activists offered each man a flower. This intervention continued for a month, after which the lane was renamed 'Safe Lane' because the men no longer used it to target women.



Figure 32: *Talk to Me*, Blank Noise, 2012

Source: www.blanknoise.org



Figure 33: *Talk to Me*, Blank Noise, 2012

Source: www.blanknoise.org

MEET TO SLEEP (JANUARY 2016) was co-hosted by Why Loiter (Mumbai), Girls at Dhabas (Karachi, Pakistan) and activists in the cities of Pune, Bombay, Bangalore, Delhi, Jaipur and Hyderabad]. The participants undertook an action, radical in context of social conservatism and male privilege – ‘sleeping’ for short periods in open parks across the country, asserting their presence in public, claiming public space, and emphasizing the right to freedom (Figure 34). In 2017 with Blank Noise linked up with 22 organisations and collectives across India in a *Meet to Sleep* action to mark the passing of five years since the unconscionable gang rape and subsequent death of young physiotherapy student Jyoti Singh, named ‘Nirbhaya’ (Fearless Woman) by the media before her identity was revealed. The action was repeated in 2018.



Figure 34: *Meet to Sleep*, Blank Noise, 2016

Source: www.blanknoise.org

Discussion

The Blank Noise project reframes the SEA variable of site-specificity through two modes of intervention – physically in diverse urban public spaces, and virtually in cyberspace through its website and blog that document actions, archive women’s testimonials and serve as public repository of themed, technologically enabled conversations and connections.

Blank Noise’s ‘actions’ create a complex, inseparable affiliation between the site and the intervention; without the physical presence of participants, the site-specific embodied ‘artwork’ cannot be accomplished (Kwon 2002). This direct method has immediate, visceral impact and is thus more powerful than indirect digital interventions, even though the physical ‘artwork’ is transient and digital content can exist presumably forever. However, the physical ‘artwork’ has limited viewership, while the virtual platform is able to reach many more people and generate dialogue through bringing together different communities and circuits of response. The first blog posts enabled a growing community of people interested in the issues Blank Noise engages with to connect with each other in solidarity online, and to affirm their own desire to change social attitudes towards women, change the gender narratives. Other people got to know about the blog through word of mouth, and then joined that larger pool of communicators. The bloggers formed a community; conversations from the blog would continue offline, in parks and public spaces.

Through its physical and digital interventions, Blank Noise has generated new social relationships among its participants, and is an example of how the variable of gender facilitates a particular “production and structuring” of community space (Phadke 2012). Patheja points out that the collective Noise builds “depth of conversation” through cyberspace the same way that it builds “depth of action” through physical interventions in public space: “It is not enough just to perform the action in public space, whatever that space might be. Through the blog we document how we felt about the experience of intervention, share our views. On the basis of what we learnt through that sharing, another action would be conceptualized and developed” (Blank Noise 2021). Tactically enabling women’s self-expression, sociality, autonomy and agency through non-purposive ‘loitering’, etc. in public space, Blank Noise offers a new site of engagement with the politics of both feminism and citizenship (Phadke 2020, 7).

Patheja clarifies that her concept of intervention “is not set in stone” and that The collective’s “ideas for action” do not emerge in isolation, but are “sparked” from listening to people’s testimonies, suggestions, proposals. The art/social practice is shaped through “collective input and labour”, and rests on “community participation, engagement, ownership, and public presence”, Blank Noise interventions are not a conscious “demonstration” of practice, nor are they a defined “result” of practice – they are an instrument for women’s self-affirmation and an

assertion of women's rights. In wider terms, they are directed towards the transformation of social conscience with regard to sexual and gender-based violence (Blank Noise 2021).

Through physical and digital interventions Blank Noise confronts the narrative of fear which women in India so deeply internalize vis-à-vis the negotiation of public space – fear of standing alone, fear of meeting men's gaze, fear of harassment, fear of verbal abuse, fear of being stalked, fear of being assaulted. Women also fear repercussions within domestic space for not obeying patriarchal mandates to return immediately after completing whatever task took them outside the enclosure of the home. "Given all this, for a woman to just be standing idle, apparently without purpose, in public space is a very brave act, a remarkable counter-narrative, and a singular challenge to the prevailing gender norms in India," comments Patheja (Blank Noise 2021). Activists' silent embodied presence in public space thus may be read both as physical testimony and empowering speech act. Blank Noise lays equal emphasis on the other crucial aspect of testimony – the act/action of bearing empathetic witness, and sensitizing and training people in this act/action. "Blank Noise and its #INeverAskForIt mission are committed and invested in building our collective capacity to be *listeners*. It isn't enough to ask or 'encourage' survivors of violence to speak when the capacity to listen has not been taught" (<https://www.blanknoise.org/home>).

Patheja describes Blank Noise as "quite fluid", in that people participate when they can, and continue to be a part of the community, a friend of the community, even when they are not directly involved in the current interventions. The group initially formed of its own momentum; the members were committed to collective work, and contributed significantly to the process of building dialogue and interventions based on lived experiences around gender harassment, discrimination, injustice, patriarchy, misogyny, and all forms of direct and indirect violence against women. "Those idealistic young people are now in their late thirties/early forties, they have families, they have careers, they have other priorities, but many remain connected to the collective and support our work. My role is to facilitate the connection; I am a kind of thread linking those earlier participants with Blank Noise as it functions today" (Blank Noise 2021).

Patheja reiterates that the collective regularly works with feminist allies in solidarity with their particular causes, often reinforcing their allies' public interventions without Blank Noise volunteers necessarily being visible themselves. "Offering this kind of continued support, seen and unseen, is crucial to our sense of who we are, to the inclusiveness of our practice, and to the trajectory of our activism that tries to confront gender-related crisis and serve as a safe repository for, among other things, the therapeutic articulation of trauma. The socially engaged art that emerges through our embodied and digital practice pushes for a new imagining of

public space: ideally, the kind of public space that in all ways will always be safe for all women” (Blank Noise 2021).

4.4 Conclusion

Art historians note that women artists have been on the ascendant in India since 1970 and that their practices “have strongly challenged the bourgeoisie notions of the divide between the private-public sphere and the autonomy, nationalism, and subjectivity” (Dave 2012, 237). The three women artists discussed in this chapter use different methodologies to navigate complex, multilayered public/social spaces that are always under construction, as Massey has remarked that space is always under construction (Massey 2005, 9). Their diverse interventions are based on dialogic and collaborative modes, and on the successful relationships of trust that they build over time with the communities within these spaces. Their creative engagement firmly rests on the process of “sharing understandings, reactions, decisions, and thoughts by the participants” (Kester 2013).

DIAA

Altaf is an early practitioner in the field of SEA in India. Her shift from the metropolis of Mumbai to rural Bastar was inspired by Bhopal-based artist J. Swaminathan whose primary objective was to collaborate with indigenous practitioners. Altaf travelled alone, always a challenge for women in India, through Bastar to meet the Adivasi community, build relationships with local artists, experience tribal art and culture, and root her own creative trajectory in the villages. As evident in the acronym DIAA, dialogue is the fulcrum of Altaf’s practice. DIAA is not a studio space for the production of individual artworks for exhibition purposes – it is a cultural space, hosting dialogue-based activities and events that foster critical thinking and reflection. It is through dialogue that she and her colleagues developed an understand of each other’s artistic premises and positions, and effectively communicated on art and other issues; reflected on personal limitations and conditioning vis-à-vis gender bias and sexual hierarchies; worked out ways to develop a critical vocabulary and ways to research and redefine ‘art/craft’ and ‘artist/craftsperson’ in the context of canonized art history in India, etc. Through dialogue the group also explored the politics and ethics of representation, self-representation; the language produced through art practice, the effects of art practice, the process of self-scrutiny through art practice, and the evolution of arts discourses through assimilation of community input and indigenous/traditional knowledge.

Altaf is critical of the emphasis that continues to be laid on 'production', technical efficiency and aesthetic particulars in the context of art, at the expense of dialogue. This emphasis reduces the possibilities of meaningful exchange between artists and audiences from different backgrounds and radically different levels of enfranchisement. It also forecloses the chance to create alternative art spaces, i.e., outside the boundaries of cultural institutions. As once such alternative space, DIAA has expanded dialogue-based critical discourse / generated a discursive community through seminars that have been attended by artists, cultural theorists, art historians, art critics, researchers, students, cultural and political activists, local municipal officials, school and college teachers, poets/writers, theatre groups, farmers, technocrats, NGO advocates and journalists. Committed dialogue has led to deep insights into the 'outsider' assumptions and conditionings that obstruct possibilities to learn and explore. It has also oriented 'outsiders' to different cultural sources and to the value systems, material knowledge and symbolic imaginary of Adivasi communities.

HAMDASTI

Chakraborty's interventions are not explicitly gender-focused, but there is a strong effort to involve women, including homemakers and teachers, within the conservative locality. She has invited women artists and researchers from outside Chitpur to collaborate with the project, and this has encouraged more participation from local women. The project has built strong local support through systematic presence and ongoing informal communication with the community, so there is generally a good response to calls for participation. As the project expands, the collective build new relationships from scratch at each new site – getting the community involved, convincing traditionalists to create room for new collaboration, getting artists interested in local practices and in creating an aesthetic vocabulary, and in wider dissemination of the knowledge that arises through collaborative work. The collective has successfully enabled two things. First: the formation of new community networks that then host and support the art in their locality. Second: Each intervention in its own way tries to create encounters with the unfamiliar, presenting interfaces and interactions that can change local people's perception of themselves, of the locality, and of their existing relationships to it and to each other.

However, the project does not show evidence of focused dialogic engagement through which the artworks can organically emerge in the material environment of Chitpur. The intervening artists or groups of artists bring their preconceived ideas/aesthetics into the project and communicate these to the community, which then participates in the collective execution of the ideas. The artists' voices dominate, and while events are documented on the project

website, there is no documentation of creative dialogue between artists and the community, between artists and participants, between participants, and between participants and the community.

BLANK NOISE

Patheja's political and creative trajectory is thoroughly feminist, challenging India's patriarchal systems through activism that is both embodied (physical interventions) and disembodied (virtual interventions). Her practice is also thoroughly dialogic, and invokes the possibility of gender affirmation, gender justice and gender equality – i.e., enables people to imagine what today might actually be dangerous to imagine in India, and in many other parts of the world. Dialogue is the axis of the project, of the activism, of the art practice, of the social practice. She does not take any project decision in isolation, and her personal approach is non-hierarchical. She describes her efforts as focused on building community, building testimony, building solidarity, raising questions, listening to opinions, assimilating critique.

Patheja's activism pivots around ways to build much deeper, inclusive dialogue with women across the spectrum, in order to develop new sets of questions around which interventions can be shaped. The Nirbhaya atrocity in 2012 made her sharply aware of the limited, fragmented and incomplete nature of existent conversations around the more extreme forms of violence against women in public spaces. She points to the urgent need to make socio-cultural and discursive space for the expression of women's fear, the need to expose the way women are conditioned to fear certain kinds of male predators, the need to expose the limits of this kind of understanding, and the need for women to have direct dialogue with those very predators. Patheja also points out that regardless of gender/sexual identity, the project's online and real-time activists and those who want to join project actions are already in dialogue with themselves, exploring their own complex internal relationship to the body and gender issues, their own gendered personal, family and/or community narratives, and their own way of navigating all or part of identity concepts and identity politics. Participating in the project's embodied or virtual interventions might be just one aspect of this deeper self-scrutiny.

The primacy of social context/community as the core of SEA practice has compelled contemporary artists to reflect on personal identity and self-definition in relation to the contexts/communities they are creatively engaged with. As mentioned earlier, the artists discussed in this chapter do not consider themselves to be an educator, instructor, pedagogue or authority of any kind. Altaf sees herself as a mediator/interlocutor, primarily a facilitator of dialogue between local and outside artists, between local participants, between artists and local participants, and between artists, local participants and the larger Adivasi community.

Chakraborty's work meshes across multiple areas – project manager, fundraiser, creator of spaces for critical reflection, administrator, and link between artists and the community. Patheja has moved beyond her early role as a visualiser/creator of interventions to the more general one of planner, team-builder, interface and bridge between various segments of the project, its past and past activists, feminist allies and networks, and the wider community created via the project's digital platforms.

These abovementioned projects are the evidence that how the women artists are the forerunners in the SEA field in the contemporary time in India where everyday life is full of segregation and complex socio-cultural codes. Through the collaborative and dialogic process these women artists have made commendable contribution to Contemporary Art in India.

Chapter 5: Four SEA Projects in Delhi (2007-Present)

5.1 Introduction

For over a decade, as part of Revue (teaming with Delhi-based designer/media practitioner/researcher Mrityunjay Chatterjee; <https://revue.network/>) I have been experimenting with modes of site-specific socially engaged art practice with diverse populations in Delhi's working-class localities, inviting a range of participants from underprivileged neighbourhoods to individually/collectively reflect on social issues, and to inscribe their experiences of their changing local milieu using low-cost materials and a range of traditional, new and hybrid media forms. The communities I work with are often simultaneously hyper-visible (as objects of discrimination) as well as invisible (without social or legal protections and entitlements) within their host environments. Prior to engaging with me, some participants had never experienced any form of art, or touched art implements / materials, or viewed themselves as capable of making art. I follow rigorous documentation protocols, and have archived a large volume of original textual and visual material. My approach has enabled what I perceive as the participants' transformed/transformational relationships, not just with their contexts but also with their sense of self, and their capacity to imagine, enunciate selfhood through art-making, regardless of language and literacy level. Their creative work is periodically shared through print publications, community events, performances and on-site exhibitions.

More specifically, the projects described in this chapter engage with women bound to particular contexts within the challenging environment of India's capital city that boasts of global standards, but where stark and brutal inequalities are visible at every turn. My documentation has an ethnographic focus, pivoting on how public spaces are navigated and negotiated by women and girls – their concept and experience of these spaces, what is socially and culturally prohibited or permitted to them in relation to public space, how they use available public space, and how they create their own particular gendered spaces of community within the available public areas. Primary sources in my field research include informal conversations, group discussions, wall painting, texts, photographs, sketches, diaries, blogs, booklets, posters, maps, audio, video and other old and new media in multiple and hybrid formats. My ethnographic approach is upheld by principles of systematic engagement, regular presence, dialogue, collective creative production, and the slow, organic emergence of extended relationships between project stakeholders over time so that the projects may

eventually become self-sustaining. I have rigorously archived a large volume of original research material from these projects, and hope to develop it into publications in the future.

Park (2007-2009), supported by the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art and hosted by the Delhi-based NGO Ankur Society for Alternatives in Education, is a site-specific art project focused on restructuring and redesigning a neglected municipal park in Dakshinpuri, a sprawling working-class neighbourhood of South Delhi, in collaboration with the local community (www.parkdpuri.bogspot.com).

Axial Margins (2015, ongoing), funded by Art-Reach India, is based in a night shelter for homeless women in Urdu Park, a large field next to the seventeenth-century Jama Masjid, an archaeological heritage site in Old Delhi. It is an aesthetic and conceptual exploration of the experience of public and private spaces, undertaken with the resident destitute single mothers from diverse backgrounds who have traumatic histories of domestic violence, abduction, addiction, assault, sexual/psychological predation and abuse.. (<https://axialmargins.wordpress.com/>).

Networks & Neighbourhood / Mobile Mohalla (2014, ongoing) funded by Khoj International Artists Residency and the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, engages residents of the adjoining working-class localities (*mohallas*) of Khirki and Hauz Rani, two “urban villages” of south Delhi. Through cross-media creative production, it examines how art interventions can mobilise women and girls from underprivileged backgrounds to push against gender restrictions and patriarchal customs to reclaim public spaces in male-dominated neighbourhoods (<https://www.mobilemohalla.net/>).

Museum of Food: A Living Archive (2017 - 2018), sponsored by the Prince Claus Fund and British Council India, evolved from the *Mobile Mohalla* project in Khirki and Hauz Rani. It connected migrant and refugee women of different nationalities and ethnicities at the site of a community kitchen in Khirki. It enabled a dynamic network of social relationships and friendships through the collective act of cooking a wide range of traditional dishes in a shared kitchen, sharing recipes and meals, and led to the creation of food archives, food maps and pop-up kitchens in different parts of the city (<https://foodmuseum.online/>).

Each project has evolved in different urban settings with women from a spectrum of social and cultural backgrounds, and my relationship with these diverse communities led me to employ feminist approaches in my research methodology.

Feminist scholar/pedagogue Shrock asserts that feminist ethnographic interventions are vital because they are centrally “invested in asking “in whose interest”” an ethnographic text is

created and deployed (Shrock 2013, 58). She provides a useful delineation of the 'methodological imperatives' of feminist ethnography – it produces knowledge about women's lives in specific cultural contexts; it is sensitive to/avoids representational violence as far as possible; it explores women's experiences of oppression as well as of their agency; and insists that the researcher acknowledge an ethical responsibility towards the communities that are being researched and represented (ibid.). Feminist ethnographic praxis upholds the idea that 'global women's culture exists and can be activated by women examining their common experiences with patriarchal oppression'; it posits "women" 'as a meaningful identity category and argues for studies and analyses of women that are context specific and historically situated (ibid., 49-50). Such praxis 'does not yield overarching theories but culturally situated analyses' that are grounded in the lives and concerns of the subject communities, and it enables the ethnographer to resist 'both sensationalism and sentimentality' in the narration of 'formerly untold' stories of subjects' lives (Shrock 2013, 57). 'Some questions must be asked of every project – such as, "Whose story is it, what is it being used for, what does it promise, and at whose expense?"... but the answers will be context-specific' (ibid.).

My gender-focused ethnographic research is rooted in a deep exploration of participants' material realities, notions of selfhood and self-worth, and wider existential concerns within the rigidly patriarchal structures that dominate Indian society and strongly condition, subjugate and silence women. This work is extremely challenging, not just because of patriarchy, male dominance/control and generalized misogyny that inscribe Indian society, also because feminist ethnographic research is infused with ethical complexities that continue to compel scholarly analysis. For instance, while lauding feminist ethnography's 'emphasis on being attentive to diversity and focusing on topics of inquiry that are relevant to its research subjects', Shrock points out that feminist ethnography may actually pose a threat to research subjects 'because it holds out a promise of an egalitarian and reciprocal relationship with the researcher that may or may not be met, especially in the long term', especially if the researcher occupies a different subject position (Shrock 2013, 49). She warns of the risk of feminist ethnographers assuming 'a universal "women's experience" that erases power differentials between the more privileged ethnographer and her research subjects' (ibid., 48). She warns of the dangers 'in reading resistance strategies romantically', since resistance struggles 'may not ultimately lead to women's liberation, and may in fact not even reflect "real" agency if women are only entering into a new relationship with a different form of power' (Shrock 2013, 56). She also warns against the production of 'rescue narratives', that 'have historical precedence under colonialism', wherein subaltern/third-world women are the 'Other' for privileged feminist ethnographers 'who through discourse construct themselves as more actualized beings' than their disenfranchised subjects (ibid., 49). With regard to the methodological imperative of

reflexivity, which is also an ethical position, Shrock asserts that the feminist ethnographer 'must recognize, anticipate, and explore the ways in which her presence in the field affects her informants' responses and behavior. Feminist ethnographers do not assume they can perform research without affecting it in some way' (Shrock 2013, 54). And while empathy with one's subjects is a hallmark of feminist ethnographic praxis, the researcher must be vigilant that such empathy does not serve merely 'as a cathartic or inspirational device' for ethnographer-witnesses 'who, after having an empathetic experience, reinstate their relatively unchanged worldview and feel no obligations in return' (ibid.)

Within my gender-focused SEA praxis I do not consciously identify as an ethnographer, but rather as an artist working across disciplines and media, with my own ethnographic observations interwoven with project participants' individual and collective articulations. My analysis maps concepts emerging from my ethnographically-inflected research against the core variables of SEA discourse (site-specificity, dialogue, direct engagement, collaboration) and New Genre Public Art (activism-oriented, created outside institutional structures, addressing social and political issues). Through my SEA research I propose to try and counter certain aspects of the prevalent top-down narrative of art as a creative modality accessible to the few rather than the many. My aesthetic philosophy and organic research methodology developed over the past fifteen years are part of an effort to embed a more democratic, inclusive template within the generally closed, elitist ethos of contemporary Indian art.

5.2 The Gendered Social Space of My SEA Practice

Gender-focused SEA praxis in India has to continuously consider the discourse of risk and vulnerability that frames how Delhi's women – of all ages and backgrounds – experience the city's challenging public spaces. The Safe Delhi Campaign, initiated in 2004 by Jagori, a Delhi-based NGO working for women's empowerment, documented a general perception that women fear and face violence while moving around the city (<https://www.safedelhi.in/>). The research noted that sexual violence and harassment in the city 'is part of the generalized continuum of discrimination faced by women and girls', and that the 'gendered nature of rapid urbanization' has resulted in 'exclusion, a lack of opportunities, and decreased access to spaces and services for women and girls' (<http://safedelhi.in/sites/default/files/brochure2872015.pdf>) The campaign identified key factors contributing to the lack of safety for women, including poor lighting in streets, parks, public toilets and bus stops, overcrowded public transport, and a male-dominated public culture insensitive to women's needs (Women in Cities International, 2010). Whether alone or in groups, women are continually vulnerable in public spaces, forced to negotiate suggestive

gestures, threats, supposedly accidental physical contact, vulgar comments and profanities; and girls are often followed by male stalkers. In general they neither get sympathy from anyone in the locality or street, nor from the police in the very rare instance that they might actually report the harassment. This leads to girls and young women not only dropping out of school, but staying away from particular public places, confining themselves to smaller and smaller localities in a 'geography of avoidance' (Butcher 2011).

While great numbers of underprivileged women work outside their own homes in privileged homes that in material terms are a stark contrast to their own deprived living conditions, this autonomy does not prevent or protect them from domination in their own homes by their household men. In terms of accessing public space for their own leisure and sociality, these women are most often restricted, by external and internal conditioning, to courtyards, lanes, street corners, parks and shops in their own neighbourhoods. However, as I have mentioned in my Chapter one, many lower-middle and working-class young women find ways to socialise outside these prescriptions, i.e., without being directly monitored by conservative family members and neighbours. They exhibit 'a preference for shared, diverse social space with a sense of physical and affective openness, where there is the possibility at least for interactions with others but also encapsulated by a feeling of security' (Butcher 2010). Many girls and young women often manage to create such spaces for collective, gender-segregated interaction on terraces, balconies, stairwells, at municipal taps, and in nearby markets, malls, beauty parlours, etc.

In a recent interview, Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, authors of *Why Loiter?: Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (Phadke et.al, 2011), reiterate their belief that 'the right to loiter for all has the potential to undermine public space hierarchies', and that loitering is '*a fundamental act of claiming public space* and ultimately, a more inclusive citizenship'; the authors point to what they perceive as 'an unequivocal shift in the conversation of what constitutes women's fundamental rights to the city' over the past decade. 'When we first talked about women's right to pleasure in the city, we were met with resistance even in feminist circles. It was considered a frivolous demand considering that women still have to fight for their basic rights. Today, this idea and the term "loitering" as applied to women's right to public space has become part of not just the feminist lexicon but part of everyday language among young people across the country. We have seen some amazing young women take our conversation further by initiating their own movements questioning early curfew at women's hostels, expanding women's access to the night, sitting at *dhabas* to drink *chai*, and so on (Ghoshal,2021)

Activist demands for gender justice and protests against sexual harassment and assault have found their way to public art projects as well as to feminist forums. For instance, in [2000] the 'Why Loiter' movement enacted with Blank Noise, a project that invited women to enact sleeping during the day in a public park in Bangalore, as a symbolic way of claiming the space as their own, one which they should be able to safely access any time – which is not the case in reality. They printed T-shirts with the Hindustani words *Akeli Awara Azaad* ('On Her Own, Loitering, Free') and blogged about their experience (<http://www.blanknoise.org/akeliawaraazaad>). In wider political/national terms, in December 2019, Shaheen Bagh, an underprivileged area in south-east Delhi, saw a large number of women from conservative households push past their traditional domestic roles and occupy a local road round the clock, braving the bitter cold to protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act, newly-passed parliamentary legislation that allegedly discriminates against minority communities, particularly Muslims (Laliwala 2020). Many artists showed their support by creating dissent-themed temporary works at the protest site, which became part of the ongoing resistance upheld through speeches, songs, slogans, posters and performances. The Shaheen Bagh action inspired similar smaller protests all over Delhi, and in other states; it was also widely covered by the world press. The protestors stayed in place, enduring police surveillance and containment, and continued to be subjected to government threats of eviction and legal appeals to clear the road for traffic. The protest was eventually dismantled during the Covid-19 pandemic when lockdowns and social distancing were rigorously enforced under law.

Modalities of gender activism, too, may render women vulnerable. For instance, in December 2012, when thousands of citizens, peacefully marched through the streets of Delhi to protest against the gruesome gang rape and eventual death of 'Nirbhaya', a young physiotherapy student, and to demand justice and new legislation to protect women, they were accused of disrupting "law and order", and had to confront police blockades and water cannons (Phadke 2020). Such expressions of dissent aim at political transformation, with gender-justice campaigns using public spaces to address the issues surrounding women's rights, safety, autonomy and mobility in public spaces. However, it is a fact that mass protests, initially fuelled by the high energy of social anger, moral outrage and a desire for permanent equitable change, are difficult to sustain – and when tactically subsumed by state discourses and state forces, may flatten out altogether over time. We have no idea about the emotions of the courageous Shaheen Bagh protesters after the CAA protest site was dismantled due to coronavirus mandates. Nor is there any way to know whether the huge numbers of men who protested the Nirbhaya atrocity were able to successfully reject the general conditioning of

male privilege and patriarchal conservatism that so easily distorts into repulsive claims and enactments of toxic masculinity and misogyny.

The authors of *Why Loiter*, written several years before the Nirbhaya atrocity, agree that this case 'was a major turning point' in gender discourses about women's access to the city: 'The idea of unconditional freedom – that women had the right to be out in the city unmolested – irrespective of who they were, who they were with, what time it was, or what they were wearing, was made visible in public demonstrations for the first time in the country.' This is qualified, however, by the fact that 'a singular focus on the spectre of violence that looms over women in public space in the reportage of such cases has done little to further women's rights to public space. This focus on women's vulnerability in public space contradicts two well-documented facts: one, that more women face violence in private spaces than in public spaces, and two, that more men than women are attacked in public. In effect, it ends up curtailing women's freedom by providing unprecedented justification to the physical and moral policing of their movements by the family, community and the state' (Ghoshal, 2021)

5.3 Park (2007-2009)

Supported by the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (<https://ficart.org/>) and hosted by the Delhi-based NGO Ankur Society for Alternatives in Education (<https://ankureducation.net/>), *Park* (2008-2010) is a public art project that involves the "reform", via creative visualisation and material restructuring, of a neglected and misused municipal park by transforming its usage patterns. The project was undertaken in collaboration with the local community – residents of J-Block, Dakshinpuri, in South Delhi.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Simultaneously site and installation, *Park* (Figure 35) is situated in one of South Delhi's many resettlement colonies, also known as 'J.J.' (*jhuggi-jhonpri* / lit. 'hutment') colonies – a low-income housing category that was a result of urban gentrification policies undertaken during the political Emergency imposed from 1975-77 by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. During this draconian period of press censorship, political suppression, state terror and human rights violations, large slums in Delhi were demolished and their inhabitants forcibly relocated to other parts of the city. Then an outlying area, Dakshinpuri was one of these places with poor or nearly non-existent infrastructure selected for mass 'rehabilitation'. The uprooted slum communities had to build their dwellings from the ground up with whatever material was available. Very large and densely populated, Dakshinpuri was divided into twelve blocks, each occupied by 500-700 working- and lower-middle-class families. Many residents I interacted

with during my project claimed this history of politically enforced, arbitrary eviction and coercive internal migration (Roy 2008).



Figure 35: Municipal Park at J Block Daksh before intervention, 2008

Source: Park Report

The park, situated on land owned by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) at the corner of J-Block, was, in fact, the only open space available for leisure, sociality and fresh air for J-Block, typically congested like the rest of Dakshinpuri. It had been abandoned and ignored by the neighbourhood for a long time. None of the local residents bothered to clean up or maintain the space; nor did the MCD have any sort of regular presence or practice any mode of oversight. Neither did the MCD try to stop people from misusing the park as a convenient site for more threatening and inappropriate public behaviour / “nuisance” i.e., for loitering, drinking and drug use. Despite an MCD bin and a men’s latrine along the main road opposite the park, locals had gradually turned the open space into a public toilet and garbage dump. Shopkeepers from the weekly ‘Friday market’ continually threw garbage into the park, and it became even filthier over the weekend. There was no available authority, municipal, collectively assigned or self-proclaimed, to enforce curbs on littering. However, despite the park’s ongoing deterioration, people regularly used it as a convenient shortcut to the main road.

Neighbourhood women shared their anxiety about not being able to/not wishing to access the park, for all these reasons, and shared their entrenched desire to have a safe green open space where they could spend time outside their houses, narrow two- or three-storey buildings with poor ventilation, small windows and doors. Wrested from minimal space, balconies and staircases angle into the lanes. Courtyards spill into the lanes as well. This is where most women spend their time, sitting on cots that they push back when motor vehicles force their

way through. These women rarely leave their lanes except for household-related tasks, such as buying vegetables at the Friday market. Occasionally they go shopping with the men of their families. The cots drawn together in the lane are their primary social space. In the early morning, a few women might go together for a walk in the scrubby green belt close by instead of the contaminated park right across from where they live.

The project objective was to make the unhygienic, unsafe, degraded park usable for residents once again. The work of 'reforming' / restructuring the park, and creatively intervening in its usage patterns, was initiated through my dialogues with local women, with the local municipal councillor, and the men of J-Block who at first were highly suspicious of me, an outsider starkly different from the community in terms of class and culture, who had somehow earned the trust of the women of their households.

PHASE I: INTERVENTIONS

I started visiting Dakshinpuri in 2007 as part of my engagement as an artist-facilitator with the Ankur Club, working with children and teenagers. For over three decades Ankur has been working in the field of experimental pedagogy with children, young people and communities in Delhi's marginalised neighbourhoods, seeking to empower this demographic by providing them with opportunities to creatively reflect on their experiences and contexts as they strive for a life of dignity (<http://parkdpuri.blogspot.com/2009/01/ankur-bal-club.html>). The *Park* project was initiated through collaborative work between the artistic team (local youngsters from Ankur Club, along with me) and the community, especially middle-aged women living close to the park. Kamlesh, Anita, Krishna, Sita, Yasoda, Chitrasathi and Vidya, all residents of J-Block, were the most visible and vocal. Sometimes they argued fiercely over seemingly petty issues, but they are all close personal friends who always support each other in times of crises, and celebrate festivals and special occasions together. These women clarified that even though residents desired and imagined a green and healthy space that they should keep clean, somehow they could not break the entrenched pattern of littering and garbage dumping. The group also clarified how the park is regularly used in other ways. For instance, Yashoda spent hours there at night during summer when there are long power cuts, despite knowing that the park is unsafe and contaminated with all kinds of waste. There was no other open space that locals can escape to during power cuts. She also said that the park was dug up during festivals and its mud used in rituals.

As a public space, the park and its setting embodied the modes of social segregation and gender restrictions 'reflected in everyday spatial practices in the city', where the social dynamic

is 'underpinned by the power relations of gender, class and caste' that are 'often governed by an impulse not to include, but to exclude' (Phadke et al. 2011, 87). When the artist team started formulating intervention strategies, we wondered how to push the issue of "reform" sensitively and inclusively. Rather than take an oppositional stance to those who misused the park, we decided to imbue the space with meaning, to make the site more attractive to the local community; we visualised re-shaping the park as a gift to the locality. We focused on first cleaning the site and then slowly further "reforming" the space through collective effort. Seeing that no single person was willing to take charge of ensuring the clean-up, we started sweeping the park as a group, with household brooms. This, we soon realised, was not going to work given the size of the park. So, we hired ragpickers who came to the MCD dumpster outside the park to drop off the domestic garbage they collected every morning, paying them Rs 50-60 per day to sweep the park on alternate days. But this did not prevent people from throwing rubbish into the park or keep a few obdurate families from using the space as a lavatory.

To tackle the menace of littering, Club members and Ankur facilitators would sit on *charpais* (woven cots) in the park and try to convince people not to throw garbage there. We encountered hostility from various users of the space, and began to be seen as trying to police the locals – many of whom were in fact keenly interested in our efforts to revive and beautify the park, but who could not change their habits of littering. Oddly, when residents became defensive, each would blame the other, and there was no solution to the problem of accumulated garbage. The logic behind our insistence on cleaning the park did not make sense to some people, who occasionally were quite aggressive – mostly local youth accustomed to using the park for private socialising. As the anchor of the project, I was continuously thinking about the problem and discussing it with the community. It seemed that the only viable solution, supported by some older residents, would be to fence the park with barbed wire. MCD officials and locals who used the park for their own purposes, and suspicious residents, then started questioning my intent. At one point, the rumour "*qabza kar rahe hain*" [they are appropriating/seizing/taking over] began to circulate with increased momentum within the neighbourhood. Middle-aged men, in particular, continued to resent us, and we sensed their visceral opposition when we began our physical interventions around the dumping of garbage.

Obstacle after obstacle confronted us during our dialogues with the residents, whose reactions ranged from resistance to apathy to obliquely threatening. Daily interruptions began to manifest as overt and subtle disruptions, and it was a struggle to justify ourselves again and again. Attitudes seemed to soften when more women began to participate in our activities, and a wider shift in the locals' perspective occurred after our first intervention that evolved through a week-long series of dialogic workshops in the shade of a large old banyan tree in

the centre of the park. A brightly painted plank was hung with ropes from a branch, forming a swing to attract locality children and their mothers. Instantly, the once-deserted area became alive and active. Locals (mostly women and elderly men) sat on the *charpais*, reminiscing and sharing their views on our central concept of *saanjhi jagah* (Hindi: 'shared space') (Figure 36,37). The members of Ankur Club, along with local youngsters, carefully documented this interaction through photographs and daily note-taking in their diaries that illustrate the blurring of private / public spatial boundaries (<http://parkdpuri.blogspot.com/2009/>):

Today I have a *chabutra* [raised platform attached to a house], but it is not even big enough for me to cut vegetables on. The big *chabutra* of my childhood enabled women to do some of their household work sitting on it. That *chabutra* is now part of a beautiful house. But people still gather there to talk to each other, even though there is no actual platform to accommodate them. It is a habit, though they can't use the space for any kind of collective work since that space is someone's house now.

— Guddu

The municipal tap in Talkatora Garden gave yellowish water, but it was used because it allowed women to socialise there. Women who came to get water enjoyed the moment of freedom, to sit around the tap and talk while waiting for the water to come. Some talked about their kitchens and cooking duties and kinds of food, others vented anger at family pressures or in-laws. Sometimes someone would be showing off new clothes; at other times, amidst giggling and laughter, the serious fact of a domestic problem would suddenly come up. We young girls, not able to empathise with such issues, would start playing while waiting for the water.

— Aarti

Even today, I feel like playing that game [rolling a cycle tyre forward by hand or with a stick], though my age and circumstances do not allow me to do so. When I have time, I sit on the *chabutra* by the bus stop of lane 17 because there I get the opportunity to recollect that game of ours. I feel I am chasing the old cycle tyres of my childhood when I look at the wheels of buses, scooters or cycles going by. Even today, I am fond of the circular movements of tyres. Sitting on that *chabutra* by the bus stop of lane 17, spending time with my friends, I find myself watching those tyres.

— Aniket



Figure 36: Discussing Saanjhi Jagah in the park, 2008

Source: Park Report



Figure 37: Discussion on Saanjhi Jagah in the Park, 2008

Source: Park Report

This documentation was the base for our first public event in the park in December 2008, a collective interpretation of the theme of *saanjhi jagah*, organised with Ankur Club members and local residents, thus opening the space to a larger public (Roy 2008). We presented a compilation of locality narratives, many by migrants, on the theme of shared spaces in their home villages, and their experience of shared spaces in Delhi in earlier decades. The narratives were displayed through various media forms – traditional games, vinyl banners, and a mural painted by Ankur Club [Figure 38] members and local boys. The mural that also served

as a backdrop for the performance *Woh Ek Maidaan Tha* ('Once There Was A Field/ A Field That Once Was'), its script drawing upon the narratives, and read aloud on a *chabutra*-like stage erected in the middle of the park [Figure 39]. We also presented traditional games that earlier were a staple of childhood but are now rarely played or valued – *barfi*, *chibbi*, *gitte*, *tiko*, *imli*, *maram*, *pitti*, *pitthoo*, *gram sigara*, *tyre chari*, *gulli danda*, *kanche*, among others. They are usually played on street corners and in shared neighbourhood spaces like *chabutras*. During the course of the project we had slowly compiled these games, their rules and strategies, through youngsters from migrant families who mentioned these games when talking about their life in the village or of the time when they were new arrivals in the city [Figure 40].



Figure 38: Mural painted by Ankur Club, 2008

Source: Park Report



Figure 38: *Woh ek maidan tha*, Performance by Ankur Club, 2008

Source: Park Report



Figure 40: Traditional games installed in the park, 2008

Source: Park Report

All these personal accounts delineated a shift in sensibility over time, and the re-shaping of selfhood in urban environments under the relentless pressure of “development”. Many people, including artists and art lovers, attended the event, creating a vibrant and animated environment, turning the public space of the park into a model of community/cultural engagement that the locals, who made up the bulk of the crowd, were unfamiliar with. They enjoyed the novelty of such engagement as much as they enjoyed the tea and snacks that were provided. The event significantly changed their perception of the potential of a public space such as the park. Establishing our presence in this manner had put in place the levels of community acceptance and the conditions required to extend the project into its next phase.

We also spoke about our project to local gardeners local gardeners who lived in Dakshinpuri (Figure 41). They suggested that if we truly wished to repurpose the park over time, we would have to apply to the MCD for a lease permitting us to “reform” municipal land. This was easier said than done, and we knew this when we began the lengthy process. Our encounters with the municipality took the shape of a series of Kafkaesque recursions within the gloomy recesses of a three-storey MCD office in South Delhi. Entering the building each day at 9 a.m. sharp with my colleague from Ankur – neither of us with any experience of dealing with the government in the context of community work – we trudged past asthmatic water coolers and claustrophobic cubicles along dingy narrow corridors on the way to the relevant senior administrator’s room. Enduring the stench from the adjoining toilet and the accidental shoving and bumping by clerks and cleaners, we would wait, relinquishing hope with each passing hour, till we were brusquely informed that the identification number on our application was incorrect, or given some other bureaucratic reason for our documents being rejected. After nearly eight months of frustration, futility and the tortuous reiteration of our purpose to

uncomprehending/uncaring officials, we finally received our three-year lease to reshape the park. By then we were too exhausted to appreciate the miracle.



Figure 39: Conversation with the local gardeners, 2008

Source: Park Report

PHASE II: INTERVENTIONS

Having received the MCD lease, we were now free to gradually develop the community vision of the J-Block park as a shared public space, and enable its material realization.

In order to explore the collective aspirations and imagination of the residents through regular dialogue, we organised a series of workshops with various neighbourhood groups. Through a collaborative process, we initiated the practice of drawing on paper and walls, inviting people of all ages, mostly women, to the sessions (Figure 42). We encouraged them to spend the evenings sketching their ideas about the “reform” of the site so that we could use the collective input as widely as possible. The pleasure of playing with images, such an important aspect of any artist’s creative practice, was a powerful experience for participants. Each afternoon, along with the ongoing discussions about the re-designing of the park, the artistic team would sit under a tree or in the corner of the room used for the workshop and initiate the drawing sessions [Fig 43]. Sketchbooks and colouring materials were given to each participant. At first hesitant, people slowly became bolder with their visualisations. The artistic team hoped that through this aesthetic projection of their ‘dream’ park, the participants would develop a sense of direct involvement in the project as well as a direct sense of ownership/responsibility towards the site once their ideas manifested into a reality (Figure 44,45).



Figure 40: Workshop on 'dream park' with women on designing park, 2008

Source: Park Report



Figure 41: Workshops on 'dream park' with the young participants, 2008

Source: Park Report



Figure 42: Reflections from the workshops, 2008

Source: Park Report



Figure 43: Reflections from the workshops, 2008

Source: Park Report

Through reviewing the addressal of the primary issue of the park being used as a garbage dump, there slowly emerged a valuable exchange of views, at times conflicted, at times congruent. People described their ‘dream’ park, an image rarely or never articulated within their hectic and difficult daily lives. They agreed that the park as a shared public space was vital to the community – for socialisation; for games and leisure activities; as a convenient place to relax after a hard day at work; for psychological support (source of fresh air in a very dense built environment); and within an extremely pressured, polluted and aggressive urban ethos, the park embodied the residents’ larger abstract ideal of keenly-desired peace, order, safety, health, equilibrium and well-being.

Most J-Block women raised the issue of privacy and the very strong wish to have a space that was open and yet sequestered, into which men could not intrude; a safe area segregated by hedges or bushes and with an accessible adjacent area designated for children. They wanted part of the area under the park’s large banyan tree to be just for them.

J-Block’s youth segment wanted the park’s usage to be altered to provide greater mobility and autonomy; they visualised the park as a space where they could break free from familial restrictions and vigilant adults; and as a space for creative performances, music, meetings and informal games. They suggested putting up a notice board to inform people of local events and neighbourhood news, and using the park’s walls to document local history via colourfully painted narratives.

The local adult men continued to react negatively to our presence, and some tried to spread panic among the people who supported us, castigating them for coming to our meetings. However, the elderly men, generically addressed as ‘Uncle’, were quite cooperative. Most were either retired or running small shops; they could be regularly seen taking siestas and playing cards under the shade of trees in the colony. They were more conscious of the need

to prevent littering in the park, and in the evenings they often joined the Ankur Club in watering the ground and reminding locals not to dirty the space. Their main desire was to have a clean space protected from the rain and sun, where they could spend time with each other.

The park was landscaped and spatially segregated as desired by the participant groups and expressed through dialogue/ and workshop visualization. The path through the park, from the gate onwards, was paved with stones on either side depicting the informal map of Dakshinpuri: a personalised community grid. One section of the path listed shops and houses from the main road till the end of J-Block (Ahuja ki Toli, Meat Shop, Tent House, etc.). Another section listed all the lanes (Dhobi Wali Gali/Washermen's Lane, Bakri Gali/ Goat-milk Seller Lane, Dhol Wali Gali/Drummers' Lane, Hijre ki Gali/Transgenders' Lane, etc.) (Figure 46).



