

PEAKING DUCK DIARIES

Issue 2, December 2013

PEAKING
DUCK

Editorial Team:

Namita Aavriti, Lata Mani, Shabari Rao, Monica James

Designer: Kena Design

Printed at: Judge Press

December 2013.

All material in the Peaking Duck Diaries is available under the Creative Commons (Attribution-No Derivatives-Noncommercial) license 2.5 (India) which can be read at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/in/> This means it may be reproduced by anyone, as long as it is not for commercial purposes. The work cannot be altered, used or transformed. If any material is reproduced, then the license requires attribution to the author and *Peaking Duck Diaries*, with a link to our website.

Peaking Duck Diaries is a publication of the Peaking Duck Network a Bangalore-based network of inter-disciplinary, like-minded creative practitioners who have come together towards a common vision and goal. Our hopes:

- To explore collaborations between practitioners working in different art practices and disciplines within the network
- To create an environment for peer-to-peer critique, nurturing and learning with a view to developing a shared critical vocabulary that can enhance discussion and strengthen our work
- To raise the level of the discourse on the social life of artistic practice in Bangalore
- To share common resources in terms of space, infrastructure, skills and opportunities
- To become familiar with each other's practice towards imagining process-driven work in the following years
- To develop creative ways of intervening in social and political debates in the city of Bangalore

The Peaking Duck Network is supported by HIVOS.



CONTENTS

- 02 **BY WAY OF AN EDITORIAL**
Lata Mani
- 05 **THE FATHER PIECE**
Namita Aavriti
- 14 **THE FLEETINGNESS OF PRESENCE**
Priya Sen
- 20 **FROM DANCER TO DANCE EDUCATOR**
Shabari Rao in conversation
with Annapurna Garimella
- 26 **STORIES NOT TOLD: PHOTO COLLAGE**
- 28 **PEDAGOGY AS THE FORMATION OF SELF**
Nicolás Grandi
- 34 **SHADOW LIBRARIES**
Monica James & Lawrence Liang
- 40 **SCULPTING THE DARK**
Ayisha Abraham
- 42 **THE NOCTURNE VIDEOPOEMS**
Nicolás Grandi & Lata Mani
- 45 **TAKING IT TO THE GALLERY: *VERNACULAR, IN THE CONTEMPORARY* AS CURATORIAL ACTIVISM**
Annapurna Garimella
- 52 **THE CONTRIBUTORS**

By way of an editorial...

In a set of informal conversations with members of the Peaking Duck Network, facilitator Manjulika Vaz asked each person which of the following images they considered most appropriate as a description of the group: a tree, a picture frame or a railway platform. Most opted for the railway platform. Having been alone in selecting the tree (I felt the network, like the tree, was a verdant shelter under we gathered to talk), I had been puzzled at the time. The group's trajectory has, however, confirmed the station platform to be an apt metaphor.

The station platform in India is a lively social space of chance encounters, transient intensity, unfinished business and sensory pleasure. An impromptu community forms in anticipation of the train's arrival or departure and just as quickly dissolves into a collection of individuals on discrete journeys that may or may not intersect outside of that location. The idea of the journey also expresses something essential about the creative process. Everyone is on their way from some germinal point whether named in terms of tradition, form, technique, practice, discipline or theoretical orientation and en route to a place as yet un-nameable, but in some way being anticipated by their current work.

The station platform is not an ideal location in which to write a manifesto, build a new critical vocabulary or allow conversations to cohere into a new vision. But it is a place in which one can communicate animatedly, watch relaxedly, eavesdrop casually, listen intently and find oneself embroiled in unexpected conversations. All of this leaves its traces on the traveler and shapes his or her subsequent journey. The station platform and all that it signifies richly evokes our experience as a network.

This issue of the *Peaking Duck Diaries* gathers together most of the work presented in the second half of our first year together. The articles convey the character of our predilections, the tenor of our dialogue and the interdisciplinary nature of the engagement. Given the network's interest in process it is a travelogue of sorts: individual artistic journeys; the relation of biography, personal memory, memorabilia and history; literary, curatorial, dance, video, craft and image-making practices that work alongside, against and across prevailing aesthetic and pedagogical conventions. Art or critique as a form of trans/scripture. Some of the work is part of on-going, pre-existing projects. Some were produced for the network over a period of a month in context of the cross-pollination laboratory, an initiative intended to facilitate short-term collaborations between people from different disciplines. The railway station is, after all, a place in which to try things out, secure in the knowledge that no long-term commitment is signaled by the taking on of a new disguise, persona or practice.

As we go to press the network's future is in transition. It will likely survive in some form though without the HIVOS funding which it fortuitously received early in its existence, it is unlikely that the *Peaking Duck Diaries* will continue to be published in this current form. We offer this issue as one of a two-part record of our coming together in 2012-2013.

We hope you enjoy reading it!

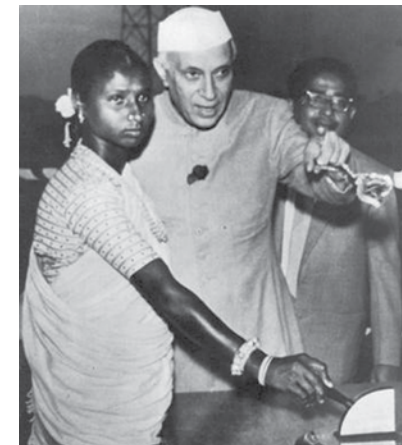
Lata Mani

For the editorial collective

THE FATHER PIECE

Namita Aavriti

In this photograph Budhni Mehjan inaugurates Panchet Dam with Jawaharlal Nehru by turning on the lever while Nehru points towards an unknown future. The story of Budhni Mehjan, a Santhali tribal woman, was somewhat uncovered in a recent article in *The Hindu* by Chitra Padmanabhan¹. Very few other traces of her story are to be found, except for the recent mention on *ambedkar.org* about the tribal wife of Nehru. This photograph captures the moments around when Budhni's life was changed. Aside from pulling the lever, she also garlanded Nehru and it was this act that led to them being considered married by the Santhali tribals. For the rest of her life her own people shunned her as she had married outside her community. For several years she lived with a man and also had a daughter with him. In her late 30s, she was dismissed from her allegedly permanent job by the Damodar Valley Corporation.



Inauguration of Panchet Dam,
Damodar Valley Corporation, December 1959

1. Chitra Padmanabhan, "Recovering Budhni Mejhan from the silted landscape of modern India", Op-ed, *The Hindu*, June 2, 2012. Available online at: www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/recovering-budhni-mejhan-from-the-silted-landscape-of-modern-india/article3480638.ece

Padmanabhan says that Budhni's story is important because she is a national reminder that "this land can be separated from its people only with tragic consequences". Budhni's life was not the only one drastically altered by the temples of modern India – there were countless others displaced mostly tribal and indigenous communities whose temples and houses were submerged and lives

"This land can be separated from its people only with tragic consequences."

destroyed by massive power projects and dams. After reading Padmanabhan's brief exploration of the antecedents of this photograph, I finally decided to write down the swarm of confused thoughts and feelings about my father's photograph with Nehru. I was struck by how similar our accounts were and the almost derivative nature of what I had written. Both Padmanabhan and I meander through geography textbooks, half-recalled memories of visits to dams and how brief interactions with Nehru changed people's lives. Did this happen to everybody whose parents lived through the dream of modernity, and whose children lived through the changing years of perestroika, Doordarshan and liberalization?

One of the more surreal memories I have of growing up is being taken quite often to look at dams on school trips or even by family. A small town I still remember is Kota. Kota was where my mother's elder sister lived, with her autistic daughter and old-fashioned husband. Perhaps during that holiday, I was patronizing as a big city girl from Delhi, or as a girl who usually goes to the chilly and rarefied climes of Shimla for her holidays and here I was condemned to Kota. What is Kota? What does Kota feel like? What does Kota have? Aside from an obvious lack of anyone of the same age to play with.

The specificities of the memory of seeing the Kota barrage quickly dissolves into an array of similar trips from school and with family to dams near Jhansi, Brindavan

Gardens and so on. There are memories of pubescent sexuality that accompanied such trips, of sunsets seen over concrete horizons, but not much of the dams themselves. I remember a few cemented walkways, a rush of water falling down a gigantic spillway, large bodies of scarily still water but none of these outings rose above the mundane. What was more awe-inspiring were the descriptions of how these dams worked in textbooks. In there, the generation of hydro-electricity through turbines and harnessing of power from a rush of water was explained, none of which was imaginable at least for me while looking at the spillways and artificial lakes. It strikes me in retrospect that I should have been awed, in the same way that I was by the ending of *X-Men 2* when the dam breaks and sweeps away the psychic Jean Grey, or how I was overwhelmed while standing in a village in the Narmada Valley in 1999, and being told that the entire village and the hills that rose above me would be under water when the Sardar Sarovar Dam was finally built.

The other memory of this trip to Kota was my daily morning fascination with a toaster that was built to pirouette. The toaster was built with vertical heating coils and slices of bread could be placed in little iron cages that opened like doors. Once all were open they had to be closed the other way so that the other side could be toasted. It struck me then that while this object was beautiful, it took double the time to make toast with it. Its inefficiency and curious mechanical beauty made it a relic not just of receding times, but also something flatter – comparable worlds that those in Kota, Shimla, Delhi, Madras, Bangalore occupied and their misstep with each other in pre-liberalized India. What was a 1900s toaster doing in Kota during the 1980s? What frame of understanding gleaned from Nehruvian modernity, the project of the Indian nation, the history of science and technology – could explain that?

