



**ACAF**

# **FIELD REVIEW**

**Issue I: South Asia, 2016**

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Kumar Vaidya, *Untitled*, Oil on Canvas, c.1980's, Image courtesy the artist.

## FIELD REVIEW PREFACE

In October 2016, **Leeza Ahmady**, Director and Curator of **Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW)**, launched a semi-annual online journal, **FIELD REVIEW**, as a platform to provide discursive opportunities for writers, curators, and art historians, extending the conversations initiated at **ACAW FIELD MEETING** art forums.

The inaugural issue, **FIELD REVIEW: South Asia**, is produced in collaboration with Delhi-based ACAW Consortium Partner, **Exhibit 320**, under the curatorial leadership of **Meenakshi Thirukode**, the gallery's Curatorial Director. Focusing on the South Asia region, this issue features six commissioned case studies that critically investigate and contextualize the shifting frameworks of contemporary art history shaping the area. These essays also address the parallel rise and evolving landscape of art criticism and writing. As an extension of the FIELD MEETING art forums, this initiative exemplifies ACAW's broader mission to deepen engagement with contemporary art across Asia and to promote dynamic, critical discourse within the global art community.



Noeline Fernando going through her personal archives. Photo: Jyoti Dhar.

## FIELD REVIEW Issue I: South Asia

### An Introduction Meenakshi Thirukode

**FIELD REVIEW: South Asia** presents six commissioned essays that attempt to situate and understand contemporary art historical frameworks that are starting to dominate the region and the simultaneous development and response of art criticism / art writing in this context.

A *trend* is a definitive term. It is generally understood as a movement or direction that dominates above and beyond those that run parallel and often times within the subaltern. In 2008, for instance, curator Vidya Shivdas with advisory input from Sonal Khullar curated 'Fluid Structures – Gender and Abstraction' at Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi that explored the contribution of six women artists spanning two generations, to the history of abstraction in India. They included Nasreen Mohamedi, Zarina Hashmi, Arpita Singh, Gargi Raina, Sheila Makhijani and Manisha Parekh. Now in 2016 the inaugural show at The MET Breuer, New York was a retrospective of Nasreen Mohamedi – the show touted by the curators as 'adding a rich layer to the history of South Asian art but also necessitates an expansion of the narratives of international modernism.'

This issue attempts to 'observe' and then present perspectives of what are now inescapable patterns within the global art world history where many locals within art histories are made 'visible' only when international institutional visibility necessitates its excavating or even weaving together. It questions whose 'history of South Asia' is being referred to and being expanded upon?



Yasmin Jahan Nupur, *Sat on a Chair*, 2014. Performance at the Dhaka Art Summit, Dhaka, 2014. Courtesy of the artist and Samdani Art Foundation.

In this context six essays look at 'Abstraction' within visual arts in South Asia not necessarily by making connections chronologically within art history alone, but also by investigating the relationships between visual artists and other cultural producers including poets, filmmakers, musicians, philosophers, architects in order to navigate through broader socio-political and psychological explorations, research and cultural production.

**Achia Anzi** explores the apparatus of abstraction in art from a postcolonial perspective through the artworks of the Indian painter Atul Dodiya and with a special emphasis on his series Painted Photographs/Paintings Photographed.

**Jyoti Dhar's** essay 'Grasp: Instruments and Mechanics' focuses on the work of artists such as Sybil Keyt, Susila Wijesuriya and Sita Kulaseker who were seemingly critically engaged, intellectually influential and yet inexplicably left out of the main history of modernism (with the '43 group) in Sri Lanka.

In a similar vein to the 'grasping' of lost histories, **Meenakshi Thirukode** looks at the seminal practice of artist Kumar Vaidya, whose formal and aesthetic language developed since the 1980's has largely gone unrecognized or even, critically engaged with.

**Zeenat Nagree** considers the performative elements of Yasmin Jahan Nupur's practice in relation to the histories of abstraction, architecture and modernism in Bangladesh while **Somak Ghosal** focuses on the poetics of absence and presence in Parul Gupta's practice given the architectural precision of her work and its minimalist focus.

In the case of India, and perhaps the region itself, there is a form of neo-colonization that occurs.

The narratives built are merely ways of being able to validate practices as being of a particular genre dictated by the push and pull of the market, in order for the same narrative to perpetuate – a way for a few players to find credibility by association to that fraught context of 'globalism'.

**Rana Ghose's** essay addresses the role of an immersive, truly independent curated experimental music/sound/noise series called REProduce Listening Room to explore how South Asian musical authorship rejects and recasts the identity politics that pop culture has mirrored, both in the sonic and market context.