Figure 44: Park listed shops and houses, 2009

Source: Park Report

The women's space created in one corner of the park was decorated with *charpais*. The traditional wooden legs of the cots were shaped like human legs, symbolic of women's desires, ever-bound to domestic routine and territory, yet yearning for autonomy and mobility. The brightly painted "legs" were adorned with the suggestion of slippers, the ubiquitous, everyday footwear of most women in the locality, and tattoos, also a typical custom. The *sawan ka jhoola* (monsoon swing), a traditional symbol celebrated in folk cultures of north India, was designed as a doorframe, emblematic of the lives of women confined to their houses and lanes, who dream of more expansive horizons and realities. The "swing" was painted with scenes depicting the lives of these women (Figure 47, 48).



Figure 45: Brightly painted legs in the women's space, 2009

Source: Park Report



Figure 46: Monsoon swing, 2009

Source: Park Report

The children's space was built close to the women's area. One section of the ground was marked out as a format for local games such as *gulli-danda* and *kabaddi*. The slide was originally conceived as a staircase descending through the surface of an open book. We had originally planned to create this from thick tin so that it would function as a resilient "wall" for children's writing and drawing. However, due to a lack of funds this object could not be materialized. Instead we installed a slide decorated with a brightly painted landscape. We remodelled the ground by the slide in a curved format to distinguish it from the surrounding area.

The youth space was designed and executed as a terrace garden of three steps that could be used as a social space as well as a stage for performances and festival celebrations.

The space for elderly men reflected the concepts of flexibility and "free" time that people are said to enjoy after retirement. We gathered old bus seats and reworked them for use by this

group, the form in some cases amalgamated with *charpais*. The resultant hybrid was symbolic of their current (and often lonely) existence, a sharp contrast from their busy lives as working individuals, memories of which often dominated their conversation even today as retirees.

Walls in cities are primarily seen as barriers, delineating and legitimizing spaces and functioning as instruments of social exclusion/inclusion. Walls around urban public spaces, such as parks, belong to everybody and nobody. As a built structure, they offer themselves as a rhetorical canvas for individual and collective self-expression, in the form of graffiti, news, campaigning, dissent, ideology, etc. We created a park wall blog as a detailed log of neighbourhood life, a testament of patterns of sociality, and an archive of local meta-histories and community aspirations (Figure 49). Many accounts bore witness to overall changes in the usage of the locality's public areas. This valuable alternative data, compiled online, cohered into a counter-narrative to municipal and official histories of resettlement and invited deeper and wider engagement with the issues [www.parkdpuri.blogspot.com].



Figure 47: Wall blog in the park, 2009

Source: *Park Report*

Site-cum-installation art (Figure 50,51) involves the creation and manipulation of site-specific, three-dimensional works designed to transform the perception of a space. Community art creates works in accordance with local requirements and elements – and that elusive variable known as “spirit” – so that the final design is an empathetic internal evolution and not a coerced external imposition. *Park* was conceptualised to embody local traces and community vision, and materialized with public imperatives as a primary guide. Thus, the final work ‘does not seek to be a noun/object but verb/process’ (Kwon 1997, 91).



Figure 48: Construction of the park, 2009

Source: Park Report



Figure 49: Construction of park, 2009

Source: Park Report

5.4 Axial Margins (2015, ongoing)

Funded by Artreach India, '*Axial Margins*'¹¹ is a collaboration with the Delhi-based NGO Society for Promotion of Youth and Masses (SPYM) that works with marginalised populations in the area of community mobilisation, health care and socio-economic development. The organisation runs a night shelter (*rayn baserain hindi*) for homeless women and single mothers at one end of Urdu Park, a large dusty field with a few trees, adjacent to Meena Bazar, a historic market at the foot of the steps of the Jama Masjid, the magnificent mosque built by Shah Jahan, the fifth Mughal emperor (1592-1666), who also built the nearby Lal Qila/Red Fort; these monuments are archaeological heritage sites. The project engages in an aesthetic and conceptual exploration of the participants' experience of public and private spaces. Some participants are locals, others migrants from villages or small towns. The women carry histories of personal and social trauma – broken homes, poverty/destitution, sexual and emotional abuse, domestic violence, abduction, addiction and mental health problems. Their children live with them in the shelter; some go to local schools. The fathers of these children usually live in the area, supporting themselves and the mother/children through manual work; they are permitted to visit the shelter during the day, and the women frequently meet them outside in the public spaces of the locality (www.axialmargins.wordpress.com).

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Delhi's Master Plans have singularly failed to provide accommodation to the vast numbers of impoverished local and migrant workers and daily-wage earners hired for construction and manual labour (Baviskar 2019, 201) in this "global city". Instead, even while extracting the maximum work for minimum wage from this human resource, the city has chosen to view them as trespassers, and as disposable, undeserving of basic rights, of protection under law, civic amenities and reliable infrastructure. These abjected populations, who survive through flexible mutual networks and micro-ecologies within their diverse informal housing clusters, and build or rent their small dwellings with great hardship, often experience state violence in the form of their homes being demolished. Municipal authorities use the logic of "clearing encroachments"

¹¹ The purpose of the title, "Axial Margins" is to argue that the geopolitical construct of center and periphery is not necessarily valid where the power centers and margins are found anywhere. Very often, we could see the social and economic margins thriving next to the power axis itself. For example, the homelessness and abject poverty in Urdu Park could be seen in the middle of the city next to the busiest wholesale market in the country. However, this site is also close to the state's political center.

and “illegal settlements” to destroy these low-income clusters and further dispossess/disenfranchise these marginalised populations under strategic political mandates to “clean” and “beautify” the city.

The marginalised participants of *Axial Margins* have a deep, and in some cases a lifelong – relationship with their locality, dominated by Jama Masjid and Meena Bazaar, a makeshift working-class market that has flourished for centuries outside the Jama Masjid, and connects to the mosque via steps to the different entrances (Figure 52). Active for over three centuries, the Jama Masjid is the second-largest mosque in the Indian subcontinent; its central courtyard can hold up to 25,000 people, and it is a major political and religio-cultural hub of India’s Muslim communities. Some residents of the Urdu park shelter say they were born on the steps of the mosque, and grew up in the surrounding area, which was their entire world. Through the adjacent, congested wholesale market of Chawri Bazaar, Meena Bazaar connects to Chandni Chowk that for centuries has remained the beating heart of Old Delhi. The narrow, noisy lanes of all these markets employ thousands of workers, and each niche and corner and cranny is occupied by hawkers, eateries, cubicle-sized small shops and workshops. As one pushes through the crowds, the mosque’s huge exquisite dome sometimes floats into view – looming serenely over the labyrinth and drawing one into disorienting moments of pure visual/cognitive dissonance that rupture the frenetic pulse of commerce, the incessant hubbub of cycle-rickshaws, porters loading and unloading bulk deliveries, young men hustling to sell cheap garments, costume jewellery and footwear, and vendors cooking and selling food from rickety handcarts. Just outside Urdu Park, the tiers of Meena Bazaar’s simple covered stalls are a source for household goods, all kinds of foods, and consumer items such as clothes, shoes, accessories, etc., available to address every need and pocket. It is also a social vortex for the innumerable workers and day-labourers who come to the market to eat, rest and sleep, and for drug traffickers, addicts and streetwalkers.



Figure 50: Meena bazar a makeshift working-class market, 2015

Source: <https://axialmargins.wordpress.com/>

In September 2019, Meena Bazaar was dismantled by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, without prior notice to the local vendors'/street hawkers' associations, as part of a larger city-wide drive to remove "encroachers" and impose an existing plan to "redevelop" the Jama Masjid precinct – a scheme bureaucratically stalled for fifteen years and vehemently opposed by senior mosque authorities who argued that the proposed "facelift" would seriously disrupt prayer congregations, local business and tourism. Civic officials, accompanied by police, watched as vendors were evicted and bulldozers levelled the market in three hours, depriving hundreds of people of their livelihoods. The market had been similarly demolished without prior notice in 2014; the uprooted vendors launched an agitation, and gradually returned to re-occupy their market spaces. The Delhi High Court issued a stay order in 2015 prohibiting further eviction till a city-wide survey of street vendors was undertaken. The order was repeatedly contested by the municipality, with the court in many instances supporting the vendors' claims. The trajectories of mosque opposition, forced eviction, vendor protest and then tactical reoccupation of the market site continue to mesh unresolved into the present. Each demolition strongly affects the shelter residents, as the dynamic habitus of Meena Bazaar is embedded in their personal histories, and continues to be an organizing principle within their precarious and often chaotic daily lives.

PHASES I and II (2015-2017)

In 2015 I was invited by Charty Dugdale, the founder of Artreach India, to engage with the women at the Urdu Park shelter (Figure 53). I was first introduced to them by an SYPM social worker. The women seemed apprehensive of my presence, but also curious about my reasons for coming to their space. The knowledge that I am an artist seemed to make them uneasy. I soon learnt why – they had had an unpleasant experience with a theatre group that had engaged with them for a few months and then abandoned them; they felt rejected and henceforth were actively suspicious about privileged outsiders wanting to do creative work with them. My outsider status, class privileges and cultural difference obstructed our communication for about a year, but I won their trust after months of twice-weekly visits during which I observed the shelter environs and spent long hours in casual conversation with residents as they went about their daily lives.



Figure 51: Urdu Park single mother shelter, 2015

Source: <https://axialmargins.wordpress.com/>

It took me some time to get accustomed to the shelter, and to Urdu Park as a social space. The atmosphere is challenging, in that things can suddenly turn volatile, tempers can fly, threats and abuse can be hurled, fights can erupt over small or large issues. As the residents became more comfortable with my consistent and non-judgmental presence, they began to talk openly about their personal traumas, their survival strategies, self-concepts, aspirations and visions of the future. I also became familiar with group politics and prevalent hierarchies within the shelter. Bina, Reshma and Tarannum, born in the streets around the Jama Masjid or on its steps, and have always lived in this area, feel superior to shelter residents from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar – they casually address them as Gaonwali ('village woman'), Biharin ('woman from Bihar'), Pagli ('crazy'), etc. Eventually, ten women (Figure 54) formed into a loose group of participants interested in working with me. All were poorly literate or illiterate. Before this project, none of them had ever thought they were capable of creating art or had any experience of personally creating art objects through any medium. Some of them had never even held a paintbrush.



Figure 52: Group of participants of Urdu Park, 2015

Source: <https://axialmargins.wordpress.com/>

The ten participants built their creative work upon a relatively stable group dynamic, consensus, and a sense of community and solidarity, initiated through discussions and workshops (Figure 55). My first intervention took the form of sessions of making diapers and pillows. It evolved through extensive dialogue with the participants, most being pregnant at the time, who had no pillows and slept on insufficient bedding. Each woman made two pillows, gifting one to a friend in the group. While stitching diapers they talked about their childhood, their personal histories, their desires and dreams, etc. This six-month activity provided an opportunity for deep listening, emotional connection, and building of group solidarity (Figure 56,57). My second intervention took the form of wall painting. The women enthusiastically painted the dull grey walls of the shelter with flowers and scenes from their villages, as this brought them solace (Figure 58). While painting, they discussed their relationship with their living spaces: the shelter and the street.



Figure 53: Discussions and workshops in shelter, 2015

Source: <https://axialmargins.wordpress.com/>



Figure 54: Diaper making session, 2015

Source: <https://axialmargins.wordpress.com/>



Figure 55: Pillow making session, 2015

Source: <https://axialmargins.wordpress.com/>



Figure 56: Painted walls, 2015

Source: <https://axialmargins.wordpress.com/>

These motivated women gradually took on the responsibility of continuing with the artwork even when I was not present. They have now reached a particular skill level; and created an organic form of public/community art from the matrix of their daily struggles. They have gained individual self-confidence and mutual understanding, while the regular art practice has infused some order into their chaotic daily lives. As a painter myself, it was a privilege to enable the emergence of a unique community aesthetic. The paintings were exhibited in the shelter and are on sale, in the hope that the artists may earn a little, and become less dependent on begging. Some of these objects and images were transformed into merchandise mugs, postcards, posters etc. and sold during the 'Open Day' we organised (Figure 59,60).



Figure 57: Open day in the shelter, 2016

Source: Project report



Figure 58: Open day in the shelter, 2016

Source: Project report

Phase III (2017-2018)

With some in-depth experience of collaborative work and the logic of symbols that they acquired during Phases I and II, participants now undertook a more elaborate exploration of the idea of map-making as a way to narrate their experience of their environment. Their interest in this modality became more urgent when agencies in charge of the shelter proposed moving it from its present site in the heart of Old Delhi to a place outside the city. This created severe anxiety among shelter residents, who had created networks of relationships in the streets and public spaces around the market and mosque, and depended on those relationships for their own and their children's survival. Participants collaboratively created a

map of the locality with acrylic paints on a single 16 ft x 4 ft canvas (Figure 61,62) – a unique form of existential cartography, since the women’s prolonged experience of this area is intimately fused with their material and psychological well-being. Each participant also painted personal impressions of Meena Bazaar on individual canvases, depicting the shops, lanes and objects sold on the pavement. While painting, the participants discussed their complicated connections with the surrounding environment, acknowledging its presence as a redeeming, stable feature within their frequently anarchic, fluctuating and highly stressed circumstances (Figure 63).



Figure 59: Women painting a map of the locality, 2017

Source: Project report



Figure 60: Meena Bazar map, 10' x 4' canvas, 2017

Source: Project report



Figure 61: Depicting the shops and lanes of Meena Bazar, 2017

Source: Project report

Given that Meena Bazaar was demolished by the municipality to make room for a parking lot, the women's creative work and personal commentary now constitute an invaluable archive that memorializes and honours what once was a thriving historical and social space, supporting many micro-ecologies and hundreds of livelihoods. The women's responses were documented through audio recordings, diary entries and a blog (<https://axialmargins.wordpress.com/>)

Phase IV (2018-2019)

From the inception of the project, we continuously observed a crucial lack of adequate food supplies and medical care for the shelter residents. Anganwadi, a government-run social services programme under the Ministry of Women and Child Development, provided residents with three meals a day. But this stopped abruptly, with no explanations given. In 2016 a government-sponsored NGO began supplying them with lunch and dinner, but this, too, ceased within a short period. The residents then began cooking for themselves in the courtyard of the shelter. They made a rudimentary stove by placing two bricks parallel to one another, between which sticks or other wood and waste paper was burnt as fuel. The residents would buy ingredients from the local vegetable and meat markets and a grocery shop that allowed them to take items on credit. They would also get leftover food from local *dhabas*. Despite this, they often go to sleep on an empty stomach and have to feed their children biscuits or bread with tea as lunch or dinner meals.

While working on the large collaborative map of the locality, participants' sketched the shops where they regularly get food, tea and ingredients. The women's day is incomplete without interaction with the larger community – going out of Urdu Park into the market to procure ingredients and food for the day's meals, chatting with each other and with the people around the grocery shop and Kalim's *dhaba*, Bihari *dhaba* and Bangali *dhaba*. Sometimes they start the day with a breakfast of tea and biscuits from Ustad's shop or Number 18 Tea Stall. This visual narrative enabled a parallel cartography of their social networks in the neighbourhood through conversations and discussions.

The participants developed personal narratives in more depth by exploring the relationship between the food they ate, their cooking practices and the environment they inhabited. This resulted in the production of recipe books, based on the discussion of food traditions of the communities they belonged to, where and how they learnt to cook, and how they have adapted their cooking techniques and philosophies in accordance with the ingredients and monetary means available to them, and the exigencies of life in the shelter. After focused dialogue around three sets of associations – food items, food, spices and utensils – each painted small (1 ft x 2 ft) canvases with brightly coloured images of the spices they use in their cooking, and of the vegetables they cook daily (Figure 64,65). Reshma, a shelter resident, said that even though dire poverty limits food choices, and knowing all too well that the destitute are in no position to reject food, she still wants her food to have “*swaad*” (flavour). She said that she doesn't like to eat food that isn't tasty, even if it's free or cheaply available. The meals sent to the shelter, first by Anganwadi and later by the Delhi government, were “completely bland, no *swaad* whatsoever”. Hence the women prefer to cook their food in the shelter yard, even if it is a struggle to get money for the ingredients. And they make sure their food always has *swaad* (Revue 2018).



Figure 62: Spices, 1' x 2' canvas, 2017

Source: Source: Project report



Figure 63: vegetables, 1' x 2' canvas, 2017

Source: Source: Project report

While painting, women talked about their favourite foods. Some had not even tasted their favourite dishes since migrating to Delhi. We were able to trace the women's personal stories through their food memories. For instance, Sabrun recalled the dish she most loved: *makai-chawal* (corn-rice) that she last ate as a child in her village in Bihar. Corn was a major crop in her region, so *makai-chawal* was a staple in village diet. Orphaned at a young age, she was raised by a strict and dominating aunt who assigned her many household chores. One day she was asked to watch over the pot of *makai-chawal*. However, she left the kitchen to play in

the courtyard, and the food got burnt. Her aunt punished her by forcing her to eat all of it. Today, when she cooks *makai-chawal* but uses a different method from the one taught by her aunt. At present, Sabrun is supported by a man who ensures she has two daily meals but is reluctant to feed her children, even though he wants to be with her (Revue 2018).

During the painting sessions the participants described the goodwill of shopkeepers in Meena Bazaar, where they buy their ingredients, and the *dhaba* owners who help them by giving them food purely on trust, telling the women to pay later when they can. The women rely on this generosity. Binu explained that when they buy a ten-rupee plate of *dal- chawal* (lentils and rice) from Kalim and ask for extra helpings of gravy, there is always a *boti* (small meat piece) in the additional gravy; Bihari, another *dhaba* owner who has known the shelter's residents for a long time, does the same. Often in the late afternoon the women go to the vegetable market, when the sellers are about to close, and collect damaged leftover produce. At night they go to *dhabas* in the Matia Mahal area opposite the Jama Masjid and are given leftover food (Figure 66).



Figure 64: Food ingredients, 3' x 3' canvas, 2017

Source: Project report

During the painting sessions the participants also discussed the skills required to earn money through begging; they were not self-conscious about narrating their experience of an activity considered risky, uncomfortable and humiliating. They mostly go begging on Jumma (Friday), the weekday that is special for Muslim communities everywhere. There are various approaches to group begging, but the participants preferred the *chaddar* ('sheet') process, i.e., holding a large cloth by the corners and going through the local markets or in front of the Jama Masjid, as a way of asking for money; passers-by drop coins, and sometimes currency notes, onto the sheet. Sometimes the women lay the cloth on the ground and sing religious songs,

or a mix of Bollywood and religious songs, that they have prepared beforehand. They wear *burqas* while begging, and if they happen to encounter friends or familiar faces, they ignore them so as not to disrupt what they are building up in the moment via the begging technique. They also travel to other parts of Delhi to beg, using the same practice/performance, far from the familiar lanes around the Jama Masjid; they choose areas where they are unlikely to find other *chaddar* beggars—too many such beggars cut into one another's opportunities, and tend to be ignored by the public. If they see other *chaddar* beggars at the chosen site, they go elsewhere. They also beg individually in front of the mosques and shops in Old Delhi. This they find much easier than begging in less-known areas. Their "costume" consists of unkempt hair and old filthy clothes, and their "performance" includes being accompanied by their children, similarly disheveled and dirty, to evoke greater sympathy through making people think they are in desperate straits. "If I wear clean clothes, nobody is going to give me money," remarks Rabina.

Each participant also painted 3 ft x 3 ft canvases with images (Figure 67,68) of the utensils they generally use in their daily cooking. Most of them prefer to cook in *kadhais* (a thick-bottomed wok) that are durable and suit makeshift kitchens where it is difficult to control the intensity of the fire. This was the first time the women were depicting actual three-dimensional objects, and most of them found it very difficult in terms of both shape and scale. Rather than drawing from memory, as was the case with their individual and collective renderings of the bazaar, vegetables, spices and other subjects, they had to place the utensils directly in front of themselves in order to render them. This mode of life-drawing was a conceptual and aesthetic challenge, but they helped each other through it. While they worked on these illustrations, the participants shared their associations with the various utensils used in everyday cooking.



Figure 65: Daily cooking utensils, 3' x 3' canvas, 2017

Source: Project report



Figure 66: *Kadhais, thick bottomed yok, daily utensils, 3' x 3' canvas, 2017*

Source: Project report

During the project's Open Day the shelter at Urdu Park turned into a temporary art space, its walls adorned with colourful paintings. The SPYM staff, shelter residents and Artreach volunteers hung the participants' canvases from the central rod that runs across the shelter's ceiling. The project texts on spices, recipes and utensils were placed on tables and chairs were arranged for the visitors. We borrowed most of the furniture from nearby shelters close to this one. Participants guided the visitors and enthusiastically answered their questions about the displayed artworks (Revue 2018). The shelter *itself* became an art space inside the community, creating new audiences who are living and working in / around the shelter (Figure 69,70).



Figure 67: *Open day, 2018*

Source: Project report



Figure 68: Open day, 2018

Source: Project report

The collaborative creation of the map of Meena Bazaar had inspired the idea of a shared kitchen. For some time, the participants had been discussing how to pool their limited resources, acquired with great difficulty, towards cooking meals in the courtyard of the shelter and selling this food as a source of income – an alternative to their normative practice of earning through begging, and a form of work that would enable them to maintain their dignity. The participants collected money towards this and put up a one-day kitchen on Open Day, preparing snacks like potato and vegetable *pakodas* and *samosas*, each plate costing Rs. 10 with tea. Visitors enjoyed the eatables just as much as they enjoyed the participants' artwork and oral accounts of the process of creating the map.

Sustained and systematic creative engagement had catalysed profound and positive shifts in participants' sense of self and identity through this project. They no longer saw themselves as struggling destitute individuals primarily concerned with their own or their children's survival in extremely difficult conditions. The continuous dialogue during the painting sessions has emboldened them to share their struggle, challenges, as well as stories of fun and frivolousness with each other. This has helped build mutual respect between the group and me, as a facilitator. Through the daily practice of painting and other activities, the participant group has developed strong internal bonds and uniquely reclaimed their living space. When their work – objects, canvases, maps, texts and food – is displayed and experienced within the shelter during the project's Open Days, that living space itself undergoes a dynamic metamorphosis into a truly alternative, radical exhibition venue, far beyond the canonised boundaries of galleries and museums.

Axial Margins, conceived in and nourished by the existential matrices of the community, and using the material stratum of everyday reality as a medium of self- and collective expression, is an example of art that serves to disrupt and transfigure our understanding of what is

apparently unremarkable. While the project participants' material hardships continue at the shelter, their psychological horizons seem to have radically expanded, and they now seem to view themselves as creative beings with valid voices, valid perspectives, valid subjectivities, valid skills – and above all, a valid place within a social system of unconscionable inequality that seeks to invalidate, in every possible way, the marginalised and disenfranchised. Democratic in scope and intent, embracing and celebrating the 'ordinary', the symbolic idiom of such art has the potential to recalibrate our customary perceptions and enable us to re-immense in the quotidian – all the internal and external phenomena we reflexively take for granted and may no longer even notice – and re-experience it as 'extraordinary', i.e., as uplifting, fascinating, astonishing, expansive, and even emancipatory (Revue 2020).

5.5 Networks & Neighbourhood/Mobile Mohalla (2014, Ongoing)

In 2014 my colleague at Revue, Mrityunjay Chatterjee, and I undertook the community art/research project *Networks & Neighbourhood/Mobile Mohalla* that aimed at engaging young women in the adjoining localities of Khirki and Hauz Rani, two urban villages in south Delhi, in an exploration of how public space could be claimed by women in male-dominated neighbourhoods. The project was executed in two phases: *Networks & Neighbourhood* (2014-2016) was funded by Khoj International Artist's Association; *Mobile Mohalla* (2016, ongoing) is funded by the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Today Khirki and Hauz Rani, once insular enclaves have a multicultural ethos, acquired over the past two decades (Figure 71). In 2006 the Delhi Municipal Corporation started sealing and then demolishing houses, artisan workshops and small factories here as part of a 'development' drive. Many original residents moved out when two- and three-storey buildings were constructed to form the dense, intimidating labyrinth of alleys that formed the localities. New owners moved in, along with migrant communities who rented living spaces from the new owners. Khirki and Hauz Rani are now home to migrant communities from all over the country, as well as refugee families who fled due to civil war, terrorism, natural disasters or chronic poverty from Afghanistan, Iraq and some African countries.



Figure 69: Khirki-Hauz rani, Urban village, 2014

Source: Project report

The existent demographic has internally expanded and diversified, while the built environment, despite new constructions, remains as noisy, busy, and congested as before the demolition drive. The narrow lanes with small stores, eateries and workshops are thronging with people till late into the evening. Local residents, including migrant Africans and Afghans, crowd around the kiosks of vendors selling all kinds of street food, vegetables, tea, groceries, cigarettes, mobile phones and other consumer goods. Construction labourers, other daily wagers, loaders, sweepers, ironers, barbers, cobblers, peddlers, mechanics, autorickshaw drivers, men of all ages, plying every sort of trade, can be seen hanging around on the street corners or outside shops and food stalls, socialising in the light of low-watt bulbs after the day's work.

Most public space in Khirki and Hauz Rani is visibly male-dominated, with women a rare sight, especially in the late hours. Phadke notes that women, the marginalised component within marginalised communities, inhabit city spaces differently than their male counterparts, and their perception/negotiation of city space varies from the male experience in terms of mobility, usage of space and the mental map of the city. She also notes that apart from class, other factors, including caste, community affiliation, age and physical ability, also significantly impact women's access to public space. "Here, the term space refers to a complex construction and production of environment – both real and imagined; influenced by socio-political processes, cultural norms and institutional arrangements which provoked different ways of being, belonging and inhabiting. This space simultaneously also impacts and shapes the social relations that contribute to its creations" (Phadke, 2012, 53).

PHASE I (2014-2016)

In the first phase, the project gathered insights and initiated dialogue about how women could be made more visible in the heavily male-dominated areas of Khirki and Hauz Rani. We engaged with a group of local female residents, including instance, domestic workers, homemakers, women running small businesses (age 25-30) and school dropouts (age 17-18) through a series of discussions and narrations concerned with women's presence in public spaces (Figure 72,73).



Figure 70: Dialogue with women in public space, 2014

Source: Project report



Figure 71: Dialogue with women in public space, 2014

Source: Project report

At first we found it difficult to interact with the women, as their busy work schedules did not leave them enough time for any other activity. So we arranged for a series of tea-and-snacks parties at Khoj for two weeks, inviting local women of Khirki Extension so that we could chat more openly, in a safe space away from the street, their workplaces and homes. The tea parties allowed them to socialise and gave us the opportunity to build a relationship with them. Our goal was to initiate an extended deep dialogue around two basic questions: how to

increase the visibility of girls and young women in heavily male-dominated areas; and how shared spaces could be transformed to become more hospitable for this group, enabling safe public social interaction. We engaged the participants through practices of active listening, the core of our dialogue method, working individually with each person to document their gendered experiences of public space (Figure 74,75).



Figure 72: Gendered experiences of public space, 2014

Source: Project report



Figure 73: Gendered experiences of public space, 2014

Source: Project report

During the first dialogue we realised that the young women were reluctant to speak freely, though they seemed keenly interested in the project. As we gained their trust, they slowly began to open up and talk about their insecurities and anxieties regarding public spaces – how when they walked through the locality, the experience of being stared at, commented on and sometimes harassed or molested by men forced them to curtailing their movements and voluntarily reducing the amount of time spent outside the house (Figure 76,77,78).



Figure 74: Dialog on public spaces, 2015

Source: Project report



Figure 75: Dialog on public spaces, 2015

Source: Project report



Figure 76: Dialog on locality experiences, 2015

Source: Project report

During the second dialogue, the girls described how their families restrict their freedom, ordering them to stay inside the house and allowing them to go out only for specific reasons and when accompanied by male kin. Family codes dominate their lives, and these codes chain their desires and dreams, forcing them to abide by conservative norms. They have been conditioned from a very young age to submit unquestioningly to patriarchal edicts that present public spaces as sources of danger for girls and women. As a result, they tend to view public spaces as always threatening; or simply as places that are not meant for them.

During the third dialogue we asked the girls to describe what they would do if they were granted one day off completely, without the burden of family rules and restrictions. They said that they would behave like their brothers and other males they knew, and not care about what anyone thought of their behaviour. Naseema said she would like to hang out with her friends, socialise at street corners, eat with her friends in dhabas, go out during the day, and loiter around the locality at night. Nilofar said that she is very fond of football and watches the boys playing in the streets of Hauz Rani. If she were granted a day of freedom, she would join them. Her ambition is to become a fashion designer, but even she knows that is it an impossible dream, given her conservative upbringing. But on that hypothetical day of freedom, she would at least go and meet the famous fashion designer Manish Malhotra. Azra talked about her frustration at being dominated at home by her father, as well as younger brothers who try to impose all sorts of rules on her. She said that if she were given a day of freedom, she would like hang out with her friends at the mall across the road, wearing shorts like the girls in the mall. She finds motorbikes irresistible, and yearns to drive one and compete in races with the local men she sees riding their bikes through the lanes of the locality. On this day of freedom, she would like to ride a motorbike and go on a day trip with her brother, her dream was to make him ride pillion.

During the fourth dialogue, the girls described their experiences of what they call “stolen” freedom and “licensed” freedom (i.e., permitted by the family). They had been allowed to freely go out into the locality (dhabas, grocery shops, local markets, parks, homes of friends) till the age of fifteen. They enjoyed playing in the lanes and roaming around. Even if they came home a little late, no questions would be asked. As soon as they neared the age of sixteen their families began imposing restrictions, saying they were no longer girls but young women, and were now expected to observe a certain code of conduct, behave responsibly, and obey social customs. From then on, they rarely decided anything for themselves, and every step they took was measured against the frame of self- or family/social censorship.

But youngsters like Naseema and Nilofer, among others, contest these restrictions in their own way. The two girls commute to university by metro twice a week. They secretly carry a

set of clothes brighter and more “daring” than their modest normal wear; they change into these, and also apply make-up, in the metro toilets. When their classes are over for the day, they call their mothers to say that they have extra classes or need to go elsewhere to hand over class notes to a friend. This is how they buy time to do things that they see other young girls their age doing – going out to local joints for kababs or *chaat* (spicy street food) or loitering with friends. Naseema and Nilofer hang out in places a bit distance from their neighbourhood because if they socialise in public spaces nearer home they run the risk of being caught by family members, or seen by someone who knows their parents and would report them. They are willing to take this risk because they view mobility, access and independence as valid personal entitlements.

Naseema and Nilofar prefer actively “stealing” their freedom in this way, rather than waiting/asking for permission from their families. They say they thoroughly enjoy this stolen freedom, no matter how brief the experience. Azra also enjoys this, but prefers the “licensing” of her freedom by her family. This means that she can roam about freely without anxiety, not keeping her movements a secret. Even though there are restrictions as to where she can go, she is more relaxed, without worrying about having to provide explanations or excuses for her time outside the house. She says that being thus “licensed” allows her to keep her dignity. There have been times when she has “stolen her freedom and then been caught or reported – being castigated after this is very painful and humiliating (Roy, Chatterjee 2016).

WALL PAINTING: A wall-painting initiative evolved through our discussions with the group members. The intent was to use wall painting as a creative instrument to draw men of the neighbourhood into a dialogue about gender equality in terms of the acceptance of women in conventionally male-associated professions, and the visibility of women in public spaces (Figure 79).



Figure 77: Wall paintings evolved through discussions, 2015

Source: Project report

The participants made a series of sketches visualising these paintings and their placement in Khirki and Hauz Rani. They selected certain walls in the locality for their renderings. It was obvious from the drawings that hidden behind their simple demeanour and restricted lifestyle was their ability to powerfully and succinctly articulate their dreams and aspirations. One participant chose a wall in the main Khirki lane where motorbikes are generally parked. She depicted girls sitting on bikes and chatting in that imagined public space, just like the locality's teenage boys and young men. Another depicted girls running a tea stall, an imagined space where girls could sit and spend their free time chatting, playing cards and other games (Figure 80,81,82).



Figure 78: Wall painting of girls in a tea stall, 2015

Source: Project report



Figure 79: Girls playing cards, 2016

Source: Project report



Figure 80: Girls playing football, 2016-17

Source: Project report

This gender-based intervention allowed us to build a relationship with the local men as well. The cobbler, for instance, who sat just in front of a wall we wanted to use for the project, was initially very reluctant to talk to us. Still, our persistent daily effort to have a conversation, including a promise to paint an eye-catching signboard for his corner, helped him to open up to us, and soon he began to interact freely with us. He gradually became a custodian-cum-curator of the wall painting behind him that depicted a female cobbler at work. When passers-by or his customers asked him about it, he replied confidently, “*Yeh kalaa hai!* (This is art!)”. Many of the enquirers, he told us, would respond with, “Hope it does not get damaged out here...!”

It took a lot of effort to produce these paintings. We tried to negotiate with the owner of a tea-stall and the owner of a workshop to permit us to paint female figures on their walls. Initially, they were reluctant, doubtful and suspicious. However, after noting the cobbler’s positive attitude to the painting of the female cobbler on the wall behind him, they agreed. The images depict young girls relaxing in each other’s company and enjoying cups of tea at the stall. We observed that local men responded to these images in different ways. For instance, one man found it interesting that the “humans beings” painted “in costume” looked like women, and not men. The notion of women socialising in public while drinking tea seemed to be beyond his imagination. On the other hand, some men asked the tea-boy whether they could bring their families to the stall and get a group portrait painted on the wall. Serving simultaneously as a collective mirror, canvas, testament, commentary and archive, the wall-painting series is one example of an intervention that resonated with the local population, enabled us to connect to most people in the neighbourhood, created a precedent for an atypical mode of communication, and established a public space for community interaction (Figure 83,84).



Figure 81: Conversation after wall painting, 2017

Source: Project report



Figure 82: Community interaction, 2017

Source: Project report

ZINE: Expanding our dialogic approach into another media form, we initiated *Mulaqaton ki Galiyan/Lanes of Encounter*, a monthly local zine themed around issues of collaborative spaces as a site for social interaction. Our intent was to create a common platform for voices that are lost within the complex cartography and diverse demography of Khirkee and Hauz Rani. The zine is directed towards stimulating creative thinking and expression in a shared and open narrative format that accommodates different entry points for discussions about public spaces and about how community nodes can be shaped to be equally hospitable to men and women. *Mulaqaton ki Galiyan* increased women's presence/visibility for women by inviting local women entrepreneurs to advertise in it, initially without cost, thus spreading the word about their businesses, services and talents. The first issue was in Hindi, but from the second issue onwards the publication has been bilingual (Hindi/English), to make it accessible to immigrants and non-Hindi speaking residents from other communities

(mulaqat.net). Further, extended into performance, the zine is read aloud in public spaces by the group of young women (who formed into the Khirkee Collective in Phase II of the project). This intervention at street corners, tea stalls and local eateries, and especially near the site of wall paintings, is a way to repurpose these spaces as nodes of creative engagement accessible to everyone, regardless of gender [Figure 85,86,87).



Figure 83: Mulaqat ki Galiyan, zine, 2017

Source: Project report



Figure 84: Reading zine in public space, 2017

Source: Project report



Figure 85: Reading zine in public space, 2020

Source: Project report

CYCLE RALLY: We also organised a young women's cycle rally (Figure 88,89) to assert their visible presence in the street through a form of safe, embodied 'fun' – a mode that has often served to discreetly or unambiguously express feminist opinions in patriarchal contexts (Phadke 2020). The event, a slow ride through the congested locality, began at 9.30 a.m. and was open to all project participants and interested outsiders. The girls on their bicycles outnumbered the intrepid boys who had decided to accompany their female friends and relatives in a supportive gesture. The youngsters openly enjoyed each other's company, a rare phenomenon in conservative Indian public space. Relishing the chance to disregard codes of gender segregation, they were seemingly unconcerned by the stares, comments, and the range of expressions – disapproval, confusion, disgust, delight, surprise – on the onlookers' faces. (Roy, Chatterjee 2016, 1:47).



Figure 86: Cycle rally in the locality by young women, 2016

Source: Project report



Figure 87: Cycle rally in the locality by young women, 2016

Source: Project report

The Khirki wall paintings, community textual production and cycle rally are potentially transformative actions for both the artists and the audience. These actions serve as mirror, portrait, window, door, dream, desire, exhalation, promise, threshold, prism, investment, horizon; they offer the experience of emotional and psychological possibility, fulfillment, fearlessness, unbinding, self-regulation, autonomy; they are the positing and inscribing of an audacious, optimistic counter-narrative to the normative socio-cultural erasure, control and negating of the aspirations of girls and women in patriarchal contexts. These interventions are examples of an SEA approach that “takes “a stand for social justice and equality” through creative engagement that puts forward “persuasive agreements for different cultural and ethical value hierarchies” (Lacey 2010). This principle of inclusion is manifested through the dialogic activity at the heart of my own practice, and which has been upheld for the past fifteen years as the fulcrum of Revue’s work. This mode of mutuality enables a dynamic condition for self-assertion and more confident personal articulation, especially in contexts of profound social and economic inequality where deprived and/or marginalised communities, and in particular the girls and women of such communities, are rarely offered and just as rarely claim the chance for self-expression.

Doctoral scholars Nian Paul and Chetana Naskar from Jawaharlal Nehru University interned with us on this project for four months, entering the work as social geographers, assisting us with documentation and to organise interventions and public events. We documented the gender dynamics manifesting in the public space of locality playgrounds and parks, and documented how teenage girls experience the locality; we also documented the experience of migrant Afghan women who, conveniently positioned as the socio-cultural and ethnic ‘Other’ within the neighbourhood, remain vulnerable to direct and indirect scrutiny, phobia and caricature.

PHASE II (2016, ongoing)

In the project’s second phase we further deepened the direct engagement with teenagers and young women from diverse backgrounds. Participants included local residents, and migrants from other Indian states, Africa and Afghanistan. Phase I of the project had created a core group of ten young women. Inspired by the group’s wall paintings, rallies, public performances, etc., young men from Khirki and Hauz Rani joined the group, which is now called Khirkee Collective. Members produce both offline and online creative work, including wall painting and reading-aloud performances on the street. The online programming includes an app to share the zine *Mulaqaton ki Galiyaan*, which has now transformed into a blog (www.mulaqat.net), and a YouTube channel ‘Mulaqat E Khirkee’, recently launched on March 8 2022, on the occasion of International Women’s day.

They can be accessed through smartphones and desktops. The collective also uses social networking sites like Instagram (@KhirkeeCollective), WhatsApp, etc., to extend and continue their conversations about urban spatiality.

For instance, using traditional, new and hybrid media, members of the Collective conducted a series of dialogues with people who live and work in the locality, or live elsewhere and come to work here – a cobbler, *presswali* (ironing-woman), *bhaturewale* (seller of *bhatura*/a fried street food), and others who have become familiar figures. Some of these subjects move around in the locality, for instance on bicycles or with pushcarts, while earning their living; other subjects occupy fixed locality sites and work there in all seasons. Through a series of conversations with these people about the nature of their work, the immediate demands of their daily existence and the general trajectory of their life-journeys, the Collective has documented how each subject, over time, has developed particular relationships with his/her customers and with residents of Khirki-Hauz Rani, and nurtured a dynamic sense of connection with the built environment itself. These unique urban ecosystems of sociality and pragmatic interdependence, necessary for the subjects' economic survival, continue and thrive regardless of unforeseen personal crises and fluctuating circumstances (Figure 90).



Figure 88: Dialog with the local cobbler, 2019

Source: Project report

Similarly, in 2017 Nian Paul explored the theme of urban spatiality through a mapmaking workshop with a group of local teenagers was conducted in Khirki and Hauz Rani. She structured the cartographic exercises as a phenomenological practice, locating the subject in the web of relations, emotions and experiences that shaped the participants' inscription of neighbourhood spaces, as well as their own subjectivities. The larger overall purpose of the cartography workshop was to document local input with regard to delineating the available

public spaces where women may safely socialise within the congested lanes of Khirki and, more particularly, Hauz Rani. Other than at beauty parlours, which are public sites yet a private/interior, gender-segregated zone, it is rarely possible for women to congregate and interact without chaperones or supervision (Figure 91,92).



Figure 89: Mapping workshop, 2015

Source: Project report



Figure 90: map making workshop, 2017

Source: Project report

The young cartographers also mapped the area as a “foodscape”. Khirki and Hauz Rani were historically dominated by Meo (Mewati) Muslims with roots in Haryana and some parts of Rajasthan and western Uttar Pradesh, and refugees from Multan who escaped to Delhi during Partition. Over the past decades these two localities have received an influx of migrants from

Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, the north-eastern states, as well as from refugee families from Afghanistan, Iraq and several African countries. The migrants have brought along their different food practices, now reinforced through innumerable small eateries and canteens that cater to the different migrant communities, a sensory fragment of the homes left far behind. The foodscape map traced the histories of cuisines, ingredients and cooking implements through informal and formal dialogues with local people. With food and food cultures as a subject, and without being trapped in the nostalgia that is so instantly and easily summoned in the context of food the Collective documented complex genealogies of the dishes cooked in the alleys and homes of Khirki and Hauz Rani (Revue, Paul 2017, unpublished).

Khirki and Hauz Rani are examples of how urban social spaces with mixed local and migrant demographics can effectively enable the deconstruction of orthodoxies and provincial attitudes, and offer a range of new interfaces, new affiliations and new possibilities of personal freedom to the large population of young people at these sites. And while the wall paintings directly imaged the participants' suppressed yearnings for greater autonomy and self-expression, the paintings also embody a bold and remarkable production of 'social and conceptual space' (Lefebvre 1990) Such space has been theorised as a complex, value-based social product/construction that dynamically influences spatial perceptions and practices of its inhabitants and deeply embeds an array of interdependent contradictions, conflicts, multiplicities, ambiguities and equivocations. All social entities necessarily produce their own space, a manifestation of their realities, self-concepts and ways of being. Socially produced space is not a mere aggregate of people and objects – it is in fact a means of production, including the production of meanings, discourses and ideologies; it is an instrument of thought and action, a form of relationship, a modality of power. Social and conceptual space, regardless of whether it is produced by the entitled or the disenfranchised, ultimately has a political character since it can be directly/indirectly used by a group or groups to inscribe and replicate forms of social dominance, or to resist them.

The Khirki wall-painting initiative was a conscious effort by a group of young women to freely imagine and create an affirming 'gendered space' (Phadke 2006). The works audaciously envision as well as embody these new possibilities, creating a spectacle within the shared public space of the locality, both during and after the act of painting, and disrupting the shared community value system and conservative locality ethos. In this instance, the girls produced the painting (of girls enjoying a traditionally men-only activity) in the challenging environs of male-dominated social space, *and* simultaneously produced a new, transformed space through "gendering" it via the act of painting, and the subject of the painting.