Now of course everything **then** seems quaint, whether the risqué English language films that were shown late at night, the quality of videotapes and their scratchiness, the buying and making of mixed tapes, and especially our (middle-class India's) frantic and tenuous grasp of Western culture.

I WAS
OVERWHELMED

II

My father often claims that he was pressured to become an engineer by my dictatorial grandfather because Nehru wanted engineers to build the country. His account of his thwarted ambition often changes. Sometimes, he says, he had wanted to be a historian. But on most occasions, he insists that he only wanted to be an engine driver. Sometimes, I feel that he would have made a good historian because of his lively and non-judgmental interest in people and places. Though scarily his views on contemporary politics make me think he might have been a staid and conservative historian. Perhaps the blessing of science is that it shields many people from directly seeming ideological. Going by how he never releases the clutch while driving a car, he would probably have been a really bad engine driver.



Father & Nerhu

My father contradicts his own account of how he was pushed to become an engineer by his fond and somewhat happy recollection of his years of training in Germany. These years, he lived alone and his singular human contact seems to have been his landlady for whom he still has an abiding yet flickering love. When he returned to Germany recently after 40 years of never leaving India, he went looking for her grave. Her name is also curiously the password for his laptop.

“He lived alone and his singular human contact seems to have been his landlady for whom he still has an abiding yet flickering love”

The family mythology of the story of my father becoming an engineer is directly tied to the Nehruvian Project and to the narrative of India’s modernity and development. This is poignantly captured in a photograph in which my father, young, handsome and with a wide, masculine smile is shaking hands with Nehru. Nehru is looking away and seems unreal, as though he has been photoshopped in – he seems vacant in contrast to the hopeful young engineer facing him. This young engineer, my father – who wanted to be a historian but instead went to Germany, fell pointlessly in love with his older landlady, had a rather late arranged marriage and then had me.

This is what I remember of my father’s story from family conversations I had until five or six years ago. Now, I fear speaking to them of things they have previously told me because their versions might shift. In pre-liberalized India, my family was a picture of constancy. If we went for a drive to Old Delhi, my father told me the same story at the exact same signal, of how he got onto the horse at that very spot for his own wedding party. If we spoke about our decade-long stay in Madras, which was our detour into independence from extended family and the patriarchal rule of my grandfather, we refer to the same neighbors, the same Maharaja Stores, and the brief glory of Amitabh Bachchan’s one visit to Elliot’s Beach.

We had the same car, the same generic television, and my mother cried when she was gifted a Sumeet Mixie because it would quite clearly improve her life. We understood ourselves as not that well off, and while we had lived in a biggish flat in Madras, where I was born, shifting to Delhi changed the class parameters of how we could live.

Padmnabhan was unable to find a reference in reports of the dam's inauguration to the split second that changed Budhni's life – her garlanding of Nehru which led to their being considered married by the Santhali community. In a similar way, I find it difficult to pin down precisely the moment or series of moments in which my father was pushed to engineering. Sometimes the story is a mournful one – my grandfather's insistence, Nehru's demands of the nation. At other times, it is brushed away because the-future-is-what-it-is and liberalization in 1991 was the reward for many years of hard work and drudgery.

My father never rose above mid-management, while his brother was indeed successful both as an engineer and manager. His indifferent career was regarded as a deep personal failure by the rest of my family, and it was only later that I realized that this was a fairly common condition of the middle-class across India. Our one-bedroom house had a huge terrace where the colony kids and I could play. Above us was another engineer who lived with his wife and child in a much smaller house and across the road was a mid-ranking, income tax officer in a slightly bigger house. Life literally felt like it was below a surface that we had not broken through yet. There were moments when we rose up but mostly economics ensured that we lived in something that felt like an unaired box that filled the city. Television broke that, movies did. Travel would have but was limited.

Budhni's story also unravels on a parallel track. After a long struggle with her community and even being kicked out of her job at the very dam she inaugurated, Budhni finds her way to Delhi to meet Rajiv Gandhi in 1985. This seems a journey reminiscent of Shakuntala's

where she finally broke her resolve and pleaded with the king who used to be her devoted lover. Budhni was then reinstated into Damodar Valley Corporation. She was 58-years-old. Especially in hindsight, this seems too little too late. As one uncovers the trail of her photograph with Nehru at the dam's inauguration, the tragedy of development seems apparent in every gesture – the hopefulness in Budhni's shy, upraised gaze, the fraudulent and overly optimistic pointing by Nehru towards a future that would not, and did not, live up to any promise he made.

In contrast to others whose photographs with Nehru have some public circulation, my father's photograph is decidedly not special. His story is nowhere as difficult and tragic as Budhni's. Neither is he like the accomplished army man who climbed the Everest² and stood proudly facing the camera with Nehru by his side. Poignantly my father looks at Nehru with hope, and lives his life to fulfill Nehru's vision, descending into the anonymous mass of the pre-liberalization middle class where life was tough and slow. This is a sad personal photograph that will never be popular or public. Even Nehru seems beaten down. Instead of rising to some distant horizon his gaze is directed to the ground, unsure, as if squinting towards a future he cannot really see.

III

The presence of the photograph is an insistence – **this happened**, even if in some way the actual moment did not register in the photographer's or the subject's own consciousness. Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes have written about the nature of the photograph as an isolated burst, "a shrapnel from the continuity of time, there is neither a 'before' or 'after'". Many who look at older photographs of their own family say the images seem unreal, as somehow divergent from their own memory as if to say "this never happened" or "it didn't happen this way". Even so the existence of the photograph is a testament to a particular moment, captured in its two-dimensional, held within a frame and devoid of smell, taste or other senses.

2. The man who led India's first climb expedition on Mount Everest, Image and Text contributed by Soni Dave, New Delhi to online archiving project 'Indian Memory Project. Available online at: www.indianmemoryproject.com/53/

A photograph is something we arrive at too late – the moment captured is already over. And yet, the photograph is of an act not yet completed or a gesture not yet finished and so we arrive too early as well. As Benjamin says it gives the moment “a posthumous shock”. Much of the discussion by Benjamin and Barthes around photography in Western culture, is fixed around certain kinds of photographs, usually newspaper, reportage, art or experimental. Only occasionally does it extend to family albums and personal photographs, in which some glimmer of the self or one’s unknowable future and choices also seem held within the stasis of the photograph.

Benjamin poetically denies a photograph fixity and finality because it is light turned to shade and shade to light and nothing made like this can claim finality for itself. I would grant photographs their insistent power, their ability to turn up as themselves over and over again, even when viewpoints, perspectives and depth change. The surface of the photograph provides a place to pause and a historical photograph allows you to look past its surface to something that was, to fall through all that it summons, an often-told story and fragments of being from another time.

In a workshop on archives I attended held in Beirut, a passionate middle-aged man presented his film about archival photographs. Beirut seemed to be in the grip of archival fever, with many people’s personal and collective projects attempting to fill the gaps of the disappearance of lived histories during the war years. However, almost in defiant opposition to this, this man makes a film of himself burning all his family albums and old photographs and we see glimpses of his relatives and life in Beirut through chemical flames. On the other hand, Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh in her project, ‘Possible and Imaginary Lives,’ reveres the studio photographs she collects, none of which are personal, and yet she imbues them with a sense of despair over a collective loss of time.

In these photographs of Budhni and my father with Nehru, Nehru is either looking upward towards the dream of the concrete dam with Budhni or despondently gazing upon the ground as in the photo with my father. Gazes never lock on each other and seem to bounce off the serrated edges of

“Gazes never lock on each other and seem to bounce off the serrated edges of the old photograph.”

the old photograph. Budhni with her young cheeks attempts to look to where Nehru is pointing, towards some distant but real possibility. In contrast my father seems to look directly at the man whose vision changes his life. That “third look between characters” that establishes their interaction with each other³ is absent, while the future which is off-screen, constantly beckons. The darkened edges of the photograph show the passage of time since, the inevitable decay that signals the coming of the much-awaited future.

Stared at too long the photograph seems to emanate time – like a blank or black screen that has all the potential of the universe until it is switched on.

SHADE TO LIGHT

3. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”,
The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader (Ed. Amelia Jones), Routledge Chapman & Hall, 2003.

THE FLEETINGNESS OF PRESENCE

Priya Sen

ON BEING INTRODUCED

I was first introduced to Ayisha Abraham's work at a 2008 conference organized by pad.ma, a public access digital media archive. Ayisha was presenting digitized 8mm colour footage from the 1930s of the dancer Ram Gopal shot by Tom Aguiar, a neighbor of hers in Bangalore, who had recently passed away. Tom made home movies using an 8mm camera. The footage Ayisha showed was some of the most beautiful fragments of film I had ever seen, and as she talked through it, the segments unfolded like poetry on a digital interface flanked by toolbars, timelines, and boxes for annotative text. The combination could have felt unwieldy. But it was strangely appropriate given the two worlds in which it was situated, something I understood even more as I got to know Ayisha's work over subsequent years. This was old film, and its surface was layered by time itself, evident in the scratches, the frame lines, and the parts that were eaten away.