The essays stem from an editorial prompt as a means to also look introspectively at the role of the writer in this pivotal moment while constructing and formulating their ideas around this genre's histories. The prompts include 'Distance', 'Invisible-Visible', 'Slowness', 'Grasp', 'Movement', 'Opacity', 'Rootedness'. The five prompts that I have set for the writers are ways in which to present a set of ideas, thoughts, arguments, that confront and engage with what is now seen as a 'genre' that does two things – one, it places South Asian art within a larger art history that is fluid as opposed to being definitive.

What is of interest is that this is occurring simultaneously to the surge of research and publications beyond South Asia that bring to light the fact that 'Abstraction' and 'Abstract Expressionism' was not purely a 'white man's' genre, even though that was the dominant narrative. And two, the more important impetus for this set of writing, is that it offers perhaps a way to not fall into existing relations between art history and the market.

It looks at the way in which each writer in some way must grapple with his/ her own ways of writing, contextualizing and thinking about their practice.

Its relevance, its power, its significance and its grappling with truths, of what their actual role is – tethered between holding on to the integrity of one's voice and keeping a distance, while sometimes being drawn into the quagmire of a market-centric 'branding' exercise cloaked as critique.

There is a need to look at both curatorial practice and art criticism as intertwined roles in a region whose contemporary art histories have been pre-dominantly dictated by the market. What possibilities lie when there are less fixed ways of looking at the role of the academic, the art writer, artist and curator in shifting the narrative beyond the many binaries that form because discourse is inexplicably tied in to the dictates of the art market and its demands?

With the work of organizations that look to create archives of art histories in the region accessible, both to artists and slowly to a larger public, what becomes apparent is that the region of South Asia can construct many art histories that re-imagine the relationship of many locals with the many globals. Definitive structured art histories to re-imagine don't exist in the way it might within Euro-American art histories, rather what exists are anecdotal and collective histories constructed from personal archives. What is largely happening at some level within the region broadly defined as South Asia is that possibilities to look at the past and construct a future that doesn't look like the present is still fluid.

In the case of India, and perhaps the region itself, there is a form of neo-colonization that occurs. The narratives built are merely ways of being able to validate practices as being of a particular genre dictated by the push and pull of the market, in order for the same narrative to perpetuate – a way for a few players to find credibility by association to that fraught context of 'globalism'.

## About the Author: Meenakshi Thirukode

**Meenakshi Thirukode** is currently a FICA Inlaks 2016-17 scholar at the MRes Curatorial/Knowledge, Goldsmiths, University of London. She is also the Curatorial Director at Exhibit 320 and its non-profit space 1After320. She is the co-founder Project For Empty Space, a non-profit which brings public art to abandoned and unusual urban spaces. Thirukode graduated with honors from the Masters program at Christies, in New York. She has written for both, local and international publications including ArtAsiaPacific, Art India, Whitewall Magazine, Fuschia Tree and The Hindu Newspaper, on contemporary art from South Asia. She has also curated exhibitions on South Asian contemporary art in New York and India. Thirukode has served on the board of the South Asian Women's Creative Collective (SAWCC) and Christies Alumni Board. She recently was the director of the New Media for Bushwick Film Festival, where she oversaw the setting up the department in its inaugural year at the 2013 festival and curating its program.

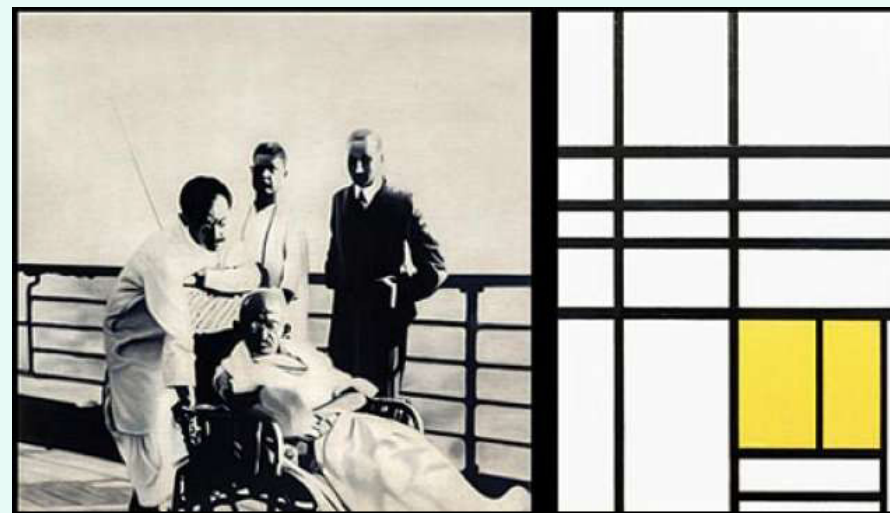
## Achia Anzi

### *Abstraction De-Constructed through the Lens of Post-Colonialism*

On the left side of the diptych sits the artist's eternal protagonist. Surrounded by three figures who stand behind his chair, the Mahatma seems indifferent to the camera's presence. The horizon is hardly visible behind the grill in this black and white image, and it is only through the diptych's title, *Onboard the S.S. Rajputana*, that the image is brought to its visual realization: making the deck a ship and the sea, a sea.