This public act, undertaken in male-dominated public space, is a radical repudiation of the distorted conditioning to which girls and young women are systematically subjected in patriarchal contexts from childhood onwards – i.e., always to suspect, fear and avoid the male body. The incessant projection and circulation of this particular family/community anxiety is reinforced by sensational media reportage about abhorrent rebellious acts such as elopements, same-sex, adulterous and inter-faith relationships, premarital affairs, sexual misconduct and other instances of women infringing the rigid cultural norms and restrictive customs based on caste endogamy, on the one hand, and clan/village/territorial exogamy on the other (Chowdhry 2014). Diktats by male custodians vis-à-vis the mobility and agency of girls and young women – censoring and restricting their access to public space via the logic that outside the home they are ever at risk of gender violence – are rooted in patriarchal obsessions with the cultural paradigm of female “virtue”. Chaste female bodies are fetishised and valorized as family/ community property, and zealously guarded as one would guard any valuable asset – in this context, one that serves as the most significant repository of family/community “honour”, and severely penalised if that code of honour is disobeyed or violated in any way.

Our projects in these neighbourhoods suggest that community art, collaboratively produced and shared in public spaces, can indeed be a form of resistance, can successfully critique prevalent customs, enhance micro-environments, transform location and landscape, heighten social awareness and question hegemonic social and cultural hegemonies. Such art can introduce new perspectives, infuse discourse with nuance, reveal what is ever-present yet rarely noticed; it can shock, surprise, and challenge; and at its best, collapse the distinction between ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ within our supposedly unremarkable, mundane daily contexts and circumstances.

5.6 Museum of Food: A Living Heritage (2017-Ongoing)

Sponsored by the Prince Claus Fund, this project pivots around a community kitchen in Khirki that has connected migrant women from different ethnic backgrounds within Khirki and Hauz Rani, the two adjacent working-class neighbourhoods in south Delhi that are the site of our project Networks & Neighbourhood/Mobile Mohalla that are a resettlement node for migrants coming to the capital from smaller Indian cities and rural areas, and also from beyond India’s borders. The localities house migrants from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bengal, Kerala, the North-eastern states, who arrived searching for fresh opportunities and the chance of livelihood; there are migrants from Nepal, and also migrants, asylum seekers and refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Congo and Nigeria. Khirki and Hauz Rani are full of food

stalls and *dhabas* catering to a large and diverse local demographic and to refugee families. Over time, Khirki and Hauz Rani have seen a transformation in terms of its culinary spaces over the last few years with the opening up of new eateries offering food prepared by domestic and international migrants. A girl from Manipur can be seen enjoying a burger at an Afghani stall, and an Afghan teenager can be seen relishing *golgappas* (a spicy street food) from a local vendor's handcart – evidence of the organic, fluid meshing of multiple food preparation and consumption practices.

The lives of the international migrant women who are now trying to build a home and raise their families in these neighbourhoods have been deeply imprinted by their experience of war, political persecution, poverty, displacement and exile. Their economic struggles continue in the relative safety of Delhi, and they have turned to their culinary skills to establish a foothold in the city and to make ends meet through preparing organic, nourishing food in the community kitchen and selling it at very reasonable rates.

Museum of Food: A Living Heritage was initiated in December 2017 to bring together these multiple food practices in a common space through the simple yet layered act of cooking by migrant women who within the patriarchal cultures of their home countries had been responsible for managing the kitchen and for daily preparation of household meals. Within the Khirki kitchen, their relationships were built not just through collective cooking but also through sharing the stories and emotions they associate with particular ingredients and utensils, describing their kitchens in the homes they have lost, the role of their mothers and grandmothers in the kitchen, traditional recipes, markets, crops, special foods prepared for feasts and festivals, etc. These women are a “living museum” of the cultural practices, customs and habits they have carried with them through violence, dispossession, exile and refugee-camp life to precarious resettlement and the multiple challenges of a diasporic identity.

The Khirki Living Lab was started with an intention of providing a space for community building via the co-extensive process of cooking and sharing stories around food. The method at the lab is to rotate the tasks of food preparation, i.e., to have one dish from each cuisine tradition cooked daily, often focusing on a common ingredient or a theme, and then to present these dishes collectively at a monthly Pop-up Kitchen at different sites, where local people are invited to share the meal and encouraged to interact with the project participants. This mode of engagement cohesively brings the different food traditions together both within the familiar, protective, intimate space of the kitchen and the wider context of the general public in public space (Figure 93,94).



Figure 91: Cooking process in Khirkee living Lab, 2018

Source: www.foodmuseum.online



Figure 92: Cooking process in Khirkee living Lab, 2018

Source: www.foodmuseum.online

A very interesting aspect of this project is that not all the participants speak each other's language, yet are able to communicate with one another and share the essential cooking information, as well personal experiences and emotional associations in relation to food. Speakers of Arabic, Pashto, Dari, French and various native dialects, they rely on an intuitive amalgam of speech, gestures, facial expressions and idiomatic translations by those among them who do have full or partial knowledge of the various languages in use. They also draw from a lexical cache common to the different languages. For instance, Arabic and Farsi share many words, and Dari is very similar to Farsi, hence the speakers are able to interpret each other's statements with a bit of effort. Those who have a full or partial grasp of Hindi and/or English also quite skillfully use these languages to enter into dialogue with one another.

Several of their children, who attend school and regular tuition classes in the locality, and speak fluent unaccented Hindi and English, help to translate for the mothers. Immediate direct communication is often facilitated through digital media – participants research their queries online and share information and images of the particular ingredients or staples or spices with the group. However, in symbolic terms it might well be asserted that within this unique ethos of polyglot sociality and community, it is traditional food culture that serves as the singular mother tongue of all participants in the Khirki Living Lab and Pop-up Kitchen (Figure 95,96,97,98).



Figure 93: Sharing cooking experiences, 2018

Source: [www. foodmuseum.online](http://www.foodmuseum.online)



Figure 94: Sharing cooking experiences, 2018

Source: [www. foodmuseum.online](http://www.foodmuseum.online)



Figure 95: Pop-up kitchen, 2018

Source: [www. foodmuseum.online](http://www.foodmuseum.online)



Figure 96: Pop-up kitchen, 2018

Source: [www. foodmuseum.online](http://www.foodmuseum.online)

Migrant communities, especially those living far from their places of origin, tend to internalise their native food practices as a form of identity to be asserted in their places of resettlement (Paul 2018). Resettled families often willingly/unwillingly adopt new food habits, cherish their native ones, occasionally give them up or adapt their embedded, hereditary culinary customs to new realities of their host country. Within the lab, discussions about traditional foods/sharing of associations with those foods in the pre-migration phase of the kitchen members' lives alternated with their wider political and philosophical reflections on military and societal violence, terrorism, displacement, statelessness, exile, camp life, epidemics, etc. Kitchen members talked about the loss of loved ones and community, about hunger, famine, destruction of their food sources via bombing and shelling, disruption of markets, farm production and supply, escalation of prices, starvation. Some people fled from villages to cities; others fled from cities to villages, everyone under the brutal stress of having to keep moving and hiding in their escape from assault, danger and death. In war zones and refugee camps, and in the cities sheltering displaced people fleeing all kinds of violence in distant regions, food and water was often unavailable, and when available it was often badly

contaminated. Awaiting the arrival of humanitarian aid, Afghans sheltering in basements survived for weeks on rice and dry rotis, and Somalis who had no money to pay off militia predators survived on semolina and water or lentils and water. Rice from India and other countries was flown into Afghanistan as food aid, but did not have the fine texture and fragrance to which Afghans were accustomed. American beans and oil flown into Somalia as food aid were similarly experienced as inferior.

The first to suffer the consequences of nutritional trauma were babies and children, but the adults were severely affected as well, and recovery was a tough physical struggle for many when they were first resettled, and had to navigate unfamiliar food options in their new environment. Such bodily trauma also has deep psychological effects, since food, the most elemental factor in physical survival, also serves as a pivot of personal and collective identity. These themes were part of the regular conversations in the kitchen, interspersed with pragmatic sharing / discussion of culinary skills. Some stories narrated in the kitchen were about learning new recipes while on the run or in refugee camps; one woman learnt a spicy dish from an aid worker in Somalia and regularly cooks it in her own kitchen in Khirki. I observed that over time these survivors seem to have cognitively defused the multiple traumas they experienced, and seem to have successfully assimilated those as facts of personal/family/community history, with a defined place in memory and amenable to willed recall, rather than as triggers that compel a re-experiencing of those traumas with full intensity/without control.

The kitchen project has now taken a concrete step towards self-sustainability: nine members of the group have formed a catering service they named Khanapados that offers cuisines from different cultures at very reasonable rates. The women procure raw materials, prepare and deliver fresh home-cooked food, and invite food connoisseurs from across the city as well as local residents. Occasionally they supply snacks and lunch for larger events such as a day-long seminar or workshop. Journalists, tourists, food-lovers and bloggers have written enthusiastically about the kitchen, and Khanapados has opened a bank account with its collective earnings (Fig 99,100).



Figure 97: Catering service, Khanapados, 2019

Source: Revue ensemble (Insta)



Figure 98: Catering service, Khanapados, 2019

Source: Revue ensemble (Insta)

Kitchen members have produced three issues of *Khanapados*, a magazine with anecdotes about the members' personal associations with traditional foods/food cultures from their home countries (Figure 101,102). (<https://foodmuseum.online/download/>). The women have also created food maps that delineated their organically emergent, new or transformed relationships with food through the difficult experiences of migration and resettlement, as 'outsiders' in their new environment seeking out new ingredients, utensils and cooking tools, and adapting to new socio-culturally mandated dietary constraints. This alternative cartography raises potent questions about "authenticity" and the intra-psychic

splitting/doubling of identity that can be a formidable aspect of migrant life, especially in the case of migrants for whom returning to their own countries is simply not an option.

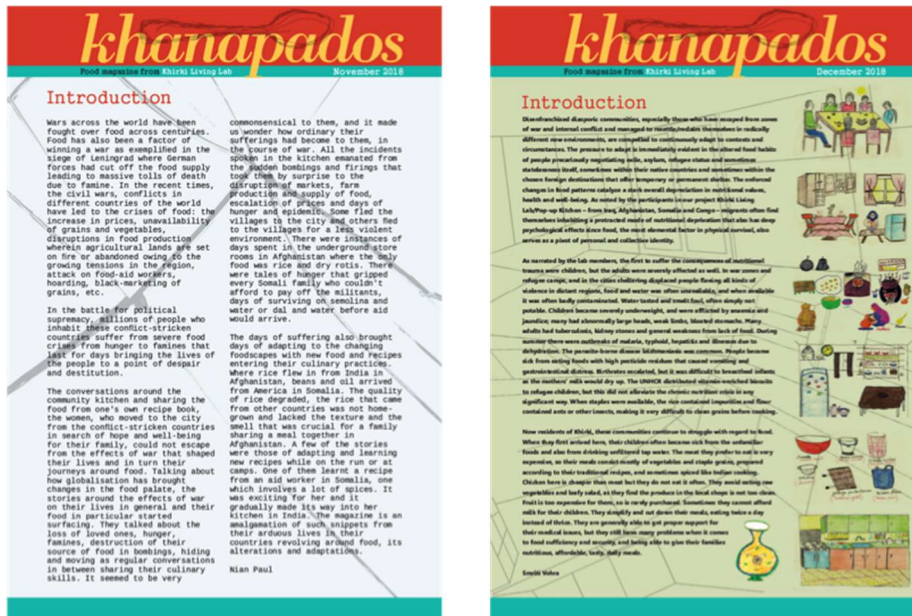


Figure 99: Khanapados magazine, 2018

Source: www.foodmuseum.online

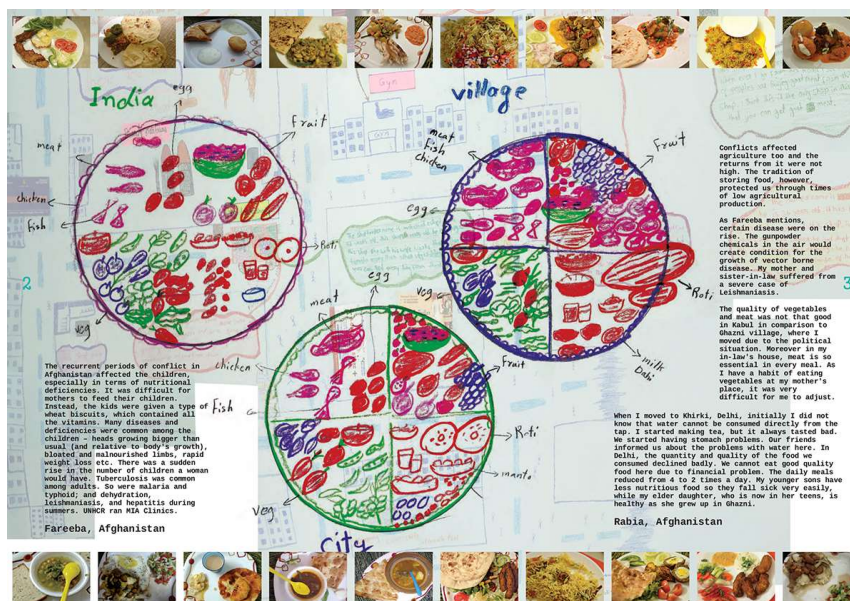


Figure 100: Khanapados magazine, 2018

Source: www.foodmuseum.online

Food preparation in this community kitchen consists of culturally mixed as well as culture-specific processes, including the selection of ingredients, the style of preparing meats, vegetables, pickles, jams, curries and desserts, the choices and proportions of spices and seasonings, the combinations of dishes in each meal, to the right amount of heat from the

stove, and even the mode of stirring the pots. Food exchanges are an essential aspect of these migrants' social bonding, and the daily sharing of kitchen space, budgeting, collective purchasing, cooking, eating together, conversing, cleaning and washing up, preparing meals for pop-up kitchens, serving food at the pop-up and larger events, etc., has strengthened interpersonal relationships within the group, and kitchen members help each other as much as possible, with their own limited resources, through personal, family and financial crises. The kitchen space continuously meets its members' needs for companionship and emotional support, and has become both a necessity and a haven for them.

My general objective as an artist/researcher is to shape new art forms/enable new representations, especially gender representations, within given local nodes and imperatives, as well as to catalyze, release and uncover the aesthetic logic inherent and embedded in the existential matrix of community, each group with particular histories, genealogies, demographics, socioeconomic patterns and cultural affiliations. An open-ended rhizomatic model is the core of my SEA practice and production. The specific mode of creative engagement in the locality depends on whether the space is public or private, open or closed. Each public space has its own possibility and limitations that allow certain kinds of engagement. The most important aspect of my SEA research process is group participation and the rigorous yet flexible process of regular dialogue, free sharing and active listening. Such empowerment is crucial in contexts where girls and women from disenfranchised and/or marginalised communities are penalized – often brutally – for infringing/rejecting cultural norms and taboos, and are generally expected to be subordinate, passive and self-censoring with regard to their social claims, public presence and individual voice. My effort is directed enabling new usages of public space for girls and women – for sharing imagination, creative thinking and aspiration. As evident from the descriptions in this chapter, given the patriarchal ethos and conservative cultural codes dominating each project site, such assertion of self-expression/self-representation, individually and collectively, is an audacious and radical action.

British Sociologist Beverly Skeggs notes that ethnography as a discipline has 'moved from attaching the overwhelming authorial weight to the concept of experience to a fascination with representation', and reminds us of the risks and repercussions of this shift: 'Representations can seduce.... Representations play a key role in shifting the limits of our understandings. They provide the tools for symbolic repositioning. But they are always partial. That is all they can be. A total or totalising representation is impossible' (Skeggs 1999, 13, 14). For Skeggs, ethnography 'is informed by a theory of knowledge (epistemology) about what can be known and how to value experience and interpretation' [of reality]; it also relies on 'how we use concepts when trying to conceptualise experience and make the link between context and

experience... Realist ethnographers believe in coherence, community, historical determination and structure. They believe that there is a reality 'out there' which can be discovered and identified. Alternatively, modernist ethnographers do not concentrate on communities but on the complex formation of identity across a range of sites in relation to wider global issues, [keeping the focus on] who or what controls and defines the identity of individuals, social groups, nations and cultures. They emphasise the role of representation when discussing reality... leading some to argue that nothing exists beyond the discursive representation of it' (Skeggs 1999, 6). Those who subscribe to the 'modernist problematic' insist that 'it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are *constituted* through experience; and there 'is no such thing as unmediated experience, although there may be experiences which we do not cognize. Experience is always in need of interpretation and we can only understand it through the access we have to language and discourse. To believe that experience can tell us the truth about a person is to reproduce the discourse of possessive individualism in which experience is understood as a property of a person' (ibid)

Creatively focusing on social, spatial and self-/community representations in my personal practice has also brought about a significant change in my self-definition vis-à-vis my SEA projects. Initially I saw myself as an artist-facilitator. However, after deep, sustained, complex dialogic engagement that enabled particular modes of relationship, each woman's status has shifted, through her creative work, from "participant" to "collaborator". In parallel, my role/identity as an artist-facilitator has shifted. Rather than considering myself to be an instructor, pedagogue or authority of any kind, I now see myself as a mediator/interlocutor, primarily a facilitator of dialogue within the participant groups, as well as of those groups' dialogue with the larger community. Combining objective distance with focused presence, I position myself at the heart of the creative process; yet consciously keep my interventions to a minimum in the day-to-day activity, or sometimes not visiting the site for several weeks in the interest of encouraging and fostering self-sustainability of the shared creative space.

Feminist scholars have urged theorists and practitioners across disciplines to take on the 'epistemic responsibility' of countering both 'epistemic imperialism' and 'epistemic indolence' through the principle of 'reflexivity' – i.e., 'responsible knowers' seeking out 'the fullest possible explanations to understand the situation at hand; they recognise their implicatedness in the production of knowledge and claim responsibility for it. They acknowledge that they are implicated and that they are accountable. They make apparent the way in which they claim authority and legitimation, enabling the reader to know how the account has been produced' (Skeggs 1999, 14). Especially while performing research on individuals or communities that are in crisis, feminist ethnographers must 'feel responsible to their informants for their

representations of them [and] recognize that representations are not value-free and often have consequences for those who are represented in them' (Shrock 2013, 56).

Shrock references the question that continues to ignite the entire field of postcolonial studies, raised by Spivak in her seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988) that asks whether subaltern "Others" can ever be authentically/appropriately represented by privileged intellectuals seeking to "give voice" to those who have been historically silenced. 'Spivak argues that academics cannot "give voice" to the subaltern, since in such an arrangement the subaltern's voice will always already be co-opted and secondary. Her argument points to the possibility that instead of giving voice to the voiceless the intellectual's action is recapitulating the subaltern status of the subject' (Shrock 2013, 50). 'The viability of representing others accurately' was interrogated in other disciplines as well, and ethnographers fervidly debated 'whether or not outsiders could or should represent groups to which they do not belong', acknowledging that ethnographer's gaze can easily function to 'preserve the current status hierarchy, rather than to dislodge or interrupt it' (ibid). In wider disciplinary terms, feminist scholars recommend that every researcher should adopt an 'ethnographic attitude' which 'can be applied within any kind of inquiry, including textual analysis. It is... a way of remaining mindful and accountable. It is not about taking sides in a pre-determined way but is about the risks, purposes and hopes embedded in knowledge projects... an ethics of witnessing which is both responsive to and responsible for' (Skeggs 1999, 17).

Given the facts of my obvious and visible socio-economic privileges, outsider status and gender autonomy, the inhabiting of an enfranchised position as a "responsible knower" vis-à-vis my research subjects, and the extent of my "implicatedness" in their collaborative cultural production, requires meticulous ongoing self-scrutiny.

5.7 Towards the New Knowledge

5.7.1 Introduction

This section analyses the SEA research presented in this thesis, linking my research hypothesis to my research questions and to my research findings.

It is important to identify whether research is practice-based, rather than practice-led, "since the two terms are often used interchangeably. Practice-based research refers to a form of research in which the originality of the study and its contribution to knowledge are demonstrated through a creative artefact or outcome, such as images, music or

performance. Practice-led research is that which focuses on practice *itself*, leading primarily to new understandings *about* practice” (Sayal-Bennett 2018). My own research is “practice-led”, and my projects are marked by a thorough overlap / elision / fusion of core SEA variables (site-specificity, collaboration/participation, dialogic aesthetic, relationship, polyphony, pluralism, community-building, self-expression, self-representation, activism) that intersect through my main research theme: the claiming / re-claiming of public space by participants, mainly women and girls, from marginalised communities, through collective artistic effort.

The analysis is presented in four linked sections: I. Addressing my research questions, II. Forms of knowledge derived/produced and III. Discursive ‘entanglements’ and ‘indeterminacies’

5.7.2 Addressing My Research Questions

Overall Understanding of How Diverse SEA Projects Connect to the Main Research Questions

Bishop defines collaboration as the “collective dimension of social experience”, and notes that participatory art is animated by three concerns. First: the desire “to create an active subject, one who will be empowered by experience of physical or symbolic participation”. Second: the push for egalitarian and democratic processes, by which the artist relinquishes “some or all” authorial control/claim to authorship, even though shared production involves greater aesthetic risks. Third, effort towards the “restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning” (i.e., art can purposively counter the socially alienating, isolating and fragmenting effects of neoliberal capitalism, globalisation, etc). Participatory art seeks ways to collapse the distinction between performer and audience, professional and amateur, production and reception. Everyone has the same capacity for intelligent response to the arts – in participatory production, audiences are not divided into active / passive, capable / incapable, and spectators are also interpreters who can grasp and make use of works “in ways that the authors themselves might never have dreamed possible” (Bishop 2006, 10-17).

The SEA projects by artists Ravi Agarwal, Sheba Chhachhi and Atul Bhalla, and the public art event organised/facilitated by independent curator Pooja Sood, described earlier in my thesis, are participatory and collaborative in that their creators took arts practice out of the protective environs of the studio. The artists had no intention to claim public space, but rather to build a connection to the public in public space, and disrupt/explore the passive participation by a viewing public mostly unfamiliar with concepts of contemporary art, installation art and mixed-media art on any scale.

WALAS' art – street performances that temporarily claim/reclaim public space through generating a momentary public shock/surprise/spectacle in a low-income neighbourhood inhabited by a marginalised community that had no knowledge of performance art – is similarly oriented. Blank Noise presents gender-focused, participatory events/performance in urban public space, a mode of transient, tactical direct engagement that is both feminist and activist; this embodied practice, even when enacted in total silence, may be read as a speech act/form of dialogue that calls for public debate on gender issues. *Womanifesto*¹² is similarly focused on representing gender issues in and through collaborative art production with particular communities, and the collective has expanded its dialogic interventions from urban into rural spaces. *Girls at Dhabas*¹³ aims at political transformation and campaigning for gender justice, using public spaces to address the issues of women's safety, autonomy and mobility in public space. Hamdasti's efforts to reclaim public space are ultimately a form of dialogue-based community building through participatory interventions with local residents and businesses in Chitpur. *Nalpar* is undertaken in a tribal setting with three local tribal artists, engages directly with local women, through dialogue, vis-à-vis 'reforming'/re-designing the area around village handpumps, to ease the women's arduous daily task of manually collecting water, and reclaiming a vital public space for women in a traditional ethos where women have very limited personal freedom and where their movements outside the home are frequently monitored by the men in their families.

Ala Plástica, *Park Fiction* and *Victoria Square*¹⁴ similarly rest on sustained engagement with particular demographics in particular spaces; regular artist/facilitator presence; dialogue; collaborative creative production; and the slow, organic emergence of permanent relationships between project stakeholders over time in order that the projects may eventually become self-sustaining. *Wasteland*¹⁵, however, is not oriented towards reclaiming public space; rather, the artist/facilitator collaborated with the local community of impoverished *catadores* to produce art from landfill 'trash', taking this art into exclusive private spaces (galleries, art auction houses) and being lauded for his engagement with the marginalised. However, the artist ensured that all the money for these highly-priced 'trash'-based artworks went back to the *catadores* so that they could improve their living conditions. In this case the participants have a very different relationship to the abject public space of the landfill (to which the privileged

¹² *Womanifesto* (See Appendix 'Select International Socially Engaged Art Projects, 1990-2021')

¹³ *Girls at Dhabas* (See Appendix 'Select International Socially Engaged Art Projects, 1990-2021')

¹⁴ *Ala Plástica*, *Park Fiction*, *Victoria Square* (See Appendix 'Select International Socially Engaged Art Projects, 1990-2021')

¹⁵ *Wasteland* (See Appendix 'Select International Socially Engaged Art Projects, 1990-2021')

artist had full access) and to the elite private space of art circulation/consumption (to which the underprivileged *catadores* had no access).

As a SEA practitioner doing gender-focused, practice-led, socially engaged creative work within the patriarchal ethos of Indian society and in the context of male-dominated urban environments, I always take into account the discourse of risk and vulnerability that frames the way disenfranchised bodies, especially of women of all ages and backgrounds, routinely experience violence and aggression in public spaces. This ongoing overt and covert violence reiterates the urgent need for all levels and modes of intervention, including through art, to ensure justice in the domains of gender inequality, sexual assault and harassment. However, this discourse is often contextually manipulated and subsumed by other discourses imposed and enforced by the state and its actors, supporters and instruments. The discourse of activism/social justice regularly confronts the militarized state discourse of law and order and 'public safety'.

Vis-à-vis my own SEA practice, I reiterate my core method of gender-focused 'quiet activism': sustained dialogic engagements within the 'everyday' realities of certain material sites in underprivileged urban neighbourhoods. Through reliable presence, dialogue and creative activities with local communities in local public spaces, I aim to gradually push the boundaries of socio-cultural acceptance, and emphasize the awareness of the need to respect disenfranchised bodies as valid signifiers of identity, ethnicity and particular affiliations. In wider terms, my attempt is to deconstruct seemingly intractable social phobia and prejudice, and through my interventions foreground the right of every person to use public space with equal freedom and enfranchisement.

A. How Can Art Interventions Motivate and Engage Young Women/Participants from Disenfranchised Communities to Create Their Own Spaces in Public?

My conceptual understanding of social/public space based on my research is aligned with the idea of the "multiplicity" (Massey 2005) of social spaces in the Indian subcontinent and in other parts of the world – spaces which undergo organic expansion and become multi-ethnic through accommodating diverse migrant communities. In terms of SEA interventions, the nature of the social space determines what kind of creative engagement or art may evolve within and through the setting. The art cannot be predetermined: rather, it emerges based on the dynamics of the space, the material limitations of the space, and the participants' relationship with the space. The relational possibilities are different in rural and urban social spaces. The former allows for abundant free movement (Micek, Staszewska 2019), but does

not have urban ‘multiplicity’; it has fixed users from the community who observe local traditions and undertake familiar sets of activities in that social space. In contrast, urban spaces are multi-layered, with different demographics always in movement, changing, varying, substituting or replacing their activities. These spaces are controlled by legal/quasi-legal codes, and regulations, and there are always multiple claimants to a site, regardless of whether it is a park, street corner, market, lane or square.

Park, *Nalpar*, *Ala Plastica*, *Park Fiction* and *Victoria Square* are examples of the social “production of space” (Lefebvre 1974) – i.e., each is a material site-cum-installation; and each also produces the experiential space, a complex, value-inflected social construction that dynamically influences the spatial perceptions and practices of its inhabitants, and hosts/embeds an array of interdependent contradictions, conflicts, multiplicities, ambiguities and equivocations that demand attention. In each of these projects, there were many claimants to the social/public/community space, with different sets of desires in relation to the space being ‘reformed’ through collaborative creative work. Within each project, community input through various forms of dialogue and creative visualization practices, keeping in mind pragmatic as well as aesthetic needs, was fundamental to the realisation of project goals.

In *Park*, it was local women who primarily expressed the desire vis-à-vis repurposing the degraded space, and their imaginings were the fulcrum of the artistic effort, but the perspectives of local youth, local elders as well as general passers-by who used the park as a shortcut through the colony to the main road, were also incorporated into the material production of a transformed social space. In *Nalpar*, the artist group worked with local women to visualise its reform, based on the women’s desire for the space around the handpump to be restructured to provide privacy, serve as a node for collective socialisation, and be decorated with traditional tribal motifs; the women’s perspective was central to the artist group’s discussion with the municipal authorities about improving drainage, re-using the waste water and keeping the area sanitary. The artist-activists of the *Park Fiction* project encouraged citizens to take control of the urban planning process through indirect activism, i.e., continuously using the space for activities connecting to local culture -- festivals, exhibitions, talks, presentations, film screenings, concerts, performances, lectures, demonstrations, picnics, sports and other public events. The artist-activists of *Ala Plástica* deployed dialogue creative visual and textual methods, and built an important body of documentation for civic and legal use in a long, intense engagement with local communities, in the effort to save the local river and delta ecologies (linked natural and social spaces) from ‘development’ and predation by the state and mega-corporations. The *Victoria Square* project in Athens empowered the community (locals as well as non-Greek immigrants) to reclaim a degraded urban area through participatory, dialogue-based art and collaborative creative work, including

production of a weekly newspaper hosted a deeper conversation around immigration, exile and related existential struggles.

In all the above-mentioned projects, the creative process was navigated through everyday relationships, and creative practice/production emerges organically from the group/participants/collaborators from local communities. The artists did not impose their formal training/technical knowledge/concepts of aesthetics upon the community; nor was it necessary for the participants to have some level of training, knowledge, aesthetic orientation, etc. They were motivated *through* their creative engagement, with the artists drawing on existent knowledge resources and skills within the group to shape the projects, and facilitate self-expression and self-/social representation. The process of artistic development was not abstract. There was no distance or alienation from local realities; participants and their creative work were organically meshed, and the rhythm of their art production was aligned with the rhythm of their daily lives and the exigencies of their material context which they understand intimately.

It is worth remembering that self-reflexive critique of relational art is difficult due to the characteristic open-endedness of such art, and complicated by the fact that relational art is frequently created through cross-media frameworks, enabling complex trajectories of representation. She also warns that if relational artworks are “unhinged” from both artistic intentionality and consideration of the broader context in which they operate”, they become merely “a constantly changing portrait of the heterogeneity of everyday life” and do not examine their relationship to it” (Bishop 2004, 51-79).

B. How Does This SEA Practice Reframe the Descriptor ‘Site-Specific’?

My understanding of site-specificity relies on Kwon’s theorization of SEA as fuelled by “a dominant drive” to reintegrate art within the social realm, and a push within art practices to generate/uphold “a more intense engagement” with the outside world (Kwon 1997, 91).

Three aspects of site-specificity are repeatedly articulated through my projects. First, the creative process/art production itself is integral to the site, and the site cannot be separated from the creative process/art production. The site and art are organically fused. Second, the execution and dissemination of the art is on-site – i.e., whatever production, event, exhibition, performance, etc are planned must take place at the site itself, underscoring the fact that there is no difference between creator and viewer, producer and spectator. Third, the creative process undertaken at one particular site cannot be replicated at another site, as the sites have distinct identities, and differ sharply in terms of human dynamics, topography, built forms

and social/cultural geography. The local communities at each site have a long and intimate relationship with their material environment and the ethos of its public spaces.

My site-specific engagements focus on building and transforming community relations through art interventions that evolve from the material sites. These interventions use traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with the wider public about social issues relevant to each site, thereby creating new audiences at each site. The art must emerge through this methodology cannot be imposed externally on the community inhabiting the site. The interventions are shaped so that the community becomes an integral part of the art/cultural production, just as they are integral to the social space where the interventions take place. Additionally, I consider public conversations, dialogue, other kinds of responses etc. to the artwork/around the artwork to be part of the material artwork; and I also consider participants/collaborators/spectators and the artist-facilitator to be part of the material site. The following excerpts from diverse project texts indicate the intimate relationship between the project participants and the sites, and the participants' embedment in their material contexts:

In Dakshinpuri, Uttam, 17, recalls vis-à-vis locality congestion: "One day the open space by our lane drew our attention. We had heard that a park would be coming up there. A few yards away, a house was under construction. We brought a spade and dug up a section in the open space to turn it into an *akhada* (arena) for playing *kabaddi* (a traditional sport). And then, stealing sand from a loaded truck, we filled in the dug-up space and really turned it into an *akhada*" (parkdpuriblogspot.com).

At Urdu Park, while depicting the fish market on canvas with acrylic paints, Rabina, 38, recalls her earlier life: "My parents died when I was very young. I ran away from my village at the age of ten, to escape being tortured by my family members. I was living in the Naupool slum when it was evacuated and demolished along with the slum at Shantivan. Then I came to the shelter. Kalim who owns a dhaba near Urdu Park moved here with us from the slum. He knows most of us. He provides food to many people who live here, and he is popular with the Biharis. Most of the time I have dal-and-rice from Kalim, sometimes fish curry-and-rice. There are also other local dhabas, and Bangali ka Hotel, the dhaba at one end of Meena Bazaar, is famous for fish-and-rice. Many Bengali homeless, daily-wage workers and travellers stop there to eat his fish-and-rice, but I hardly ever buy that as each plate costs thirty rupees" (*Axial Margins* report 2019).

Vidhi, 17, a member of Khirkee Collective, remarks: "Earlier, when my friends and I wanted to visit the mall opposite Khirki/Hauz Rani, we generally went past the Khoj studio. I was nervous and uncomfortable walking there, especially if I had to walk alone, as that particular lane was always full of men. Sometimes they surrounded me, at times they were drunk. I used to ask

my friends to come with me when I had to buy meat from a shop in that same lane. If I was by myself I walked so fast that I didn't even notice what shops I was passing, other than the one selling Chinese food, the chicken shop, and the barbershop with a large mirror. I only used that route because it was a shortcut to the main road, across which is the mall. But after joining the project *Mobile Mohalla* and doing creative work with the group for the past few years, I and my friends have learnt to negotiate the lanes and the people here. We stood in public and painted murals on the locality wall, and we got to know people who have been here for a long time – for instance Jha-ji the tea-stall owner, KT-ji the barber, Raju-ji the cobbler. The lanes have become so familiar that I can even walk alone, which I do. And I am not scared now when men surround me. I ignore the drunks completely. The people in the lanes know me and I know them too" (www.mulaqat.net).

After a day spent cooking in the small community kitchen in Khirki, the women collaborators shared their experiences of arriving in India as refugees and their initial struggles to adjust to radically different material conditions, to an alien cultural ethos, and unknown foods. Mari, 35, recalls: "When I came to Delhi from Kabul with my six children, everything was unfamiliar, from food to drinking water. For the first two months I only made *bolani* (flatbread stuffed with mashed potato) and *rajma* (red beans) for my family. We did not eat meat or chicken as I didn't know the shops here. I made inquiries in the market and learned that meat was not available in our area, but after talking to local people I came to know about Hauz Rani, a Muslim neighbourhood adjacent to Khirki. In Hauz Rani I found *halal* butcher shops, but they mainly sold buffalo meat, whereas in Afghanistan we normally eat goat and lamb meat" (*Khanapados*, 2018).

Throughout, my practice has provided opportunities to reflect on Kwon's identification of two opposite trajectories relating to the "site" as a core variable of contemporary SEA praxis:

First: The "yoking together" of the "myth of the artist as a privileged source of originality" with the "customary belief in places as ready reservoirs of unique identity". Site-specific art reworks traditional aesthetic values such as originality, authenticity and singularity – these values are transposed from the artwork to the site, "reinforcing a general cultural valorisation of places as the locus of authentic experience and coherent sense of historical and personal identity" (Kwon 1997, 104, 106).

Second: "Sites" are undergoing various modes of "deterritorialisation" in alignment with the ethos of globalisation and its schema of life as "a network of unanchored flows". The specific relationship between the artwork and the generative site "is not based on physical permanence", and this produces "liberatory effects" – multiple allegiances and meanings, fluid notions of subjectivity, identity and spatiality, the dismantling of traditional orthodoxies, the

manifestation and embedment of difference (Kwon 1997, 108, 109). Aesthetic and art-historical concerns are treated as secondary issues, and cultural production tends to demonstrate a characteristic “dematerialisation” and “deaestheticisation” – i.e., the “work” of art “no longer seeks to be a noun/object but a verb/process, provoking the viewer’s critical (not just physical) acuity regarding the ideological conditions of the viewing”. The artwork may rest on aesthetic strategies that are “aggressively anti-visual” (informational, textual, expository, didactic), or on aesthetic strategies that are “altogether” immaterial/ephemeral (“gestures, events or performances”). Given that SEA practitioners would inevitably renounce “the nostalgic notions of a site as being essentially bound to the physical and empirical realities of a place”, we need to scrutinize the belief “that a particular site/place exists with its identity-giving or identifying properties always and already prior to what new cultural forms might be introduced to it or emerge from it” (Kwon 1997, 91, 108).

C. The Politics of Socially Engaged Aesthetics

The concept of aesthetics in my SEA projects has emerged from the participants’ relationship to their social space in their daily lives. The ‘everyday’ as an aesthetic mode pushes back against canonised notions of what constitutes appropriate subject matter for ‘art’. The ‘everyday’ is the ground of our material awareness, holding us and flowing through us; it is what we know and where we live. Flexible, non-purposive, intangible, insignificant, ignored, overlooked, neglected, obscure, the many-faceted ‘everyday’ is so customary that it is experienced as a reflex and escapes further scrutiny. However, our everyday reality in fact manifests through an oscillating dialectic of the familiar and the strange, the habitual and the exceptional, the banal and the special, the dull and the vibrant, the numbing and the stimulating, the iconoclastic and the traditional. These are not oppositional energies but complementary ones – intersecting coordinates on the axes of time and space within our daily experience.

When project participants creatively self-represent/represent their group identities in different media forms, the aesthetics are determined through objects that the participants see or utilise as part of their own lives. For example, the group of domestic and international migrant women who constitute the *Museum of Food* project in Khirki/Hauz Rani depict the vessels and cooking tools that they have obtained from the local market, or in some cases carried from their home countries. There is no idealisation or nostalgic retrieval, no attempt to inscribe ‘authentic’ cultural signifiers indicating their places of origin (Afghanistan, Somalia, Congo, Iraq, Bihar, Nepal, etc.); instead, the emphasis is on rendering facets of their real, present, condition of

dislocation, exile and arduous, precarious resettlement. Similarly, in the project *Axial Margin/Urdu Park*, participants collaboratively created a map of the locality with acrylic paints on a single canvas, a unique form of existential cartography. None of the participants had any training in art. Each woman also painted their personal visions of Meena Bazaar on individual canvases, depicting the shops and lanes, and the objects sold there. The colours and forms in the artwork arise completely from the participants' 'everyday' experience and intuition.

Kester valorizes SEA's commitment "to the forms of insight that are generated through processes of social interaction and intersubjective exchange, grounded in the context of resistance" (Kester, Krenn, 2013). With regard to the way relational practices reconfigure the tricky issue of aesthetic autonomy within SEA, he identifies two levels of dialogic collaboration. The first is the "symbolic level" wherein the artist "comes up with a concept or an idea that requires them to assemble the bodies of people who play some symbolic role or 'participate' in some nominal way, acting out a prescribed script or set of movements. The bandwidth of that engagement is pretty narrow. This involves a kind of directorial notion of participation in which the artist remains the primary locus of creative agency". The second is the "structural/organic level" wherein the artist "meaningfully surrenders some authorial autonomy to collaborators... It's not a question of giving up all creative agency as an artist, simply of seeing the faculty of creative agency itself as a contingent factor in the work, and making the process of exchange an integral part of the creative practice" (ibid.). Socially engaged artists who retain their aesthetic autonomy to a significant degree may view this choice "as a way to open a space within hegemonic cultures in which asking certain kinds of critical questions is very difficult, because the roles of those who speak and those who are spoken for are predetermined" (ibid.).

Discussing the complexities of shaping the SEA research narrative that 'gives voice' to inhabitants of particular sites, Bourgault points to "a real anxiety" vis-à-vis the ethics of representation; this anxiety becomes particularly acute when writing about disenfranchised subjects. Moreover, within the ethos of quiet activism, "strategically devised and supported through affect", the true value of fieldwork is experienced "in the embodied encounter and not in its written analysis" (Bourgault 2022, 109, 111). She notes that the "crisis of representation" can be experienced in other ways as well – for instance, in the case of artist Rick Lowe's ongoing, self-sustaining community-based initiative Project Row Houses that involved the restoration/redevelopment of a section of a blighted African-American neighbourhood in Houston. "Students visiting his studio remarked that his paintings provided a valid reflection of what was happening in the community, but 'it was not what the community needed'"; this response "triggered for Lowe a definitive conscientization" and a powerful push for more critical relevance within his long-term civic engagement (ibid., 112).

Discussing the “crisis of representation” that is a focus of cultural studies, Rutten et al note that cultural memory is always inscribed through a mode of either “delegation” or “description”. The former pivots around who has the right to represent whom, in cases when a limited number of representatives decide for and speak for an entire group. The latter pivots around how different cultural and social groups are portrayed across cultural and social discourses and images. “Those who are delegated to speak and act in the name of another... govern, in a way, the process of presentation and description of the other” (Rutten et al 2013, 465-66).

The authors then raise what is perhaps the most significant issue vis-a-vis community-based, participatory, dialogic SEA projects: *Is the artist wanted there, and by whom?* Their conclusion: “Every artist (and anthropologist) should be required to answer this question in depth before launching into what threatens to be intrusive or invasive projects (often called interventions)” (Rutten et al 2013, 462, 463-64).

D. Relationship between Aesthetics and Ethics in Collaborative Art.

SEA ethics and aesthetics are connected through the principle of inclusion. SEA ethics rest on principles of equal participation and acceptance of a multiplicity of voices. This acceptance brings in cultural and personal diversity, and a spectrum of ideas and images that facilitate multiple forms of aesthetics. An artist’s role is to assimilate these diversities and create the conditions that foster inclusive aesthetics. These aesthetics may or may not subscribe to existing notions of aesthetics, but rather give rise to a completely new form of aesthetics, embedded in, emerging from and evolving through their specific location, rather than from an abstract universal template. The aesthetics of each project vary according to the nature of the social/material space, the nature of the community inhabiting/using that space, and the nature of the collaborative work by project participants. Aesthetics are determined by the skills, knowledge/s, desires and capacities they bring to collective creative work.

This obviously creates the possibility of diversity in aesthetics. Each of the sites creates unique kind of aesthetics, which cannot be replicated or repeated in some other sites. The wall paintings in the project *Mobile Mohalla* project, wall painting in the *Park* project and the paintings in the *Axial Margin / Urdu Park* project differ extensively in terms of both process and product.

The aesthetics of *Nalpar* are distinctive and unique, drawing upon specific tribal iconography that infuses the site with cultural meaning in a complete way. The artistic process of collective map-making in Ala Plástica’s projects and the *Park Fiction* project are highly participatory,

involving a large group of civic actors and a multifaceted planning and implementation procedure based upon collective enunciation of a collective vision.