Ayisha spoke of many things. She said the word "amateur" had its origin in "lover, a devoted friend, a devotee, a pursuer of objective". Tom's films expressed love, that was clearly evident. Ayisha talked about the problems posed by an insistence on meaning and the pedantry that such a conception of knowledge infuses into beauty, into the sensory, fleeting nature of a moment, causing a distancing as it were, from the intimacy with which the object might be experienced. All this while Ram Gopal danced for Tom's camera sometime in the 1930s. As I listened, I sensed Ayisha's excitement of having discovered more than just a bit of

film. In a sense it was as in cinema's grandest gesture – the ability to preserve life long after it has ceased, in fragments of time, light and movement. Ayisha's encounter with the footage spoke of a desire for a few, perhaps contradictory, impulses – to allow the footage to exist as phenomena on its own terms, to have it be continuous with its own history, to make something of it which also meant to connect it to her world and experience, to acknowledge its particularity on the one hand but also its existence as a historical object. Later, this footage became a film, *I Saw A God Dance*, and I imagine some of these conflicting impulses played themselves out in its making.

I remember thinking how malleable yet transient these fragments of film were.

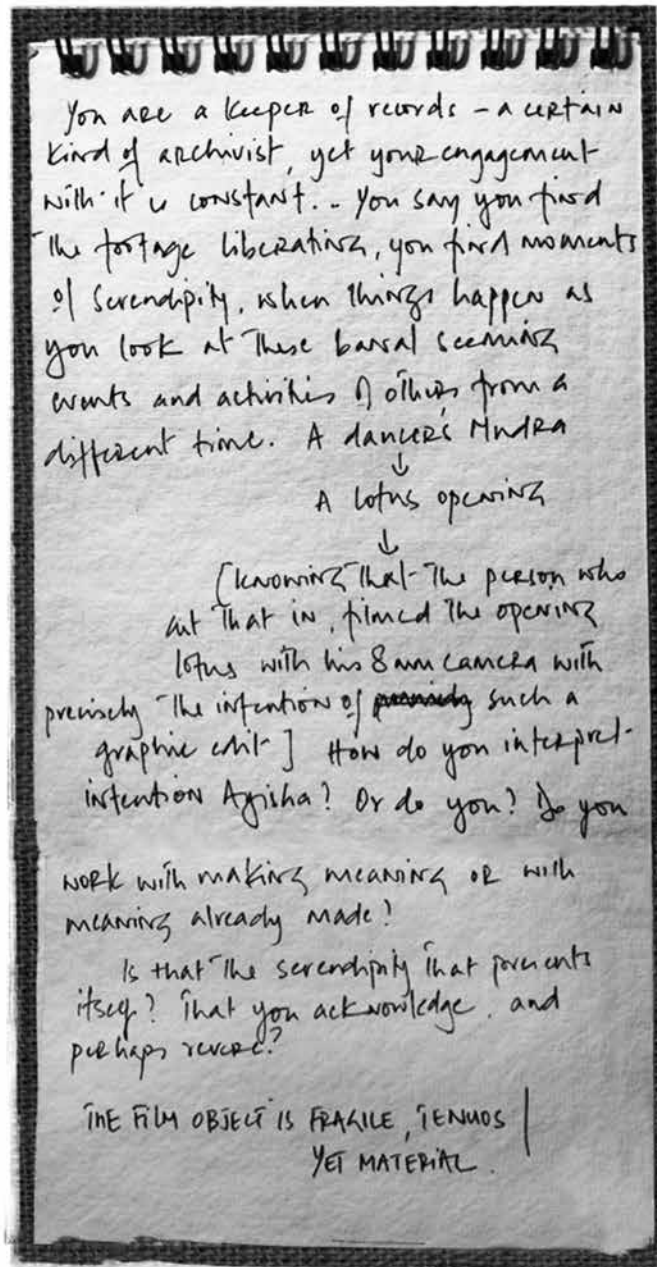
'Another way of telling'
Starts from the fragment -
The Particular Object.
Continuous with its own
history.

The insistence of meaning, the inevitability
of historicizing, the pedantry of a world
known ...

I remember you saying to me Ayisha,
that tentativeness will look for its form.
[Not tentativeness as uncertainty...not an
uncertain form, but as an approach to
trying to uncover phenomena on its own terms.

Looking at a piece of film - a product of light
& time - light from another time - other
people's records of family life, memories as
if new - I have questions for you.

ON BEING A KEEPER OF RECORDS



ON DISCOVERING A LETTER TO N

September 1st 2013

Dear Ayisha,

I found a copy of *Mappings: shared histories . . . a fragile self*, published by Eicher Gallery in 1997 to mark fifty years of independence, and to address the politics of making the nation and its consciousness. In your piece, ". . . Looks The Other Way", you have written to your friend, N, about a series of photographs you made copies of in order to intervene "incisively into a historical preciousness, by marking, defacing, reframing, slicing the surface". "With window frames I traversed anxiously the landscapes of each image. Looking for new relationships that could emerge from parts taken out of context." The images were parts of a photograph, isolated from the whole. In doing that you created a movement in time, broke out of the confines of a frame, reframed, reconstituted history as it were, and presented the curious difficulties of memory objects. The photograph became a landscape, a terrain that was traversed differently with each new framing.

You called it "telephoto-ing" into and also gestured at the encounter with technology - the copies and copies of copies made using a Xerox machine, as well as the digital manipulation of the original photograph. It reminded me of a story "The Adventure of a Photographer" from Italo Calvino's book *Difficult Loves* in which a photographer, obsessed with photographing every moment of the woman he loves, declares, "photography has a meaning only if it exhausts all possible images". After she leaves him, he tries to photograph her absence, and then absence itself, of everything around him that resisted photography as well as the entire visual field. He tears up photographs and negatives in his madness to try and possess an image. "Perhaps true, total photography, he thought, is a pile of fragments of private images, against the creased background of massacres and coronations."

Your photograph – “The Doll” presents to me one such private image – the seated child with the doll looking into the camera is at the centre of the frame, and to her right is the lower half of a man standing next to her, and part of a sari-clad, crossed leg of a woman at the edge of the frame. To her left is another child, half out of frame, and also looking into the camera. By interpreting this image I will bring to it a reading that you possibly had not ordained for it. You might think it to be overly pedantic, this imposition of my world and understanding on it, something you have spoken about in your work with found film, that inasmuch as meaning is enriched through locating images in conceptual and contextual frameworks, the particularity and distinctiveness of the object itself is lost as a consequence. To me this photograph – or the manipulated image of a photograph speaks of a private act, a dismembering of the personal from precisely this creased background of its history. Perhaps, the act of “telephoto-ing” here seeks to tell a different story from the one that was intended in the original photograph. History itself is reframed, time extends in more than one direction. The present as future-memory becomes a possible consequence of this transformation.

You say you have a tenuous relationship with the digital and what is intriguing to me is how the digital actually signifies a “return to material”, and to your early training in painting and sculpture. I imagine this tenuousness to be connected to the intangible, non-tactile, distant practices that are the essence of our digital universe. The digital overrides the connections that material so naturally presents. Would “The Doll” be possible at this time, when this is the predominant mode of production? What relationship does it present to history and time?

With love,
Priya

ON BEING CONFRONTED BY A THOUSAND MOONS

In a conversation with Ayisha about her work with collecting and reconstituting 8mm home movies and footage, we talked about how biography and ethnography were part of the process in an excavation of this kind. She said the work felt like a continuation of the “archaeology of the characters”, where the archaeology is constructed rather than presumed. Perhaps this form emerges from an agreement between family history, collective memory, technology, its obsolescence, and the images that remain. In Ayisha’s work there is an acknowledgement of this very powerful consensus. The documentary with its demand for knowing, explanation and exposition, pursues a “guise of objectivity” and paradoxically a template for truth-telling. Ayisha describes her interviews as ramblings, whispers, utterances that couldn’t possibly hold so much weight. They become ways to annotate the image and to return to the tradition of photo-text. The impulse for documentary itself gets dispersed into different forms of stories.

Enroute or Of a Thousand Moons, a film made with 8mm family footage of a family, a personal favorite of mine, unfolded as an unframed record of this family’s “film-worthy moments.” The soundtrack is where one senses the presence of the person who put this together. Through the fragile imprints of family picnics and travels much is revealed and much is lost. Not a loss to be mourned, but one that is as continuous as time. Ayisha’s body of work is about home and time and loss, each being a precondition for the other. It is work that extends beyond technologies drawing on material that is found or abandoned. It is about coming to terms with the fleetingness of presence.

collective
memory

FROM DANCER TO DANCE EDUCATOR

Shabari Rao in conversation with Annapurna Garimella

Following an autobiographical performance tracing her journey from dance-maker to pedagogue, Shabari speaks about the institutional contexts that structured her intellectual, emotional and aesthetic journey.

Annapurna: Shabari, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about your background before we get into the particulars of the performance. When was it that you started getting a notion of yourself as a person interested in movement? Did you have a relationship with dance or just that of a body in space, moving around?

Shabari: I think definitely dance, first, because that was what was on offer in school at Centre for Learning, Bangalore (CFL), and I used to go for bharatanatyam classes independently as well.

A: When you took training from a teacher outside of school and a teacher in school could you sense any differences in the experience?

S: There was much more rigor, many more demands on me, as a student outside the school. Within school, I think our teacher was really struggling to find a way of getting through to people who did not want to do bharatanatyam. This is the first time I am thinking about my own teachers! Alakananda aunty, the one in school, used to be in tears often because the class was so distracted.

A: Was this because the school invests so much in the

idea that students should say what they feel, or is this an experience that one can have while trying to teach in a setting where students are not interested?

S: I think, it is a bit of both. As students of CFL, we were very outspoken. But now when I look back with my current understanding, I guess she, Alakananda aunty, was struggling to get through to many of us. I was one of the exceptions because I actually liked doing it.

A: When was the first time you saw contemporary dance? Or had you seen it before and never done it?

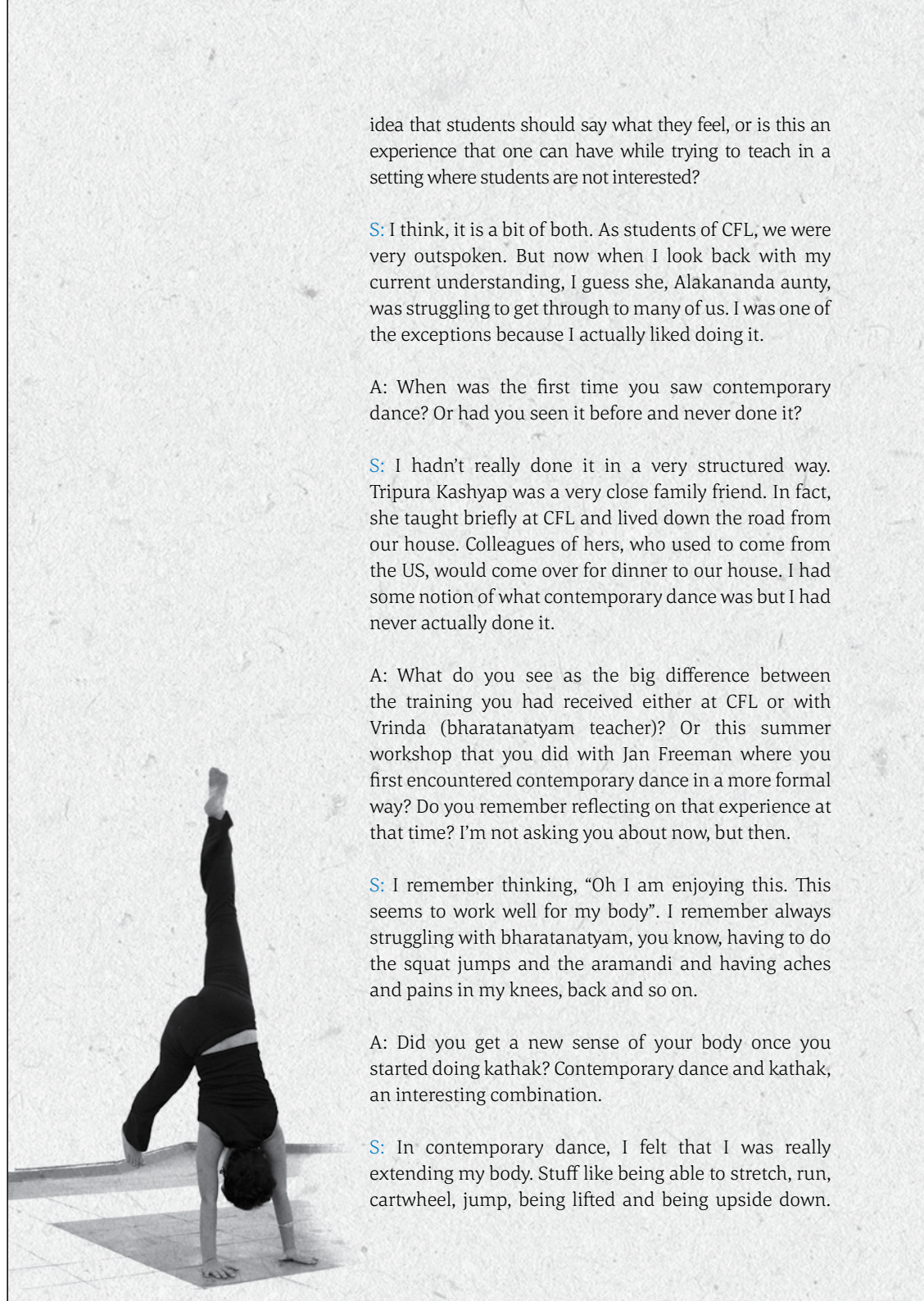
S: I hadn't really done it in a very structured way. Tripura Kashyap was a very close family friend. In fact, she taught briefly at CFL and lived down the road from our house. Colleagues of hers, who used to come from the US, would come over for dinner to our house. I had some notion of what contemporary dance was but I had never actually done it.

A: What do you see as the big difference between the training you had received either at CFL or with Vrinda (bharatanatyam teacher)? Or this summer workshop that you did with Jan Freeman where you first encountered contemporary dance in a more formal way? Do you remember reflecting on that experience at that time? I'm not asking you about now, but then.

S: I remember thinking, "Oh I am enjoying this. This seems to work well for my body". I remember always struggling with bharatanatyam, you know, having to do the squat jumps and the aramandi and having aches and pains in my knees, back and so on.

A: Did you get a new sense of your body once you started doing kathak? Contemporary dance and kathak, an interesting combination.

S: In contemporary dance, I felt that I was really extending my body. Stuff like being able to stretch, run, cartwheel, jump, being lifted and being upside down.



I have always had a flexible body and to be able to use that in performance was nice. In kathak, I felt very feminine and graceful, soft hands and all of that. I was just discovering this way of moving.

A: So in three years, when you came to the end of the BA programme at the Natya Institute of Kathak and Choreography (NIKC), where were you? As a dancer, as a teacher, as a student, performer...

S: I feel like saying, pretty much in the same place. But I guess I wasn't because I was ready to leave. I also remember feeling that in the contemporary scene I wasn't getting trained any further. I had reached a certain level and I was performing a lot as a part of STEM Dance Kampni and with NIKC Ensemble. We were touring a lot at the time. But I didn't feel that I was growing much. Luckily for me, my education was not good enough. Many things were just words and concepts that were not even explained. So being a practitioner interested in ideas and concepts, I think I have developed my own notions of aesthetics or form and technique. My understanding of these concepts is really rooted in my practice.

“I think i have developed my own notions of aesthetics or form and technique”

A: To go back a little, how did the pedagogic and performance structure of your degree tie into the CFL experience with its state-your-mind-to-the-point-of-rudeness sort of pedagogy?

S: Well, I think the atmosphere was very different. There were many ways in which I didn't quite fit in, but I was trying very hard. There was this romantic notion of a guru and it was the first time I was in this kind of set up, doing a namaskar and touching your guru's feet and “don't step over the musical instruments”, and having a sense of reverence and following rules about hierarchy and so many things. And I would always be the odd one out because I had come from this very weird school.

romantic notion

A: When you reflect on the performance that you just did, given that you have this very deep understanding of all that structures art-making, whether it is financial or pedagogical or how somebody sets up their institutions or companies, how do such things impact your piece? In relationship also to the way you do it.

S: The first thing to me is that I don't like the idea of an established hierarchy between a teacher and a student. I acknowledge and understand that the teacher has a lot of power, experience and knowledge. When you are standing in front of the class, whether you have experience or not, you have power. How you use that is very critical to the kind of teacher and pedagogue you are. I feel that kind of structure of, “I'm going to tell you what to do and you do it,” both in terms of making art or in terms of teaching is not my style. I think that realization, even in a vague way, shifted me out of the STEM Dance Kampni and Attakalari model of functioning.

So I have collaborated a lot in making work. Also when I teach I look at it as collaboration, where I need to be met halfway, something I make clear right from the very start, even when I am teaching a class of six-year-olds. I communicate to them that I'm not doing them a favor and they are not doing me a favor by being here. Unless they also put in some energy and some effort, I have no reason to do it. But my responsibility is to make it relevant, to make you want to put that energy in. So that's how I see my role as a teacher.

A: If teaching is itself a kind of a performance as much as it is a craft, what is the role of the teacher? And what is the role of spectacle in the teaching performance?

S: I use spectacle and performativity very strategically while teaching. To start with spectacle, I use that a lot and strategically. So I would do something that I know the students can't do. Students are used to their teachers not being very agile, no? As a regular teacher you might walk in, you sit on your chair or you stand or whatever,

but that's pretty much it, right? But I get them to do stuff like lying on your back and putting your feet up in the air. And then I do something a bit spectacular, maybe like a cartwheel or something. And it works, especially with the boys who feel like this dance isn't cool enough. So I do use spectacle in that way.

Another thing that I might use is rhythm, I start clapping and people become sensitive to that and then everyone is clapping. Then you stop and you have silence and you have their attention on you. So many little things about performance... I really use it. I'm exhausted every time I come out of a class!

A: What is the place of narrative and musicality in this kind of performance? It is such a huge part of dance.

S: There is definitely a pacing for a class. There definitely is an energy graph, which provides a rhythm and the tone of what is happening. That is why planning actually helps.

A: You are a teacher and an artist, and in the way that the curriculum of dance is practiced all over the world, in my limited knowledge, it is separated in most institutions. Why is the crux of your piece the separation between performance and pedagogy?

S: The last ten years have been really about coming to terms with or reconciling between those two as separate or as joined. There was definitely more glamour in being a performer than there is in being a teacher. And even being an artist is mysterious, this person who works based on inspiration, you're supposed to be gifted in some way. And you try. As a nineteen or twenty-year-old, you're trying to embody that, you try and be cool and arty. But teaching really brings you down, you know, it really grounds you, because otherwise it's chaos and your class is falling apart. You have to have a plan, you have to do something, you have to progress in some way, you have to build something. And there is that very real work that needs to be done. But there was definitely a hierarchy between teaching and performing.