For Kester, the 'meaning' of a given work of littoral art "is not centered in the physical locus of the object, or in the imaginative capacity of the single viewer, but is disseminated through a "spatio-temporal" register in which "the work 'means' differently in different locations and times, as opposed to the immanence that is characteristic of modernist formalism". Since the littoral artwork interacts with and draws upon diverse other discursive trajectories ("existing belief systems, ideologies, the psychological make-up of particular viewers or participants, etc.") it produces multiple levels of information; this pluralistic dimension means that there is no single 'work' to be judged (Kester 1999/2000, 4).

Bourgault suggests that the transdisciplinary demands of SEA projects compel the researcher to adapt the research ethic accordingly. Just as she has multiple "intersectional" identities (visual artist/art educator/community worker), so do the project participants (self-taught artists/community members/homeless or house-insecure citizens/low-income urban dwellers); "All these identifiers, and the many others related to living, underline the entanglements and oscillating positions" that mark the group and individual experience (ibid., 104). While scrutinising the level of artist visibility, the subject positions of artist and participants, and the "inconspicuous agency of quiet activism that offers potent alternative forms of resistance", Bourgault also observes that while participants may remain in their existent condition of precarity, "symbolic capital is typically accrued to artists engaged in these practices" (ibid., 102, 104, 105). Awareness of these power differentials is a crucial to the ethics of any art or other praxis with disenfranchised communities.

E. How Can Self-Sustaining Public Spaces Evolve through Collaborative Creative Processes?

Here, by the term 'self-sustaining' I refer not to resources required for the maintenance of such spaces, but to the idea of autonomous decision-making and capacity to ensure the satisfactory continuation of day-to-day activities within those spaces. In other words, after an initial phase of being administered by external agents/facilitators, the created space should ideally be able to 'run itself' (be managed by the community using it and benefiting from it). For this goal to be realized, the consensus should reach through inclusive, democratic, dialogic processes. We need to study how self-run space is shaped, and how to deal with material problems, outside interference and disruption as well as with undesirable/unforeseen aspirations (issues of control, privilege, access, authority) by the artist/researcher, by community insiders or external users of collaboratively created/produced space.

Theorising how/why the social turn in contemporary art “prompted an ethical turn in art criticism”, Bishop points out that artists now tend to be judged by methodology (“the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration”) and tend to be criticised for failing to fully ‘represent’ their subjects (“as if such a thing were possible”). Artists are also accused of egocentricity and imposing themselves upon participants if the “consensual collaboration” through which an SEA work should emerge is subjected to artist-imposed limits. This intellectual trend is influenced by identity politics – respect for the other, recognition of difference, protection of fundamental liberties – and risks transforming into “an inflexible mode of political correctness” (Bishop 2006). In this context, evaluating the work of art is a challenge because authorial intention “is privileged over a discussion of the work’s significance as a social and aesthetic form”, and collective and individual artists “are praised for their authorial renunciation” (ibid.). This is an important discursive criterion of SEA: that the artist should “renounce” authorial presence and instead prioritise and enable participant group expression/self-representation. This is linked to the idea that art “should extract itself from the useless domain of the aesthetic and be fused with social praxis” (ibid.).

Delineating the need for “an alternative to the well-intentioned homilies that today pass for critical discourse on social collaboration”, Bishop argues that in SEA, the production of dematerialised, anti-marked, politically engaged projects is part of the *political* task of “rehumanising”/“de-alienating” a society “numbed and fragmented by capitalism”; however, this has been conflated with/read as an equally important *artistic* gesture of resistance. Hence, no collaborative works of art can be unsuccessful, unresolved or uninteresting, because it is assumed that “all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond. However, it is crucial that we discuss, analyse and compare such work critically *as art*” (ibid.)

Kester focuses on the subject position of the contemporary littoral artist, and the “tendency of artists to identify themselves with a highly individualized concept of personal autonomy on the one hand, and with the capacity to transcend self through their mastery of a universal aesthetic knowledge on the other” (Kester 1999/2000, 5). This often results in a “problematic” failure to be critically self-reflective, combined with a sense of perceived authority, i.e., that he/she, conditioned to view him-herself as a “trans-cultural agent”, is entitled to “heedlessly transgress boundaries of class, race, and privilege, and to engage in discursive acts ‘on behalf of’ any number of disenfranchised ‘others’ [...] make contact with, and spiritually ‘improve’, the racial or class Other” (ibid.) This will always be a “persistent area of tension” as long as the littoral artist is more privileged than the ‘others’ he/she is attempting to creatively engage with. Littoral artists should work “to mitigate the effects of these associations as much as possible, and to open up and equalize the process of dialogical exchange [...] This is perhaps the most effective way in which to avoid the problems posed by the ‘salvage’ paradigm in which the

artist takes on the task of ‘improving’ the implicitly flawed subject” through various modes of representation (ibid., 7).

Kester warns against idealising the concept of community, since “any process of community formation is based on some degree of violence and negation (of those individual characteristics that are seen as extraneous to a given community's common values or ideals)”; and community is an ongoing/evolving process, rather than a fixed/stable entity (Kester 1999/2000, 7). But it is also necessary to question the belief that the artist, a “singularly privileged” figure, ‘can somehow ‘create’ community through a superior aesthetic power or relate to a given social or cultural collective from a transcendent or aesthetically autonomous position”. It is a challenge for a littoral artist to collaborate with a more “politically coherent” community/collectivity – one that has “through its own internal processes, achieved some degree of coherence, and a sense of its own political interests, and is able to enter into a discursive collaboration on more equal footing” (ibid.). This augments the potential of project self-sustainability, since the community will be less dependent on the artist’s presence and authority.

Kwon underscores SEA’s “salutary goal” of conceptualizing the “site” as “something more than a place – as repressed ethnic history, a political cause, a disenfranchised social group”; the site has been redefined / transformed from a material locus (“grounded, fixed, actual”) to a discursive mode (“ungrounded, fluid, virtual”). She also underscores the simultaneous redefinition / transformation in the role of the socially-engaged artist, who is no longer just a maker of aesthetic objects, but also functions as facilitator, educator, coordinator, bureaucrat, curator, arts manager, programme director, funds-raiser, archivist, etc. These “methodological and procedural changes” now enable artists to function as authority/authorial figures in their own right (Kwon 1997, 95, 96, 103). For Kwon it is crucial that site-specific practices, now increasingly mobile and shifting across the discursive spectrum, be imbued with the appropriate “relational sensibility” that enables the practitioner to address “the differences of adjacencies and distances *between* one thing, one person, one place, one thought, one fragment next to another, rather than invoking equivalences via one thing *after* another”. Only through this capacity for connection can the practitioner “turn local encounters into long-term commitments and transform passing intimacies into indelible, unretractable social marks” (ibid., 110).

5.7.3 New Knowledge Derived/Produced through my SEA Practice/Projects

Sustained over time, my SEA projects are marked by overlaps in praxis. The projects are interconnected, the mode of engagement is relational with all participants, and my interventions have a common substrate. My practice is apparently a continuous process, but within this I identify various forms of difference and enable their emergence. I do not view my project sites as research ‘fields’; I do not treat my project participants as research ‘subjects’, not treat their input/contribution as research ‘data’. I am not an ethnographer, but since my research is heavily gender-focused, I have used feminist standpoint epistemology as an ethnographic method across my projects. This decision has helped me to shift my role from artist-facilitator to creative catalyst-interlocutor, and helped me to strengthen the relational aspect of my practice within and across all my projects.

Some standpoint theorists posit that women are highly skilled in deploying “emotional acumen” – a “unique, intuitive ability to read and interpret pain and hidden emotions and understand the genesis of those emotions”. Both within and outside the home/family, emotional acumen has vital functions; it renders women especially sensitive and responsive to social injustice, and enables them to find ways to challenge and subvert the oppressive status quo (Brooks 2007, 59). They also posit that women from subordinate and oppressed groups cultivate “double consciousness” (also cultivated by these groups generally) – “a heightened awareness” not only of their own minority perspective but also of the lives of the oppressor/dominant; they have “a working active consciousness of both perspectives” (ibid., 63).

My experience with my project participants seems to prove what is posited by some standpoint theorists – that women are highly skilled in deploying “emotional acumen” – a “unique, intuitive ability to read and interpret pain and hidden emotions and understand the genesis of those emotions”. Both within and outside the home/family, emotional acumen has vital functions; it renders women especially sensitive and responsive to social injustice, and enables them to find ways to challenge and subvert the oppressive status quo (Brooks in Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007, 59). Standpoint theorists also posit that women from subordinate and oppressed groups cultivate “double consciousness” (also cultivated by members of these groups generally) – “a heightened awareness” not only of their own minority perspective but also of the lives of the oppressor/dominant; they have “a working active consciousness of both perspectives” (ibid., 63). Knowledge that arises from double consciousness serves both as a “space of resistance” and as a “site of radical possibility”; and the mode of double consciousness confers a kind of “epistemological privilege” from which new critical research questions may arise” (ibid., 66, 69).

While assimilating standpoint approaches that valorize the ‘situatedness’ of women’s knowledge (in this case, knowledge in relation to site-specific, gender-focused SEA), I also took into account Kwon’s perspective that site-specific art is becoming more and more “unhinged” from its embedment – in the literal sense of physical separation from the generative site, and in a metaphorical sense “as performed in the discursive mobilisation of the site in emergent forms of site-oriented art”. Since site-specific art is no longer restricted to “local, particular, unrepeatable pre-conditions”, it is difficult to assess the work in terms of emergent knowledge/s: “What is the commodity status of anti-commodities – immaterial, process oriented, ephemeral, performative events? What is the status of traditional aesthetic values – originality, authenticity, uniqueness – in site-specific art?” (Kwon 1997, 96).

My SEA practice is best understood when scrutinized through the mode of “diffractive analysis”, which draws upon optics and the phenomenology of perception to present as foundational the “personal, affective and embodied minutiae of lived experience as the place from which a new kind of theorisation can emerge” (Sayal-Bennett 2018). In contrast to reflection (or reflexivity) – a process that “holds objects of investigation at a distance”, “aims to find accurate representations, free of distortion, across different fields of study, and is concerned with the interaction of separate entities” – diffractive practices “aim to understand the world from within. They place the emphasis on material experience, which means understanding that material objects and encounters are produced and reshaped through ... their relation to one another” (ibid.).

As a form of critical engagement, diffractive analyses are involved in producing the world rather than offering a neutral and objective description of it. Thus, diffractive analysis accounts for the ongoing “entanglement” of researcher and researched, rather than considering the subject as “a singular point of empirical knowledge”, and the object of inquiry as passive and stable at an “objective” distance. As delineated by feminist scholar Donna Haraway (1988), knowledge is “situated”, “partial” and locatable” and contingent on the knower’s position, and “cannot be conceptually removed from an embodied point of view” (Sayal- Bennett, 2018). Situated knowledge is specific to a given situation, and in the context of arts research, is invested in “the agency of materiality and the epistemological potential of the arts, namely their role in generating rather than merely illustrating theory” (ibid.).

Diffractive analysis shifts the customary focus from the observation of *differences* between material objects and processes, to the *effects* created by these differences. This is best illustrated through the scientific definition of diffraction. When waves encounter an obstacle and overlap at the same point in space, “their amplitudes combine to form a composite wave. The resultant wave is a sum of the effects of each individual component wave. When the

individual waves interfere with each other they produce a diffraction pattern. This way of combining effects is called superposition” (Sayal-Bennett, 2018).

Such descriptions accurately describe the overlap/elision/fusion of core SEA variables – site-specificity, collaboration/participation, direct engagement, dialogic aesthetics, relational practice, polyphony, pluralism, community-building, self-expression, self-representation, and (quiet) activism – within each of my projects, as well as between the projects, taken together as a creative and social unit that I experience as ‘superimposed’ upon each other in terms of trajectory, methodology and production.

In terms of my own methodology, I am aware that while standpoint theory is critiqued as being essentialist, since women inhabit multiple, contradictory, heterogeneous realities, it has always oriented itself towards active community building through constructing space for dialogue from different perspectives, without repressing or compromising difference. It emphasises the importance of communication between and among different groups of women, which should not end with the achievement of a particular alliance or shared standpoint; it recommends that the process of “continuous listening and interchange” should be incorporated into women’s communities in order to strengthen them and enable them to evolve courses of action for social change (Brooks 2007, 70, 75, 76).

The most significant and strongest aspect of my SEA practice is sustained community engagement that involves daily presence, dialogue, creative collaborations and other exchanges. Each visit is a different experience and yields different ‘results’. It has often been the case that after carving out time in the day with difficulty due to my own family/household demands, I reach the site after an exhausting subway commute to then find that communication with the group is fractured and blocked. There might have been some conflict between the members for some immediate reason, or some intimidating legal issue, or government or staff interference at the site, or illness, or children’s issues, or (in the case of the community kitchen project) someone’s close relative dying / being killed by violent forces in a distant country to which the participant can never return. Fortunately these kinds of recurrent obstacles have never stopped the group from continuing to support each other, emotionally and creatively, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when field visits became very difficult due to infection surges, lockdowns and social distancing policies. Rather, the uncertainty, unpredictability, losses and hardships are what binds the group together and binds me to them, a relationship of closeness and attachment that has kept the groups functioning in terms of creative output, despite funding for the projects coming to an end. We are all concerned about / feel responsible for each other’s well-being.

Thus, while the projects are time-bound, my affect-based 'fieldwork' and relational practices persist beyond the project frames and durations. I agree with Kester that the SEA practitioner's identity is "tested and transformed" by this "intersubjective experience", and that it is continually necessary to nourish and uphold "some concept of an intersubjective common ground" that would enable the emergence of shared discourse, as well as enable the practitioner to negotiate the difference between him/herself and "co-participants". He also warns that empathy, so central to SEA relational practices, may itself be vulnerable to "a kind of ethical/ epistemological abuse" – i.e., when "the very act of empathetic identification is used to negate the specific identity of the other subject" (Kester 1999/2000, 6). The fact is that despite our most democratic impulses and faith in equality as a human right and social good, it "is simply not the case that 'we' are all 'the same' – we are differentially positioned relative to material, cultural, and economic interests", and empathy is the unquantifiable mode through which we bridge these quantifiable divisions. Kester also warns that empathy can become "an excuse to deny our own privilege and the real differences between ourselves and others, and to subject them instead to an instrumentalizing aestheticization... The empathized subject is not expected to answer back, only to bear the marks of their suffering and to thereby elicit our emotive identification" (ibid.).

Bishop, however, posits that within the frame of SEA, intersubjective relations should not be seen an end in themselves but should be viewed as a way to reveal and understand more complex concerns about the core concerns of socially engaged practice – aesthetic pleasure, visibility, community engagement/patterns of interaction (Bishop 2006). She notes that relational art which "privileges intersubjective relations over detached opticality" is a social form "capable of producing positive human relationships", hence is automatically assumed to be "political in implication and emancipatory in effect" (Bishop 2004, 61, 62). In the context of aesthetic judgements being equated with ethicopolitical judgements of the relationships produced by works of art, Bishop asks: "But how do we measure or compare these relationships? The *quality* of the relationships in relational aesthetics is never examined or called into question. . . If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question is to ask what *types* of relations are being produced, and why?" (ibid., 65). She values SEA works that demonstrate "relational antagonism" – i.e., relationships that are "marked by unease and discomfort rather than belonging, because the work acknowledges the impossibility of a 'microtopia' and instead *sustains* a tension among viewers, participants and context" (ibid., 70). For Bishop, the integrity of relationally antagonistic work rests in the fact that it does not offer "togetherness" or an experience of "transcendent human empathy that smooths over [the] friction, awkwardness and discomfort" of "nonidentification with the other". Rather, relational art expresses not the fictitious whole subject of harmonious community, but

a fractured self of partial identifications open to constant flux. The model of artistic experience provided by relational art is “more adequate to the divided and incomplete subject of today”; and relational antagonism is predicated “not on social harmony but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony” (ibid.).

Miller advises us to put aside “rather sterile definitional issues” and to instead focus on “the more interesting difficulty of evaluating relational art” (Miller 2016, 169). From his perspective, the normative critique of relational art, as enunciated by Bishop, “operates on the common-sense assumption that not all relations are worth celebrating, aesthetically or otherwise” – relationality cannot be praised as a good in itself, “given that exploitation, humiliation and physical or psychological abuse are also human relations, but presumably not the sort that relational artists want to endorse or enable” (ibid., 170). The ethical and the aesthetic cannot be collapsed under the rubric ‘relational art’; the qualitative nature of the relationship is central to the aesthetic nature of the work, as are the identities of those who participate in the making, experiencing and sharing of the work.

Miller sees Bishop’s view as a framing of relational aesthetics “as the aesthetic equivalent of a regressive, consensus-based politics” (Miller 2016, 173). Difference (i.e., lack of consensus), is characteristic of any society that is multicultural and values pluralism; and radical democracy, that accommodates the potent energies of difference, aims to “embrace and promote this tension as a productive political force that forecloses any possibility of a rational, defining consensus, an inclusive, homogenous ‘we’” (ibid.). Translating this “progressivism” from the political to the aesthetic, Bishop identifies relational antagonism, “characterised by relations of dissent, friction, unease, instability, confrontation and the like”, as the “aesthetic equivalent to the politics of antagonism” – the kind of politics necessary for democratic society, “in which relations of conflict are sustained, not erased” (ibid., 174).

Miller then invokes the counter-argument made by Mouffe (2005) who differentiates between the mode of antagonism (“the uncritical valuation of confrontation for its own sake”) and what she terms “agonism”, that emphasises “the importance of disagreement and difference as democratically productive forms of social engagement” (Miller 2016, 174). Agonism does not project a rational solution to the “we/them relation” between conflicting parties, but does recognise the legitimacy of mutual opposition/mutually opposing claims. Transferring this political understanding to the context of aesthetic practice, Mouffe states that agonistic critical art, like the antagonistic, “foments dissent and makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate”; however, such art does not consist only “in manifestations of refusal” (ibid.). She identifies the danger of critical art not sufficiently “proposing new modes of coexistence, of contributing to the construction of new forms of collective identity”, if

antagonistic/agonistic relations are not skilfully navigated: “The radical perspective may actually be trapped within a very deterministic framework according to which the negative gesture is, in itself, enough to bring about the emergence of a new form of subjectivity; as if this subjectivity was already latent, ready to emerge as soon as the weight of the dominant ideology was lifted. Such a conception is... completely anti-political” (ibid.)

Miller takes heed of Mouffe’s warning – he asserts that while the politics of antagonism “ultimately aims at a more robust ideal of democratic relations” through the embedment of multiple modalities of difference, critical art can and should serve as a “productive impetus” towards this positive political goal. Critical art should not be “a bleak testimony to the fact that *that’s the way the world is*”; nor should it be a nihilistic declaration of “art’s socio-political impotence”; nor a fatalistic acknowledgement of the status quo/impossibility of social change” (Miller 2016, 175). Critical art should not stop once it has identified social wrongs, but rather should push further to try and transform those inequalities and injustices. Miller returns to his key question: “How are we to evaluate the mimetic reproduction of exploitative relations as an aesthetic relation? ... Does aesthetic merit arise from antagonistic character alone?” and concludes, “It cannot be the antagonistic gesture *per se* that counts as an aesthetic virtue – it matters *what kind* of antagonism it entails” (ibid., 176, 177).

I have never held romantic notions about SEA and its activist potential, about sites, about communities, about the multiple modes of engagement arising from and sustained through committed practice. My project participants are ‘divided and incomplete’ subjects, as am I. Collaborative work with them at different project sites as well as off-site has been rewarding, uplifting, affirming, enriching, but it has also naturally involved intra-group tensions, challenges, friction and conflict – varied subtle and overt ‘relational antagonisms’ that I have tried to resolve in dialogue with the groups to the best of my ability, and as sensitively as possible.

This engagement mandates much ‘emotional labour’ in the field, and also compels me continually scrutinise my own privileges – personal autonomy, mobility, higher education, socio-economic resources, modes of access, etc. Even prior to all these is the fact of having a stable home, a privilege that most of us take for granted but that assumes incredible significance when one is doing any kind of cultural work with people who have lost their homes, families, communities and countries, under terrifying, in some cases genocidal, circumstances, and are struggling with the trauma of exile, displacement, impoverishment, precarious refugee status and equally precarious conditions for material survival.

I do not personally identify as an ‘activist’, but as an artist, even while I acknowledge that my SEA projects, oriented towards empowering disenfranchised groups through collaborative

creative cultural work, do have an activist tenor and trajectory. However, I keep my ‘activism’ consciously ‘quiet’ for two reasons:

First: Given their backgrounds, the international migrants do not want to talk about their past – it is emotionally too difficult; and it may endanger their relatives in conflict zones of Africa, Afghanistan and the Middle East that these migrants have fled. I respect their silence, and whatever I do know of their histories, shared with me over the years as we built up mutual trust, remains absolutely confidential. India has no official policy of rehabilitation/resettlement vis-à-vis these particular groups of refugees and shows no sign of moving in that direction – in contrast to its policy of offering citizenship to Tibetan refugees, who followed the Dalai Lama into exile in India when China occupied Tibet in 1949-50 and who continue to escape into India today. In 2017 citizenship laws were changed, giving Tibetans born in India between 1950 and 1987 the choice to legally become ‘Indian’, and thus acquire all the rights, entitlements and protections bestowed by national identity documents; but this choice, while obviously beneficial to second- and third-generation refugees, is a highly charged issue that divides the larger community. A very different politics is in play vis-à-vis refugees who have arrived/ are arriving in India after fleeing terrorism, jihad, civil war, ethnic purges, militancy, state-sponsored slaughter and other forms of catastrophic violence in other parts of the world. They have to manage as best they can in India, with the limited help of UN agencies, negotiating an ambiguous, constrictive (il)legal status; those who are eligible for asylum/resettlement in Western countries submit their documents, and with luck, and a strong case, they sometimes succeed. In addition, a prevalent heuristic of nativism and the current populist ethos of politically-fuelled Islamophobia adds to the existent identity politics, xenophobia, misogyny, reflexive suspicion and myriad forms of overt/covert discrimination in these migrants’ local contexts, and adds to the migrants’ multiple anxieties about the present and the future, especially with regard to their children. I am constantly vigilant about the risk of participant exposure, and in order to protect their identities, and to alleviate their anxieties, their faces are never revealed in project images; their names are changed in project narratives; and I ensure that these conditions are respected in their encounters with journalists, bloggers and other people interested in the project.

Second: My primary focus is on the polyphonic *art* produced by the project participants. They work freely, within a pluralistic, inclusive collaborative ethos – there is no socio-political agenda, no activist manifesto, no singular ideology undergirding, informing or infusing my creative and research work. As clarified in the thesis abstract and Chapter One, my practice-led research aligns with Haseman’s concept of “performative research”, wherein the research findings are presented in the language of symbols, and thus not bound by the linear or sequential constraints of numeric or discursive writing (Haseman 2006, 1, 5). Performative

research deploys “symbolic data in the material forms of practice” – images, music, sound, forms of live action, digital code, etc. While all these forms are indeed ‘texts’ in the objective sense that any communicative object or discourse is a text, they should, however, be primarily understood as “speech acts” – “utterances that accomplish by their very enunciation and action that generates effects” (ibid., 6). In this multi-method paradigm, “the symbolic data works performatively. It not only expresses the research, but in that expression becomes the research itself” (ibid.). Any activist underpinnings in my SEA projects are a by-product – not inconsequential, yet not central to my concerns – and thus will always be ‘quiet’, in the sense of being subsidiary, tangential, peripheral to what has always compelled me: subjectivity ‘performed’ through the symbolic language of forms.

5.7.4 Discursive ‘Entanglements’ and ‘Indeterminacies’

I undertook this thesis with the aim of contributing to the study of SEA in India, where the discourse is still nascent, barely featured within mainstream art critique, and more or less absent in art pedagogy. From my perspective, it is imperative and urgent that SEA be included in arts discourses, as well as included in social science and research discourses since SEA is thoroughly cross-disciplinary and draws on methodologies from various fields. As evident from this section, the internal discursive relationships between various important critiques within existent global SEA discourse also need to be continually reviewed and debated, as SEA scholars seem unable to come to a consensus vis-à-vis important themes.

Bourgault stresses the importance of discursive clarity with regard to the “obfuscated ontological roots” and “relational eco-systems” of “boundary crossing” work – SEA production resting on and reiterating partnerships, solidarities, mobilisations, collaborations – that exhibits the “transpollination of disciplines” (Bourgault 2022, 113, 114). She asks whether such mutuality influences the “authenticity and validity” of SEA projects, and how it might “inform their state of transgression”; and she also raises the fascinating question of what happens to the artist’s authorship and presence in boundary-crossing work – does a focus abstract/absent itself from one “ontological landscape” in order to manifest and “gain traction” elsewhere? She warns that trying to quantify the “efficacy” of SEA practice “would reduce it to rubrics and metrics, disregarding the intangibles of mood, affect and agency that attend the complexity of social transformation” in boundary-crossing projects. By contrast, “hybridising within and between modes of meaning, new materialist conceptualisations” allow us “to expand the circle of affect and imagine collaboration and social practices in terms of a dynamic assemblage of multiple agencies and processes” (ibid., 116, 117).

For Sayal-Bennett, art history and art practice are “distinct investigative processes”, with distinct methodologies. A major problem in traditional art-historical theory and critique is that its mode of representational analysis detaches the discussion of an artwork from discussion of its methods of production. “Representational analyses remain outside of creative processes by making sense of them purely on the basis of their outcomes, disconnecting the meaning of the artwork from the way in which it was created”; this mode of theorisation excludes/effaces significant dimensions of both practice and practitioners. “Such forms of analysis substitute a representation for an action.” It is necessary to investigate what is silenced by standard art-historical methods, and to excavate the “possible realities” that are obscured through its “insistence on the representational”; we also need to craft art-historical critique differently through reintegrating “embodiment and materiality” into the research process. In this regard, SEA has indeed reinvigorated the discourse.

Appadurai focuses on the need for greater awareness of meta-textual/discursive relationships within qualitative social science research. He points to the dilemma of researchers having to negotiate a “curious double ventriloquism” in their fieldwork: “While one part of our tradition [ethnography] dictates that we be the transparent medium for the voices of those we encounter in the field, that we speak from the native point of view, it is equally true that we find in what we hear some of what we have been taught to expect by our own training. Thus our informants are often made to speak for us” (Appadurai 1988, 16). The problem of voice, thus, is both a problem of multiplicity and a problem of representation: “How many voices are concealed beneath the generalisations of reported speech in much ethnography?... How can we construct... a dialogue that captures the encounter of our own many voices with the voices we hear and purport to represent?” The researcher/artist’s dialogue with the researched is not just speech navigated/compiled in the field, between self and other, “but it is also a dialogue over time between anthropological texts and their ever-changing readings” (ibid., 16, 17). For Appadurai, the inscriptions of place and voice in ethnographic texts are ultimately an expression of discursive power; and until we conduct “even-handed discussions of the politics of the spatial migration of images and concepts”, the Euro-American panopticon will remain dominant. Without this “even-handed” approach, “zones of cultural invisibility” are “doomed to remain inaudible” in qualitative social science research – one example being immigrant/refugee voices that are “caught in mid-air, trapeze artists swinging between national spaces” (ibid., 19, 20).

Remarking on the re-emergence of the artist “as the progenitor of meaning”, Kwon offers an unsparing critique of the mode of itinerancy that functions as a pivot of contemporary SEA praxis. Echoing Foster (1995), she asserts that “the intricate orchestration of literal and discursive sites that make up a nomadic narrative *requires* the artist as a narrator-protagonist”,

and that this renewed emphasis on the individual creator “leads to a hermetic implosion of (auto)biographical and subjectivist indulgences”, with “myopic narcissism... misrepresented as self-reflexivity” (Kwon 1997, 103, 104). There are other dangers in continually projecting the reworking of personal identity and relationship to place/site/community as “discursive fictions” and as “polymorphous critical plays on fixed generalities and stereotypes in the end may be a delusional alibi for short attention spans, reinforcing the ideology of the new – a temporary anecdote for the anxiety of boredom” (ibid.). Moreover, “the paradigm of nomadic selves and sites may be a glamorization of the trickster ethos that is in fact a reprisal of the ideology of ‘freedom of choice’ – the choice to forget, the choice to reinvent, the choice to fictionalise, the choice to ‘belong’, anywhere, everywhere, and nowhere. This choice, of course, does not belong to everyone equally” (ibid., 109). The understanding that identity and difference are culturally constructed should always take into account that “the ability to deploy multiple, fluid identities in and of itself is a privilege of mobilisation that has a specific relationship to power” (ibid.).

Responding to the issue that today, via technologically enabled, multivocal, pluralistic arts discourses, the processes of collectivity and collaboration have *themselves* become desired commodities, with “the desire for community affect” underpinning “all the Facebook subcultures” consumed globally and supported by the “fake” image of “people sharing the affect of a community experience”, Bishop remarks that many artists still subscribe to the earlier paradigm “of false consciousness versus authentic participation” (Riff et al, 2010). For Bishop, mediation does not necessarily compromise authenticity, and she considers the most interesting SEA projects to be those “that take the binaries of mediated and spontaneous, false and genuine and do something interesting with these paradoxes, to show that participation doesn't only connote the desire for collective experience” (ibid.). Today, participation “is not the radical alternative to privatised individualism that it once was”; contemporary art can be orchestrated by a collective authorship; and while there is “a lot of rhetoric about equal collaboration... the work of art as we understand it today always comes back to the sovereign space of the artist who initiates and creates it. This is true even with collectives, most of whom are led by one or two central thinkers”; even community art, often believed to be the “most de-hierarchised and de-authored” form of collective practice, “depends on the characteristic leadership of its main instigator” (ibid.). Bishop is convinced that while art can “lend its competencies to social movements”, the latter themselves do not originate in art. Moreover, art is “in fact incredibly vague when it comes to advocating change, even with groups that call themselves ‘activists’” (ibid.).

I conclude my analysis on a metaphorical note. During the years of my art practice for this thesis, I undertook innumerable journeys to the disparate sites of my projects via the Delhi metro subway system. The metro is an indispensable and the most economical means of local public transport, and its ten lines, above ground and below, traverse huge distances from end to end of the sprawling city and into bordering states, carrying up to six million passengers daily. As material sites, the metro stations/trains literally and potentially manifest all the core variables of SEA – community, public space, sociality, dialogue, participation, collective effort, collaboration, networks, exchange, engagement, performance, articulation, representation, relationship, etc. On my metro journeys into the ‘field’, I frequently found myself reflecting on my own meta-textual itinerancy: my journeys between the different kinds of migrants who were my project participants. I myself had become a kind of discursive migrant, moving between different spaces and voices and groupings and identities; moving between different SEA theorists; moving between my projects as discrete units across my research spectrum; moving between my roles within each project; and finally, completing the migration from the first chapter of my thesis to this final one.

At each metro station, as the train pulls in and slows to a halt, a male and female automated voice announce the name of the station in Hindi and English, and remind commuters to step off and step on carefully, to ‘mind the gap’ between the edge of the station platform and the edge of the carriage. This repeated robotic injunction provoked me to reflect on the challenges of research/writing of the research narrative via the metaphor of the ‘gap’ – between objectivity and subjectivity, between *ethnos* and *graphos*, between self and other, private and public, fixity and flexibility, theory and practice, question and answer, problem and solution, fact and fiction, reality and illusion, silence and speech... etc. I have found that as a qualitative researcher I must indeed always ‘mind the gap’, be continuously aware, vigilant and mindful with regard to the subtle interstices, cracks, crevices, splits, borders, boundaries, fringes, seams and joints of the research experience – for it is in the fissures and fringes, just as much as anywhere else, that authentic, empathetic, inclusive, socially engaged understanding and art may take root and evolve.

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Appendix 1

Select International Socially Engaged Art Projects, (1990-2021)

1.1 Introduction

The chapter examines select international Socially Engaged Art Projects undertaken by different artist/ collectives between 1990 and 2021.

In Chapters Three and Four my research focused on the SEA projects of seven artists from India and discussed the upsurge of interest in new modes of 'participatory' art practices from the 1990s onwards, which may be attributed to contemporary artists choosing direct engagement, often undertaken as an act of sociopolitical resistance, with specific social and cultural systems. This chapter presents six international SEA projects that follow similar trajectories of direct site-specific engagement and collaborative methodologies, and each shaping local meta-narratives of resistance.

These six projects are sited in different locations of South Asia and South-east Asia (Pakistan, Thailand), Latin America (Argentina, Brazil) and Europe (Germany, Greece). Some of these projects are directed towards creating or reclaiming spaces for certain communities, while other projects aim to build and transform community relations by positioning art interventions as social practice. Each project is briefly contextualised against the prevalent socio-political conditions of the country where it is situated.

I first focus on two SEA projects in Asia: *Girls at Dhabas* (2015 – the present, Karachi, Pakistan) and *Womanifesto – An International Exchange* (1997 – the present, Bangkok, Thailand).

Girls at Dhabas is a project by a feminist collective that focuses on increasing women's visibility in traditionally male-dominated public spaces such as *dhabas* (small roadside eateries, ubiquitous in the subcontinent) that are gradually disappearing in globalised metro cities. *Womanifesto* is a platform that invites women artists from across the world to engage in conversations on feminist thinking and practices.

Both projects create interventions enabling women to express their personal and collective aspirations and claim greater agency and mobility for themselves within male-dominated the public space of conservative societies.

I then discuss two SEA projects in Latin America and two in Europe:

Magdalena Project (1999-2009, Rio de la Plata, Argentina) and *Wasteland / Waste Land* (2008-2010, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil); *Park Fiction* (1997-2005, Hamburg, Germany) and *Victoria Square* (2017, Athens, Greece).

Magdalena Project is an environmental recuperation project by Ala Plástica, an NGO/collective working in Buenos Aires province that focuses on local and regional ecologies. It collaborates with other artist groups, scientists and specialists, conservationists and rural and riparian communities on crucial issues, such as exposing the damage caused by state-sponsored 'development' along the banks of the Rio de la Plata, a vast river-cum-estuary formed by the confluence of the Uruguay and Paraná rivers and emptying into the Atlantic Ocean. North of Buenos Aires, this labyrinthine delta is the entrance to a massive vast wetland system spreading into Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil.

Wasteland / Waste Land, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil is a project by artist Vik Muniz to create art from garbage in collaboration with the *catadores* (waste pickers/scavengers) toiling daily in the toxic environment of Jardim Gramacho, the world's largest landfill, located outside Rio de Janeiro. The project was filmed by filmmaker Lucie Walker over three years and made into *Waste Land*, an award-winning documentary.

Park Fiction is a socially engaged art project designed through collaborations between artists and local communities of the St Pauli area of Hamburg, along the shore of the river Elbe. The project emerged from the long-standing campaign against municipal plans to gentrify the area, dominated by Turkish residents, under the rubric of urban 'development'.

Victoria Square is a socially engaged art project by artists Rick Lowe and Maria Papadimitriou, which took the form of an evolving contemporary arts space in a once-elite neighbourhood in Athens now dominated by struggling Middle Eastern and African refugees and migrants who reached Greece after brutal exploitation by human traffickers and terrifying boat journeys across the Mediterranean.

The six projects discussed here centre around creating and re-claiming spaces for communities, particularly those occupying the margins, while others aim to build and transform community relations by positioning art intervention as social practice. The projects embody the core variables of SEA discourse – site-specificity, collaboration, dialogue, community voice and social objectives. I conclude the chapter with some general observations.

1.2. Select Socially Engaged Art Projects in Asia (1997-Present)

1.2.1. Overview

This section comprises my observations on two SEA projects in Asia: *Girls at Dhabas* (2015 – the present, Karachi, Pakistan) and *Womanifesto -- An International Exchange* (1997 – the present, Bangkok, Thailand). The contextual research for *Girls at Dhabas* is based on the video (Khatri 2017, 8:31), and the project's website (<https://girlsatdhabas.wordpress.com/>). My research on *Womanifesto* drew on the initiative's website (<http://www.womanifesto.com>) and 'Womanifesto: A Biennial Art Exchange in Thailand', 2019 by project co-founder Varsha Nair. Both projects focus on how women express their personal aspirations and claim agency for themselves in public spaces, especially within conservative societies where women are traditionally subject to insular patriarchal codes, are ascribed subordinate status and often endure draconian familial and social constraints on their personal freedoms.

1.2.2. *Girls at Dhabas* (2015 – Present, Karachi)

As in India, urban public spaces – government offices, streets, *dhabas*, markets, public transport – are dominated by men. Middle-class women use cars with male drivers, and it is common to see a woman escorted by male family members or acquaintances on the streets. Women moving around freely, spending time alone in public spaces and travelling on their own often invite rude glances, obscene or critical remarks and physical harassment, and are judged to have questionable morals. Sarwat Viqar in her article titled 'Women's public lives and sovereign arrangements in Karachi's inner city' published in 2018 supporting anthropologist Kamran Asdar Ali's observation that public spaces are not welcoming or hospitable to women, states that it is equally evident that the conditions enabling women's presence in public spaces are quite dissimilar to those enabling the presence of their male counterparts. Notions of masculinity (that women find threatening) are conflated with notions of public space (hence it too is associated with threat); gendered identities are performed by both men and women; and while women's labour is essential to the urban economy, their public presence 'is often made invisible through practices of surveillance and exclusion' (Viqar 2018, 418). There seems to be extreme freedom for men, though these spaces are closed off to men of certain backgrounds, such as those from low-income groups and who belong to an ethnic minority in the city (Viqar 2018, 420).

Cities in India and the global South have large numbers of in densely inhabited underprivileged settlements – complex social spaces that are illegal or quasi-legal, and are simultaneously

highly gendered, and multilayered with different classes, castes and religious communities living in tight proximity and struggling with poor infrastructure and municipal neglect (Baviskar 2006, 1, 2). Karachi is no different; as in Indian cities, public space is intensely male-dominated and women struggle with all kinds of overt and covert restrictions and cultural codes that restrict their agency and mobility. Women are constantly negotiating in and with public spaces and have to find a specific purpose to access them. Moreover, there is a sharp distinction between how women from elite backgrounds and those belonging to lower-income groups claim their space in these cities. A woman's presence in the public domain is contingent upon strict conditionality, which seeks to circumscribe the extent of the female presence in the public sphere (Viqar, 2018, 420).

Girls at Dhabas was founded by Sadia Khatri, a young Karachi-based journalist whose upbringing in a conservative middle-class household and restricted access to public spaces like the local dhaba motivated her towards feminist action (Shilpa 2020, 281-93). Khatri and other three young women started stepping out of the house after work to spend time at a local *dhaba* in a bid to shatter the cultural norms that govern the city's public spaces, and to experience new forms of personal pleasure and sociality, and the ownership of personal time. *Girls at Dhabas* started as a hashtag on social media [#genderandpublicspace] in 2015 and aimed to question the role of gender in determining access to public spaces (Khatri 2017, 0:36). Khatri (Figure 103,104) clicked and posted a photograph of herself at a dhaba to gauge people's reactions. While she received various responses, the hashtag slowly gained traction as several young women began to upload photographs of themselves in similar public spaces. The organic growth of the hashtag eventually led to the coming together of women, hitherto unknown to one-another, intrigued by the idea of spending time in public spaces without an errand to run or a specific purpose.



Figure 101:: *Girls at Dhaba, 2017*

Source: www.girlsatdhabas.blogspot.com

Traditionally, these public spaces are male-dominated, and most women associate them with a sense of personal fear. However, the girls who took part in the initiative wanted to explore the public space as a source of comfort through the innocuous act of spending time at local dhabas, places traditionally meant for male socialisation and recreation. This non-purposive movement, undertaken in order to relax and be comfortably social with female peers in public spaces, became a way for them to reclaim ownership of their time and pleasure while establishing a certain degree of disinhibition.

This idea gradually spread to other male-dominated public spaces. Women started organising cricket matches on the streets where usually only men were seen playing. Around the same time, an unfortunate incident occurred when a girl being harassed while biking in Lahore as discussed by Khatri in the video creative commons talk 2017. To protest this issue, the *Girls at Dhabas* group organised a cycle rally in Karachi and Lahore on 2 April 2016, with the slogan *cycle chalao, patriarchy dabao* / “ride a cycle, suppress patriarchy” (Khatri 2017, 8:42). This event (Figure 36) brought many young women together to participate in offline events as well – playing street cricket, organizing cycling rallies and running tea stalls (Phadke 2020, 6).



Figure 102: Cycle chalao, Girls at Dhaba, 2016

Source: www.girlsatbhabas.blogspot.com

The women who became a part of this group have stood in solidarity against other forms of gender violence such as street harassment; and their strong sense of sisterhood led them to devise the term *behenchara* / “sisterhood”, a spin on the colloquial Hindi/Urdu term *bhaichara* / “brotherhood” (Khatri, 2017 10:34).

Apart from hosting a podcast called ‘Behenchara Diaries’, (Figure 105) created by collective members Safieh Shah and Zehra Naqvi (Phadke 2020, 6), the project’s website has archived the documentation of a range of women-led sub-initiatives, such as mural painting, the creation of a ‘chai station’, a ‘journaling corner’, a ‘self-serving station’ and even a ‘cup-washing station’ (<https://girlsatdhabas.wordpress.com/category/behenchara/>). These interventions have furthered the project’s objectives and served as a locus to explore “behenchara” narratives and meta-histories in Karachi.



Figure 103: ‘Behenchara Diaries’, Girls at Dhaba, Karachi, Pakistan 2017

Source: www.girlsatbhabas.blogspot.com

Within a couple of years, the audacious initiative expanded beyond Karachi. Young women in other Pakistani cities too began participating actively in public spaces, inspired by *Girls at Dhabas* to viewing public spaces as sites of leisure, pleasure and autonomy rather than of threat, trauma and restriction. Through this radical shift in perspective, the public spaces that participants earlier visited only when accompanied by male friends and family members were transformed into hospitable nodes into which they now invited their male friends and relatives to socialise. The movement quickly spread, reaching wider circuits through posts and images circulated on social media [#FeministMapathon] (<https://girlsatdhabas.wordpress.com/feminist-mapathon/>). In a 2017 interview outside a Karachi *dhaba* for the digital initiative Creative Mornings, Khatri and collective members Natasha Ansari and Atiya Abbas agree that as activists they 'often miss out' on aspects of play and fun and humour when they get caught up in discussions of feminist theory, and that their interventions in public space are a more 'inclusive and accessible means' than academic jargon, with regard to raising feminist subjects for discussion (Khatri 2017, 18:11)

Girls at Dhabas eventually travelled to neighbouring India, inspiring women, particularly in the city of Bengaluru in south India, to reclaim public space through the simple act of lounging/loitering/non-purposive presence and movement, experiencing ease and agency in spaces traditionally hostile to and suspicious of unpredictable female presence. The project engages a community of young women who claim comfort in urban public spaces that traditionally had little room for them. Each 'gendered space' (Phadke 2011) transformed through emancipatory feminist intervention is itself is considered a social entity, as Kwon remarked, the site itself is considered a social entity, a "community", but not simply in terms of ecological or architectural design (Kwon2002, 95). The site for this project became a significant space for asserting social identity for young women.