A: In your work, the two times I have seen it, I see three points: teaching, artistry and performance. And there is a kind of layering, which seems to produce the energy of your dance.

S: I want to dance, to express myself through my body. But, I don't think my career is worth ruining my back for. So how do you make that possible? That's what is interesting to me. I feel like I respect my body and value it way beyond wanting it to do something so that I can be spectacular.

I would like to create that space where you do push your body, you extend the possibilities of what you think your body can do to what it can actually do. A space where you are having a conversation with your own ability and there is a kind of a dialogue. And there's no need to do anything more than that. Just do what is possible, see what is possible and I feel that there's plenty to do even in that space. Even in that, there is possibility for beauty, there's possibility for expression, there's possibility for questioning, there's possibility for growth, for art and for life.





Speaking Duck, 12th July 2013



Archana Prasad at Street Scholars, 2nd February 2013



Zasha Cola & Sumesh Sharma on Clark House, Speaking Duck, 12th July 2013



Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy & Abhijeet Tambe at the Cross Pollination Laboratory, 6th July 2013



Nakula S at Street Scholars, 1st June 2013

PEDAGOGY AS THE FORMATION OF SELF

Nicolás Grandi

Intellectual Emancipation and Conscientization: A Laboratory that starts in Latin America

My work as an educator started in Argentina. I began teaching at a very exciting time in a variety of spaces, from the University to community workshops across the country. The neoliberal policies adopted in the 1990's could no longer sustain themselves and this had led to a series of social and economic crises. Most excitingly, however, it led to a deep cultural reshaping. We found ourselves rethinking our ways of relating to each other because of our need to survive with little money. We had our inheritance of a culture of struggles and also our intrinsic creative qualities. The end of neoliberalism came as a force of motivation and activation to shape a fresh constellation of social relationships.

We began doing video workshops for communities with the intent to foster creativity and imagination. Our intention was not to work from issue based problematics, though if these appeared they would be welcomed. Rather we set out to create spaces where collective work, coming together and organizing each other, was prioritized; neoliberalism had left quite an imprint of individualistic and self-driven determinations.

I recall two encounters I had in this period which greatly influenced me. One was *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* by Jacques Rancière, and later *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire. From Rancière I learned the idea of intellectual emancipation where teacher and taught place themselves in a relation of equality – equality not as an objective but as a principle. This allowed me to free

the teaching process from prescribed methodologies, to begin a quest where the unfolding of methodology was situational and depended on the group one was working with. The key aspect in this was to activate the will of the student, to make the student work.

Freire brought conscientization to light, a way of thinking of education as a practice of freedom founded in understanding the dialectical relationship of consciousness and the world. But Freire's conscientization posed a problem for me. He argued that the world is not formed in contemplation but in work, in action. His approach seemed too materialistic. It left aside the spiritual and mysterious components of human experience and gave rise to an internal divide: how was I to negotiate a space between my contemplative practices and a political understanding?

A spiritual and political divide? Unity in practice in India.

In India, I found a source of inspiration and ancient knowledge that deepened the inquiries I had begun back home. In particular, two teachings from the Vedas produced an indelible imprint.



The first was from *Rig Veda* 10.191: “sam vo manāṃsi jānatām”. It can be translated as “with our minds put together may we understand”. I found its inviting quality and its humbling attitude beautiful. Not only did it resonate with Rancière’s idea of equality as a starting point but it deepened it by providing an orientation towards the approach. “May we” completely debunked the “we will understand” attitude. Learning becomes not only more flexible but also less instrumental.

The second teaching that touched me came from the *Praśna Upaniṣad*. *Praśna* means question. This *Upaniṣad* begins with a beautiful story of three sons of three different Rishis setting off in a quest for the truth. The seekers reach the home of another Rishi, full of questions. The Rishi asks them to live with him for a year promising that if by the end of that year he knew the answers to their questions he would teach them.

Two aspects emerged from this story: one the need for a question to initiate any quest. Seeker and researcher need this as a motivation or motor, to move, to search, to discover. The question is at the base of any dialectical process, it is the promoter of dialogue out of which knowledge might arise. Second, I was struck by the aspect of living together as part of the learning process. Knowing each other is a much more grounded way of knowing what kind of things can be taught and learnt, for not everything is suitable for everybody.

When I began working with my Indian students I found that they were very similar to youth in 1990’s Argentina: apolitical, ahistorical and aspiritual.

Shattering the Classroom

Two projects offered ideal contexts to develop a pedagogy embedded in the flow of life itself: *Marubhumi Katha*, done in Kutch and *Chronicles of a Pickle*, done during Kochi-Muziris Biennale. Generally the classroom is very withdrawn from the world. One is inside four

walls, a non-inspiring space where tables and chairs become elements that generate distance more than an ambience that facilitates a common search or quest. A first step towards rearranging this form was to work with the circle, very much part of the traditions of *Abya Yala* or *Flourishing Land* (the name given by aboriginal communities in pre-Colombian times to what was later designated as the Americas). The circle is the space in which every voice is heard, where everyone can face each other, and where the experiences of life are shared. For example, a community that lives in Sierra de Santa Marta, Colombia, uses a space called *maloka* for what we would call the classroom. The difference is that it is an open bamboo structure, and it is not just used for teaching but also to call together any gathering or discussions in which all members participate. For them, education does not finish in the *maloka*, but expands to the jungle, the hills and to each other’s homes.

Kutch and Kochi became our *maloka* at two different instances in time. Our circles would be opened at breakfast and before dinner. We would put our day in order, organize it, and debate conceptual frameworks, share experiences. It became a way of our growing together alongside the development of the projects.

learning process



We did grassroots research, having conversations and interviewing people — Megwals, Rabaris, Syrian Christians or Jews. We visited relevant places and lived with the locals. The need to read emerged naturally from these situations as students felt they had to prepare themselves for the interviews and have enough grounding to be able to continue to have enriching conversations.

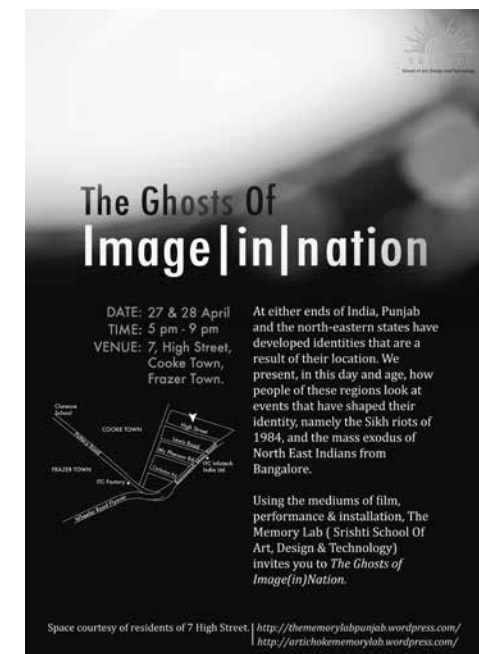
On the wound, humility and placing oneself

Punctum is related to the wound, “that which pierces”. Barthes developed this concept in *Camera Lucida* to establish the way a person relates to an object at a personal level. But a punctum is not only an intrinsic element of works of art. It can be very much alive in the world itself. What punctures us? Are those motors for stories to be told? Do we see in getting wounded a need to transform that experience and put it into circulation as a healing balm? Working in Preet Nagar, near the Pakistan border in Punjab was at times an overwhelming experience. Since 1947 that land has been wounded again and again.

“Punjab became a place to face reality and the burden of history”

For students, Punjab became a place to face reality and the burden of history: Partition, Operation Blue Star, 1965 and 1971 wars among other things. They confronted these not in terms of the big narratives that (H)istory feeds us but in context of the (h)istories found in and among the survivors, in those that found themselves in the middle of the conflicts. One student came and asked me “How do I ask: ‘Can you show me where your brother was killed?’ Can I even ask that question?” The situation inspired humility. The student opened herself to listening, to debating internally and with others whether it was correct to ask that question. She faced herself and she had to position herself in relationship to others. Formation of the self

I like to think of this as a practice that goes beyond pedagogy, i.e. beyond the institutionalization or prescription of teaching methodologies. I think of it as a way of approaching education, one in which the one producing the work is as important as the work being produced. If a student can learn how to negotiate daily life, if she or he can hitchhike on a truck to get to a village to do research and in this process lose the fear that he or she has been educated into.... If students can also open themselves to the experience of the land they are walking on, to the pain somebody has suffered, and to the joys that a community has celebrated with particular care.... If history is understood from this perspective, and if being political is understood as how one participates in the public realm, then I consider it to be a pedagogy of the self. A pedagogy that acknowledges the self as formed of layered dimensions which include an inner and an outer world; the self, its context and the relationship they establish.



SHADOW LIBRARIES

Monica James and Lawrence Liang

The past decade has been a heady one for bibliophiles. Even as the digital era and the proliferation of electronic books technically makes it possible for each of us to walk around with a library on our computers, there is also a fear about of what this means for those of us who, to adapt a religious term, have defined ourselves as 'Ahl al-Kitāb' or People of the Book. If there was a creed that bound the three of us (Danish Sheikh, Lawrence Liang and Monica James) it was Borges' intriguing claim that the universe was a library and the fact that much of our imaginative and moral life had been shaped by the interaction between the word and the world. For us there was no distinction between our utopias and our logotopias. So the disappearance of the library from public life, and the steady decline of book culture, troubled us, immensely.