1.2.3. WOMANIFESTO—An International Art Exchange (Thailand)

1997- Present

In Thailand, as in all of Asia, deep-seated, historically embedded patriarchal frameworks have ensured that women occupy a perennially subordinate status. After the 1932 Revolution, a bloodless coup that ended almost eight hundred years of monarchy in Thailand and established a national constitution and a democratic regime, there was a consequent rise in social awareness. The media, human rights organisations, social movements, etc., began pressing for amending the existing laws in favour of social justice, changes in social structures and more equality for women. These demands continued through political and military upheavals over the next few decades. In recent years increased socio-political conflict,

including strong student protests against both the monarchy and the army, has affected the lives and livelihoods of Thai women, who in general suffer invisibility, exclusion and lack of access. Women's organisations are trying to meet these challenges and are finding new ways to negotiate gender inequality (Buranajaroenkij 2017, 4-5).

Womanifesto was founded by Thai artists Nitaya Ueareeworakul and Varsha Nair, an Indian artist who moved to Thailand in 1995, to foster the voices of women artists from Thailand and its neighbouring countries. This collaborative multidisciplinary platform invites women artists from across the globe to build conversations and interventions based on feminist practices, and to address the issues of women's rights and gender equality. Through workshops, seminars, residencies, etc. and other events, the platform develops networks with participating artists, art students, and local urban and rural communities (Nair 2019, 141-71). The aim was to work autonomously without any pressure from funding bodies, thus retaining agency and autonomy with regard to realising its initiatives and exhibitions (Womanifesto, n.d).

Womanifesto first held its first public event in 1997, a series of large shows in independent arts spaces and organised large art events in independent art spaces (Figure 106). The exhibitions comprising installations, painting, sculpture and performances were showcased in Concrete House and Baan Chao Phraya Gallery in Bangkok. Resident artists opened their homes for visiting artists, and these domestic spaces then became a site for informal discussions and gatherings. The events created an opportunity for these women artists to meet and continue their conversations, share ideas, and decide how to execute plans while carrying out quotidian tasks like cooking (Womanifesto 1997).



Figure 104: Womanifesto first held its first public event in 1997

Source: <http://www.womanifesto.com/>

With confidence gathered from the success of Womanifesto I, Womanifesto II was organised in 1999 (Figure 107). The exhibitions grew in scope, were installed outdoors, and saw participation from many more artists, emerging women artists and fresh arts graduates from Thailand, and they expressed strong interest in participating in future events. The organisers received some support from the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA), which helped take the art projects into public spaces and connect them to a wider audience. With the support from BMA, a small green patch in the historic part of Bangkok, where locals usually jogged or did aerobics, was offered to Womanifesto for the event's outdoor installations. As a result, the participating artists who displayed their work here had an already available audience (Womanifesto 1999).

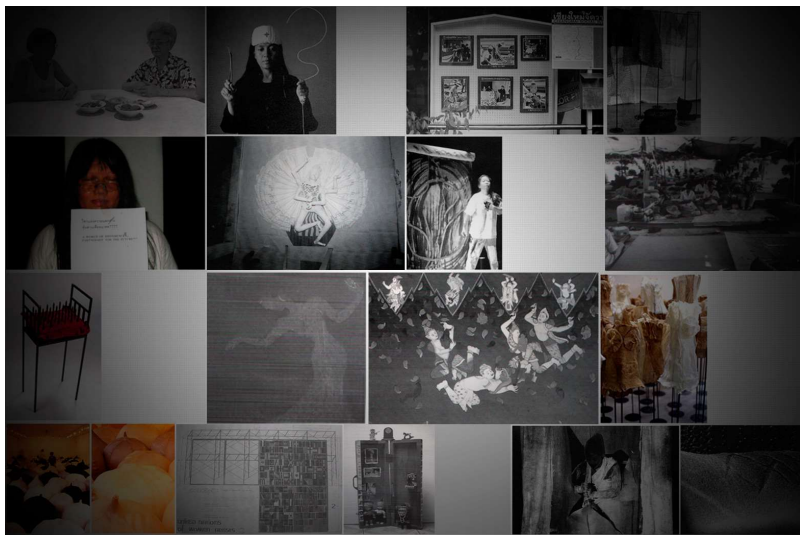


Figure 105: Womanifesto, 1999

Source: <http://www.womanifesto.com/>

The project (Figure 108) slowly broadened its scope, including and connecting practitioners irrespective of gender, thus smashing the misconception that Womanifesto is a platform for women alone (Nair 2019, 148). In 2001 Womanifesto organised its first workshop at Boon Bandarn Farm in Srisaket province of south-eastern Thailand, bordered by Cambodia. This forested region with diverse agriculture and livestock is near Khayoong Creek that arises from the Preah Vihear hill in Cambodia. The farm is thirty-six kilometers from the Khmer-era Preah Vihar temple, and lies in disputed terrain along the Thai-Cambodian border; the area is a source of cultural/political tensions and occasional spasms of nationalistic violence between the two countries. Womanifesto invited eighteen participants – artists, curators, arts administrators and cultural management students – to this event.

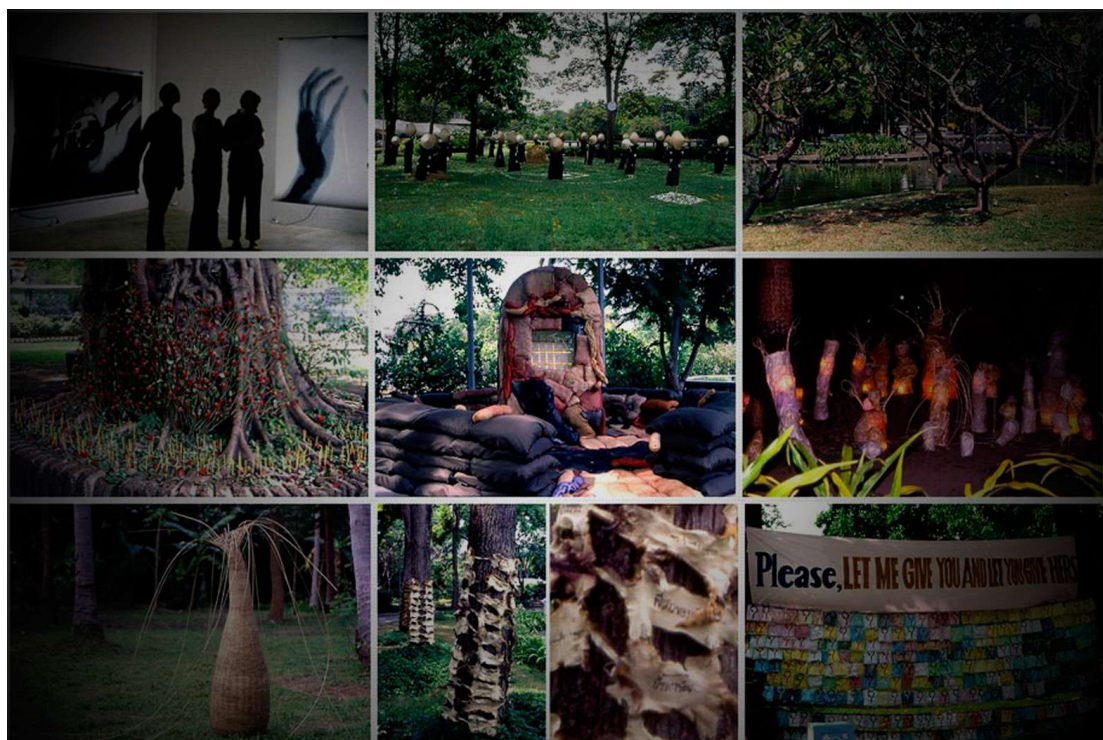


Figure 106: Womanifesto, 2001

Source: <http://www.womanifesto.com/>

The workshop was an instrument for interaction with the local community, a space for the exchange of ideas, particularly around crafts traditions and artisanal practices, laying emphasis on the position and contribution of women vis-à-vis collective/indigenous knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation in the villages. According to Nair, 'the premise of the workshop was very much to interact with local craftspeople and explore the handmade, but it certainly did not end up being just about that. Within such pastoral surroundings and bountiful nature, complete with rainstorms, power failures, leaking huts and an array of creepy-crawlies, the participants presented their works at evening slide and video shows; we were connected with the world via mobile phones; photo developing and photocopiers were located in the nearest big village and, a video installation was filmed, edited and eventually installed in the farm's chicken coop'. This workshop enabled the forging of close relationships between participants and the local community not just through art-making but also through manual activities such as cooking, using locally harvested vegetables, herbs and greens from the farm. The participants also organised workshops with children from local schools, centred around storytelling, and sharing knowledge about horticulture, pottery and simple videography. 'Avoiding the use of technology was not a requirement of the workshop and if it had been, it would have been hard to do so,' remarked Nair. 'Technology has crept into our lives, for better mostly, it's just a matter of realizing to what extent. For many of us dealing with rapidly developing and changing technology has become part of our daily routine,

in many ways transforming our lives... [though] many artists might not directly employ high technology in their artwork, at a basic level it certainly plays a major role in helping us gain and research information; communicate, network and interact with ease and speed, thus opening up the world as never before' (ibid.). The last day of the workshop was a participatory Open Day, with the artists hosting a picnic and reinforcing their relationships with people from the village and beyond (Womanifesto 2001).

In 2003 Womanifesto brought out an international print publication that explored new definitions of 'art' and 'community' (Figure 109). They achieved this through an open call to artists and non-artists across gender and from diverse social backgrounds to contribute to the publication *Procreation/Postcreation*. All the material was received electronically and compiled, edited and designed in the form of a box with over eighty contributors. Womanifesto expanded their public engagement through a web-based project, *No Man's Land*, (Figure 110) launched in 2006, and co-curated by Varsha Nair and Katherine Olston. Seventy-five participants from different backgrounds from across the globe, were invited thematically explore the borderless area of cyberspace and consider attitudes towards nationalism and what a 'no man's land' represented to them. As Olston comments in the curatorial note, 'Borders possess the capacity to create a sense of belonging and security, yet they also often promote a homogenous idea of identity and cultural value and therefore often may not allow for diversity, resulting in nationalistic narratives often being superimposed over ethnically diverse groups of people in an attempt to ignore or obliterate difference... From a curatorial perspective and considering the issue of borders, it is interesting to note the project has largely been administrated and curated over the internet. Participants were gathered through existing professional networks, and were invited to partake via email. As a co-curator to the project it has been interesting liaising with artists who I have never met, and perhaps never, in fact will meet. My relationship with them is purely online and I realise that I do not know their gender, their age, their accent, or their nationality. Moreover, Varsha (in Bangkok) and I communicate almost exclusively through email and thus it makes little difference to the project whether I am in Chiang Mai or Sydney' (Womaifesto 2003).



Figure 107: Womanifesto brought out an international print publication that explored new definitions of 'art' and 'community' 2003

Source: <http://www.womanifesto.com/>



Figure 108: Web-based project, No Man's Land, 2006

Source: <http://www.womanifesto.com/>

In 2008, Womanifesto organised its first artist-in-residency programme at the Boon Bandarn Farm (Figure 111). The five weeks of art residency brought together eight women artists from different generations and backgrounds, as well as students from local schools and the local university, to engage with the seventy-year-old silk weaver Khun Pan Parahom (now deceased) who had spent most of her life on the farm. She was known for her experiments with traditional vegetable dyes made from the surrounding flora. The Office of Contemporary Art within Thailand's Ministry of Culture supported the residency and the participating artists. The event once again linked the artists with local artisans and set up a dialogue between the practitioners of traditional and contemporary creative forms. While living in the village, the artists had the opportunity to learn about other arts, music, oral poetry, and rural architecture. Their learning also involved the seasonal harvesting of rice. Participants went on a special picnic that provided a different setting for artists to be in conversation while generating ideas collaboratively. This picnic stimulated a series of informal conversations which 'can be viewed as ephemeral artworks... can navigate the power/knowledge relations differently, and... can, in fact, support agency, and create new knowledge, forms of solidarity, or living community' (Elke Krasny 2017, cited by Nair 2019, 150). An Open Day event on the final day reflected on the talks given and the work produced during the residency (Womanifesto 2008). And while the residency did create some tension in the border patrols along the Thai-Cambodian border, it also demonstrated the feasibility of holding collaborative public art events in this politicized/militarized context.



Figure 109: Womanifesto organised its first artist-in-residency programme at the Boon Bandarn Farm, 2008

Source: <http://www.womanifesto.com/>

The projects led by Womanifesto are a rigorous collaboration between the artists group, visiting artists, non-artists and the local community at the site. The reciprocal creative exchange materialises through various forms of dialogic engagement. The collaboration is based on the layered formal and informal conversation, sometimes in the form of seminars, talks, exhibitions and public events, as well as developed informally via activities such as cooking meals and sharing traditional and contemporary artistic skills.

1.3. Select Socially Engaged Art Projects In Latin America And Europe

1.3.1. Overview

This section discusses four SEA projects: *Magdalena Project* (1999-2009), *Park Fiction* (1997-2005), *Wasteland / Waste Land* (2008-2010) and *Victoria Square* (2017), located respectively in Río de la Plata, Argentina; Hamburg, Germany; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and Athens, Greece. Each project involves an artist or group of artists using participatory, dialogic and collaborative processes to engage with communities from different backgrounds and social contexts.

These four diverse projects are examples of long-term sustained artistic engagements that, in terms of ideological alignment, reject the homogenising thrust of globalisation and instead call for new, non-extractive relationships with the natural world, keen scrutiny of the ethics of production, and rootedness in community-based local ecologies. The complex collaborative processes of these projects become instruments for the claiming and democratisation of public/social spaces; for affirming and supporting disenfranchised social groups; and for working with dispossessed migrants to creatively explore issues of identity, upheaval, exile and belonging within a broader, fractured political ethos sharply polarised by the ongoing migrant/refugee crisis all over the world.

1.3.2. *Magdalena Project*, *Ala Plástica*, Rio De La Plata (1999-2009)

Ala Plástica is a non-profit environmental and art organisation that works in the Rio de la Plata river basin, south of Argentina's capital Buenos Aires as described in Kester's account of collaborative practices in contemporary art that often overlap with the work of NGOs, urban planners and activists (Kester 2011). Ala Plástica (1991-2016) was formed by Argentinian artists/environmental activists Alejandro Meitin, Silvina Babich and Rafael Santos (who later left the group to work independently), their collaboration emerging through different projects, in different phases, with the poor, rural population of the region

(<https://alaplastica.wixsite.com>). In an interview with Ala Plástica in an online Journal of Art and Culture, Latin America, interdisciplinary scholar Jennifer Flores Sternad said that The collective identifies itself 'as emerging from the community as promoters of a self-organising dynamic and not as therapists that "descend" upon the community'; the attempt is to 'mobilize new forms of collective action and creativity that challenge the unidirectional way of perceiving reality... It is not a simple change in scale or perspective. It is the possibility of developing a different objectivity, a different way of perceiving ourselves, in connection with "what is Other?" through a work initiative that is self-generating' (Sternad 2007) Through using tools such as dialogue, photo-narratives, cartography, satellite images, drawings, texts, spatial and cognitive mapping, the collective generates a 'practically indescribable mesh of inter-communications' that result in 'an innumerable quantity of actions developing and growing through reciprocity'; these are deployed to defy institutional authority and the 'techno-political way of thinking' that enables government and corporate agencies to damage the eco-system and the social fabric of local communities (ibid.)

Working with committed specialists, conservationists, activists and local communities for over two decades, Ala Plástica has linked diverse riparian meta-ecologies to create a unique social space of common concern that resists the 'development' agenda of the state. A primary 'development' project is the state's Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA) that implements neoliberal economic policies to organise South America into transnational corridors for generating intraregional global business opportunities (Kester 2011, 140). Through imposing new development in the delta, IIRSA further triggered land degradation, increased the frequency of floods and industrial pollution, contaminated the river water, and destroyed small farms and cottage industries. The complex situation became a challenge and motivation for Ala Plástica, who worked to raise awareness of ecological decay, and the related collapse of livelihoods, rural infrastructure and social cohesion.

The accumulation of industrial pollution in the river had raised the riverbed, which led to flooding every year (Figure 112). In addition, state-supported construction in the delta continued to degrade natural resources. Ala Plástica developed its interventions to mobilise delta communities to collectively address these and other environmental threats and disasters (Thompson 2012, 98). One such catastrophe occurred on 15 January 1999 when a Shell oil tanker collided with a German cargo ship on the La Plata river. Over the next five days about 5000 tonnes of oil had spread over sixteen kilometers of riverbank, polluting the water, the shoreline of Magdalena, a tourist town, and the nearby Parque Costero del Sur that is part of a UNESCO biosphere reserve. 'Shell was reluctant to take responsibility for the spill and only began clean-up efforts after a court case was filed against the company. Three weeks of recovery ensued, criticised by community members and NGOs as being superficial and merely

an attempt to assuage public ridicule'; and company clean-up tactics using bulldozers were alleged to have caused further damage (Crossman 2013,137). Sustained government apathy was evident; local journalists skeptically observed how a 'government sanctioned biologist arrived in Magdalena by helicopter to survey the damage. Stepping out of the aircraft in a dress and high heels, she teetered across the marshy landscape. As a representative of the state, she seemed neither prepared nor interested in fully understanding the damage caused to this sensitive ecosystem... the disjunction between the state's representative and the environment, like Shell's resistance to take responsibility for the accident and subpar clean-up efforts, demonstrates a long felt disconnection between urban centres and rural communities in Argentina' (ibid).



Figure 110: Magdalena Project, Ala Plástica, Rio De La Plata, 1999-2009

Source: alaplastica.wixsite.com

In stark contrast, Ala Plástica initiated a qualitative study and damage assessment, coordinating efforts by the local administration and UNESCO. The result was a pluralistic impact survey, rich with visual documentation and detailed input from local riverside actors (*junqueros*/reed-workers and fishermen), scientists, a fauna rescue group affiliated with the La Plata City zoo, and an information team that daily released information about the oil spill into the public sphere. Between 1999 and 2009, Ala Plástica had a central role in the production and circulation of three major reports evaluating the consequences of the spill on the ecosystem from different points of view – crucial data to be used for institutional purposes and environmental legislation. The collective also contributed to reports by environmental agencies. One such report, sponsored by Friends of the Earth, documented similar damage by Shell to ecosystems in Louisiana, Nigeria and the Philippines. It contained a section on the

Magdalena that ‘records small town residents’ struggle to seek legal action against Shell. The town lobbied for compensation [asking for \$20 million] for the loss of industry, trade and tourism, and five hundred residents of Magdalena filed for loss of livelihood’ (Crossman 2013,137- 140).

Ala Plástica’s documentation served as crucial evidence in court cases against the company that was systematically appealing the charges. The documentation included satellite, aerial and ground level images of affected coastal land during and after the spill. The group created an educational video for public viewing, intended to initiate a ‘philosophical discussion about the relationship between technology, industry, community and landscape’, and to counter the tendency of the public to disconnect from the brief, intense concern about the natural world that follows any major environmental disaster; aired on cable television in 2007, the video asks a key question: ‘Can technology heal technological wounds?’ (ibid).

Magdalena Project is best understood within the frame of other collaborations AlaPlástica facilitated between environmentalists and the local community, as alternatives to IIRSA’s plans for the region. In *Emergent Species* (1995) Ala Plástica engaged with the coastal land to plant reeds and bulrushes in an effort to preserve aquatic plants that sustain and diversify the ecosystem of the coastal region (Figure 113). The artists also built a social and political relationship with the community in Punta Lara, a natural reserve, and initiated a discussion on the politics of ‘development’ in the delta region – eliding an ‘emergent character of creative ideas and practices’ with the ‘corresponding rhizomatic expansion of community’ (Coleman 2016, 91). Coleman notes that Ala Plástica ‘demands the reconceptualisation of the complex relationships between nature and culture, the material and the discursive, and human corporality and the environment... these categories are not ontologically distinct but rather co-constitutive and implicated in the same emergent phenomena; the cultural is immanent in the material and vice versa’ (Coleman 2016, 85-98). According to Meitin, ‘the exercise catalysed local collective action and the formation of an international network that has expanded throughout the greater Río de la Plata Basin to other communities and interest groups in Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, and Uruguay (Coleman 2016, 92). These countries shared the same environmental concerns and wished to collectively raise a dissenting voice against the depletion of biodiversity in the coastal belt, destruction of rural and riparian livelihoods, and predation of natural resources by big mining, pharmaceutical and petrochemical corporations.



Figure 111: Emergent Species Ala Plástica, 1995

Source: aloplastica.wixsite.com

Another example of such collaboration is *Proyecto AA* (2000), undertaken with the Kolla aboriginal community through Delta School 95 on the Irigoyen Canal. (Figure 114) Local knowledge about the region's habitat, topography, agriculture and cultural traditions was recovered and documented through the artistic process of map-making, oral history narratives and family photographs, and led to the emergence of various kinds of visuals of the delta region (Kester 2011, 144). *Proyecto AA* also enabled practical collaborative community action – building embankments to prevent flood damage, creating emergency living spaces, and providing vocational training in organic farming and bee-keeping. Women played a key role in this project as the men were away hunting and fishing, and began to be considered by various collaborators as 'colleagues' (ibid.).



Figure 112: Proyecto AA Ala Plástica, 2000

Source: alaplastica.wixsite.com

The collective has addressed social and environmental concerns through nuanced dialogue with involved stakeholders as well as through extensive and continuous dialogue with the marginalised communities in the region (Figure 115). Over time, these dialogic and collaborative methodologies enabled Ala Plástica to build an effective communication network between local communities, supportive government officials, scientists, environmentalists, and NGOs (Kester 2011, 141). As enunciated in the collective's own words: 'What we have managed to create with our practice might not be a network but rather a living organism made up of relations and communications, catalysed as a result of a wide spectrum of unconventional exercises in intimate contact and collaboration with artists, rural producers, architects, geographers, biologists, artisans, environmental groups, naturalists and local communities, among others' (Sternad, 2007). Ala Plástica's projects stand as impressive interdisciplinary social engagements that have brought communities together, raised awareness about/mobilised against profit-oriented neoliberal governance and policies that cause profound ecological and social damage. They affirm that their main commitment 'is to relate the intuitive, emotional, imaginative and sensorial aspects of art, with the development of exercises in the social and environmental spheres. In the long run we hope a series of artistic, sensory, political, economic and social relations and connections will follow one another, thereby generating the emergence of transformative actions that will influence power' (ibid). Committed to sustainability, consensus, the articulation of marginal voices and the regenerative potential of

collective action, Ala Plástica also warns that 'it would be quite easy to fall into the trap of wanting to find solutions. Our perception, conditioned as it is by the West, carries a lot of that. To produce success stories, solutions' (ibid.).



Figure 113: Continuous dialogue with the marginalised communities Ala Plástica, 2000

Source: Nato Thompson, 'Living As Form' 2012

1.3.3. *Wasteland / Waste Land*, Rio De Janeiro (2008-2010)

Waste Land (2010), the Academy Award-nominated documentary film by Lucie Walker, shot over three years, features Vik Muniz, a Brazil-born, Brooklyn-based artist and his site-specific SEA project *Wasteland* undertaken with the *catadores* (unorganised waste pickers) of Jardim Gramacho, the 321-acre open-air dump, one of the largest landfills in the world, outside Rio de Janeiro (Figure 116). In 2008 Muniz began working with this community to create art with recyclable 'trash' from the toxic, polluted site that overflows with garbage. *Catadores* of all ages pick through about 200 tons of recyclable material each day, with garbage from millionaire mansions mixed in with discarded material from the *favelas* (slums) and ghettos. The stigmatized and disenfranchised community labours for hours each day in the landfill to accumulate enough recyclable material to sell as usable junk in the market. The dump serves as the primary social space for the *catadores* as well as for others on the margins – drug traffickers, addicts, petty criminals. The waste pickers' struggle isn't merely for daily survival – associated with filth, they are socially ostracized (Walker 2011), and child *catadores* are ever vulnerable to predators.



Figure 114: Jardim Gramacho, the 321-acre open-air dump, one of the largest landfills in the world, outside Rio de Janeiro, 2011

Source: <https://variety.com/2010/film/markets-festivals/waste-land-1117942029/>, 2010

As in much of the global South, recycling has an impressive record in Brazil, where waste segregation and recycling is a crucial means of livelihood for impoverished communities. Established in 2001, Brazil's National Movement of Recycled Material Collectors (MNCR) has been pivotal in advocating for changes in law and policy to protect and benefit the estimated one million informal and formally organised *catadores* across the country. 'Brazil provides a role model for integrating waste pickers into the municipal waste management network. In 2002, the country provided official recognition to workers by listing waste picking as an occupation in the Brazilian Classification of Occupations. Waste pickers or *catadores* contribute to the waste management system by segregating and gathering the recyclables, an important resource of any economy... *Catadores* work long hours, sometimes exceeding 12 hours, bending, lifting, pushing or walking long distances in doing their work. They live life on the margins and their difficult work conditions are compounded by poor living conditions. As in other countries, their direct contact with contaminated waste renders them susceptible to diseases and consequently a lower life expectancy'; and despite some integration and relative protection within new labour laws, they face 'constant prejudice and harassment from society'(<https://globalrec.org/law-report/brazil>).

Muniz had initially planned to paint portraits of the *catadores* (Figure 117). However, he changed his mind after meeting them at the site, and instead collaborated with them to create large photo-works of each subject from scavenged materials. He delineated the subjects in

theatrical poses, drawing on the Western art-historical canon as well generic painting conventions. ‘Muniz had to persuade his subjects to participate, shoot portraits of them in an impromptu studio in the dump, get the collectors to pick garbage to sculpt with for their portraits, and then document the final collage... “These people are at the other end of consumer culture,” says Muniz. “I was expecting to see people who were beaten and broken. But they are survivors”’ (Moakley, 2011). Initially hesitant and suspicious, the *catadores* developed trust in Muniz over time, and permitted him to photograph them once he had assured them that the images would not be shown on television. Through regular sessions with the *catadores* in his studio at the site, he addresses a key question: ‘Can art change the lives of a group of people, using the same material they use every day?’ (Walker 2011, 0:17). The idea of using recyclable materials as a form of pigment to create gigantic collages based on the photographs was collaboratively developed; the *catadores* participated in the portraits’ overall design, and Muniz paid them for their time (Figure 118).



Figure 115: Muniz had initially planned to paint portraits of the *catadores*, 2010

Source: <https://fourarts.org/event/documentary-waste-land/>



Figure 116: Vik Muniz Create gigantic collages based on the photographs, 2010

Source: jewishphilosophyplace.com

The main thrust of community-based site-specific art projects is that 'the members belonging to the community will be involved in the process of art-making; the role of these members varies from a spectator, audience, and public referential subject' (Kwon 2002, 95). Muniz's act of art-making with the *catadores* in Jardim Gramacho, enabled the 'mundane, impure and ordinary space of every day' to become 'an integral part of the space of art' (Kwon 2002, 11). Those who were spectators at the beginning also became a part of the art-making process as the project continued, through which the group discovered a new relationship with the site as well as with the degraded material they negotiate daily for essential survival. The art-making opened another world to these *catadores*, who prior to meeting Muniz could not have imagined that familiar, filthy, discarded material could be used in such a unique manner (Walker 2011, 2:00); that their art made from 'trash' would be socially valued; and that they themselves, accustomed to social rejection as a underclass laboring in a filthy environment, would actually be valued and respected as talented, imaginative 'artists' (Figure 119).



Figure 117: Art made from 'trash' *Wasteland*, 2010

Source: www.wastelandmovie.com/gallery.html

Christopher Schmidt observes that the garbage used in the artworks 'metaphorically represents the diminished social status of the *catadores*; a "spoiled identity" that Muniz hopes to overcome by transforming the garbage and the images of the *catadores* into recognizable artworks' (Schmidt 2017, 10). However, Muniz 'does not significantly redefine the role of the audience as participant, and more importantly, any collectivist social transformation achieved in the *catadores*' participation is undone by Muniz's conservative definition of the final photographs produced by the collaboration as the bounded aesthetic artifact" (Schmidt 2017, 22). Moreover, the portraits replay the dynamic between the 'fetish commodity and the forgotten labor behind it'... It is not just [the *catadores*]' work that has been appropriated but their image as well: a portrait of themselves, constructed by them, that is nevertheless "authored" by and remains the intellectual property of Muniz' (Schmidt 2017, 15, 23).

The film does show Muniz acting upon his sense of responsibility towards his collaborators – he goes to London to auction the Jardim Gramacho works at Phillips de Pury, a leading auction house for art and design. One portrait sells for over \$64,000. He 'returns 100% of the proceeds to the subjects so they can improve their labor union to educate and protect the workers of Jardim Gramacho' (Moakley 2011).

Muniz's collaborative methodology has indeed challenged the embedded hierarchies of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' (Phadke 2012, 52) that structure all public/social spaces, and *Wasteland* successfully inscribes the *catadores*' production within the larger stream of SEA discourse. However, the stark differences between the cosmopolitan, privileged artist and his

deprived collaborators empowered through his wider public efforts cannot be collapsed in actual terms. Schmidt notes that 'in neither Muniz's art nor the film is there any discussion of the *catadores*' citizenship, legal rights or interactions with the state and its social support network, or lack thereof. In fact, in some ways *Waste Land*'s sentimental focus on Muniz and the workers' individual catharses blinds us to the neoliberal structures that create both the abundance of waste material the workers must sort and the precarity of the workers themselves, due to capital's accumulation by dispossession, which leaves larger and larger swathes of the population in poverty' (Schmidt 2017, 17). And it is impossible to imagine the impoverished *catador*-artists being invited into the elite spaces of documentary film festival circuits where the film about them was shown to elite audiences, or to into the elite auction houses where the artworks they made were put up for sale to elite purchasers.

1.3.4. *Park Fiction*, Hamburg (1997-2005)

Park Fiction spans the neighbourhood of Hafenstraße in the harbour area of St Pauli and the densely populated neighbouring area of Pinnasberg, Hamburg (Kester 2011). Hafenstraße had a history of civic dispute over the squatters' movement since the 1980s. The squatters 'consolidated their control over occupied buildings, organising an alternative institutional network that included a daycare, school, café, soup kitchen, library, legal aid clinic, and even a radio station', which were often attacked by 'fascist gangs' (Kester 2011, 200). Despite these supportive facilities and establishments, Hafenstraße remains one of the city's poorest areas, today occupied mostly by the Turkish community, and in dire need of municipal intervention in the form of public services and infrastructure (ibid).

However, as the area was a lucrative real estate prospect, city authorities devised an urban development plan that sought to demolish the old neighbourhood and rebuild it to attract more privileged classes through riverfront development along the Elbe. Local residents, squatters and artist-activists resisted the idea of gentrification (Figure 120), proposing instead that the open space be converted into a self-organised park with a view of the river (<https://park-fiction.net>). This was the 'point of crisis that initially catalysed *Park Fiction*' (Kester 2011, 202). After a long struggle and some street battles between the residents and the municipality, local artists were invited by Hamburg's cultural authority to develop an art project in this public space (Kester 2011, 209).



Figure 118: Local residents, squatters and artist-activists resisted the idea of gentrification, Park Fiction

Source: <https://park-fiction.net/>

Park Fiction was financed in 1994 by the 'Art in Public Space' programme of the Hamburg Department of Culture that focused on resolving conflict and fostering civic engagement. The project was realised in 2005. It emerged in concrete form through the local residents' association *Hafenrandverein* (Harbour Edge Association) using a parallel planning and design process to block the proposed housing and office development, and instead presenting collectively produced plans for a public park at that prominent site. Key campaign figures negotiated with public officials and mobilised the community included artists Christoph Schäfer and Cathy Skene, filmmaker Margit Czenki, and Ellen Schmeisser who later worked for the city to liaise with residents (<https://www.spatialagency.net/database/park.fiction>). The participatory design of *Park Fiction* was an alternative to city blueprints that idealised commercial interest over the community desire for recreational space; the project's methodology is evidence of the 'macro-political nature of collaborative work at the level of larger institutional and social formation' (Kester 2011, 202).

In its first phase *Park Fiction*'s highly participatory, multifaceted planning and procedure 'developed the idea of a "collective production of desires"' (<https://www.spatialagency.net/database/park.fiction>). Materialising the space into a park was carried out by local people without seeking permission from concerned authorities. In this

regard, a highly successful tactic 'was to not only protest for a public space but to act as if one already existed' (ibid.). Instead of formal protests and other familiar modes of public resistance, the people in the neighbourhood began to use that space as if it was *already* a park, thereby signaling their vision as well as their intent to municipality. Residents' and visitors' acts of continually using the space by for leisure and creative production made the proposed 'park' a 'social reality'. The artist-activists encouraged citizens see themselves as stakeholders and to take control of the urban planning process by continuously using the space for activities connecting to local culture -- festivals, exhibitions, talks, presentations, film screenings, concerts, performances, lectures, demonstrations, picnics, sports and other public events (Figure 121). A fountain, an open-air solarium, magic carpet (a wave-shaped piece of lawn), a tulip-patterned tartan field, mobile palm islands, mailboxes for young people who want to receive private communication were also set up at the site (Kester 2011, 203).



Figure 119: Using the space for activities connecting to local culture, *Park Fiction*

Source: <https://park-fiction.net/>

Placing a high value on consensus, throughout its decade-long evolution *Park Fiction* developed special tools and techniques that rendered the planning process more accessible to participants. The park's design was collectively worked out through games on the site, clay models sessions, 'hotline phones', 'action kits' of questionnaires for public opinion, and maps, dictaphones and instant cameras (Kester 2011, 203). Interventions to resist municipal pressure included the temporary events held in the park, 'as well as the installation of a "planning container" on site which could be moved around the neighbourhood to collect residents' wishes. A film by Margit Czenki, *Desire Will Leave the House and Take to the Streets*, was produced and a game about the planning process was developed to make

transparent the opaque workings of bureaucracy. Other strategies included presenting the project at international art and music events (Figure 122), including Documenta 11 to which took the “planning container” was taken, and an event in St Pauli where groups involved in similar initiatives were invited to present their experiences. Such exposure ensured that Park Fiction was widely known and made it difficult for the authorities to block the proposals’ (<https://www.spatialagency.net/database/park.fiction>).



Figure 120: Presenting the project at internationally, Park Fiction

Source: <https://park-fiction.net/>

The space of the collectively re-envisioned/repurposed slope along the river was not viewed in mere material terms; the site *itself* was envisaged as a social entity/part of the community (Kwon 2002). The project deliberately stopped residents’ direct activism and instead mobilised them through cultural engagements on the site (*Park Fiction*, n.d). Local residents spontaneously participated without any prior acquaintance, collaborating regularly over a long period and participating in all kinds of activities that ranged from beer-fueled charettes to workshops with schoolchildren (Kester 2011, 208). *in Czenki’s film, Sabine, a project participant, asserts: ‘It wasn’t just about having the park as a green area, but also about parks and politics, about the privatization of public space, about parks all over the world, about skateboarding and the pace of the city and accordingly it was about community conferences and democratic planning procedures’* (Bromberg and Bloom, 2004). For artist-activist Schäfer, *‘Films, performances and lectures brought art, town-planning and politics together, or rather created political discussions about art and vice versa questioned the standardized forms of political practice’* (*ibid.*). And in wider terms, through serving as a dialogical space and

instrument of civic transformation, *Park Fiction* created new relationships and affiliations between the local community and other artist collectives, urban planners, activists and NGOs. The project also encouraged the shaping of new relationships with similarly oriented collectives and organisations in other parts of the world through a series of international symposia on themes of urban activism.

The current destiny of *Park Fiction* is quite ironic, in that it now ‘serves as a colourful setting of subcultural chic within the on-going gentrification of St. Pauli’; with more high-rise buildings and flats built in a former industrial area nearby (Rühse, 2014). ‘Now residents and employees with a higher income populate stylish cafes and restaurants next to Park Fiction, which is often (Figure 123) used as an outdoor dining area by such establishments. Most of these new residents and visitors are unaware of the park’s history. In fact, Park Fiction served to increase the market value of properties in the district, thus inadvertently supporting profit-oriented, socially irresponsible development, such as the privatization of public spaces in the area and its typical manifestation in the erecting of high-rise buildings, of which supporters of the park were critical’ (ibid.). *Nevertheless, Park Fiction will always be an effective example of site-specific, collaborative SEA, and an embodiment of ‘successful planning from below’ in a context ‘where top-down bureaucracy traditionally dominates the decision-making processes’* (ibid.).



Figure 121: Park Fiction

Source: <https://park-fiction.net/>

1.3.5. *Victoria Square*, Athens (2017)

Ava Wiland and Rafael Salzar's 8-minute documentary (*A Space for Belonging*, 2017), available for viewing on the Rava Films website (<https://www.ravafilms.com/abog-rick-low>) and other digital spaces (e.g., <https://vimeo.com/301952529>), presents the site-specific SEA project *Victoria Square*, an arts centre named after the migrant-dominated Athens neighbourhood where it is based, by American artist Rick Lowe, who was invited to collaborate on this project with Greek artist Maria Papadimitriou (Figure 124).



Figure 122: American artist Rick Lowe, who was invited to collaborate on this project with Greek artist Maria Papadimitriou

Source: <https://www.ravafilms.com/abog-rick-low>

In the film Lowe narrates how he engaged with the site at a crucial moment when refugees from Syria were surging into Greece to escape the genocidal civil war and ISIS jihad. Athens became a hub for these immigrants, most of whom were/are desperate to reach Western Europe and apply for asylum and resettlement there, but were/are stranded due to lack of documentation and anti-immigrant policies enacted by the governments of those very countries. There are also large numbers of African migrants, fleeing abject poverty, violent marginalization, ethnic cleansing and other forms of state and societal persecution in their home countries, and escaping the continent via traumatic journeys through Libya. Abused, trafficked, terrorized and preyed upon till they reach the coast, they cross the Mediterranean in fragile dinghies; many drown on the way, or are turned back towards Libya by the Greek, Italian and Libyan coast guard.

Lowe explains that since 2015 Greece too has been experiencing severe socio-economic and political crises, all of which were compounded by the refugee crisis (Wiland and Salzar, 1:30). Scholars affirm that in 2015, all over Europe “a new chapter of crisis began, a time periodised as the refugee crisis”, in alignment with other global crises that catalysed and coerced human mobility through brutal “declared and undeclared” catastrophes compelling millions of people into exile. Throughout their harrowing journeys towards what they visualize as freedom and opportunity, both strands of migrants cling fiercely to the hope of building a better life for themselves in the West (Carastathis & Tsilimpounid 2020, 3).

Victoria Square was once home to the elite and bourgeois Greek families who lived in the area’s luxurious apartments and buildings. These dwellings gradually emptied as the original residents moved to the suburbs, and the migrants, many of whom had been living on the streets and sleeping rough, took the chance to move in. With this sudden influx of an impoverished population, the neighbourhood became degraded and crime-infested. Locals who lived and worked around Victoria Square were worried about increased refugee presence having a negative impact on business, safety and social life in the area. Their opinions on the refugee crisis and its outcomes, including increased pressure on local resources, were quite sharply polarized between hostility and empathy vis-à-vis the migrant demographic.

Lowe clearly declares his aim of community building (Wiland and Salzar 2017, 00:38), aspiring through his project – the creation of an arts centre in Victoria Square – to add value to the neighbourhood, where daily survival is an acute struggle for the inhabitants. Lowe’s intent was to empower communities – both Greeks and non-Greeks – through a participatory, dialogue-based process that could build new relationships and better modes of public co-habitation, and create a deeper conversation around immigration (Figure 125). Acknowledging that the migrants occupying the neighbourhood lacked the fundamental understanding about how to collectively care for the locality and work to transform it into a better living space (Wiland and Salzar, 2017, 00:45), the artists wished to shape a platform that would give everyone in the neighbourhood, both locals and migrants, an active sense of belonging to Victoria Square, and thereby feeling more responsible for its transformations (Wiland and Salzar 2017, 04:19).



Figure 123: Build new relationships and better modes of public co-habitation, Victoria Square Project, Athens, Greece

Source: <https://www.ravafilms.com/abog-rick-low>

'I think of myself as not just a socially engaged, but a socially and community engaged artist,' Lowe declares in conversation with Jan Cohen-Cruz in an interview for a field report in Blade Grass an online magazine published in 2018. "Socially" alone is too broad; "community" gives it a focus. That community in my case is usually attached to a geographic context, a particular place. The kinds of issues I deal with play out through the place in which people live their lives. The work tries to create places within geographic communities where people come together to think about growth and development in their communities, that has a higher value than just surviving; rather, how they want to live in that place... *Victoria Square Project* [VSP] provides a place that is a platform for people to think about their community's assets and how they shape them [for that community's good]. I think of these projects as nerve centres of their communities, bringing people together to be thoughtful' (Cruz 2018).

Dialogue, as well as daily engagement at the site, was central to the artistic process, and this led to the production of the weekly newspaper *One to One* (Figure 126) that sought to acquaint people from varied backgrounds with one another (Cruz 2018, 9). Lowe was pleased to have passers-by stop to view what was happening at the site; and he was especially pleased that since the opening of the arts centre in Victoria Square, sanitation workers started cleaning the street, and drug addicts were asked to vacate the area. This further illustrated the sense of belonging that the project instilled among members who would keep a constant eye on the area to ensure that it didn't lapse into its former neglected state (Cruz 2018, 2).



Figure 124: Dialogic process led to the production of the weekly newspaper *One to One Victoria Square Project*, Athens, Greece

Source: <https://www.ravafilms.com/abog-rick-low>

Through everyday conversations the artists discovered a range of creative talent and creative skills within the neighbourhood. *Victoria Square* became a collaborative atelier for art workshops, events and exhibitions, and today the centre is a vibrant node for interaction and exchanging ideas. It is also a local hub where people can engage with forms of contemporary art relevant to their daily life (Figure 127). Workshops on contemporary art are conducted for all age groups. The space has initiated an international radio programme for amateur artists to share their practice-related thoughts and concepts with the community (Wiland and Salzar 2017, 06:36).



Figure 125: The centre is a vibrant node for interaction and exchanging ideas, Victoria Square Project, Athens, Greece

Source: <https://www.ravafilms.com/abog-rick-lowee>

'I try not to put art in this mystical place that's beyond other activities. People come together around sports events and all kinds of things,' Lowe explains. "On one hand, *VSP* is much like any community development work. On the other hand, like most art, it has a lot to do with intention. Which means the practical outcomes are important but the symbolic things are more important, what you are trying to explore beyond the practical. *VSP*'s practical outcome is to have a policy that integrates new people with existing folks. That can be reached in different ways'(Cruz 2018,9). *VSP* is thus oriented towards eroding and dismantling existent social and cultural barriers among a large group of people of diverse ethnicities and conditioning (Wiland and Salzar 2017, 06:29) but with common life experiences –loss of home, nation and human rights, traumatic uprooting, refugee-camp alienation, material deprivation, constant threat of deportation. Above all, they have in common the particular, unyielding, indescribable personal tension of being stateless, indefinitely trapped by and between various states, and politically suspended en route to their desired further destinations.