Library of Unosis

The Library of Unosis has been teetering at the edge of a cliff for centuries, rocking back and forth, and slowly building momentum to launch itself one way or the other at some decisive moment. Confronted by the only borrowing rule of the library its occupants sway similarly between one book and another. Throngs of anxious bibliophiles wander the narrow aisles in ascetic silence for years, some of them never actually borrowing a book. Everywhere, on high wooden bookshelves, on dark stone walls, on the arms of old reading chairs, battered desks and lecterns, a single sentence is engraved: "You may pick any book you desire but choose carefully for you can only choose one." In this realm of abundance where every bookshelf is weighed down by over-spilling volumes scarcity is the reader's lone talisman and guide. You are given unlimited access to the teeming shelves and fissures of the library on the condition that you can borrow and read only one book – for the rest of your life.

Ironically, the motivation for our project began with the closing not of an offline but an online library. For several years *library.nu* had emerged as one of the largest book-sharing communities of which we were active participants. When it was shut down our reaction was a visceral one, as though a much loved home had been demolished overnight. We realized that this feeling of loss was shared by thousands of people around the world for whom *library.nu* had become a second home on the Internet, not just because you could download books but because it had created a community of readers.

In *Austerlitz*, W. G. Sebald writes of the closing of the Bibliotheque:

The old library in the Rue de Richelieu has been closed, as I saw for myself not long ago, said Austerlitz, the domed hall with its green porcelain lampshades which cast such a soothing, pleasant light is deserted, the books have been taken off the shelves, and the readers, who once sat at the desks numbered with little enamel plates, in close contact with their neighbors and silent harmony with those who had gone before them, might have vanished from the face of the earth.

While none of us, unlike Sebald, had personally experienced the dramatic effects of war on libraries, we nonetheless could identify with the depth of the loss that he felt even in context of the disappearances of ordinary book cultures whether in the shutting down of Bangalore's Premier Bookshop, the disappearance of a culture of old booksellers from the streets or the 2012 photocopy case where a consortium of leading publishers filed a case against a small photocopy shop and Delhi University claiming that course packs were in infringement of copyright. Apart from this being a legally dubious claim it went to the heart of how people in India have accessed books and built libraries – one photocopied page at a time.

If the universe is not to be taken for granted then we felt that it was incumbent on us to create our own blueprints for the future logotopias that we wanted to inhabit. One of our inspirations came from discovering

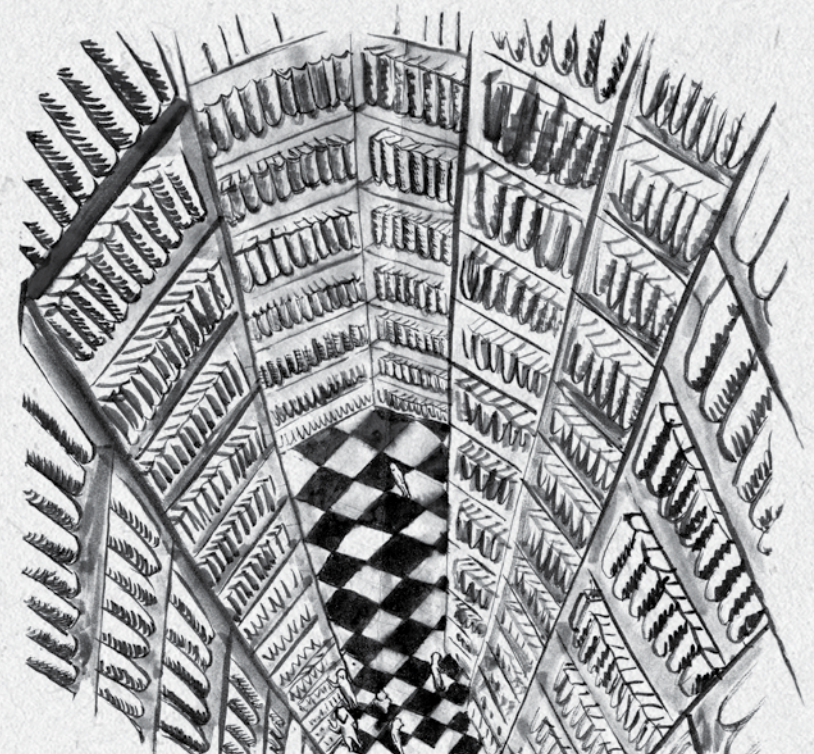
that much-loved book by Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, which was not just a masterpiece of fantastical literature but also his contribution to debates over urban forms and collective living. In despair over the kind of urban development that he saw in post-war Italy, Calvino set out to create a document of hope – one which produced fictional cities which mirrored not the world as it was, but as it could ideally be. Inspired by his vision we set out on our own, asking ourselves what it would be to create a set of invisible libraries as way of thinking about the utopian potential of a single library.

We began by collectively reading Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, discussing how it spoke to us individually as well as how we could adapt a similar approach to telling a story of invisible libraries. In Calvino's tale, the weary sovereign Kublai Khan asks the itinerant adventurer Marco Polo to describe to him the wondrous cities he has seen. Marco Polo obliges with vignettes of cities which mix fiction and fantasy, physical and metaphysical forms, all the while merely describing different facets of Venice. We decided to adopt a similar frame and took as our starting point the ironic appointment of Borges as the librarian of the National Library of Argentina at about the time that he went blind. In our text, Borges calls upon Ibn Batuta, Emma Bovary and Calvino himself to describe the libraries they have encountered.

Library of Barataria

Batuta could see Borges doing the math in his head and on the twelfth square he described the Library of Barataria surrounded on all sides by fecund land. It seemed like it grew out of soil overgrown with creepers and the branches of trees that had seen little discomfort. It was therefore a little surprising for Batuta to walk into a large room filled with empty book shelves save for one lonely book in the middle shelf at the heart of the library. The barrenness of the library seemed like an affront to its surroundings. It took, Batuta recalls, less than seven hours for him to finish the somewhat uninspired tale of

a sailor from Baghdad lost at sea. But he had no sooner placed the book back on the shelf and was ready to leave the library when he saw two more books on the shelves. Perhaps he had not noticed them earlier. The second book contained a reference to a battle of which Batuta, despite his wide reading and travels, was unaware and he wished that he could find out more. But since that was not to be he proceeded to the third book. His wanderings had not been kind on his back and half-way through the third book he longed for a soft bed but all he could see around him were more straight-backed chairs. There were neither clocks nor windows in the room and it was only the clear sound of crickets that informed Batuta that it was well into the night when he finished the third book. Turning his fatigued eyes towards the shelves he saw that four more books had surfaced. Unable to continue and yet unwilling to give up, Batuta took up the challenge as only foolhardy adventurers would.



MASTERPICE

If only he had then known the fate of the emperor's offer to the chess maker he would perhaps have left after completing the seventh book.

Our discussions of possible themes and ideas led to a process of sharing our own encounters with books and libraries. At that point, it seemed as if it would be good to think of the project as an experimental comic that would combine text and image so we invited Anu Biswas, a young illustrator, to join in as we moved between the exhilaration of an idea on paper and the absolute misery of distorting it through our writing. It was the first time that any of us had attempted a collaborative writing effort of this kind and it was evident that our different styles would be our strength but also our greatest hindrance. We battled over treatment, choice of words and even names. But if there was something that we learnt it was the fact that writer's block generally strikes the lone author and when writing in a group we are able to feed off each other's energies and keep at bay the dreaded fear of the blank page. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze was fond of saying of his collaboration, "I used to work alone, and even that was too many people, and then came Guatarri." Accustomed in a country like India to making place for other people even in the most crowded of spaces, we have found that writing like learning is more about conversations with others than about mining your own thoughts.

The Library of Us

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a man in possession of a respectable library must be in search of more books. At times the thirst to expand his collection gets the better of him, and it is then that he abandons caution to the winds and hastens toward marriage. He reasons – if that is what you might label his thought process – that he will find a partner who echoes his literary interests while simultaneously expanding the boundaries of his vision. He imagines a collection of

books that rival his own and are worthy of battling over, and he envisions the pleasure of sieving and sifting out the appropriate titles and placing them in the swelling ranks of his own collection. If he pictures his partner, it is as a smiling, encouraging automaton, hands reaching forward only to assist him in stacking the books in the order of his choosing.

How naive he is.

“Every shelf represents a marriage, the books within it organized to reflect the compromise the happy couple eventually arrived at.”

The Library of Us stands as a testament to such unions made or broken on the question of merging books. Every shelf represents a marriage, the books within it organized to reflect the compromise the happy couple eventually arrived at. Too many shelves feature gaping spaces split down the middle, a testament to the couple's failure to create a federal union from their solitary selves. At times, you sense a weary resignation as the books are thrown together without any sense of taxonomy; at others, you find the dawning recognition of a mismatch as carefully tailored arrangements spectacularly fail.

SCULPTING THE DARK

Ayisha Abraham

I was thinking of darkness – of night, of that night without light – the scourge of our modern world, our urban existence, in which darkness symbolizes fear, embodies ignorance and primitivism; a colonial construct for which we must strive in the march of progress toward light and illumination. But what do we see when we shut our eyes, when we sleep and relive our conscious lives, when the power goes off and we are without UPS? Or when we are in a dark forest enveloped by the night sky without the haze of city lights?

In darkness we try to have our eyes adapt. When we first enter a dark room from the light of day we see nothing. Our eyes adjust and gradually “forms” emerge –silhouettes, blocks of light and dark hues – and then our bodies find a path to negotiate space without stumbling. In the *Nocturne* series, Lata Mani and Nicolás Grandi catch those points of light, mere lines and dots in the landscape and the sounds of life that inhabit it, sounds to which we turn deaf ears or which are smothered by the roar of traffic and elude us as though playing hide and seek.

In *Nocturne I*, the life forms of nature, the lines of thick and clear grass, fall against the light. The circular torch-like light falls onto the dark screen bringing up that which is invisible, blanketed by the sunless night. A plant glows in all its green – the city represented by lit-up buildings, dots and points on a horizon. The camera helps you focus as it moves.

In *Nocturne II*, dusk descends and light must come from within. The objects themselves must radiate light, carve out niches in the dark. It is as if we are cutting into a black sheet of paper to reveal patterns – circles, a fire, the electrical cold of a tube light. The warmth of the fire becomes conversation in a social milieu. The sounds of nature recede to filter in the tones of classical music. Dispersed light forms circles of smudged yellow.



By the end both darkness and the light have been possessed, made peace with, carved into like primitive sculpture, chiseled to imbue the chi and spirit of our soul: our inner selves. The seeking of knowledge of the dark in *Nocturne I* ceases. The darkness is now one with those who represent it. Technology is exchanged and becomes a tool to carve and craft. The bright moon in its golden form, the final image of *Nocturne II*, is of the darkness itself: a darkness that is illuminated to its most radiant.

For Nicolás, the mere task of shooting in the night was a challenge. How do you shoot in the dark with a tool – the camera – that needs light to represent the object of its gaze? For Lata, as she lies in bed listening to urban nature, the calls of frogs, crickets, and night birds, the city is reimaged. Urban nature reveals itself in its sounds only at a time when sleep slows down the pace of life. And what we pay no attention to emerges, alerts us to its presence, breaking down the boundary so unnaturally constructed between the exterior and the interior.

For both Nicolás and Lata, it is the ears that become a recorder of night music, the body an ethno-musicologist listening intently. From this layering of sound and carving of image comes text. A poem is crafted not simply with ink on paper. Rather, in a collaborative meeting point, writer and filmmaker, play with text that hesitantly, and in a staccato fashion inscribes the surface of the video, even as image and sound resist any thrust to over-theorize. Absence, emptiness and darkness begin to assert themselves, unabashedly combining different ways of seeing, hearing and reading, leaving one with a sense of calm, the feeling that *Nocturne I & II* can just exist, as is, without too much explanation.

SILHOUTTES

THE NOCTURNE VIDEOPOEMS

Nicolás Grandi and Lata Mani

Image and Text

The relation of image to text in videopoems is not one of correspondence. Conceived in Deleuzian terms as including the optical and the sonic (imsigns and sonsigns), the image does not “illustrate” the text. And the text is not intended to re-signify the image, to corral and certify its meaning. The challenge in videopoetry is achieving porosity between text and image, an integrated encounter in which neither determines nor overpowers the other. This makes it possible to access a composition in its plurality, in the combination and interplay of its layers. The text for *Nocturne I & II* suggested itself after the visual assembly was nearly complete. It arose in response to it; but as an epiphany that distilled (evocatively in *Nocturne I* and as a kind of a declaration in *Nocturne II*) the thinking that had guided the image-and-sound-making process in the first place. A recursive journey: return, re-turn, place, re-place, look, listen, edit, pause, repeat, re-start. At a certain point, the form coheres enough to convey the sensory experience intended, suggesting something of an arrival.

Sound

Sound was the starting point. The idea for *Nocturne* grew out the symphony of the night - crickets, frogs, the hoot of the occasional owl, the whistle of a security guard, dry leaves being scrunched underfoot, the whooshing wind sweeping sound and dispersing it. Hungarian composer Béla Bartók’s “The Night’s Music” from *Out of Doors* with its movements – its silences, the



choir of creatures, near and distant sounds, the human element – offered a means to contemplate a possible structure. The sound was composed as layers that continually discover, echo, extend, interrupt, morph or transform one into another, into silence, into digital frequencies entwined with nature’s sounds. Sound is not a supplementary force, filler for the unease provoked by the sensation of emptiness in the face of the stand-alone image as in the horror vacui notion. On the contrary, it was seen as a source of the flow of things, the site for the development of the forces driving the work, for the minute composition of what French composer Michel Chion has termed audio-vision, that simultaneous experience of the heard and the seen.

Circle of Confusion

In the dark, the challenge of seeing contrasts with the accuracy of our hearing which is able to pick up minute noises and even their direction. A telephoto lens was used to “carve” into the darkness, to unveil what is not easily seen with human eyes. The telephoto enables one to play with the focal plane. The depth of field does not change abruptly. The transition

from sharp to out of focus is gradual and the region in which this occurs is called the circle of confusion. Prior to that circle, and beyond it, the image starts to blur. Playing with the circle of confusion allows rays of light to take different shapes, enabling transformations and discoveries within the image. A tiny spot of light can become an immense orange ball. And the black lines of a palm tree branch can dissolve completely, allowing us to discover a banner in the far distance and to read what it says.

Ensemble

In looking for a way to describe our collaboration, we found that the usual ways in which we name the different aspects of a working relationship (concept, script, director, camera, editor) did not quite express the synergy we had experienced. So even as we acknowledged Nicolás' expertise as the *sine qua non* of the collaboration, we moved away from a division of labour description to thinking about the quality of the experience and the principle at work, both in our process as well as in the final form of the videopoem (its composition, sound, editing etc.)

Ensemble seemed to capture this best: from the Latin word, *insimul*; in, in and *simul*, at the same time, in and at the same time. The word first proposed itself in its musical sense of a group singing or playing together but it had other meanings that broadened its appropriateness. This included simultaneity, shared space, performing together, each part being considered only in relation to the whole, elements connected by a series of relations. Ensemble signified our intent, the fluid, reciprocal energy of our collaboration and the layered yet integral multiplicity of the work.

Nocturne I: vimeo.com/66952917
Nocturne II: vimeo.com/63462567

TAKING IT TO THE GALLERY: Vernacular, in the Contemporary as Curatorial Activism*

Annapurna Garimella

The assignment given to me by the editors of Peaking Duck Diaries is to discuss the curatorial work behind the show Vernacular, in the Contemporary (VINC), an exhibition I curated for Devi Art Foundation (DAF) in 2010-2011. Before I do this, I think it is worthwhile to present a portrait of what is happening in curatorial practice in India today. Galleries, institutions and individuals are more and more undertaking serious curatorial projects. Rather than invoking curatorial standards from elsewhere, I would like to first reflect on our situation, one in which the curator often has paradoxically both too much and too little power to create and present a narrative. This odd situation is the product of the way in which institutions are structured, the forms of patronage that make shows possible, the themes that curators take up, the spaces in which exhibitions happen and the types of audiences who visit them. A brief discussion about the general circumstances in which curation happens in India will serve to contextualize VINC more accurately.

*In May 2013, Annapurna Garimella presented the second Speaking Duck lecture, a series in which artists and scholars are invited to address a broader public.

Context

Curation in India is by and large seen as an extension of catalogue writing or interior design by most institutions. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers a very basic definition of the word “curator”: “a keeper or custodian of a museum or other collection”¹. In practice, though, the notion of keeping or custodianship is much more complex; today, in the world of cultural institutions, especially outside of Britain, the word “keeper” is used primarily in zoos. This is because the world over, zoos are downplaying the on-going collecting of animals, an activity now associated with imperialism and colonialism, and foregrounding their work in conservation and pedagogy. In India, historic museums such as Mumbai’s Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (formerly known as the Prince of Wales Museum) have begun to use the term curator; the Museum’s director, Sabyasachi Mukherjee, for example writes to potential visitors from the “Curator’s Corner”². Generally, what seems to have happened is that “keepers” have become custodians of living things while “curators” are assigned the task of taking care of objects.

If we move away from the idea of maintaining and caring for objects to a more current and popular use of the word “curate”, we arrive at what Alex Williams noted in the *New York Times* that to curate [now] is a coded way of stating “I have a discerning eye and great taste”³. Ironically, this early 21st century trend resonates with the Victorian notion of the gentleman-connoisseur, who was compelled to demonstrate at every turn his discernment about and sensitivity to a world thickly populated with objects. In the last decade, especially in the boom years of the art market (2002-2008), curators have acted primarily as preceptors of discernment, not so much about how to sensitively view artworks but how to invest in the right artist. A few more established, senior curators have also become the gatekeepers of what

constitutes the “best” critique put forward by an artist in an artwork and is thus the most relevant for our times.



In a country such as India, where there are multiple art worlds, each with distinct yet sometimes overlapping markets, aesthetics and artists, there are very few places where a self-identified curator is invited to structure the art experience that an exhibition can offer. Curation mostly happens in the context of showcasing modern and more frequently contemporary art, and curators of this art have taken on the task of representing entire regional art worlds. Geeta Kapur for all of India, especially in shows that are in foreign institutions, Gayatri Sinha and Ranjit Hoskote and Nancy Adajania in Delhi and Mumbai respectively but also abroad, Marta Jakimowicz in Bangalore, R Siva Kumar for Santiniketan and the Bengal School and several others have become the voices that shape what is the history of a particular art, who is counted as an artist or what issues are relevant. A lot of the curation here is based on longstanding personal relationships and involvement with artists, specific art histories and institutions.