Kwon notes, in relation to SEA, that 'the emphasis on the social stems from the belief that the meaning or value of the artwork does not reside in the object itself but is accrued over time through the interaction between the artist and the community' (Kwon 2002, 95). *VSP* has produced wider audiences and networks in the city through the events and exhibitions, adding value to the downgraded neighbourhood, enabling unique forms of self-expression, and

skillfully navigating the fraught issues of identity that suffuse the wider political aggression towards the migrants.

1.4. Conclusion

The SEA projects discussed here from South/South-east Asia, Latin America and Europe are located in social/public spaces with diverse social matrices. The projects deployed collaborative methodologies to engage participants from diverse backgrounds, collectively producing or recuperating or reclaiming or repurposing social/public space. The artists and participants use dialogue to create mutual and community understanding, and do not rely on exclusive, external aesthetic, technical or political knowledge.

As examples of site-specific engagement, these projects focus on building and transforming community relations through art interventions that evolve from the material sites. The projects involved local artists and local communities and used traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with the wider public about social issues and their impact on individual and group life, thereby creating new audiences within each site and context.

The creative processes in these projects established collaborations across various disciplines, engaging artists, environmentalists, architects, urban planners and other specialists. All the projects foreground empathy, inclusion, diversity, relationship, and progressive value systems inherently resistant to the oppressions of patriarchal, governmental, corporate, elitist, populist and other kinds of authority.

Appendix 2

Interviews of Indian artists which constitutes the primary source.

2.1. Interview with Pooja Sood, curator of the festival 48C PUBLIC ART PROJECT

By Sreejata Roy

Venue- Khoj Studio, New Delhi

March 2020

SR: What are ways that led you to select an artist for the Public Art project?

PS: I was approached by the Goethe institute to do this project. Before this, I curated a few small public art projects. Then we decided that there must be a festival route for ten or twelve days, but it is not a biennale. What should be the festival route? The metro was new then, and only the yellow line was completed. I talked with Ravi Agarwal, an artist, and we decided to travel the metro line. We went on and off the metro and found beautiful places connected like Kashmiri gate, Palika Bazaar, and Chandni Chowk, and I told you, this is fantastic! Then I met Arunava(Senior Professor, School of Planning & Architecture, Delhi) and told him about the plan, and he said let me do the mapping for you. When mapping, he suggested we take Roshanara Bagh, a beautiful site in old Delhi. Then I called him in, and they started doing the mapping; it was social. The initial idea of having that network was mine. As he began to unpack it, I realized how fantastic it is because it takes you from the Colonial to Old to Contemporary Delhi, which became beautiful. Once I got to the site, I was very excited.

SR: How do I get artists?

It was much tougher to get Indian artists than to get International artists. I have no time or money to go and do secondary research, to go abroad. In 2008 there were only three or four catalogues, exhibitions on ecology, Enny Lipton, and a couple of others. I ordered those catalogues online, literary three or four, and we did as much research as we could on artists working on ecology. At that time, Sharjah Biennale did a massive exhibition on ecology; I went specially to see that. So the international artists are elementary, and I picked three or four of

them, but even though we thought let's invite them for a research trip, they will come and see, and the urban research team took them all over the places, and then they went back. Then we gave them a month to develop a proposal and select the project. For this, we have the money, but it was not that you do something, sitting over there at home but come and spend two-three days. They went to every site and chose what they would do like Mary Miss wanted to work with Roshana Bagh/garden. Then from Fag, they did all the research on the medicinal plants.

However, there were very few Indian Artists working on ecology, and there were only Ravi Agarwal and Atul Bhalla. So it was a proposition that I made to several artists who want to work in ecology and who work in the public frame. So Desire Machine Collective was looking at this lovely forest. They were looking at sound work and talking about Meghalaya, the secret groom. All the artist who was invited was told can you work? Can you think about this? It's a concept, and these are the sites. So some artists came, for example, Sudarshan Shetty did a site visit and came with an unusual project, that time it was nine lakhs, to make some bridge from one site to another. We gave two and a half thousand dollars to the artists as a fee and ten thousand dollars as a production budget so that people could realize a large project, and I wanted that scale, and that's how we chose them. So I invited the artists using my kind of own sensibility. Some came with great stuff/ideas, and some did not. So we worked with some of them who did not, I backed off, and some who did. Some of them did not fit the bill; it seemed they wanted to do a big project and meant nothing.

SR: Process of Installation of artworks in each site, how it happened, and what are the challenges?

PS: I realized there was no way, having understood that I could do this alone. I have a team of four young architects from SPA (School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi). We have ten sites. I gave each of them two areas three months in advance, by August 2007. They sat in the Khoj office, and I gave the emails, proposals, and locations. I asked them to go to the sites, measure the areas, figure out everything, and get in touch with the artists and what they wanted. For example, Mary Miss wanted the land absolutely flat, so we brought trucks full of sand to make it equal, then we have to send her the site sample back and forth. The Indian artists looked after themselves, but they needed support.

Then also, I went to one person who does the fabrication as all the international artist's works were done in India, and they sent fabulous drawings, which had to be made here. So this person is an artist, and he is from the college of art. This guy has implemented all the International works, all the big projects. He helped with putting it all together, anything large and stainless steel, and he took over some of that, and I had a technical team who had worked and went, and they realized and measured. How many meters of wire do they need, a backup

generator, how do we get electricity? Somebody had to be there at the site so that nothing had got stolen. It was tough to manage everything on each site. For electricity, we needed our own generators. So the technical team went out and mapped everything with the group of young architects. I was sitting at my desk and making sure that everything was done. If there was a problem, they would come and talk to me. The biggest problem was getting all our permissions for each site.

SR: What are the Challenges?

PS: I was running a Public Art Festival, and my questions were very different. My questions were, what do you do in a city like Delhi, it means a little bit of spectacle, but Delhi itself is a spectacle; look at the crowd, look at the people, look at the light, everything, look at the spaces like shopping malls, what you do, so I was apparent that I needed to create a bit of a spectacle. My question also was that if you put Contemporary Art out there, does it make a damn difference to anybody who will see it? If we put a text on the ground inside the gallery, we know that it is an artwork, but in India, people outside the gallery do not give a damn to this kind of works. They will step on it and say that this is useless. This is one of my questions, and I think it is essential to put it up. A lot of you would say even though the artists had worked in the site as a geographical site, how close it is to the river Yamuna and who comes to it, hoping that that's a busy site because it is near the metro station, it was what you can be called dismissively "Plop Art", you take work and put it there.

But given that it had been put up the artwork there, we always had a mediator, we did all the water stuff at Kashmere Gate (Old Delhi), which is the closest point to the River Yamuna. We had put big videos on Palika bazaar (Connaught Place, Central Delhi), where people can sit and wait. We put up the giant images of Vultures, another work, Secret Mangroves in the roundabout of Mandi House, which straight went to the Natural History Museum. Anything to do with trees you cut down and its reference to the making of the metro is crucial. Krishna Chonat, Navjot Altaf's works were put up there. So in terms of placement, the artists did a site visit. They were also referencing the sites, geographically and otherwise, which was really important because the artists were doing it. For me, they are all large sculptural works, but there were also fascinating print works put by Atul Bhalla, "Have you ever seen the Yamuna, Have you ever touch the Yamuna?" all the way from the metro station out and he did it in performativity. To Motornama, it was totally socially engaged; they came three four-time times and did a complete training with the rickshaw walas /pullers over there, training them as if they were a tourist of their own sites. What has happened to Roshanara ever since the industries have been thrown out? It was a beautiful rediscovery of a place that has gone because of the ecology of that space. It was from the sizeable Big Bucket which Subodh Gupta did to between areas like Sheba Chachi's "Water Divine", a beautiful installation

inside the Delhi Public library (Old Delhi), with videos and sound pieces which is very immersive. There was a full understanding of why they were there.

When we were putting up in Kashmere Gate, the children were complaining why you are taking our playground, where we play cricket. When we were putting up in Roshanara, some people were laughing and asking each other how we should know what was happening here. There was no significant obstruction, but people were curious about what was happening, why it was happening, and if we say art, they asked what kind of art is. There was no anti- feeling or action but only curiosity.

What was beautiful at Palika Bazaar rooftop was three videos with molten lava falling off, one was water falling, one was heartbeats because it was life, there the people sitting there pin drop silence for hours with those vast screens, it was a fantastic experience. I remember with the water, light falling artwork "Light House", people were standing and asking what this is and don't know where this is coming from. So when we told them that the water was coming from Yamunotri, they started the conversation that Government was not doing anything, and we didn't get enough water, so the discussion around the water began.

Krishna Chonat's dead tree is hanging from a crane in the middle of central Delhi. At the putting up, people were taking selfies and saying, My God, what this Delhi Municipal Corporation is doing. Once we put it up, we lit it up with light. The auto-rickshaw pullers came and stood there and started saying that our Government is pulling our neck like this and hanging us. Navjot's works, on the other side, were on videos, talking about the history, how these have gone, and development versus ecology. They were all listening to it and giving feedback. It was fantastic. It was also mesmerizing to see the dead tree hanging like that.

SR: Your Definition of Art in Public and Public art in the Contemporary period?

PS: Earlier, the idea of Public Art was only monuments, murals, and statues of prominent personalities; of course, the concept of Public Art in the contemporary period is not you are mute spectator; you are actually engaging them. As you and I know that when you are really involved it is there the real embeddedness, either it comes through collaboration, it comes from certain embeddedness, it can be dialogical, art comes from somewhere else, when we talk about Socially Engaged Practice, something else happens to make it art. So I think that Public Art is a very general thing in public space, today the digital is a public space, for us doing public art-ecology, even the mall was a public space. You can put art there and see how people respond. It is for me to step out of the white cube, which is a very closed space. Even in Khirki, Khoj, we do it in the studio even if that is for a specific audience, you can try and bring other people, but finally, it is for the art world, the extended art world, students can come, but they are also for the particular egalitarian art world. When you step out, you are trying to

make sense of how people will look at it. Without dropping the standard, you still have to have quality.

SR: What are the Festival's socio-political impact on each site and the city?

PS: I wish to do this Festival once a year or for two years, and then you can measure the mass and the criticality of people engaging with art. The first time it was new, for only twelve days, it was fascinating and over. But that was not the point; the point was to do this regularly, where art can be taken as a change vehicle.

SR: Emergence of a new audience; each site is creating a new audience?

PS: In SEA practice, when you are embedded in a space, the people taking part are also the audience. This is by them, for them, and the people around them. As far as I am concerned, it is an exciting way, even in terms of marketing. If you want the people to come, you co-create the audience.

SR: How do you as a curator see this Festival in terms of site-specific art

PS: It was just an experiment for me; it was never done before. Delhi no chance and don't think in India, any festival like this happened.

It is an experiment to unfold

1. Does Contemporary art make any damn difference?
2. Why should anybody in the street care for contemporary art, which has its own language and method?

But I felt it did and does, as some works were super powerful. We must also remember that our South Asian sensibility is not so conceptual; we have a particular way of understanding the words/text, the materiality, and it is authentic. That brought the people together; for example, if "Have ever seen the Yamuna?" would have been only words printed without the water jerry can with the videos at the end, then that would not have made any sense to the people. Abroad, we could have only either one, and people would have been excited. But I think there is specific materiality, and how all of us in South Asia react to that is very important. So I think

1. That the understanding of juxtaposing of materiality and visual is essential, in fact, curatorial.
2. This Festival also taught me how there is no public space in India; it is either private or Government, and there is no "public" space. I don't think people don't want it. There are more and more gated communities. Where is that public space? Very few shared spaces.
3. It was precious for the artists, especially the Indian artists. Nobody had worked in a public space like this before. Shilpa did one "Blame" that is also getting up on the bus

and talking to people; that is like a performance. But none like putting artwork in public space and seeing what the people say, installing it in the public space, understanding the problem, and then staying there to see how people react. It is an opening for Indian artists to deal with their work and the public space.

2.2. Interview with Ravi Agarwal, Artist, Environmentalist

By Sreejata Roy

Venue- Artist's Studio, New Delhi

April 2020

SR: Do you think your practice can be titled as Socially Engaged Art?

RA: The categories are so fluid that it is hard to say what does it mean. I always interested in how I speak to the world outside, away from the Art world. I bring back to the so-called art world the conversation between Art and Society. So I think I do not come from the interest in the history of art and the art forms but in the engagement of art with the world. So all my questions are about the engagement of society and the concerns about where we are going politically and culturally. A lot of the questions and discourse lie outside the art world into the other worlds. (into the political world, academic, and social world). So that is how I investigate through a sure thing, and my investigation is not limited to what you might call art forms; my investigation would include science, observations over the kinds, writing, and even academic writing. So for example, if you look at my work on the river, there is something, there is a visual form, there is also text written extensively including academically in journal, also worked on it as an activist. So art becomes one of the ways I engage with the world, not the only way.

SR: How do you engage yourself as an artist with the social, cultural and political world, can you explain with an example of work?

RA: I have worked for four years with a fishing community in the Bay of Bengal in Tamil Nadu, South India. It is a long-term engagement that grew. My interest was in the community and the relationship to the ocean. That also meant how the ocean was changing, the politics of the coastline, what was happening on the particular beach and what was happening to the fish. Also, what was the cultural invocation for fishing, how did language impact, how did they observe the sea, what the sea meant to them, and what was the sea they saw? These are questions, and I am not going through any particular discipline except as an artist, because I think art gives the freedom to work across disciplines. I was writing, and I was taking pictures.

I was constructing pictures (taking pictures), interviewing, talking to poets, talking to writing, talking to NGOs, and looking at the court and what was happening on the coastline. It came to a body of work called 'Else, all will be still'. The body of artwork, which also constitutes writing, had been seen outside, not in the gallery space. For me, the reason for doing that was because I am interested in the question of ecology and nature, and I think I see nature as culturally produced form but also a socially and politically impacted form. It is an entangle question, it is not a separate disciplinary question, so that was my language, of course, that part of work has become an installation, films (two films, one long and one shorter film) and also a bunch of photographic works and writings in a diary and published book. So that is the way I liked to see my work, I guess it is socially engaged because I am interested in both the questions of nature in the ecological crisis and also looking at new ways of discovering the term through the eyes of people who are vulnerable on the ground. How does an inhabited ecology look? These questions become social, political, and cultural simultaneously and, in a broader sense, social because politically, you can get into the idea of social society.

That is how I operate; that is the way I am increasing as I am now looking at the desert. It's called the 'Desert of the Anthropocene,' a similar kind of multi-variety. I am looking at what is happening there, but there is a robust visual component because I am very strongly visually drawn to what is happening. However, art can also be a perfect place for complex questions; it can hold many complexities, many-layered complexities, and I think that excites me to be using it as an artist.

SR: How do you choose a site?

RA:

In the fishing project, initially, I went there as a tourist to visit and see, and these questions started coming to me when I went there one or two times. Then I met people and I got curious, more and more curious. Then something grew in me, and I decided to dig something deeper. So I think my curiosity leads me to something and start navigating the space.

SR: When you are talking about site like ocean, water, this reminds me your early work, and your long time engagement with the river Yamuna, can you reflect on this?

RA: I have a long relationship with the river as a bird watcher as an activist. But this starting of what became a photographic series of works, films, and these ongoing engagements, started in 2004. Just because I have started visiting the river many times, something was drawing me to it; there was no real reason. There were recurring visits and some kind of energetic interaction; some energy extended to the river and lasted for three to four years. For me, it is undefined because it was a kind of energy exchange more than a social question. It's more than a research question. It is a personal drawn engagement as an artist. There is also

a great idea of visually and aesthetics, which are part of that, maybe other reasons of with what I may connect with. So it was a project for me, it is an exchange of energy with a certain kind of landscape and community. I am sure that its all there, I have to be ready for it, so it also depends on my state of mind, my receptivity to it. That is why it lasts for a long time. Many of my projects last for two to three years, I do not know what will happen there. I want to be there and think about it. So the river is that kind of space and I think there is some energy in exchange, and that is how I can put it. It is pretty undefined, and it is not a project site.

There is no project proposal; there is no site, just interest, exchange and a constant attraction to going there and knowing more. It is not to do with an engagement, which is beyond the obvious. Hence it is an artistic engagement, I am not going only with my mind, I am going there with own self. I cannot define it except through the process of the mechanism of art. The outputs also tend to be like that. I think they can only belong to the art world as an art space work.

SR: How do you reframe the term 'Site-Specific' in your work?

RA: I think all my works are site-specific but not site-specific, which connects to my more larger questions about everything. It is always located in a site and I never deny the site, I never say its from anywhere, it is from somewhere. This is kind of research methodology where you define your subject very particularly and then you draw things out of it. So it is the same thing, I want to be rooted in what I do, I don't want to be abstract in my direct location. It's not my way of working. It leads me to a certain kind of social interaction because I am rooted in that. So it is not usual, though sometimes I have done it, where the work starts as an abstract idea of something but starts as a specific thing, specific to it. Then it might grow into an abstract idea later. However, there is a specific root of the work. I can tell that the people I have met, who I was talking to, and what is happening become part of my writing. To me there is an authenticity about that, so it kind of research kind of idea that I am here.

SR: Can you please talk about the project Yamuna Elbe that you have curated; how the idea of site-specific Public art came into your mind?

RA: Yamuna Elbe was actually proposed to me by the city of Hamburg. They proposed that they want to do the project with me along with Till Krause City of Hamburg, Goethe Institute New Delhi, City of Delhi. It sounds very interesting to me, and I said, I never have done this before and never in India.

Sites are very important in any Public Art project and it has to be site-specific. Its site was in Hamburg and Delhi, the sites are very different, as the works are very different. For two reasons, the sites are different, forms are different, and the discourse in the two countries is different about the River Elbe and the River Yamuna. Third, the history of forms is different in

two places; Hamburg has a particular trajectory of Public Art, so there is a certain kind of art in Germany, which you can do so, it was the boat parked on the most expensive harbour in Hafencity in Hamburg and it was an intervention site and conversation site for talks, fun everything that was the site. Here the site was different because the site was in front of the whole Yamuna Bridge and that site was really important for us and we have difficulty getting it, but we got it. For example, this is a historic site, Yamuna Bridge was made in 1911, if I am not wrong, the same time the Howrah Bridge in Calcutta was made. It is not identical, but similar bridge, because they are both two stories bridges with railway and road. This is also shortly before the capital of India was shifted from Calcutta to Delhi when King George visited India. So I think the bridges were made and the purpose they cross the two major rivers Ganga and Yamuna. So many connections between the cities, one is far east, one is western north in India. I think it is a fantastic story of a bridge. However, there are other reasons, because cross the Yamuna Bridge it is Old Delhi, and the whole socio-economic strata changes and this side becomes central Delhi, where the bureaucracy and the offices are, where the power station is. However, the third reason was where the site was.

A hundred thousand people were shifted from Yamuna Pushta, just in 2004. I was really interested in the violence as the future of a modern city, much like Paris. For us it was a site of historical and a political site and also a site which could be visited both by the middle class of Delhi but also the poor. So it was un ticketed, un barriered because we wanted people to come from everywhere. The question in Public Art is who is the 'Public.' So for me, all these are political ideas, what is a public space, which is the public, what is the site, what are the territories? These are all political ideas. That is how we read the site.

SR: When you have been working on a site, like an ocean, or river, for many years, you are engaged not only with the site itself but also with the people there. Is there a collaborative aesthetics that emerged through your practice?

RA:

To an extent, that the people were my guide and I am working. I am not sure there have been any collaborative aesthetics, because they were not producing any aesthetics, I was, so the term aesthetics what part, they enable me to see. So how I was looking at the river was part of my engagement with them? In both, I am not interested in the idea of water being separate from human society regarding political and social hierarchies. I am interested in the people who live on the river bank and who are the people who live on the coast. If you look at the class and the caste equation, they are the bottom layer of everything. So over the years, I have developed ways to work with the communities on the ground, especially migrant labor, and their mutual comfort in working with me. But I am not sure I will call it collaborative aesthetic. I cannot, as it is my aesthetic, because I can't put the aesthetic on anybody else.

So there have been strategies of collaborative works done, but I don't call it that I work like that.

SR: What kind of aesthetics emerges from your work in each site?

RA: The aesthetics completely changes with that understanding; because one is sensitized to complete different way of looking at something and also what is become important to look at in a sense, so your gaze is directed by your collaboration with the community. What you choose to do is depending on what kind of understanding you develop in collaboration with the community. That ultimately influences it; hence, it takes a long time for the aesthetics to emerge. Otherwise, I could go and do it. Why should it take such a long time to produce 20-30 works in 4 or 5 years? This is not very productive. It takes time because you have to know, why you are doing something and for example on the sea called 'Engines twenty Kilometers; the typography of twenty engines' and it comes from the idea that the hierarchy within the fishermen, the people with engines and the people without engine boats. So the idea of doing the work is completely because of the hierarchy in the community through the long association with them. Otherwise, at first glance, it looks like they are all fishermen but not all the same fishermen. Also, it is challenging for a man to talk to women, which is very intrusive. I am hesitant to do that, not because I am not aware of the dynamic but access as a man is very difficult, so you will see that probably if I was a woman, my work might reflect other kinds of aesthetics. Therefore, my personal location is very much guided by who I am, but what I am doing there is guided by what I understand. It entirely depends on collaboration with the community. So twenty engines, twenty kilometers I could not have done without spending time there. There are so many other works; the gaze is the part of understanding something, and how you get that understanding takes time. So you cannot go to the community and do something. I am working on waste pickers for a long time as an environmentalist. However, I have never worked there, never photographed there because I do not or I could not do it for some reason, cannot understand why, I have often been asked why I do not work on waste, but I said I do not know. So it does not always happen, and may because I was working with the community for some time, I never wanted this kind of relationship. So all community engagement leads to one kind of work, it may or may not.

When you show these works in art spaces, not all art spaces understand this, the complicated process the artists go through, and they are so used to seeing objects. It is almost like not only is the space isolated, but the people and the space are also socially isolated from the social realities. So the problem of art space is not the physical white gallery; it is what constitutes the global intellectual connection of the white gallery, which, mainly through the market and outside the market, the intellectual connection is missing. The problem is with the human interaction in that spaces; spaces institutions are not the space; people inhabit them. So I

really think the art market space over guides the art space, and I think we do not even acknowledge it to an extent. It is very determined.

SR: What is the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in your practice?

RA: Ethics reflects some values and aesthetics is like an appearance of some reality. So both ethics and aesthetics are some kind of reformatory words to the world outside. They both function performance to the world outside. I think they cannot co-exist without each other. Art is like a performance of society, and ethics are the reality of the social and political world; ethics/values are the critical ones, and they are values; without values, there is nothing. So they are in separable words; I think I cannot separate them. Even if we look at form, how do you draw on a canvas, and how extensive should the line be? That is something the human mind is guiding, and the human mind is devoid of values. So ethics and aesthetics are intertwined, and without ethics, there can be any aesthetic form that has no meaning.

Some question of something guides all my works, for example, 'Engines twenty Kilometers,' which is the typography of twenty engines. Through that work, typography of twenty engines in this category is a comment on technology, the access to technology and the politics of that. That is an ethical question, and it is an ethical viewpoint. Why there is not everybody has equal access to technology; for me, equal access is a part of a value of life that we should all have equal access to the world produces, how I think of that work and how I produced it in habitat with both these questions. Aesthetics, how I chose to photograph it in what way and why I chose to do putting in particular fashion is guided by the ethics, the values of equality and fairness. These are the elements, which are constantly guiding my work. The vegetable grows on the riverside, I am not looking at beautiful metro depot but I am looking at the vegetable pickers, waste pickers because of the social values. That is what draws me to that interest. I think even abstract expressionism has the same question. For me ethics guides all aesthetics.

**SR: What do you think about your role in the whole process?
(Your intention)**

RA: My intention is to show my point of view first to myself and to the world.

2.3. Interview with Atul Bhalla, Artist

By Sreejata Roy

Venue-Online Platform Skype

May 2020

AB: I want to go back to history because most of my work is centered on water.

In 1998 we had the first public swimming pool built in the DDA Sports complex in Hari Nagar, West Delhi. I have always been in West Delhi. This is the first swimming pool. It was I was the first and only one who joined the swimming. When I entered the water, it was only the medium and I. It was a very cathartic event. So when I went into the water there, I realize that there was an outsider view is also an insider view. Then I lose specific division changes, sound changes, lot of thing change when I am in the water. Earlier to this, I had gone to the swimming pool near my school, which was on Pusa Road, we used to go to the pool in the Railway Stadium near New Delhi Railway Station to swim, and our school used to take us there, so I had had some initial training there when I was in sixth and seventh grade.

In Delhi, and I am sure in many other parts of India, we get Municipality water one hour a day, so this is also where one has grown up with leaving the tap open and the water drip in. So morning hours when I was in Patel Nagar, early seventies and eighties, we used to leave our tape empty. So we wake up in the morning that 'Paani aah gayi, water has come. At that time, we never had water pumps, so within that hour from 6:30-7:30 in the morning, we had to clean, wash clothes, take a bath, do some cooking, clean the utensils, everything you do in that one hour and then we used to fill few buckets in the bathroom and five-six pans in the kitchen. We did not know whether there would be water in the evening; if the water came, it was our luck; otherwise, not.

However, that has not changed, we have pumps now, but still, we have to keep the tap open to switch on the pump. How do we know whether the water is there or not? So even today, we leave the faucet open, and around five thirty or six-thirty, water comes, and we switch the motor, and water will go up to the tank. This fact is not usually known by the people who travel to India, or a tourist from Bombay, etc., because Bombay has 24 hours water supply. I think it is the only city they have water supply all day, and the other towns have mostly Municipal supply, and they depend on the water supply at one particular time. Mostly the Municipal supply is for only one hour; we must realize that India is a water-scarce country.

Nevertheless, we have many rivers, but our water management is inferior. Delhi has seventeen days of rain, on average, per year. So all this stuff has come up as part of everyday living; waking up in the morning with the sound of dripping water in the metal bucket is the more atrocious way of waking up in the morning. So that was how every day worked, there was no Sunday, and we had to wake with the concern of water hoarding; otherwise, there was no life.

That happened, and the swimming pool thing occurred after the event. I was going to Bombay, where we used to travel by second class, frontier mail, and was sitting at the door. It was the

month of monsoon, the river was full, and the water level was high, the water was almost touching the track, so the train stopped on the bridge, and the water was rushing very fast under me, so I just had a feeling that I should jump, because I just want to be in this water. So all these events are very cathartic in my practice; it was the year 1998. Then I had a show of paintings in 2000 at the Arpana Caur Fine Art Gallery, which was not a successful show as far as I think today. Some of the paintings and drawings are nice, they are also on the water, as I was not satisfied, after that, I stopped working for four years from 2000-2004. While traveling a lot, I went up to Gangotri, Hrishikesh, Uttarkashi, Haridwar, and Yamunotri. Looking at ourselves, we are in the Ganga, we are bathing, people are using soap, and the water is getting dirty. We get charamrita, drink the water, drink the Ganga water, sit in the Dhaba (local restaurant) next to the river and ask for a bottle of Bislerie (packed mineral water). So how do we conceptualize this in our mind? How do we conceptualize this dichotomy? What is river water versus bottled water? Five minutes again, we had river water, and now we are sitting for lunch, so we want Bislerie, so all these informed my practice and then in 2005, we did a show, and Shukla Sawant has come over. I was working on the direct cast. Our space was occupied by water within other vessels, marking the evolution whether it is the bucket or the Bislerie. So I did a direct cast of Bislerie bottles. Earlier, there were 5 Litre bottles and 500ml bottles, and that was shown, and I called Shukla over to my studio, and she asked why don't you have a solo in Khoj? As I was not getting any gallery, I did not have any gallery. I have also done some watercolors in the 5 years of not working. There were small watercolors of plumbing objects. The water will always flow; that is the nature of water, because of gravity, because of incline, because everything the inherent nature of the water is to wash, so what we do is instead of flowing, we put it through pipes, and we control it. The work was called 'Control,' a set of twenty watercolors of plumbing objects. I did all, I did the direct cast, and also I did the first performance work. As I was going to the riverside, watching people bathing in the river and all the riverside activities, I thought that the camera also came in and the performer came in at the same time, this is December 2004, and I exhibited January 2005 in Khoj.

Next, I got myself photographed, and a friend helped me, immersing myself in the Yamuna, the work. The work's title was 'I was not bathing but drowning.' This was famous, and it was shown all over. Gayatri did a show, Public Places, and Private Places, that was done after the gestation period because this gestation period helped me to look at photography, look at performance, look at the violence of the camera, and how I conceptualize water in my work. All of these became important in the whole environmental venture; beside there was personal journey there was an environmental question, there was a questioning of photography, also because anybody or any of the artists were doing performative photographic work where they have turned their lens to that sense, because the camera is a violent tool and rather than being

a voyeur, I turned the camera on myself, that was the idea. So I did the work, and I was not waiting but plumbing; only one was shown at Khoj. This was an important show in 2005, and it was done when Delhi Biennale was talked off. It was when the talk on creating TAC was happening, and many people had come over. So that is how I started my journey from looking at something conceptual, and then I also thought that somewhere the gallery was not enough, and obviously, all of these works were very difficult to possess; nobody was buying photography at that time, nobody was video at that time, I didn't have a gallery, so I showed at Khoj, so what happened that same year, that I got a show at a private gallery, Anant. That was also October 2005, but she told me they had no space and asked me to hold the show during Diwali. Just because nobody goes to the gallery during the festival, Diwali. I have ten days to show during Diwali. But the people still remember the show because I have shown withering for the first time, I have a large mashk cast withering, mashk is a leather bag which is used in mosque for water, I have a direct cast of Bislerie bottle exhibited in water, in a static withering, where water is static again against the nature of water exhibited at the gallery as a withering. So all are those done that time. Then there was another work, 'Death, the River and Me', in which I removed my hair at the bank of the river, and another work, 'I was not waving but drowning. These works happened at Anant. It so happened that the gestation period of four years from 2000-2004 December proved very fruitful that I could have almost two solo shows in 2005. My journey started, and I was invited to do an art residency in Partapur, a village in Rajasthan. It was the Partapur Art Residency, and I worked there for a month. It was exciting because Partapur is in Banswara District, and this district is called the Cherapunji of Rajasthan because it is so green. The district has one thousand lakes, and the village we worked in was called Bori because it gives the maximum tax for wheat and grains. There are ninety-seven wells in a village of 10000 people. But the government has promised them piped water but I was looking at the wells and the baulis and how they are erected and built the baulis. Then in 2006, 'Dilli Durast' also happened, which is the most important residency in the history of Indian contemporary art. I am not saying because I was a part of it, but I am saying because this is the first time the residency took place in old Delhi. At the end of the residency, the works were exhibited at the site, whereas all other residencies are taken to exhibit in the white cube. In Partapur residency also, the works were exhibited at the residency site. In the art residency Dilli Durant, the concept was Gigi Scaria. He invited Himanshu Desai, he invited Mahmood Farooqi. Mahmood Farooqi was absolutely unknown at that point in time. Dastangoi happened first time at this residency. So Himanshu Desai was from Bombay, Gigi Scaria was a Christian from Kerala, Mahmood Farooqi was a Muslim from Delhi, I a Hindu is born and brought up in Delhi, who never know Old Delhi, this was the first time we all stayed in the art residency for a month in Old Delhi. Though few of us are residents of Delhi, there was a deal that we won't go home. We were in Chisti Kabar Bazaar all day, staying at Al Noor Hotel. It

was crucial that the first time I worked conceptually on 'Mashk,' which foregrounds water, the relation between Hindus and Muslims, and the act of halal, all those things were significant. That furthered my journey as a conceptual artist because I was not producing the work which could be consumed or exhibited in the gallery. Even though by 2005, by that time I did have a gallery show that was just a show, I never knew I would continue with that artwork. A lot of work came out of the water concept. The 'Piaoh' work came to be very famous. Piaoh at Fatehpuri became very famous. The 'Mashk' work, which later was in Deeksha Nath's show 'Still and Moving image' at Devi Art Foundation, Devi Art Foundation eventually bought that work. All of these are very important for my journey as an artist and conceptual artist, as well as working in the public field. So 'Dilli Durast' was over one month ago, and we built a relationship with the people staying around us in that whole bazaar. The people in the neighborhood. Along with the local people, the artists and art critics were invited to the show, whether it was Geeta, Vivan, Gayatri, or Dayanita Singh; everyone came to Old Delhi on a rickshaw and walked. They came up to that weird hotel terrace in Old Delhi. We exhibited videos on the terrace and some of my works on the water tank. It was the most fantastic space to put up the work. The work expanded because it conceptually exhibited the works at a location from where they were because people recognized each Piaoh and its existing sites. Then with Mashk work, they say, oh, you don't know how to halal, that family who came with their wives in a burqa and sometimes wives with wearing Hijab and the children were also there. Some of that told me "aap ko aata nahi halal karna/ oh! You are not comfortable doing halal!" You have not held the knife correctly; why didn't you also show blood?' So the work really expanded. After that, those works were never shown together in a white cube; they are shown separately shown in the white cube but never together. So it was an important part of the whole conceptual journey looking at water conceptually and looking at or putting works in the public domain, which many people think? If you remember my work in 48 degrees, there was a sticker I was giving out that said, 'Have you ever seen the Yamuna? Have you ever touched the Yamuna? That was the first time I was giving out the text in the public domain, and it was on the yellow placards; it was all over Kashmere Gate, and it led to the installation within the Kashmere Gate monument. When you drank water from the cup, which I was giving you there, it was a private act in a public space because the act of drinking is private. Still, it is in a public space. The monument is public, so while drinking publicly, participating, and taking away a sticker, a private act has turned into a public act, this I find very fascinating, and even today, it fascinates me about art and social practice where you can do something to the act, how can eating which is a private act become public. It is also similar to drinking and eating together in a public space, so that is my journey. At the time, very few people were working on the Anthropocene, on water, and on the politics of water. Ravi Agarwal, of course, has an NGO called toxic link; he was a little more informed than I am on things like government

environmental policy and how he is forcing a change, but that was a different thing. There were only two people at that time.

SR: How does your art practice reframe the descriptor 'site-specific'?

AB: One must understand in my practice, something may not also be noticed, that is, especially in the public space where I worked; I continuously revisit sites. Over time, I have worked several times on the Yamuna, and if you notice, the site has become crucial. The work was installed at the 48-degree Public Art Festival (2008), and the result was called 'Chhabil' at Kashmere Gate monument; I chose that site, even though it is a gated space, the monument, the archeological survey of India won't do much. However, I insisted on keeping that site. The site became extremely important to me because the real road used to go through the gates earlier. Old photographs prove that the road and the Kashmere Gate were opened before the metro came up. You could take a tanga or a rickshaw through the gates. This is also the northern gate of Delhi. It is the only gate facing north and north leading the road to Kashmir. Kashmir is in the Himalayas, and the Himalayas is the place where the rivers come from. North is where Ganga originated, and the Yamuna also formed. Also, there is a history of Kashmere gate in 1857. That was the gate that was broken through at the time. There was a pontoon bridge on the river Yamuna. At that time original Loha Pool did not exist. The Loha Pool came in 1917 or 1918 or maybe 1921. The site is essential for the location; the site is vital because the road, which leads to the north, leads to the river's source. Kashmere Gate is the site where it also has the inter-state bus terminal because that is the old Delhi where the wholesale market is. It connects the three other states, and many people come to shop in the entire sale market. Everyone takes their stuff and luggage home; even the trucks are loaded from Kashmere Gate. So it seems that it is an extremely loaded site, and to do something there and to give out water, I also made a projection in the nighttime. The projection was significant because I wanted work to be displayed even at night as I did not want it to be a day work only. During the day, it is an object and everyone can see the thing, seventeen feet high, inside the monument, you can walk across it, you can go up and drink water and whatever, but what happened in the evening, we have the projection of my Yamuna walk done in the previous year 2007 projected on the installation or art object and spilled over the monument. So the monument actually becomes alive. So when I was taking it down, the people from ASI (Archeological Survey of India) in Kashmere Gate requested me to leave the work (installation) there. They said people are coming back to the site just because of your monument. Otherwise, nobody visits the site, and only one and two will visit the site. There were not many histories walks at that time, the history walk fashion is now in the last five years. So the work brought the site alive; it brought the site's location alive. So site-specificity is essential in most of my work.

I want to give another example from 'I was not waving but drowning' where I drowned myself in the river. It is done in Jagatpur village; I have been going to that village for the past 4 years before I did that work. This work 'I was not waving but drowning' was done in 2004 and exhibited in 2005. Then in 2007, I used that space when I did the Yamuna walk, then I retook a photograph of the site, then I did work called 'The make' where I made a boat, and I put the boat in the water, and I sued the same site again. Continuously, I had been using that site on the bank of the river in Jagatpur village as a site for my relationship to the river. So here the site becomes extremely vital even emotionally because it is evocative for me. 1. It is a political site 2. Evocative site. Doing something with water is not only a political act, it is also a personal act, it is also an emotional act. It is not only a political journey but also a personal one. Otherwise, I would have been just an environmental artist; I don't call myself an ecological artist nor an activist artist; other people do, but I don't. I just call myself an artist. For me, sites are very central; I used this site three times or four times. If you look at the similar work I did in Patna, 'Aaj Bhi wahi Saab Hota raha' where I did a project for soil bite, done in Khoj Patna where I tied a text behind a boat, 'Aaj bhi wahi Saab Hota Baha'i'. It is the only bridge for a hundred kilometer north and south of Ganga, which connects north to the south of the city in Patna. Ganga is there and it comes to Gaighat and bridge is called Gandhi Setu. Three Gs of the subcontinent, Gai, Ganga and Gandhi and my text 'Aaj Bhi wahi Saab hota raha' is actually questioning big Gs, our relationship with very big concepts. Site is important, I can give several examples of my work where I examined the site in Hamburg when I did the work Yamuna Elbe project (Curated by Ravi Agarwal and German curator Tel Krause); I was the only artist who did the project in two spaces, which is Hamburg and Delhi. Delhi was the millennium park, I did the work. 'What will be my defeat?' I did again a project on the Yamuna, which was questioning Mahabharat. That site was crucial as it was the old Yamuna Pushta slum, the biggest slum, demolished. The question was, 'What is my space?' notion of space, the idea of space of the river, also as a site as a reflective site in Hamburg for those local people, so site plays a vital part for me. It is not only the politics but what it evokes for me.

SR: Do you think your practice can be under Socially Engaged Art?

How do your art interventions motivate and mobilize people from different backgrounds in the site of artwork/ public space?

1. **The relationship between your artwork and the public placement?**

1. **What is your role in the whole process?**

AB: What comes to my mind as social practice, as per Claire Bishop's 'Artificial Hell' in the first chapter, is something called 'social term'. In social terms, I can almost quote as I read it a

few days back, she mentions that what art is not socially engaged? So one does not have to be in the field to be socially engaged. Picasso was socially engaged, otherwise socially engaged would not have happened; similarly, Matisse's reaction to the social problems affected by the war; even though his palate changed after WWI and WWII, his work became very grey, but we also know that position after 1960 is different as you see the history of public engagement and socially engaged work. But I have told you that I don't want to call myself an activist, I would not like to add social practice to my work because there is much more to it. Even though its function within the realm of society. When I put a question and give out a sticker and say "Have you ever seen the Yamuna? Have you ever touched the Yamuna? Then after six months, find the sticker outside the Dhaba in South Delhi. Though my work was done in North Delhi, it fascinates me. So that way, yes, I am socially engaged. But whether my practice is only social practice, I don't think so because I do not want to take a hierarchical position that some socially engaged people do. That is what Claire Bishop has told also me that the danger is the hierarchical moral position that the socially engaged art does.

I will come to a complex reading of my last solo in connection to this. When I gave out stickers, and in Hamburg, it was done in large prints in hoarding size, and the text was in German; because of lack of site every five days, as you know with public artworks, you don't get permission to do something on the road, so we did on a boat. On the boat, there was large hoarding, and every five days, we changed, and it said 'What is my space, there were twelve questions and the question were philosophical and it came from Mahabharata question. Everyday people coming from the same office, same thing they would see a different question, so yes, I am questioning that. The same work manifested that into yellow stickers, which said *meri jagaah Kaha hai, Meri waja kya hai?* And all those things you can see on Instagram, which I putting up again, which I have done in 2007, and then I gave out other stickers, then recently I had a show with Shalini Passi Foundation, where I gave out stickers saying *Agar Mujhe nadi hai to Samundar Kaha hai?* It is about putting the question in the public domain. When I put the question in the public domain, I am social because I want them to take the sticker. Want them to take the work differently in different spaces. Most of the time, the sticker does not have my name on it and travels everywhere. One day I went to a party at somebody's home, and in the foyer, I found two or three stickers on the Yamuna, "Have you ever seen the Yamuna? Have you ever touched the Yamuna? I found some of the few yellow stickers and 'What is my space, and the host did not know they were my works; he had just collected them from somewhere. So it became exciting that the work can travel and has a life beyond the site and the social event; that's what is important to me where the work happened beyond the event because we all do an event when we do the social practice. Most works are done after an event, whether it is a performance or this, but how does the work lives beyond that, this is very fascinating for me. I continuously do that because I find most of the time, we artists blame

many other people like Clean up the Yamuna, Clean up this environment, do this, do that. My questions are more, and they go to philosophical terms, on the edge of philosophy, site, and location. So when I say what is my madness, it addresses the madness of man towards nature, madness of the river when its flood, conceptually does that and also addresses our own thing, what do I want to live with, have I succumb to the wants of neoliberal culture or have no madness at all left in me. So there is a number of ways the question can be answered. So that way yes, I am in the social. I would not call my practice completely social, I do Public art project, I do number of projects even if you remember in the art fair also, I was giving out badges to two-three Art Fairs ago, where I said almost similar words in Hindi, Mera Pagal pan kya hai, mere Jivaan kya hai and etc. Then in, a fancy party of Raqs Media Collective where have shown something at Devi Art Foundation, and it was the closing party of the Art Fair. There I was giving badges saying in separate words, 'The' 'Artist' 'will be' 'defeated' 'by' 'the' 'artworld' .I gave them separate badges, and only the artists I have been defeated, and a lot of artists got mad because they were making their own sentences as they are all separate badges with separate words. They made the sentences that the artists would defeat the art world. But at 4am, when the party finished, I gave the whole sentence in a bag, a lot of artists got mad at me and said what they were doing, the artists cannot be defeated. So all are these socially engaged work. If you want to call it social practice, I won't object to you, but I won't call it social practice. It is socially engaged, yes.