The least “curated” art has been what is designated as folk, tribal, traditional, courtly, popular, craft or temple art, what I have designated polemically as “vernacular” art in the DAF exhibition. Among these, the folk and tribal have garnered more attention, mostly in as much as they can be aligned to or reinforce the avant-garde or critical orientation of the curator. There have been no attempts to think through, in a sustained manner, the diversity of art histories and contemporaneities, markets, forms of intellectual property and authorship, aesthetic propositions and artistic subjectivities that these art forms theorize or make. The other vernacular art forms do not even merit this sort of attention. Though vernacular art practitioners are the largest population of artists in contemporary India, they are merged into the larger landscape of leisure, consumerism, devotionalism,

1. Oxford Dictionaries, oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/curator

2. “Curator’s Corner: Museum of Tomorrow: Developing a New Vision Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya”, themuseummumbai.com/Curators_Corner.aspx

3. Alex Williams, “On the Tip of Creative Tongues”, *The New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/2009/10/04/fashion/04curate.html?pagewanted=all

etc. and rarely addressed as artists qua artists. This, of course, is in part related to the vexatious hierarchies inherent to widely circulating ideas of avant-gardism that have dominated modernist culture for nearly two centuries. These ideas gain authority by both dividing Art from Craft and by designating Craft as the laboring muse that must serve reigning Art. But in our country, the invisibility of vernacular artists is also interlinked to the authority of Anglophone urbanity and the mostly unacknowledged complex forms of casteism that drive it.

“This is because critique has become a powerful fetish in this art world”

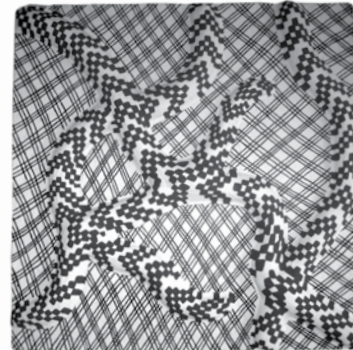
As a person who is not a “native” but a “migrant” to the modern and contemporary art world, I have become acutely aware that critique, powerful and necessary as it is, has not been enough to bring about attitudinal changes or even more robust structural transformations. This is because critique has become a powerful fetish in this art world, one that marginalizes almost every other concern that an artist, critic, curator or viewer may bring to the making, reception and study of art. In fact, it is a widely held perception among the denizens of the contemporary art scene that vernacular artists do not have the ability to “critique” their practice or their milieu and that is why they are vernacular. The operating notion of critique here elevates irony, sarcasm and displeasure in the making of art. There is fundamental fear and distrust of pleasure, beauty and harmony and disbelief that there is any radical potential in them.

When the DAF opportunity arrived, I saw it as an opportunity to use these observations as fuel for curatorial activism. Instead of criticizing the modern and contemporary art realm by concentrating on the enforced minoritization of the majority, I decided

to conceive the show as a “thousand messages in bottles” that travel between various art worlds, each thoughtfully composed from the specific experiences of various vernacular artists⁴. I also requested and received from DAF the opportunity to develop policies and structures that ensured artists in the exhibition received the most ideal experience of participating in a commission, collection and curation-driven exhibition.

The Exhibition

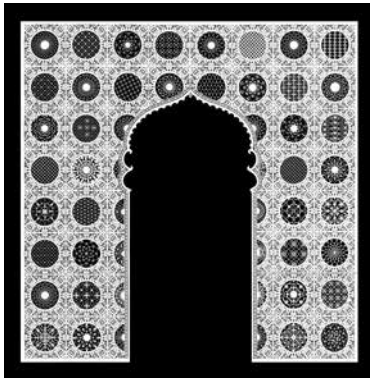
In the concluding section of this essay, I would like to describe the curatorial activism in practice by discussing a couple of projects commissioned from artists specifically for the exhibition.



Radha Sollur's Nagamandalam (*VINC 1*), is a series of cast paper sculptures made based on snake patterns used in Chittara mural painting. At once abstract and visceral, the works derive their energy from the flow of the graphic patterns over the curving shape of a snake that seems to be resting just under the paper. Lekha Poddar, one of the heads of Devi Art Foundation, was fascinated by the nagamandala or snake diagrams that she had seen in her travels in South Western India. She wanted Sollur to paint them to which the artist initially agreed. But when she returned to her village, people there warned her against it and said she would invoke the snake's negative energy. As a curator, I heard this story and decided that I would not push in this direction. Instead, I asked her to draw all the snake patterns she knew. I also noticed that like any folk art form that moves from its conventional context to paper, Sollur's Chittara too stuck to the center of the page as though it needed to ensure that it was anchored firmly in the new setting. While the image was secured because of the centering, it lost the vitality of the Chittara mural from which it was derived. While traversing the undulating walls of a mud house, Chittara treats its support both as architecture and as painted sculpture, an effect that is lost on paper-based Chittara.

4. Annapurna Garimella, “Making the Exhibition” and “The Education of the Curator” in *Vernacular, in the Contemporary*, Parts 1 and 2 (New Delhi: Devi Art Foundation, 2010-2011), pp. v-xii and iv-x, available at www.academia.edu/1778077/Making_the_Exhibition and www.academia.edu/1778085/The_Education_of_a_Curator

After she drew the patterns we asked her play with scale, coloring and gradually, over a period of six months, Sollur was able to do something she had never done before: draw the nagamandala without invoking the snake's wrath and to let go of the center and occupy the entire canvas. Because she was interested in my suggestion that she cast it in paper and then paint it, she also learned how to collaborate with another class of artists. The ultimate result is that Sollur produced a set of works that challenged her conceptual and craft abilities and allowed her to understand that she can use her creativity to work on commissions without necessarily compromising her beliefs and ultimately her connection to her community. I learned how to give attention to the cognitive processes that artists engage and then work with them to expand their repertoire without violating cherished vocabularies and principles.



Kirti Khatri's *Purana Darwaza* (VINC 2) is a large stenciled and cut paper room, patterned after Ahmedabad's famous Sidi Sayed Mosque. Khatri learned his art from his guru, a master jadau artist. Jadau, a jewelry technique, involves the stenciling and cutting of gold and silver foil and the inlaying of the resulting voids in the pattern with precious stones. It is a highly refined art and is similar to the kind of refined filigreed carpentry and stonework for which Gujarat has been famous for centuries. In fact, the mosque is partly the result of a long-standing local history of manufacturing architectural elements such as tombstones for Arab and North African elites, who exported them to their respective locations. Though there is a great deal of similarity between the aesthetics of jadau and the historical practice of refined stone carving for elite Jain, Hindu and Muslim clientele, Khatri had not previously recognized the connection to Islamic architecture. His clients are largely diasporic and Gujarat-based, rich Jain and Vaishnav business families who want their own religious and class identities confirmed in the art they commission. They want Krishnas and Art Deco peacocks to ornament the walls of their mansions. They rarely ask him to make a work of this scale and of this content.

I posed to Khatri the possibility of upping his scale and address the Islamicate character of his art. Initially, he was reluctant to alter the scale; Khatri likes to make work only as large as his kitchen table because he wants to work only at home, not in a studio. But soon he developed a design strategy that would give DAF a cut paper room I wanted while allowing him to remain in his favorite workspace. He went to the mosque and studied it for the first time in great detail and with an attention bordering on obsessiveness; he produced all of the screens in cut paper. He then delivered it and collected his payment.

COMMUNAL CULTURE

This was the extent of obvious engagement the exhibition received from him. But somewhere in the project, I saw him coming to terms, even if in a limited fashion, with a building and an art history that has been obscured in contemporary Gujarat and its communal culture. There was a new feeling of admiration for the mosque and a willingness to honor its artistry by making it his own. Khatri was also able to relate the mosque's aesthetic to the Hindu and Jain buildings with which he was already familiar. Even at this very basic level, a connection was made and the possibility of his developing it further has opened up because of the project for the exhibition.

There were many such instances throughout the commissioning and curation process. Curatorial activism was intended to devise ways for artists, researchers, DAF and I to learn how to push the boundaries of an art form in ways that were productive and not violent. I do not know whether and to what extent artists will continue to make such work in the future; but I am aware that all of us became cognizant of a nascent feeling that selling work or manufacturing pleasantness or critique is not necessarily the only aspect of making art. Learning could be as much or even more fun.

THE CONTRIBUTORS

Namita Aavriti

is a researcher, writer and occasional video-maker.

Priya Sen

works with video and sound narratives, as an artist, editor and sound designer. She occasionally teaches experimental film practices and lives in New Delhi.

Shabari Rao

is a choreographer and dance educator.

Nicolás Grandi

is a filmmaker from Argentina who has been experimenting with music, performance and sculpture and with research in the arts and education.

Monica James

is a writer, media practitioner and researcher and works with Maraa, a media and arts collective

Lawrence Liang

is a writer, media lawyer and co-founder of Alternative Law Forum.

Ayisha Abraham

is a visual artist who lives in Bangalore. She is a visual arts consultant at Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology and a member of the artist collective, Bengaluru Artist's Residency1 (BAR1).

Lata Mani

is a feminist historian and cultural critic.

Annapurna Garimella

is a designer, art historian and founder of Jackfruit Research and Design.