SR: How do you see your role in the whole process? When you say that your work has traveled from one part of the city to another as a sticker or text beyond the site/ location, beyond the artistic event.

AB: Referring to the question role of an artist in the whole process, I did not want to be didactic; for me leaving a question, most of my texts are questions, and some of the readers are statements that do not end with a question mark, and they are very abstract. I would instead leave the question and abstract in the public domain rather than become didactic. Did you clean up the Yamuna today? Did you pick up the garbage today? This does not work. When I ask a question, I am implicating myself; very few artists do this. In that way, I have a problem with a lot of Public art, a lot of social practice, that the artist does not implicate him or herself. I involve myself right from the beginning in whatever work I do. Where am I and how am I responsible for making this happen and not happening? So as an artist, I implicate myself. Through this process, I am involving myself by asking questions, and in the process, I am also questioning myself.

When I ask myself about myself on the Yamuna, I see that it may be three months ago. So what is my relationship, or when I ask what is my space? What is my space today is locked

up. The question becomes extremely pertinent if you ask the laborers who have to walk home. So my question is, what is my space, my cause, my madness, and my poison? All these can be asked through my number of works. I have proposed an underdeveloped project that never happened; it is on what limits a city has and defines hatred because the limit either be crossed or overcome. I overcome the hate to start loving not at all. Maybe I have traveled the limit of hate and started killing; we have overcome or crossed the boundary of greed. Coronavirus is the one through which we are looking at the world. All these things are essential to where I put the questions and me. As somebody will trigger some questions and I have no answer, I can only question myself, pose a question to the public, and not give any answers; that is where I see myself as an interventionist.

2.4. Interview with Sheba Chhachhi, Artist, Photographer, Activist

By Sreejata Roy

Venue- Artist's Studio, New Delhi

November 2019

SR: Brief on how you began your practice and what exactly inspired you to focus on women at work and the women's movement?

SC: I started as a documentary photographer; I was invited to Delhi from NID (National School of Design, Ahmedabad). I did some photography while I was training there; interestingly, those photographs were also of women I found hanging around and in the backyard of a temple; those were the earliest images. When I came to Delhi, my sister was very much involved in the women's movement, which was the peak of the anti-dowry movement. My sister was one of the founders of the first women's group in Delhi, called 'Stree Sangharsh .' She had been writing to me anyway about what they were discovering. It was a horrific situation, the so-called kitchen accident where young brides were basically murdered for dowry, and she had been writing to me and asking me to help her make some posters while I was in a queue. So I got really powerfully infected by what I saw and was sad, I was inspired when a small group of people was putting up, and I got involved and started photographing.

In a way, my instinct responds to what I am seeing. Over the years, I got increasingly involved with the women's movement, and I think I have photographed for ten and twelve years, building up a kind of history. The photographs are initially really meant for us. They were not for publications or newspapers. In fact, in the beginning, the mainstream media representation

of women was either victim or consumerist homemakers, so it was also trying to develop an alternative way of representing women in struggle. Women try to change their conditions. If this went parallel, I wasn't working not as an artist at that time; I was working more as a designer; basically, I was involved in visual communication, and my friend, who is also from NID, set up a small studio. We were developing communication materials for people working on the ground. So health was a big issue, health education, disability, and urban issues. I also got very much involved with the resettlement when the master plan was made; this was in the year 1980. So I am talking for a span of 1980-1990 roughly, over ten years. So that involvement with the NGOs, we were talking on the ground, working with the people's collective, people's movement was there throughout and a very intense engagement with the women's movement. There was also peace movement, anti-nuclear movement, all of that, especially urban issues in whichever way involved in that. So this stands about ten years, and by the end of the eighties, 89, 90, I started to feel that in my attempt to challenge stereotypes of women, I had created a new stereotype, which I had come to demonstrate. I found the press photographers there, and they were making the women pose slightly the same way as in my photographs, so by that time, I was covering movement, etc. I started thinking about documentary as a mode and posed serious questions about it.

Basically gives you the idea that this is the truth; there is no such thing. The documentary is as interpretive as any kind of artistic work and is subjective. So what I had created came from my personal interaction with the situations, politics, etc. There were also questions about the power relationship, coming from elite society and feminism; one of my key things is to question the power relationship in the society, to track the structures and how the rules are constructed to oppress the women. So I began to question the power relation in my photography. So these women I had been photographing for ten years, there are many homemakers, good close friends, and fellow travelers, we worked together and knew each other. I felt the way I represented them that was only one aspect of the whole work (working class, lower middle class, mixed background, but they are all part of the women's movement in Delhi). We did a lot of workshops, teachings, women's communication schools, skills in rural areas, Hindi speaking belts, poster making, etc. So this is very connected to grass root kind of activism.

Then I went for an experiment to invite seven of these women to collaborate with me, all taking charge of their own representation. So in a way, today, everybody does stage portraits or construct portraits, but I think nobody was doing that at that time. So what we would do that, I spent a lot of time with each woman and she would place, she would choose a posture, would choose props, though, which she could tell a story, and we would work together to play like a theatrical set up, very performative. It was an invitation to perform ourselves and develop feminist portraits. It is also an attempt to shift power, where she has much more agency by controlling how she looks. I still have the ability. I was still behind the camera, but there was a

difference; the balance had changed. Then I think we made a theme out of what happened between us, their subjectivity, my subjectivity, and I call it inter-subjectivity space. That, for me, is also a turning point in my practice as a documentary photographer. Whatever work I did after that tended to be in the same collaborative mode, so the later works with much greater engagement with the women I met.

So this was also a shift away from the documentary, a change into to kind of fiction. It was docu-fiction because the women's stories were made from their experiences. They were also fictionalizing themselves, performing themselves, so it was fascinating; also exciting was the working class women, who were used to photography as a part of the market, market studio situation which is performance. Where you are going using their props, there is a backdrop; this was a straightforward way. They were willing to perform; however, the middle-class women wanted to be discovered, and they wanted to be somehow revealed, which is really the.....movement, the camera revealing. The other thing that was challenging was one image being a de-central portrait. When I shot the work, I put together photos taken across ten years. So images from the street, from our stage series, and two, three, four, sometimes five images would create the portrait of one woman, and in that sense, the moved my way perhaps towards art. I also had reached a point, and at the same time, questioning, what we were doing, we were making some kind of educational material, exhibitions. There was a time when I reached a limit, and I wasn't challenged anymore, and we were doing very well, with plenty of work, etc.

After getting too engrossed, I stopped doing that kind of work. Then, my engagement moved, and issues continued, but I went out to explore. So trying to find other languages, I started working with clay, terracotta sculpture, and pottery. So a period of experimentation brought these together in my first Installation, which combines photograph sculpture and text-based research, 'Wild Mothers 1' in 1993, exhibited in the UK, 'Wild Mothers 2' in 1994 in Delhi, a version of the same show. At that time, I was unfamiliar with the term 'Installation,' for me, these are the forms. They are making sense to me; this is what I want to speak about. I was looking for history, and indigenous feminism, so doing a lot of research, reading on aesthetics, and extraordinary poetry written by Agya Maha Devi, by these women, who stepped out of the home and thoroughly questioned the patriarchy within the religious prohibition. So all these things came together. So in 'Wild Mothers 2', shown in Delhi, the Goethe Institute combined images from the women's struggle to change society, which was from the women's movement and women seeking a transformation along with history with such women in India. There were many reproductions, historical names, and images of female power from a century to the present.

SR: The relationship between the artwork and the public placement?

SC: To me, the relationship with the viewer/ public was always significant; the reason I went to this expression; is personally, I don't want to show photographs on the walls. I felt that people flip through images like they flip through magazine pages and don't really engage. So 'Wild Mothers 2' was about trying to include the viewers. It had translucent images. It was an electrical structure with a reflective surface below, so the viewer where she stood would look at one image and, through that, see another image. That would build one kind of story, and if she shifted here, she could build another story; she also saw herself reflected within the Installation. She was part of the story that was in Goethe Institute, Delhi. I brought lots of groups; I brought the Asti group. I have got some lasam, we have got a lot of discussions. For years I have set up exhibitions of photographs in bastis /slums and removed lights on pegs. I was actually liking the possibilities that I create things that were very difficult to develop in a raw state, so I was bringing the women instead of taking them out. I did that not only for my own work; other women artists were showing what was interesting to them; I used to take them there as well. That was an early period when I first moved into exhibition space, and then all my works were in cultural centers and public spaces. For cultural centers, I did not tie up with the gallery; my first gallery show was in 2004 or 2005, much later, which is, for me, a much more privatized and elite space. So in terms of public engagement, it has been a significant part of my practice. I continuously dealt with the question of the relationship with the viewer participants. It was always a desire to make the viewer participate in the artwork and not a passive consumer of the image of the artwork.

SR: When you talk about the sites Basti/slum and cultural centers, how do you reframe the descriptor 'site-specific' in your work?

SC: The public's engagement runs through all of my work. Now site-specificity is more particular in Delhi Public library, for example, which happened much later in 2008. It is profoundly site-specific, where I discovered the hidden kind of duct under the library, the swimming pool, on which was my whole Installation, part of the 48-degree Public Art Festival. I have researched that there is a water history in that area. So it was like unfolding the archive of that site as well as creating an immersive experience and bringing in the number of layers of cultural memory around the question of water, which was deeply bound to the site. For me, that is one example of a really site-specific.

Another example is the shopping mall (Select City on press enclave road opposite Khirki lane and Khoj). I developed an interactive virtual reality project around GM food(genetically modified food). There was a huge debate going on at that time, specially on eggplant; Jairam Ramesh has put lot of debate across the country, lot of vested interested scientists and ecologists were in the same usual argument and pointing the people without any

responsibilities what that means etc. The shopping mall became a site, which was a site for consumption and I also noticed there a lot of people who are going to the mall, to buy, to eat, it was going into the heart of the consumerism and trying to stick to people back, so I use very playful method, it's a work called 'Bhogi Rogi' basically it was a room you enter, it has two ways screen at one end. As soon as you enter, you see yourself on the screen, transmitted by a camera and mixed with the images that are being projected on the screen already. So it starts with a 'sarso ka khet'/'mustard field' and you are standing there and the flowers are rising up and slowly it becomes, it was one of those seeds that was under the threat of genetically modified food(that is mustard seed), then it slowly filling up with mustard oil, this came out as some kind of weapons, so you go through series of psycho of transformations where each of these food whether it was mustard, rice, tomato, eggplant so as you through these, initially it brings fun, but you start seeing yourself being made out of what you eat. Its start getting evocative, and while you are playing with your tool, you will see on the screen and people play with it and enjoy and its fun and its strange. Then you start filling with toxic stuff and the body starts shrinking and it disappear and is taken over by the GM Food and suddenly see your face different and it is a cycle for 6-7mins. The idea was to use playful through performative way, so that people think about what they consume and how that constructs their bodies. It was an interesting experience and it was huge involvement. It was 10000 people walk through in the mall. While you are inside, you are absorbed with yourself but you can be seen from outside, so everyone outside room could see what is happening to the person inside which is two way reflection and this worked very well except once the person realized they could be seen outside, they quickly send someone to take a photograph and the entire attention goes with the photograph. I would say that partly the work was re consumed and it's a tricky business to work with narcissism. The idea of narcissism is very powerful and I tried to work with it and give it a twist and it works but its not so easy to charge and predict what is happening, but it was very interesting and this for me is very site-specific and also try to use very low cost mechanical, no high tech. This travel many places, to Chennai, and to museum spaces.

SR: How you see in your work that it motivates and mobilize women to create their own space

SC: I don't see its like a one to one relationship and would say my work, consciously facing the feminist group enable empowerment to create that space, so that's the broader context. My work contributes in enlarging, adding layers meaning towards that , for example, history, indigenous feminism, for example issues that were not considered so much part of women's area like urban planning, so actually getting women to think that they could contribute to occupy the space, maintain the space, they should be active contributors, in that sense yes,

but I have seen that my artwork enable to create space. I think the artworks created space temporarily within which women can find space and internally I met.

SR: Do you think that your artwork creates a new audience?

SC: There are many publics when we speak about public art and public space, specially in a city like Delhi, which is so differentiated, by caste, gender, by history, by many ways, so I can say there are certain kind of public that came in the Installation in the daily public library in 48 degree projects, range from the library users to street kids to passersby to creative community, also to the students from University who are interested in ecological issues and some unknown and unspecified people who just walked in and to me that was one of the most profound public I have done, because of the immersive nature of experience and because people could spend time in that space , there were volunteers who hang around and gather feedbacks. It was really interesting to see the way people engaged, the way people read the stories, the way the people responded to the condition of Yamuna, also a sense of wonder and magic, just to find how one boy from the street was keenly looking at the video. The guard says, he comes everyday and leave. However, I trained the guard that your job is not to stop, but go to the street and ask people to come and experience the Installation. They also did like that.

2.5. Interview with WALA Collective (Akansha Rastogi, Paribartana Mohanty, Sujit Mallik)

By Sreejata Roy

Venue- Artist's Studio, New Delhi

December 2019

SR: Describe your process and objectives of WALA as one of the collaborators from the group. With a public art grant, like the one that you received from FICA, how do you engage with the concept of Public Art? I'm not talking about Atul Bhalla, Ravi Agarwal, or Sheba Chhachchi. Their practice is different. I have specifically chosen the WALA because I have followed your project events. I am very interested in knowing how you interpret public art and how you three (You, Paribartana, and Sujit) started your journey.

AR: So, by a lot of hit and trial, thinking about ways of working together. Paribartana and I graduated from the same Master's program. So, we knew each other. We learned a lot of artist friends, so we made many groups of three, like many collectives before we came to WALA. We collaborated on several films, where everybody pitched in with other artists. Gradually we were trying to find ways of working together. We registered a society... didn't know anything at all, we were young and just right out of college, but we wanted to make some society; I don't know what triggered it, but we wanted to work together. So that was the main intention. We didn't know about Raqs Media then; we didn't know about all these collectives. Still, we wanted to figure out a body — a formal body or an informal body. So we tried to make an all-India sort of group, or society of artists. We followed it with two meetings with a lawyer to actually register.

Find what exactly we wanted to do, so it was more to do with more of a place to meet to see films together, something like that. So we thought, let's figure out the content, what exactly it is, and what kind of work we want. People kept coming and leaving, so different formations happened with other people. Finally, somehow, with Sujit Mallik(another colleague) and us, we stuck around for several meetings and met very regularly, at least once a week. So before we call ourselves WALA, we had already together applied for three years regularly for FICA Public Art Grant. The third time we got it. When we got it, then we became WALA.

SR: You and Paribartana were in the residency at Sarai-CSDS?

AR: Yes, in 2010, we were in City Studio 1 residency; three of us Sujit, Paribartana, and I, were already working together. We were applying for proposals. So, in 2008 and 2009, we applied for the FICA grant. 2008 you were awarded the FICA Public Art grant.

SR: 2008

AR: Yes, 2008, you got the award, so we applied. We got the FICA Public Art grant in 2011. Writing proposals became the starting point for us to bring our ideas together and find out that if we are to do this, then how? So it was essential to find common ground. So what was evident, as both come from Orissa was that most of the projects we were writing and working towards happened to be in Orissa. Sujit is also from Orissa. So there were bizarre connections among ourselves. Paribartana and I were dating and Sujit and Paribartana speak Oriya; they've known each other for years. Sujit and I were connected in very different ways, apart from Paribartana. So we were able to figure out a common ground. 'City as Studio' became a crucial point to push ourselves to do some work. We were writing proposals but wanted to do some work. Kachra Seth was our first work.

SR: Was it part of 'City as Studio' in Sarai-CSDS?

AR: No, it was not part of City Studio, we completed the residency. Being part of the City Studio residency gave us the courage to just do the work without caring; it was a fantastic group of practitioners in different fields. We were trying out different and new ideas. Everybody was experimenting. For Raqs also this was their first one. They were celebrating ten years of Sarai. It was an exciting moment; we could hear from the best of Sarai people, getting introduced to Sarai; I had no clue about it. From the visual art field, there was no access...my background is... I did Literature then History of Art from the National Museum. Not from Baroda or JNU, I didn't have that sort of access, coming from a very trained perspective. I was aberrant at the National Museum Institute, and everywhere, so I had a different view everywhere. I didn't know; Baroda has Art History etc. Parbartana and Sujit had done their bachelor's in Orissa. Both did their bachelor's from Bhubaneswar, Orissa. They came here to do their Master's. So that's how we met.

SR: Are they coming from a visual art background?

AR: They are visual artists. We were all trying to figure out the art scene in Delhi, figuring out art spaces in this. That is also the period that we were already here, 2005 onwards, the art scene was still at its peak, the crash hadn't happened...seen the parties, witnessed the entire boom period. Now getting to Sarai at this point made a lasting impact, merging different disciplines, putting more importance on the conversations, the process, and thinking more about it than the end product. All of that had a lasting impact. They gave us a lot of energy to do things rather than thinking about them beforehand; whatever we needed to think about could be done later. For us, this instantly became more interesting. Living in Delhi, everything is located in South Delhi, the entire art scene and central. Most of the young artists when land in East Delhi. I remember during openings, buses full of artists used to come from East Delhi. East Delhi was a significant location that way. But event-wise, nothing was happening. So we were interested in shifting that access. We began to explore Delhi, and the metro had just started. The Delhi metro gave a different perspective to look at the city. At Anand Vihar, ISBT, or Nizamuddin, you could see the crowd and not much else. The Delhi metro gave us a different idea of crowds passing by and trespassing. We were interested in these visuals. All of us, like Sujit, had lived in other parts of Delhi by that time. I used to stay on the North campus first, then came to South Delhi for my Master's. Sujit had lived in Badarpur area, Najafgarh area. Lived-in experiences were part of our experiences; we were interested in this outer part of Delhi, we used to just sit in the metro, go anywhere, explore the city, just go to Samaypur Badli, randomly taking the Mudrika (name of bus route in the inner ring road), being part of City Studio helped us to direct that energy in a very concentrated way. So we realized that that was already the focus and should be the subject and content of our work. We got a way

to articulate that. So Kachra Seth happened in that way. Right after we got out of City Studio residencies, in September 2010 is when the Commonwealth Games were happening in Delhi. Already so much focus was coming on Akshardham and that area. So we stretched that to bring it to the Gazipur side belt of Gaziabad and East Delhi up to Semapuri. We did our performance...

SR: What did you do in City Studio, which happened in two phases?

AR: In City Studio, we worked individually, not as WALA. Sujit joined City Studio phase 2; he got individually selected in the second one, Paribartana and I. I had also applied with a proposal, but they didn't choose my proposal but put it into rappoter. I was supposed to write down what everybody was saying. But Paribartana was selected as an artist.

SR: What was Kachra Seth? Was it a performance?

AR: Very interestingly, only one person was performing. It was only Sujit performing like there was only one fictional character we created called Kachra Seth. We played around with his appearance and disappearance. He would appear on a specific date and time. Now though, it has changed. In 2010 the Seemapuri main road, from Old Seemapuri bus station to Dilshad Garden chowk...very very large road from old Seemapuri bus stop to Dilshad Garden extension chowk, that very, very wide road, at the center had a divider of 10-15 feet and on top of that divider was a garbage point. On both sides of the road, slums and rag pickers would work. So the partition was the work area. One side of the road is Gaziabad, and another side is Delhi. From that point, Shahadra cuts. So we were very interested in that middle point where they work, where they stay in the garbage pit land, a unique site. All that we had announced about the event, we created an invite of our own. We said Kachra Seth would descend on this date, this time at this point in the middle of the road. So Kachra Seth appeared as a Mughal king with a lotus bud in one hand and with a mirror in the other. He arose and what he did was, made him silently walk that path. In between, there was also a masjid. Near that garbage, near the middle of the road, he walked to the sewer and touched it; there were mobile toilets around it. He went inside, and he did a couple of acts, and people walked alongside him. It was September; thus, it was rainy. Obviously, it was heaps and heaps of garbage, and it's not just waste; it is lots of different kinds of materials. So walking with him meant you would get dirty, and the ground would be up and down, not stable. The legs will definitely sink into it. It was also raining. He did some acts, but because he was a silent observer and he was utterly contrasting, he was wearing cheap necklaces, all of the dresses we had designed. He was a complete contrast to the surrounding. We call these incidental audiences audience; the invite-only went out to the art audience. Some art audiences were there, some of our artist friends. Then we were joined by a big crowd of people living there, who were trying to understand,

know and ask, enquiring and poking Sujit to speak. So, what was very interesting was we called the kit WALA collective performance, but it was performed by one person. After that, people kept asking if this was Sujit's performance, the idea of the performer, the artist, plus it was happening in East Delhi, people had to take the metro, and walk out to the periphery. Lots of people came like Inder Salim came. This created some questions that were uncomfortable for a lot of people. When he touched the sewer, he hugged the sewer pipe running; you can see this in one of the images. We literally had to bring him out of that. We had to take him out on a bike and rescue him because people were all over him, so they snatched his necklaces. We were filming, taking photographs, everyone was making something or the other with their mobile phone cameras. We planned to document the performance. Obviously, there were two layers of the audience. Whoever was different, the local residents were looking at them. As Sujit was not speaking, everybody else had to talk, negotiate, and answer what was being asked. "Are you making a film"? "What is happening?" "Explain." "What are you doing"? "What is he looking at now"? "Elaborate." "Because he was just silently observing. He would just walk. All the art audience with us, who would look different, became answerable to everyone else. They had to elaborate, explain or develop their own methodology to find an answer. And for us, we recorded all of those conversations. For us, that negotiation was for each one of us to make. Some were walking by the side because everybody wouldn't dare to step on shit. Those discomforts created a lot of questions and energy. So this community that we were able to evolve around WALA. Everybody was excited to do something of their own.

I don't know if all of this is important for your research.

SR: Yes, yes, definitely, I am listening to what you are saying, and I am going to ask you questions about it. It is fascinating how people were getting to engage on their own. And then different layers of people and different ways. For example, the performer is not talking. I didn't know that this was like this.

AR: Everybody after that got so excited about the miniature art. Everybody was waiting for the next performance because some entity that didn't exist was created; it disturbed everyone because Sujit had to literally be rescued from there. We had to move him out of the scene as it became violent at one point. And we didn't know how to end it, escape the background, or make him disappear. He appeared, and his appearance caused many problems and divides. There were these audiences with whom we didn't know what to do. How to engage with these energies and deal with these answers. It lasted from half an hour to more than an hour. Slowly walking, observing the drain, the road had caved into the drain, so he looked at the trough. Once he disappears and one of the toilets, he goes in. Whoever could climb would climb because everything was filthy. People climbed the toilet wall to see what he was doing inside.

When he came out, the lotus bud was open. So he was doing soft, silent, subtle acts as the Mughal king appeared in imaginary geography. But it really challenged us, with questions we were unprepared for. How to deal with the audience and these questions of ethics and morality or anything like that. That helped us to push for the FICA grant, so we knew what our project was now. Before that, all our projects were based in Orissa.

Now when we got the award, our project was based in Delhi. So it became the Kachra Seth observatory. We expanded from East Delhi to the entire city of this observatory. Since he disappeared, what would happen now? Where he would appear. We imagined those possibilities where his appearance was important. So the next appearance of the project under the FICA grant occurred at the Rashtrapati Bhawan, at the India gate. He had reappeared outside the National Museum, between the National Museum, India Gate, and the National Gallery of Modern Art. He had to come somewhere here. He had to go to Rajpath. He had to be present from there to Rajpath.

We were interested in the politics of the centre and periphery, figuring that out. We don't believe in that. We don't come from that angle, but we were interested in mapping this distance now that he has appeared here, thinking about waste. Then we called the project 'Narcissist' and got a job in the mirror shop. Standing on Rajpath looks almost narcissistic, the most eventful street in the country, but also like a mirror image; one side looks exactly the same as the other. The landscape and how the Rajpath is designed are mirror images. So narcissists got a job in the mirror image and never came out. How about distorting the architecture of Rajpath. So we carried a mirror with us throughout the performance, and we were reflecting the light of these architectures, so it would distort in the mirror.

SR: Were you not chased by the police?

AR: We thought we would be. We wanted to replicate another group of pilgrims; the performance was on Sunday. Loads and loads of buses come to India Gate and the National Museum. We were again a group of 50-60 people, art people, who landed on a Sunday morning at 11ish at India Gate for a picnic. We were moving in that large hoard from the National Museum to NGMA walking on that road. So again, the distribution of the performance, there were some acts that we performed; it was more of a leisure walk. So walking was an exciting and essential part of the performance. Walking, touring, and guided tours became a form for us to think about it. So, where the performer is always missing, Sujit comes out, and Kachra Seth disappears. It is groups of people, then certain acts are happening, but how is the performer? The person who is to be questioned is not there! We were interested in distributing that agency of the artist or the performer.

SR: My question is, first, as this project is very site-specific, do you know why you chose that site? You've explained why you are changing the location. But how do you reframe that idea of site-specificity? How do you reframe the rubric of this site-specificity in your work? Yes, for the first performance. Overall how does Wala reframe the term site-specific?

AR: We are working with the site as a National Museum is also a place where most of the meetings were held, where both of us studied. We spent two-three years there. So mostly, all the sites that we have selected, we'd had a relationship with for several years. So there is a continuance, they have been in our thought, way of working. They have been part of our framework. So we have not selected a site where we have not worked with the community or group we didn't know. So in that way, we really didn't venture out. We didn't, and we didn't know how to also. We were never invited or asked to work within a particular specific context. So most of the work originated from our own way of thinking and working and came from our own process. So they are more embedded in the sites. It's coming organically from work, from our consideration of one site connected to the other, to the other. So in that sense, site-specific comes from the thinking of the work.

SR: Is site important in your work?

AR: It is.

SR: How do you reframe site-specificity in your work?

A: It's a fundamental question now how do we look back and reframe the locations? The sites we selected were so integral; we were observing them and giving back...like we were weaving them; they can't be separated. How to reframe them, rephrase site specific...I think the site is a... it's not that we had gone out to think of sites; we did. More or less, we ended up pulling them into a narrative. Sometimes narrative came. First, the site came later, or the site came first, and the description came later. All sites were interconnected and not unrelated or out of our zone. We were playing with the material we'd grown up on and experienced in Delhi, as all of us were migrants. Our way of looking at Delhi and being curious about it. Wala was more of an articulation of thinking with that curiosity of a big city and our relationships with it. So anything and everything was interesting; for example, the Delhi metro was one of our sites. We were totally blown away, and I still can't get over it. I am still as curious as I was. Each time they open a new route on the Delhi metro... We were totally blown away by how it goes from underground and comes over the ground. What you then see and what you then imagine. So that imaginative quality opened up a whole new way of looking at the city for us. Okhla route that goes from Panchsheel Park to Noida, this is the pink line. It goes through the Okhla

Bird Sanctuary, which was totally missing; we didn't know this perspective to look at Okhla. Unless you are living in that area, it's incredible. You see Delhi so differently. Looking at the Yamuna while going to East Delhi from that bridge. For us, the sites were perspectival frames to sensorily. The site was also a methodology for entering into our content. I think it's not only the site-specific; these workers were something that stayed in the area. It comes off, it's durational, it's ephemeral as it was a performance. But it was a performance where the performer was also missing; what you see are all pictures of gatherings. So we were interested in the form of gathering. We began to design these gatherings. The content became less important; what is being talked about is less critical, but creating that frame and creating that duration and a little pocket within that site became more important. This time, we made in the "Narcissist got a mirror job." We couldn't have created it during the 2 - 3 years we spent in the National Museum as Master's students or regular visitors to India Gate. We couldn't have developed that pocket. That time was precious; they are like black holes, like temporal pockets in that site, holes in a site that disappear.

2.6. Interview with DIAA, Navjot Altaf, Artist

By Sreejata Roy

Venue- Email & Telephone

June-2020

SR: How can art interventions motivate and mobilize different disenfranchised communities to create their own spaces in public?

1 N: Each place has a unique set of conditions and needs to be understood deeply by the artist. So the context in which artist works, researches and experiences situations for a short or for a considerably long period of time becomes crucial.

To answer your question on the basis of my practice and experience in the context of Bastar I would say that the Interaction and communication with the local artists and the community people in the neighbourhood in Kondagaon, Bastar- (where more than hundred artists work in different mediums) - at various levels, helped me and my indigenous artists colleagues to be able to reflect on distinct aspects of our own/individual lives and cultures we came from, which stimulated us to regard and develop an insight concerning why and how presumptions or preconditioning could hinder the ways to explore possibilities of learning -(learning as we

know is a social process) -from diverse cultural resources, and from lived experiences and knowledge and artistic expression of local indigenous communities my colleagues belonged to.

Artistic expression as John Dewey points out ... “articulates the significance and the manifestation of life for a particular culture...”

*To get an idea- how the whole journey began I would like you to read an extract from one of the interviews as I won't go into basic details while responding to your questions.

.... When I travelled to Kondagaon Bastar area to see the memorial pillars installed in public spaces in 1996, I met some of the local artists who were trained and worked independently at Shilpi Gram studios- (conceived and built by internationally known adivasi bell metal sculptor Jaidev Baghel whom I knew since 1973) , - including those who are my colleagues now. They expressed their interest in interaction with artists from outside to take a break from what they were doing. So based on a mutually written proposal to the IFA (India Foundation of for the Arts), the project *Modes of Parallel Practice: Ways of Art Making* - to work side by side (making independent works) at Shilpi Gram, was the starting point. J. Swaminathan's collection and catalogue writing for Bharat Bhavan had raised some questions in my mind and I saw myself intervening in that area from a feminist perspective (because my interest was not to look at Adivasi art merely for formal significance, unconcerned about the cultural/historical context in which their art is produced , my intention was to engage with the visual field from a premise that is informed by a progressive political perspective as one looks at any other contemporary art practice) For me a question concerning the self and the other/ individual- was relevant ...

The process of working in a common space (Shilpi Gram studios) gradually encouraged communication leading to extensive travel within Bastar, where one not only sensed the dynamics of local art and culture, but also felt the socio-economic and power asymmetries at almost all levels. There were no women practicing art independently despite being trained at Shilpi Gram under various schemes. Numerous travels with my colleagues included visiting few high schools in Kondagaon.

The focus of our conversation at Shilpi Gram studios was on how to understand each one's premise and position as artists, whether we could communicate on art and other social issues, about our limitations and conditioning as we came from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, developing ways of coining the terminology, reading and re-defining the terminology of art/craft and artist/craftsperson in the context of art history in India,(Art historian Bhanumati Narayan and Shivaji Panikkar were part of the project –as observers and resource

persons) and questions related to representation and self-representation from different perspectives and sexual hierarchies. Further, the language produced through different modes of art practices became important, what specific artistic practices are doing, and the process of self-reflection through practice in the context of critical thinking was deliberated upon.

Over a period of two years, collaboration as a strategy was negotiated between us when we intervened in a public space. What I would like to emphasise here is that it was not only about my intervention in a their area, but my Adivasi colleagues' intervention in their own areas as artists. The nature of our collective projects was different from other local artists working in the guild kind of environment run by different individuals, most of them worked as assistants in some guild or the other in Kondagaon....

...Here I want to mention that I had not gone to Bastar with an intention to collaborate with Adivasi artists. The IFA grant we received was to encourage interaction between artists from different cultural backgrounds. Which slowly moved towards exploring the possibilities and the problematic of experimental modes of collaborative art making? (Nancy Adajania and Navjot Altaf in conversation with Amrita Gupta Singh- | HAKARA JOURNAL 2019)

Back to your answer

After being engaged with artists, people from different professions, community members, activists and cultural activists etc. in Bastar I would say that art intervention can stimulate and invite local communities to participate in creating public spaces for their own usages. We have experienced that through interactive working processes, research, and collaborations, artists could 'enhance levels of sensibility to processes that connect'. And the artists along with the participants from the communities or other professions could take a position of enablers... 'the ones who trigger its initiation'.

On the other hand in Northern central part of Chhattisgarh in the coal mining area, despite all kinds of political pressures, communities from more than 80 coal mining affected and to be affected villages, have come together- (movement known as Koyla Satyagrah, followed on the principles of non-violent, Salt Satyagrah Gandhi had in the 30's)- to collectively resist displacement and forced evictions for coal mining ...they are in favor of renewable energies as they want to continue farming and be the stakeholders and decision makers. They are a community of resistant... a result that is procured through co-participation, and dialogue. I find that, that kind of public spaces where they gather for political meetings or for other political activities are spaces they create for themselves for feedback and collaboration, places of containment. It is in such settings I witness the emergence of the processes of learning for life; it is there that living knowledge or wisdom comes forth and one can sense that the "main ecological crisis for them is the increasing loss of connectedness". (The video work done between 2014 -2018, *Soul Breath Wind* has emerged from my long standing interaction with

them, with their co-operation, shared experiences, knowledge and their trust on me) On my part I always take the outcome of the process back to them.

SR: What kind of Socially Engaged Art practice emerges through this process of mobilization? (Please explain through your own practice)

NA: You see to understand parallel and other modes of art making practices through the process of interaction, working side by side in a common workshop space in Kondagaon , as independent artists from different socio-cultural backgrounds, and engaging with high schools we (adivasi artists Rajkumar Korram, Shantibai, Gessuram from Bastar and myself from Bombay) got interested in co-operative / collaborative art making processes and mutually negotiated a strategy, an endeavour that we found exploratory and dynamic and it further helped us question our visual and cultural literacy, limitations and conditioning. as we came from different cultural backgrounds, to discuss our art practice/s critically, we continued making efforts to coin terminology and the language to have deeper discourse on art. On the other hand Interaction with community members in the immediate neighbourhood and in close by villages gradually helped us understand the workings of the social networks of different villages, and issues associated with respect for adivasi culture and human dignity.

When I look back at what has emerged through the process - Firstly- what was most important was the process of communication between us (artists) which stimulated / motivated us to working with the community members as more people wanted to join in.

Secondly- when we collectively intervened in a public space such as *Nalpar* sites where people of all ages come to fetch water. We saw it as a process and site oriented project - that evolved over time - from our interaction and engagement with the community members and with the municipal authorities in Kondagaon- for the allotment of sites for this collaborative experimentation as the hand pumps are installed by the municipality, but with no proper drainage, resulting in unhygienic surroundings.

Our concern was to transform such public sites aesthetically along with the neighbourhood communities, where they themselves (women, children, and men) come for a mundane job like fetching water for domestic or other usage.

Designs for *Nalpar* sites were worked out collectively on the basis of artists' and communities' shared experiences and our (artists) understanding of the significance of signs, symbols, objects incorporated by adivasi communities of the area during rituals and social functions.

These interactions expanded our perceptions of how symbolism is basic to the human mind and the most ancient and fundamental method of expression. So whilst working on hand-pump

designs, we sensed that symbols for adivasies have been effective at several levels and how certain symbols over the centuries have continued to be part of their spiritual life as well, and how in present times they are able to relate to the new signs, which have been evolving due to changing political, cultural and economic environment.

So if you notice, our hand pump structures have incorporated earliest /pre-historic signs of water and earthen pots, which are still used by adivasis in their ritualistic patterns, whereas water taps and hand-pump signs that we have used, are used by the political parties as well - as their election symbols in present times... most interesting part of this whole process was the emergence of unanticipated insights which could transform or reverse the previous thoughts and decisions...

Since we have been engaged with questions around contemporary art practices that are inclusive of people's participation, process of which entails a methodology that is distinct from a studio-based practice in which the site of production and reception of the artwork are separate from one another, It requires a kind of critical approach that takes into account the generative role of reception. In such art processes reception is part of art production.

I find that Grant Kester expresses what I want to point out. In his words, 'when we are dealing with projects in which the viewer or participant answers back and in which those responses have the potential to reshape and transform the work itself over time, we require a more nuanced understanding of reception.' (Kester 2013: p. 7).z

SR: How does Socially Engaged Art practice reframe the descriptor "site-specific"? (Please explain through your own practice)

NA: The site-specific work in Baster in my opinion is '*context-sensitive*', inclusive of people's participation from specific areas...it centers on processes of human interaction and social discourse.

SR: What kind of aesthetics arises through collaborative art practice when the participants are not determining those emergent aesthetics via any practical or theoretical knowledge?

NA: The aesthetic which has evolved from the process of our collaborative practice (*nalpar*) I would say is aesthetics informed by conversation... Also it is relative to people's cultural experiences, reflective of the symbolic language, I have discussed earlier. Here people from both sides are open to experimentation and do not get intimidated because the artist/s consciously learn not to imply hierarchical approach and consciously reject construction, and

implementation, of any kind of *aesthetic hierarchy and aesthetic judgement as such...* because the process respects unanticipated outcomes.

Speaking about myself, process of collaborative practice like this in Bastar has made me much more aware of how art systems (power structures) which are built on particular aesthetic value judgements function... while working collectively with the communities and the indigenous artists I also got interested in the concept of 'what is there between rules and absence of rules'? How the process could contain openness to being different which remains open...

The most enchanting experience for me/us has been that despite all kinds of uncertainties most of the participants never let their desire get diluted for the best and took pride in their knowledge and skills and a sense of the self and agency on the site of production. Certain times when the outcome was not what we had intended... the process; we thought gave us a chance to learn and reflect rather than focusing on developing a formula and evidencing success alone. Emergence of unanticipated insights you see are always more joyful.

SR: What kind of politics are embedded in these aesthetics?

NA: politics embedded in these aesthetics first and utmost for me is Politics of inclusion – which is possible only by initiating a system of equal aesthetic rights for art works...here I would like to quote Boris Groys - as I find affinity with his thinking in this matter when he says that that the "Politics of equal rights on the level of aesthetics, on the level of aesthetic value is a necessary precondition for any genuine political engagement... The contemporary politics of emancipation is a politics of inclusion – directed against the exclusion of the political and economic minorities. But this struggle for inclusion is possible only if the forms in which the desires of the excluded minorities manifest themselves are not rejected or suppressed from the beginning by any kind of aesthetical censorship operating in the name of higher aesthetical values...."(essay –The Logic of Equal Aesthetic Rights) These theoretical ideas reaffirm my own thoughts concerning such issues...

SR: How can self-sustaining public spaces evolve through creative processes? How can spaces be self-sustaining evolve through creative processes? (Please explain from your experience)

NA: Here I would like to give examples of two of my projects, *Politics of 100 Mahua Trees* 1998, and *Barakhamba* 2010, 2010.

1998 - when i engaged with Forest department officials and their nursery assistants and local schools and people at Modinagar. My idea was to engender relationship between people and the landscape computed by art, and culture of sharing knowledge... I planted 100 Mahua saplings in Modinagar (at 6 selected sites) obtained from the forest department. After the workshop, Aas Muhammad, an assistant to artists in KHOJ Workshop in 1998, kept a track on the planted trees. I was in touch with him. Trees in public spaces are self-sustaining and provide goods and services to living beings.

2010 - Barakhamba 2010, was about the recovery of trees in public space in Delhi.

The DMRC had replaced the lost *Baheda* trees by planting *Pilkhin* above the metro Station between the outer circle of Connaught Place and Tolstoy Marg, but the legally stipulated minimum 6 feet x 6 feet space required around the trees was neglected by the civil work authorities. The concrete tree guards had, in time, turned into dustbins and were harmful to the health and growth of the trees, as well as unhygienic for other living beings.

Collaboration with environmentalist Ajay Mahajan and biodiversity scientist Fayaiz Khudsar, for de-choking 180 trees on Barakhamba Road, resulted in working in co-operation with NDMC's horticulture department. The process included developing working relationships between the various collaborators in order to define focal points and strategies that would enable us to engage state agencies in the project. Theoretically a project such as this raises questions regarding the participatory and processual nature of art making in public spaces, and to what extent art can make a difference to the environment and other living beings, but the question I have is - why there is little interest in works that do not end in products to be viewed in India.

Working with environmentalists, the horticulturists from NDMC, and individuals taking initiatives with a specific focus on environmental issues, has enhanced my understanding of how people from diverse backgrounds intervene in public spaces and have been working towards change.

In this case the artist's intervention/interest/commitment/collaboration could initiate activities to the benefit of the trees and the environment.

SR: What is the relationship between aesthetics and ethics within both traditional and contemporary modalities of your collaborative art practice?

NA: You see collaborative art practice inclusive of people's participation respects the principle of aesthetic/ethical which demands acknowledgment of difference, aesthetic frictions, and

recognizes the space which exists- as in our case - between the urban and adivasi artists, and then artists and the community people... that is how when we entered into dialogue with each other and over period with the schools and community members, we got interested in co-operative / collaborative art making processes. In late 90's we mutually negotiated a strategy to explore collaborative mode as an experimentation to explore the scope of productive interaction with the community people in the neighbourhoods (for *nalpar* and *Pilla Gudi* projects). Our collaborative practice as mentioned earlier has been context sensitive, engages uncertainties and believes in reaching out to communicate and involves them in the process - for us it has been important to learn from their lived knowledge and experiences and our experimental mode, and we have been interested in the processes in which the gulf between learner and teacher is challenged and in which both make efforts to be equally 'accessible and vulnerable in the knowledge relationship'.

Dialogue Center –DIAA, at Kondagaon which was conceived and built in 2004-2005, collaboratively with my adivasi colleagues with the support from number of women from Bhelwapadarpara and Kopaweda neighbourhood is not a studio space to produce individual art works for exhibition purposes- but to create and secure a cultural space that allows for critical reflection and to apply critical thinking. Activity like *Samvad* / seminars since 2007 facilitates interactions between people from different socio-political-economic and cultural backgrounds and different professions which demands a process of both learning and unlearning. We believe that the difference and the engagement together provoke reflection...

Seminars have been inviting artists, cultural theorists, art historians, art critics, research students, cultural and political activists, local municipal officials, school and college teachers, poets/writers, theatre groups, farmers, technocrats from NGOs around Kondagaon, advocates, newspaper editors and journalists among others...to discuss and increase our understanding of a chosen subject matter. For example the subject matter of *Samvad 4* was : *Contemporaneous*, the discussion focused on how the political resistance by the people in the rural adivasi areas and other towns and cities are confronting everyday / current socio-political cultural and economic pressures being imposed on them by the dominant authoritarian, capitalist forces at various levels...what happens when nothing happens for long periods, and what happens when the people want to speak of their struggle, individual consciousness and collective actions (at local /state or national levels)...and how the artists from different disciplines in specific situations and contexts have been responding and engaging with the political resistance against "oppressive forms of totalitarianism" and are employing art to resist freedom of expression and use it as a means to encourage communication to invite multiple points of view...

SR: What is your role of the Socially Engaged Art practitioner in the whole processes?

NA: Looking at the socio-politico-economic tensions and power relations in India and the world in the last 3 decades or so , I feel that my interest lied and lies in the processes of creating and securing cultural spaces that allow for critical reflection and to apply critical thinking... spaces which could, as Nancy Procter says , “embrace the struggle for emancipatory knowledge, its transformative and effective potential... to ask deeper questions...

2.7. Interview with Hamdasti (Sumana Chakraborty, Artist)

By Sreejata Roy

Venue- Kolkata Café, Kolkata and Email

January 2019

SR: How the idea project first came to your mind, and the details

SC: I was doing my master's at Harvard University in art design in the public domain. Then, two things happened; one is that one artist from Chile was working with us, a group of us from MIT and from Harvard art students, to help us understand to help us that what is the issue we wanted to tackle, where do want to start, what is the starting point. Then, I was really thinking about starting a thesis on friction between people and the government, people and police, and people and local officials. I wanted to engage with art to overcome the barriers that prevent local people from reaching their leaders etc. That was happening parallely, and there was a University competition on culture entrepreneurship challenge where you could propose a design of a cultural organization or cultural business. Almost a hundred people submitted applications, and I was the finalist. So, as a part of that application, I came up with the idea of Humdasti. I thought of an organization that will provide fellowship to artists working long-term in different community spaces where there is a point of friction or contestation between two groups or communities. In that area, first and foremost, we started at the police station, a point of a lot of friction and a clear dividing line between police and people. That was the idea. Then got a small grant as part of that fellowship and as a part of that challenge and as a finalist, five-thousand-dollar grant. I came back to India and thought of starting it. I was also joined by a girl called June. She was an undergraduate student from Harvard, and she decided to come and help me set up Humdasti. So that is how it began, and we started thinking about where can we create this project. We approached the police department and community police

department and looked at other spaces where art would have been people's everyday life in their community but wasn't anymore. That is why we identified Chitpur as one of the areas to work in. For a couple of reasons, like I said, Chitpur already had this art as part of their public life and everyday life, so, for example, people's courtyards are being used for rehearsals and performances. Oriental Seminary School, which was one of the first English Shakespeare clubs in the city etc. So Chitpur is also a microcosm of Calcutta, with many different communities, etc. It seems like a place where many communities co-existed. It is interesting to see the point of the relationship between other groups of people.

The police project initially didn't work out because we needed a lot of funding for that project, but in Chitpur, we could work with much less budget and slowly started testing our methodology, etc. Along with June, we began with oriental Seminary School first because I had read about a walk that Iftikar Alam of Calcutta Walk had conducted, but he has done all the different theatre spots in that one block of roads. It is exciting that there are so many theatres in that tiny few kilometers walk. So, we started with Oriental Seminary School, the first collaborators and teachers; there was no principal then. The head teacher Mrs. Priti Ghoshal, she was really supportive. She was constantly engaging with the student's activities. There was not much going on in the school then. We started workshops with students; that's how we began. We reached out to other artists of different backgrounds. The idea was that the Hamdasti fellowship should support all kinds of writers, artists, filmmakers, and architects, bringing them into this socially engaged project. So, we reached out to different artists and tried to see whether they would be interested. Then in the process, many people left, and many people stayed behind, which is how we formed the Hamdasti collective. We started from there.

SR: What process did you follow to engage with people in the locality?

SC: When we started working with the students, we reached out to different shops and craft studios near the school. They were not very open to anything, but they became curious and engaged once they saw the students. All students lived within walking distance; they came to school walking. And so, we started doing three parallel workshops with the students from two classes, led by three artists, some of them stayed behind, and some left in the long term, but those three projects continued. A project that continues even now is mapping, mapping relationships, positional movement in the space, mapping people's narratives and stories, etc. And see the points of tension, moments of encounter or not, misconceptions, etc.

Along with the students, all three artists working. They started going around in the neighborhood, interviewing and talking to people, and that is how the larger community got involved. For example, they were going to Diamond Library, they asked in the neighbourhood if they could do some kind of project and the library was one of those. So, after a broader

mapping they identified these spaces. Then the people of the neighbourhood started getting involved in Diamond Library project. Since our goal was to involve more and more people, artists invited Diamond library people to do workshops with the students. So thus, different people got involved. One of the projects started happening from one of the houses over there, it was just in the lane next to Diamond Library, Chayanika Dey and her family. She used to run art class, so, artists started working with OS students and her art class students. Slowly creating bridges, creating collective that were non-existent before. For OS students those kids were like rough and rowdy boys, thus in a way reshaping new relationships among the boys and the neighbourhood, etc. In the first year, we had three projects: Story Box at Diamond Library, one with the printmakers playing a memory game created by Nilanjan, and another with a pop-up museum. It was all in this stretch, the hundred-meter stretch of the road, and there were expected participants; students were divided into groups, but there were participants scheduled across different projects. Drawing attention to the stories not spoken about in the history of Kolkata, the stories about the printmakers, but neighbourhood was never looked at as anything special or anything remarkable. We always talk about big palaces and all of that.

The other process we followed was, once the project started developing, the artists prototyped the projects in the community, like a pop-up museum, like Varsity did a small pop-up museum with the students in the community. So that again got more people involved.

The pop-up museum was basically Varsity; she is a graphic designer. She was working with a group of students; they went around and started talking to people about what they thought should be in the museum of Chitpur and what objects they could contribute. They also went to Jorashako Thakurbari; they had never been to any museum before. For these students, what is a museum, and why is a museum created. In the OS school, teachers were also trying to create an archive. So, they got involved in that as well. Then the pop-up museum was based in the courtyard of Chayanika's house, as I said, she was the first resident involved, and her students were also involved in mapping these objects and stories. Varshita worked with bamboo craft people to make different shelves embedded in the architecture, and then one day, people came and kept their things there, and then they came and shared their stories with the audience. We were cautious to not invite an outside audience into that space; it was more for the people there. We didn't want to make it a project that was done by poor children. Still, a few people we contacted for their feedback, etc. That was the way of getting people used to this kind of project. After that significant step, all the artists, all projects they did, went back to their feedback, what they thought of it, and what better could be done next time.

Slowly the ownership grows. We also asked people what role you wanted to play in the project; they wanted to be artists, storytellers, guides, or organizers. Everybody has their opinion on how they want to get involved. It was a collective of craftspeople, shop owners, and a few

residents who contributed to the museum. The second version of the pop-up museum happened during the festival. By then, the students and everybody got really invested in the idea. This is also a way of getting people used to this idea. For some time, they are doing it might but understand what they are doing. So, it was a process of building a shared understanding, a shared goal, shared kind of value for the project. And everybody was on the same page about the project and what they wanted to get out of it. When we initially approached Diamond Library, they said what shall we get out of it. After the project's second year, we asked them, what did you think? Do you think any value in participating in this? They said something is different from our everyday life, engaging with people who don't come to our shops.

Initially, artists and the community started at different points. Still, at some point, coming together at the understanding of the project, I think that we needed to do the project not once but many times and do it incrementally so that more and more people get involved and become part of the project. So that was the first edition; knitting can tie up in the first edition. We had a festival in the neighbourhood because the festival format was also an essential part of the project. After all, the festival is the moment where building the project is the process of ownership building, getting people to relate to each other, building relationships, and sharing stories. The festival is a moment like 'our moment, that neighbourhood can be like this. So, it is like building this Utopian moment of Utopic vision or what it can be. In the festival these three projects pop-up museum, memory game and Diamond Library projects were ongoing at three different spaces in the neighbourhood. Students were involved, parents got involved as volunteers to manage the crowd and teachers got involved. We put lights in the whole neighbourhood. We had different programs for different audiences who may not attend art events. We had a heritage walk, we had film screenings, and we had talks. It was a one and half day event, ongoing all day long. Almost 800 people coming from all over Kolkata. Specially parents and family of the students also came. People from outside as well. We had a partnership with Telegraph newspaper, they covered it very well. The first time the such neighbourhood was happening outside Durga Puja or a lot of Boi Mela/Book Fair that happened around city. Students were doing everything. We sit back; Hamdasti was not mentioned anywhere. So, Chayanika took the Times of India people around. That was a kind of stepping back for people to reflect that this is a possibility. The idea was to see what is possible, it might not happen in reality, but it creates a moment of imagination. Like after that, OS school actually created an archive. Mr. Ghoshal said he always had the idea of an archive but being part of this project gave him the impetus to actually develop the archive. And came into contact with people who contributed to the magazine of the archive. It created new networks of people there as well. Students were also taking leadership in their neighbourhood; initially, when we met them, we asked them to write a few words about their school, but they

could only write, "in our school, there is a big ground and three trees." That was the level of articulation and thinking, but in the end, they were like talking about the objects, the history of Chitpur, and sometimes making a story. But the combination and all of that I thought was rewarding in the first year. especially working with the students. But by the second edition, we realized that working with students will always be easy, with the students they will always be learners and teachers. So organically, we started reaching out to other community groups to work with. We moved to the girls' school in that area. The girls' school is Sree Vidya Niketan. In OS school, we would love to continue, but unfortunately, there was a change in party politics, and the teachers who supported us got side-lined, and the boys were not allowed to participate. They created a heritage club within the school, and the activities were limited to that. Teachers collaborated with INTACH and took it forward. So that was also very nice. We have open houses, and we share our work in progress. Artists also learn, unlearn, have their questions, get feedback from a larger audience, we share the process with people. This is also seen as audience building. It is not about the end product. It is more about the process. Opening up an interesting way to communicate this to people. So, we have these open houses, and after the festival, we have the lab. Again, students, and teachers come together to get feedback. That is how we go forward and create three labs-like rooms with students, and they do their activities in these rooms. And it's a gallery in Dover Lane. It's now shut down. It is there but not really functional. It is part of the CIMA art gallery. So, we have these open houses, which are very important, as there is a lot of unlearning for the artists participating in these projects, as maybe they are doing it for the first time. One open house is about urban typology and how that affects the community, and another open house is about the archive as practice. So different things artists were working on. We have a lab after the thing, at the lab we invited different people from the city, about twenty-five artists who are working with the idea of the city. Maybe they are not in community practice, but somehow they engage with the city in some way. We had a Pecha-Kucha-style round table. Following that was a discussion on what we could do to collaborate. At the end of this one-week lab, we asked them to propose an idea they would want to do. Whoever proposed the idea, we returned to them, and they became part of the second collective. So that was also an auditioning process, a way to identify who could be interested. In the second edition, various people joined, including art educators, writers, visual artists, journalists, and Ruchira Das, co-director of ARTSA. They all got involved and did a similar one-year process of developing projects, community events, and in-houses. So many projects are again started by first identifying who you want to work with. Each artist had some idea of the issue they wanted to work with. The idea was also to find common ground between...

In the first round, all the artists came up with the same idea about what they wanted to do; they were more open and worked the same way. Many artists have their work, and some are

more open, not coming with fixed agenda. But some people come with a clear plan of what they want to do, their politics, and their interest. Finding people who want to share your agenda with you is crucial. We may not want to do the same thing, but what you do may also benefit them in some way or the other. We must keep working on that, finding that, and discovering that. So, I will tell you where did I start. Nilanjan continued to work with printmakers; he would do his mapping exercises. It was a technical project, exploring different printing forms, pushing them to think about printing, activating the letterpress, starting the offset printing, and four colors. Also, he was using these printing tools they talked about.

They talk about Sonagachi. It was not a very intense project but using the word Shona. Many parts of Chitpur are connected to the phrase Shona. Mapping how people's expectations change was a kind of discussion he was trying to build. His primary focus was to work with the printmakers. They were doing from the first edition on printing technique.

Shrota came with an apparent interest in pre-wedding photographs of women for matrimonial and prospective bride photographs. She identified different photo studios that were those who used to do such photography. They were interested in collaborating; some were celebrating their hundredth year and wanted to be part of such a project. There were meeting clubs, embroidery clubs in the neighborhood, and a couple of families like the B K Pal family; they were also interested in sharing their stories. They liked her, and thus, they built a relationship. Slowly we found common ground in a group of very despaired people, these male photographers and women. She started using these photographs. Then they, as prospective brides and host these three dialogues, one at the house of B K pal, photo studio, and finally at Chaitanya Library on the road. The conversation was about these photographs and what it says about society, beauty, women's agency, etc. There were these discussions among photographers, these women and other women in the community, coming together, sharing their stories, and questioning themselves. Shrota was documenting that, and she finally created a bioscope with excerpts of these conversations. She further had discussions on the road using these bioscopes. The project has continued since then, and she has been building relationships. That was also a fascinating process of how she created this community of people where there was no community before, sustained this conversation and dialogue. People who participated in the first dialogue became the co-facilitators of the second dialogue. She also interestingly built participation. This was kind of how it kept growing, this collective of women. Finally, she took the conversations to the streets.

Ruchira does work with the school. And she worked in a very organic way. She worked with the students to see what they found interesting about their neighbourhood, and they finally created a kind of pop-up museum with objects that they found interesting in the neighbourhood, the stories. The project was about getting the girls to step out of the schools and go to the streets and places that they never occupied before. That was the crux and the

beauty of the project. Anuradha was working with homeowners, documenting different kinds of *dalans* (*courtyard*); she also had a research interest. But people who collaborated with her were interested in doing some activities and dividing the *dalans* as a community or cultural space for public activities. They did various activities like carom tournament in the *dalan*, *fanush* making workshop. She opened up different possibilities to them. Those families are part of the fellowships, allowing artists to use their space to come up with more projects. Project was opening up these private spaces and making them more accessible to the public. What happened in the way that all these homes are now opened up. Not just our project, but other musicians are coming and performing, activating these *dalans* again.

Did the card games that he played at different clubs, word association games that he played, and collected people's opinions on what they think of conservation. Heritage is an elite concept, and people are living at the margins of these heritage areas in deplorable conditions. So, what they think about heritage and conservation, his work was that. He played five such games at different clubs in the neighbourhood.

My project was a jorabagan traffic guard. Finally, what happened at this time was that the vision of working with the police station also came through because they were helping us with traffic management in the first edition, and they really liked the project. They said, please do something in our station. We agreed to do something. We discussed what could be done, then they said something had to be done with the traffic. The thought of a project using traffic as a metaphor for how we negotiate our position in the city. I interviewed them a lot, collected a lot of things they create, like photographs they take and recipes they want, and their creative outputs were collected and made into a game through the police station, which then the police will play with people of the audience. And then have this conversation about the city. You get contradictory viewpoints about the town.

Suhasini worked with the craftspeople and created word sculptures, inserting poetry into everyday lives. That was her objective, and there was a challenge in building collaboration. Some of the craftsmen didn't want to collaborate; that was the challenge.

In each project, people from the community played different roles. Some are contributors, co-facilitators, co-artists, organizers, and hosts. What is expected in all these projects? Well, what can we really do? We can bring attention to unrepresented stories, something we realized was familiar in all our projects; we could make space for people to share their stories and viewpoints. There you have unusual interactions between people who would not regularly engage otherwise. People could do something they are unfamiliar with, breaking the barrier that is how you negotiate the city and finally thought that having new imagination about town and people.

By the second year, we realized we didn't want to revitalize or conserve Chitpur. We were trying to facilitate the alien encounter between people outside their comfort zone and ideas

outside their imagination. That is what we were finally trying to do. Again, we had a festival, a series of open houses, and a series of community events. Then we had an ecosystem of collaborators and the neighbourhood. Even the students from the first school, even though the school didn't allow it, came back and became part of it again as guides and mentors. We tried to make the festival so that it defies people's expectations to go and be an audience. Not like that; they had to engage, have to have conversations. It was called the peers of Chitpur. Everywhere you go, there is something like speech bubbles. It was in two parts in the neighbourhood, one around OS school and one around traffic guard. The traffic guard was at the registration desk, people signed up, and different guides took people to various projects through the lanes and by lanes. One guide was a student, and one guide was a resident. So, you saw the projects from different perspectives. There was no one narrative, no one perspective for this neighbourhood. Festival happened over one and half days in a much larger scale, like there were 12 venues, one at Jora Bagan traffic guard and another was at OS school. It was madness logistically but also very rewarding. We promoted the festival on social media as an unfamiliar experience. It was a work of building community and working around changing people's perception of what art can be.

Similarly, we had talks, film screenings, etc. But between different audiences in this space. But even in the previous one, we also got people to host exhibitions. The photography studio where Shrota worked, they hosted the show. Diamond library hosted its own exhibition. It was also creating space. As artists we tried to create unusual encounters but also create space for people to occupy, share their own stories. My game was structured in such a way that people could share their stories, fill it with their thoughts, their photographs. Around 800 people turned up in two days. And constantly breaking the expectation that you have come for the heritage revival was also a challenge. They realized that it was about local stories but not about conservation.

In the third edition now, we have given an open call, this time in Hindi, Bengali, and English, and invited applications from people. About 25 applications for Shrota, Nilanjan, and I are continuing. We got the Khoj grant to continue. We continued some of our work. Nilanjan will work on the fringe space like Shonagachi and interaction between men and women in the area like Chitpur. At the police station, another artist is working. The project continues, but some other artist works at the police station. I have moved to Hatkhola Byama Some. Shrota is working with women on the perception of women, public spaces like the park, etc. So, you can see some projects are building on, and we have invited people to come for some projects. This project is interesting as the police are co-hosting some of the fellowships. And the two houses are official co-hosts of the project. Thus, ownership is also shifting who owns the project. As we have been working in space for a long time, we found people in that space are

also becoming co-owners of that project. Earlier, we had to convince people to do it, but now they share open calls jointly with us. And in the new space, they are again starting from scratch to build relationships. Getting community, getting society to create room for collaboration, and on the other hand, getting artists to be interested in these kinds of practices and making vocabulary and understanding about these kinds of techniques. Creating new networks of communities that hosts and supports the art in their own locality or eventually building towards it in the long run. Each project, in its own way, is trying to create encounters with the unfamiliar, make encounters that change perceptions of themselves. So that's the two ways I think in which we work.

SR: What kind of aesthetic emerges from this kind of work?

SC: It is not about the form but the experience. The aesthetic experience of what we imagine is an experience where the state of it is almost irrelevant, as the form has to be surprising or unexpected; that was one of the few criteria it had to be. The question of who has power, who doesn't, who is a skilled artist, and who is not. It has to defy people's notion of what is skill and art. People again encounter that are unfamiliar. That is genuinely the aesthetics of the project. How to make something strange? To do that, you play around with the forms, subvert expectations, and subvert who the author is not. I would try to look at it like that. The setting is almost a relational aesthetic rather than an experiential or formal one. A moment where how to engage with each other is subverted for a moment or changed. A new relationship is supposed to be created. Defying people's ideas is what is really art; which makes art, who doesn't. Like Shrota keeps saying that I am not an artist. But I think it is very refreshing. You are not bound by a formal kind of training. There is something that might emerge from it. It might be ugly in the traditional sense, but it defies expectations.

A couple of possibilities. Some of them are already existing spaces. Like the clubs, they are already existing spaces. We are trying to change, subvert or play around with the kind of conversations happening at *para* clubs. Though the spaces exist, there lies the shift for them to support the art.

One thing to start with is that there is already engagement, and community and activities are going on. Then we came and changed something about it or tweaked something about it, changing the nature and functionality of that space. The police station exists, and there is already functionality clearly about it, but there is also a space for engaging with communities. That is a long-term vision. That will also require people in the community to become co-founders and patrons of the arts. It will also need other organizations to support marginal artists. I think if we can create value for the art, then the organization will already have some amount of money, I am not talking of large-scale projects that cost a lot, but in that case, the club should be able to host an artist for a month to do something for the community. Every

Durga or Kali puja can invite a contemporary artist to do community art that will involve the whole community.

SR: Are you looking at Puja committees to raise money for such art?

SC: I suppose that will take a very long time. Right now, we are trying to do it through crowdfunding. The people of Calcutta could support these projects. The first step is that people host artists; they are willing to host artists. The final step is for them; without us, we might still have the role of finding artists and selecting artists. Also, imagine the possibility of NGOs hosting artists. We did a project outside Chitpur at Pavlov Mental Hospital with Anjali. We facilitated the artists and asked the government what the artists could do. Of course, the arts also took it forward. We encouraged that process the first time.

Artists also saw our community space. He is a very senior graphic artist. So, it was a very fantastic project. They were really able to challenge people's ideas about what mental illness is, who is capable, who is not competent, who makes art etc. The participants took over after we stepped back. In a short time, a lot of things happened. That is another model. Some NGOs are interested in working with communities; they support artists in the community. Not only do it for the campaign or social awareness, but for the arts, for the sake of doing crafts. Anjali is an organization that does it very well. So we work with them. So we are exploring another model where we work with other social organizations, a small para club, or an established internationally known NGO that supports these projects as a part of their work. We are doing another project with Swayam this year. We did a lab at the end of last year where we discussed between artists, and civil society could be the future collaborations. So, we were conversing about what can be the art practitioner's role in civil society. That is another way of looking at it and seeing how we can build it. It was amazing to see that police actually started a fellowship for artists after we did. I was really inspired by the urban governance office in Boston; you could always have a resident artist. That is a possibility of exploring something. That's what we are building towards eventually. That is why you keep doing audience building, people's understanding of why this art practice. What is its role in society? These open houses are significant in building that understanding. Festivals are significant.

SR: What particular factor makes your project site-specific?

SC: Not site-specific from a legal perspective. Being sensitive about the context, responsive to people's needs and aspirations in the area, and their value system. What do they think of art, and what can art do. We do things like, all the projects are done with local materials and skills; all the artists have worked with local craftspeople. All that is there.

In previous editions, we worked with people of similar interests. But this time it was an open call, we know we may not have the same understanding of this kind of work. The idea is to get

people to understand that when they develop their practice in space within the community, it is essential to identify the points of tension, what is at the periphery, what the conflicts are, and how they can push that a little bit. How can they exist at that friction point, play with it, and subvert it? So, finding that site and responding to that. Then finding the relationship equation between the people and playing with that is the element of site-specificity. Not all artists do that, but I hope people can do it. In my practice, I always try to find a point of discomfort. You know that you are uncomfortable with something, pushing yourself at work, and the conversation has to hit some nerve end.

As soon as we get comfortable with something, we move to the following discussion. In Hatkhola Byam Samity, I created these icons. Many conversations were happening around how they joined the club because they wanted to be an ideal man; it's not just physical but also mental to being a role model. They saw me creating these drawings continuously. I made a lightbox with these drawings. These are icons of things like your diet, your role in society, something you do in your leisure, and your hobby. And invite people to create images of the ideal man like a silhouette. So, they made one image top or headphones, etc. And what is meant to be a perfect man? For me, I was wondering if I should put a drawing of a condom? It was too soon to do that. So, I put beef, for example, and discussed that we should have beef because they are protein. So, we had a discussion on why beef and why not beef. Then we had a conversation on love, what love is, and whether we need love, so what we were doing had to be site-specific not only for the physicality and formality of that space but also to find that edge to play with. We have to find ways for artists to think about this. We had an open house where Jasmine Patheja came to talk as a part of speaker this time because it was about devising dialogues. Each available has a different topic. She was saying how you question your identity in this space and what the hierarchies are in this place. Trying to find ways to do our work critically.

SR: What do you think about your role as a practitioner in this project?

SC: Project manager, fundraiser, creating spaces for questioning, reflection, facilitating that. I do my own practice within that. As a facilitator, I engage with a larger community of artists. Do something of my own in the community or the group I am trying to work with.

2.8. Interview with Blank Noise (Jasmeen Patheja, Artist)

By Sreejata Roy

Venue- Online Platform Skype and Telephone

June 2020

SR: I learned of your work when your project (Talk to Me) and my project Park were selected in (2011) as finalists for the International Award for Public Art. I followed your work through the Blank Noise website. From the outset of my doctoral research, I planned to focus on Blank Noise as one of my case studies of socially engaged art in India. How and where did you start your practice?

JP: I Started the practice when I was in college when I was in Srishti, and I enrolled in finance. But as an exemplary art student, I always asked questions like where art is located? Who makes the art? Is one artist making art, or is the public making art? How can art not heal? Is that specifically for galleries and so? These questions around who makes it? Where is it located for what is very important? My professors directed me to Community art practice to see Suzanne Lacy's work in the feminist art practice. And so, I found a lot of connection, an inspiration there. And then I was also part of a year-long lab at Srishti called Communication for social change, which combined the art and design students for one year. We looked at how artists and designers could play a role in social transformation. Usually, we bring, in the end, to work with an NGO and initiate making a poster or a film. But how do artists come in the beginning and build a vision and bring stakeholders? And how do artists communicate, and how do you work in? How do you work towards social change? One year's lab was instrumental in making it possible to do that. It also exposed that social issues, you know, exposed me as a student to the idea that social issues are complicated. They are complex, and there are many ways of working around this. There's didactic messaging that no one will change, and then this.

The artist is a facilitator. Yeah, the complex. It made me think a lot about it. We were taught to think a lot about Community Medium Media, whose community, media, all of that.

So that was kind of the groundwork and mixed with that work, these experiences of street harassment, which had no name, no vocabulary. And for me, to be away from home for the first time and as a young adult in Bangalore was really exciting. I walked everywhere and was like, let me get to know the city. No one told me when to come home, so I was excited about that. But that was accompanied by street harassment and the fact that there was no vocabulary for it. So my friends said it's not a big deal; why are you making such an issue? How come it's happening only to you?

So, the fact that something terrible was happening and that it was being made to be expected. I fear everyone in my peers modified their lives around street harassment, but it didn't necessarily do. They didn't recognize it like they went in groups or had a boyfriend or something with the other. But, still, they weren't acknowledging that fear was normalized to them, so I think those questions and these experiences and that kind of art practice exposure. As I said, let me, I want to do something about not knowing what to call this phenomenon. I just remember mentioning to my director and the Srishti Director that I think I want to work on it called eve teasing. So that's really how it started to bring attention to street harassment. And it's always been about building dialogue, building discussion, opening conversation on what is otherwise made invisible or uncomfortable.

Yeah, so the practice started there, and the idea always was that.

After three months of facilitating and starting Blank Noise at Srishti and graduating, I graduated with these questions: Where is the community, whose community, and how does this issue affect all of us? Why aren't we talking about it? How do we make everyone talk about it?

So, I recognize now, or in recent years, that I've learned to realize that the vision was always about building a movement, but I was more with these questions. I didn't have the vocabulary like movement or any of that back then. Still, yeah, it was always about everyone's issue. This affects everyone. How do we get everyone to talk about it? So that's like Black Noise is built by many people called action Sheroes and heroes and Theyroes.

And everyone comes in to do their bit in that given time and continues to be part of the community and a friend. But there's also time specificity that people can engage with. So back then, in my early 20s, mid-20s, and late 20s, there was a whole, there was a whole group that was forming itself.

They are now writers and editors. So it was really like a sense of the young. The 20-year-old youth in their early 40s or late 30s were instrumental in building Blank Noise, so we've always made testimonials of sexual violence.

By that, I mean (Annie Zaidi?) or Raghu Karnad, all of whom played that role in that period. Himangini Gupta, yeah. And by that, I mean that when I look back, everyone made a significant contribution in their own way and shaped Blank Noise. And today everyone's a friend of it. I mean that same. They're not away, not present in the same kind of labour, but they played a role. So that's how Blank Noise is built on these people's labour. It's built on a collective labour. It's built on lived experiences of people who speak about their experiences of sexual harassment, who question it. So that's really what is based on.

And then we've been an archive of these testimonials and then we design public actions based on what these testimonials tell us. So, we work to shift that. So, for example, suppose people are talking about fear and violence. In that case, we're working to turn that and say, hold space

for that. But also build these public actions that change the narrative, like sleeping in the open, standing idle in public spaces, or walking alone.

SR: What was your initial process of bringing people together?

JP: It was more like building a process rather than following a process

It was like a growing community of people interested in this issue were coming together. They were responding to the conversation. I was writing a blog, and I was publishing on a blog.

It was just publishing because I said oh, this is interesting. I thought, let me try it, and then people started responding. So, it's really one step following the next. There is, of course, a process where it was not like a laid-out process, it was more build the process as you go along, and today I can, and so when we as a small group got it, it was really like word of mouth. It was blogs. It was a lot of the bloggers who became journalists. So, blogging and the Internet had a crucial role in the journey of Blank Noise. Having said that, we may not specifically only on the Internet. Still, a lot of the fact that we take the form of an ongoing conversation is because a medium like a blog also allows it.

We will post things, people will respond to something, and those conversations will happen offline in parks and public spaces. Then we said, let's do an action on learning to be idle in public spaces. So, it was a lot of community connecting, speaking, listening, and building these ideas of future possibilities. What if women stood idle?

And then we always recorded, it's not enough to just go and do this action, but how did you feel? So you know, we would share these experiences, bringing another action share.

Oh, so it was always about one person bringing another in. So it's always if there is any process. I would say the process was always to build testimonials. Then we develop these actions rooted in changing, you know, in creating the world we want and desire, so that's the two parts of it.

But the testimonials, and to continue to be a space that builds testimonials and makes people feel safe while speaking about this, is central to our practice.

SR: How did the idea of "action sheroes" / "heroes" / "theyroes" come about?

JP: Well, we started doing these actions across City streets. One of our first actions was called 'why you looking at me' where we stood at traffic signals, carrying tape on our, you know, wearing alphabets and forming a line saying why you looking at me. We started calling these interventions actions. Then we recognize it by simply standing idle by city railings; there was something heroic or now heroic happening.

And we were confronting our own fears in that process. And so yeah, we started calling ourselves action Heroes 1st, then action Sheroes, and now action theyroes. That's how it started happening and it was word of mouth. In between in 2006 we had a blogathon which

was an idea that was proposed by one of our volunteers, who we call action shero, Smita, she said: "Women's Day is coming up; why don't we ask all the bloggers to share their experiences of street harassment."

That's what I mean by that we built these testimonials. And on March 8th, 2006, hundreds of bloggers took part in this and spoke about street harassment, something that they had experienced, not forgotten but had no vocabulary for. So people remember things that happened 30-40 years ago but had not spoken about.

That reached a larger public, and that's when people started writing to us. Press internationally and nationally and locally picked it up. People started writing, saying we want to start chapters, you know, now I didn't have a script saying Smita was going to suggest this and this is going to happen. Still, it was really like, people sparked it. Smith had this idea. And in a smaller group of us, Himangini, Harnit, and Raghu got together and wrote to these bloggers, asking them to publish them. That was the testimonial-building bit.

But how did the term action hero and Shero come about and theyro will come about when we started doing these actions. We were doing it literally weekend to weekend. Because there were chapters in different parts of the country, people would do the same in Bangalore, Patna, Hyderabad, Chennai, Bombay, Delhi, and Calcutta. So that's how it happened.

That year, we started doing these actions simultaneously in different cities because there were. Then there was a presence because people in their 20s were making themselves available, wanted to have this conversation, wanted to make a change. And so, we were doing these actions parallel. Then the idea, the words 'Action hero' came about. We said, let's recognize this for something, people confronting our fears in doing so, fear of standing alone and going against that warning. That says come home as fast as you can, look down and walk. So, we recognize something happening within and in the public space. So, that's how the word Action Hero is formed.

SR: Public space is the site for many kinds of protests around many different issues – political, social, legal, human rights, culture, and so on – and interventions are part of the visual language of protest. What is your concept of intervention? In your view, how are interventions by Blank Noise different from other activist interventions in public space?

JP: That's really interesting. I don't think I've thought in great depth, but I will be feeling from now on about this.

I don't think I want to hold it and set it in stone. But, you know, sometimes some protests are not necessarily initiated by Blank Noise. But where Blank Noise is in solidarity, we have contributed a little to the form of protest. I remember in 2012, 2013 when I was in Calcutta, one of you know. Again, this is not for the record. This is a sense of any credit, but just as a

way of thinking out loud. I remember we brought in the placards that said violence against women. One of the things I remember suggesting, which was also implemented, was where each person would articulate why are you here?

I am here because of the idea of locating what makes solidarity, questioning solidarity, and discovering self. So that was perhaps, and I recognize that it's crucial to Blank Noise. What I saw in Calcutta when the protest happened; was some placards that said, I am here because I feel like there it's binary. Still, it's fascinating to think of when there's a.

Protested said there's a big March. How do we design for that March verses that are not blank Noise? Is that Blank Noise? Like how do we, you know? Even though Blank Noise versus not like organized 50,000 people marching, That's not what we've done. But it does not limit and say that we won't do that or think about how that protest can look. You know, the visual language of that protest as people walk is, like you're saying, protest art and the history of protest. So, I wouldn't, yeah, I wouldn't limit it to say this or that. But again, what I think makes Blank Noise unique is the idea of relocating yourself. Like creating space for the person to be articulated, defined, and located in building the political. So the personal, social, and political links are, I don't just come here to help, don't just come here. Tell me why you're here and make that visible; that becomes what I think is central to how we work. Whether it's made to sleep or walking alone, it rests on you, your journey of fear, your relationship with fear, warnings, and blame, and your journey of being that action shero.

So, it says, I'm not talking, it's not my practice, that I'm showing you. You come because this is important to you. You come because this is significant to you. You tell me why it's substantial, and I think it defined what we've done until now. So, that's the idea of being the action hero or hero, so many men come to Blank Noise, and they often say, I want to do something for women.

We say, OK, please, get over the good Guys syndrome. We don't say it like that but tell me why this is significant as an issue to you? So Blank Noise rests on that kind of labour of its community. That it's a difficult place for volunteers to also be in, because it's not that traditional sense of volunteering that I'm coming to help the *Sanstha*, I'm joining something for this significant and important to me, as I have witnessed and lived and experienced it in my life and that's what I want to change.

Our action is in terms of the medium located in the body and the memory of the body. And I suppose that's what, that's how we collectively intervene and now as we work increasingly with allies with feminist allies, it is really about houses, relevant or specific or unique to this community's history or her story or their story. So, it is always about understanding that, and making that visible.

SR: Your practice rests on successful mobilisation and group cohesion. How would you describe the kind of socially engaged art that emerges from this process?

JP: Our practice emerges through this process of mobilization. And our practice that does not exist without its community. I mean, it's empty otherwise. It's just a bundle of ideas, and even those ideas don't come just sitting in a cave. They come from listening to people. So, the art practice does not exist without people. Of course, it rests on the labour of people. But, it also rests on the participation, engagement, ownership, and sparks that people propose and suggest.

What kind of practice emerges that rests on the community built by the community. As an artist, my role is to facilitate this. It also enables imagining because it is about working to end violence against women, which is a crisis. So, the artist also comes to facilitate that process of imagining and holding space for age, holding space for trauma, and processing. But even though I'm not a therapist, yeah, so that's that, that kind of practice, the one that has no shape without its community, that's empty without community, basically.

SR: What kinds of politics around major social issues, such as gender, caste, etc., reinforce your practice and are visible through your public actions/interventions, i.e., your art?

JP: I think politics has evolved and grown, and you know, like I remind myself, I didn't grow up knowing caste. I was caste-blind because I was privileged, and all I learned was that this had happened and was wrong. But I think the community, critique, and questions have really made me and us address this and question this. So even though when we started, it was about street harassment. Understanding and speaking about fear and making space to do that, over the years, we questioned the politics of fear, the kind of man we're taught to be afraid of, and that's what you know. So that question led to a talk, to a project, where we set up tables and chairs and had these conversations.

This article might also be helpful.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-07-03/can-a-couple-of-tables-make-bangalore-s-rapist-lane-safe-again>

When we recognized after 2012 when there was so much more attention to violence against women in public spaces. After the murder and gang rape of Jyoti Singh, the question that I started thinking about was, you know that one is that not enough people have spoken. We are missing the whole conversation because the conversation is incomplete. After all, not all women have spoken.

So, I think that really, and how are spaces of violence interconnected? So, we noticed a lot of attention to street harassment and violence against women in public spaces.

After that, I found that at Blank Noise we started working more and more to address how victim blame was playing a role across spaces of domestic violence and street harassment were connected by victim blame. Workplace harassment was connected by victim blame.

I'm sorry I've lost your question a little bit. You were asking me something else, yes politics? So in terms of politics, one recognized the politics of fear and the fear narratives and the politics within that. Which type of man is seen as a threat and which is not. How do we consciously work to shift that and work to end that? Secondly, which kind of identity of a woman experiencing violence? From which type of man, it's not enough that it's built by us, the English-speaking, urban Indian women. However, even the urban Indian woman is not a homogeneous identity; that has really propelled working collaboratively. And that's why today, I meet to sleep is built not by 1 Blank Noise where it's built but not just by the people we have called our action Sheroes and Heroes and Heroes. Still, it's being made by other organizations, collectives networks like *Sangat*, like *Rhea*, it's being built in rural India as well, so that's those. It's one event, one intervention in forming the next, and I see it as a series of questions that shape.

Often, these public interventions also make us think, reflect, and inform the next project.

SR: How do you define 'community'? What are the challenges of working with women from underprivileged communities, for instance, in your projects on street harassment and the more dangerous forms of violence against women? Is this street harassment very class-biased?

JP: Right, so it is undoubtedly class and caste-based.

So, it depends on who's speaking about it and who's not whose story is not being heard, and that really defines our understanding of street harassment. I mean that after 2012, we have worked consciously and are continuing to work consciously. But, it always feels like never enough because there's so much more to be done.

Street harassment is class- and caste-based. But I want to challenge that by saying that it is not if it's only women, "women like us" speaking, then it's problematic. So, that's why we are trying to work in ways such as in November, December, and October. We worked with somebody who specifically worked on reports of caste-based violence, which was caste-based violence in public spaces in India. So, you know that street harassment, class-based violence, sexual violence, gang rape, and murder are also involved. It was by an upper-caste man on a Dalit girl or that woman. So, it is the othering.

When I'm hearing your question, I think of those videos that have been passed on and circulated of a woman walking through the streets of New York. Who's whistling at her, harassing her and the critique it received, and even the critique Blank Noise received. But those are the points we want to work with, you know, to say OK, who's speaking? Who's being

heard? Who is yet to be heard, and what is our understanding of street harassment? What is their knowledge of sexual violence? So, today our work is not only about street harassment. It is more about how our spaces are interconnected. We, like from 2004, have been recognizing how victim blaming plays a role in enabling violence. That has become our pivotal project because it continues to build testimonials of violence. And then we have to meet to sleep, saying I have a right to not just be free from fear or request to be defenseless, and there's no such thing as asking for it. So, we still embody what 'I never asked for it' means by claiming the right to sleep.

So, in terms of your community question, I think the idea of community is always evolving and constantly shifting. In 2006, I knew what an action Shero is and what the Black Noise community is. Sometimes I wouldn't. There was an orkut.com, and I would suddenly discover Blank Noise belay on or put in, like, who are they? Where this? Social media and people joining the community were also the early years. But today, the community is more porous. I would say that

feminist allies are also part of the community. The people you know, fellow feminists, are part of the community, so I don't have a strict sense of what a community is. I run into people who say, " Oh yeah, that day that we participated in the event here. So, I'm also an action shero. Maybe somebody doesn't call themselves an action shero or hero, so it's very porous. Perhaps it moves from event-to-event intervention to intervention to your event.

SR: What is your role vis-à-vis the many people working together in the collective? Where do you place yourself in the whole process?

JP: I see myself as somebody facilitating, I see myself as a more of a thread, I see myself as a thread in the organization and also somebody who's building methodologies, enabling building methodologies, essentially trying to make meaning of what we're doing, storytelling of what we've done, creating vision because again, people come, people leave, people come and leave based on their time. So also recognizing, when are you an action Shero, "labour", so we like defining some of this, recognizing the past and working towards the future. And continuing to build space for people to step in and say, why are they here? This identity of mine is also shifting, right? I was 24 then, and I'm 41, so there's a different one back then. It was peers, and we were all the same age, so I'm also making sense of what I do. It's not like a static position; it's something that's shifting away that I'm 41. Somebody else is joining a 17. We have a 17-year-old intern, so I'm not in denial of that dynamic, and I try to break that consciously. But it's on; you know it's still living. It's a living thing. I see Blank Noise as a living organism, and we're all. I think my role is essentially building vision facilitating, and creating, as an artist, creating space to imagine, propose, and build alliances. All of that rests on seeing

what's missing. Working on that. I don't have like a fixed thing, but as an artist, as a person building vision in the organization again. I don't sit on a mountaintop, alone, or in a cave alone; it's always in conversation with fellow action heroes, the past continuous action heroes as I call them.

Also trying to bridge that somebody has not been in touch with Blank Noise for 6-7 years, so I'm also often trying to bridge that. Trying to put some system. Maybe even like an Advisory Board with the past fellow action heroes, so there's a sense. So, there's a lot within that. As a thread-aware of the different journeys and the ongoing work. Blank Noise became a registered organization a few years ago. It was also about understanding what we wanted to do.

It needs some capacity; it cannot rest on only volunteers, so that's a lot of my work right now. It is about trying to build teamwork on the caste-based research project. That happened through another person, so it can't rest on the freedom it had back then; it's like we're just discovering something. We still always want to be learning, but there's a different kind of labour, responsibility, structure, and capacity that Blank Noise needs. My work right now is also about building that capacity and craving. So, for example, I'm not necessarily proposing the next new event, for instance. It's not like from talk to me, to me to sleep. It's not like that at the moment; right now, it's more about scale. It's more about scale because they're never asked for it.

Mission needs that scale, so learning to think that way and learning to build capacity is what we're doing. So, it's ever-shifting, yeah.

SR: Do you consider Blank Noise to be an art project? An art practice? A social practice? A form of urban research? In your view, what makes Blank Noise unique?

JP: I think the uniqueness, so I don't know what I mean. Maybe I can email you this, but to me, it's an odd practice.

As it may, I ask where the question comes from in terms of questioning whether it's an I mean you as an artist who thought about this social issue. Start meeting with people; you started events in public spaces and all. So actually, it has expanded.

Artist starting with that, what is that uniqueness in that whole project or a practice? A socialist's practice? Or, you know, urban researchers project, an approach? Why is it an artistic practice? If you want to write to me, think and send it to me.

When art practices in the process, it's in the questions, right? Very often.

Somebody outside of an art practice sees it as, oh Blank Noise, they might do something, they're likely to do something creative, but their focus is on the public creative part of it.

And for me, then the labour is about making them. If that conversation moves forward, the struggle is also about understanding that art is not just the end result. But one production, it is everything behind that. So, solidarity is the conversation of facilitation.

I mean, Blank Noise proposes possible futures. It enables those possible feminist futures through collective action, and that collective action is not a one-time wonder. It's not a one-time manifestation. It's a process of community building, testimonial building, solidarity building, raising questions, and listening to questions, listening to critique.

So, it's something that's flowing

like I said, one step leads to the next. And that's what, and it's protecting our right to imagine. It's proposing to fearlessly imagine what we deserve and for that imagination to lead the way, and it's facilitating that. Otherwise, depending on who you are, you may imagine something which may also be dangerous in our country or the world. Still, I think that's what makes it said this axis, I suppose, of the organization, the activist group, the art practice, the movement.

I think for me, it's an art practice. I don't know any other way, so I'm also with the organization-building part. I'm evident that it's not make a tremendous sense. That's only to enable the movement to carry on and for us to meet our vision.