The image records a scene from Gandhi's journey from Bombay to London. After boycotting the first Round Table Conference which was initiated in London on 12th November 1930, the Indian National Congress sent Gandhi to the Second Round Table Conference as its sole representative. But the documentary nature of this image does not only provide the viewer with visual evidence. It constructs the way in which the image is seen.

For instance, despite the fact that the title does not reveal the identity of the three individuals behind Gandhi, their proximity to the Mahatma suggests that they also play a role in this historical journey. Technically, the photo records the light that is reflected from the surface of the depicted bodies, but seeing an image is not only seeing the effect of light. It involves historical references and is subjected to interpretations which might of course be surpassed or ignored, but to view an image aesthetically, i.e. through its formal qualities, is to deny its potential of participating in the world.



Atul Dodiya, diptych from the collection *Painted Photographs/Paintings Photographed*. (Left panel) *Onboard of S.S. Rajputana*, 1931, 2013. Oil on canvas; (Right panel) *Composition, Piet Mondrian*, 1936. Archival digital print on hahnemuehle bamboo.

However, the image in Atul Dodiya's diptych is not a photograph. As the series' title, *Painted Photographs/ Paintings Photographed*, indicates the photograph was reproduced by the artist with the painstaking practice of brush and paint. The painting is attached to a digital print on the right side of the diptych with details from Piet Mondrian's canvas. In doing so Dodiya blurs the differences between the allegedly inherent qualities of photography and painting: The photo becomes "flat" while the digital reproduction liquidates the aura of Mondrian's canvas. Whereas traditionally the diptych joins two panels into one artwork, Dodiya's *Painted Photographs/ Paintings Photographed* seems to do precisely the opposite.

The *Painting Photographed* on the right shows details from Mondrian's canvas, one of the painters who were responsible for detaching the canvas from traditional representation and setting art as an autonomous occupation, while the *photograph* painted on the left belongs to the visual narrative of India's struggle to independence. This dual claim to autonomy characterizes Dodiya's series.

The painted photographs document scenes from the Indian anticolonial struggle while the paintings photographed belong to a regime that insisted on art independence. This dichotomy illustrates the central question of this essay: What is the relation between aesthetics and politics from a postcolonial perspective?

### ***Cracks in Modernity***

Mondrian is no stranger to Dodiya's canvases. Along with other modern artists such as Cezanne, Malevich, Picasso, Magritte and Paul Klee, the Dutch painter is a point of reference for Dodiya's constant engagement with modern abstraction. In the exhibition *Cracks in Mondrian* (New York, 2005) Dodiya displayed nine paintings appropriated from Mondrian and fused them with nine maps of Indian states illustrated in the 18th century by the French diplomat and cartographer Jean-Baptiste Gentil. The reference to Gentil's maps is not accidental. Gentil's ethnographic maps along with their folklorist illustrations are part of the Western effort to represent and thus gain mastery over the territory of the other. By abstracting these maps and transforming them into colour planes devoid of lines, demarcations, figures and textual references, Dodiya neutralizes the oppressive apparatus of representation. But while trying to overcome the representative oppression the artist is aware of the risk of another subjugation.

The unshaped forms stand in contrast to the rigid Mondrianian grids which are superimposed on the maps. The grids, which seem as grills, block access to the map and its historical territory.

Mondrian's cold and calculated compositions are blind to the agitated history of Dodiya's post-colonized province. While Gentil foregrounds otherness, Mondrian's formalist canvases prevent the possibility of otherness.

Similarly, in another painting which portrays the beginning of the Gandhi's aforementioned journey, *S.S. Rajputana Leaving the Port of Bombay* (2014-15), Dodiya creates a tension between two readings of the painting. On the lower right corner Dodiya organizes the crowd who departs from S.S. Rajputana in a right-angled triangle shape. In the opposite upper left corner the ship is seen while sailing towards the horizon. The black and white photographic image is disrupted by three colour planes, each of them seems to compete with the painting's figurative elements: the shore, the ship and the sea.

The light khaki vertical plan covers the left end of the canvas. Its triangular shape and proximity to the sea suggests a displaced and abstracted strip of shore. The peach colour line which crosses the canvas horizontally, battles with the sea's horizon on the image spatial division, while the twisting dark khaki colour resonates with ship's silhouette in the water but cuts through the horizon line and breaks any possibility of visual illustration. Here again, the canvas witnesses two assumingly distinct claims to independence: artistic and political, aesthetic and nationalist. While the black and white photographic image represents a historical moment in the Indian struggle to independence, the abstract spots which are superimposed on the photographic image embody the modernist struggle to liberate the artwork from the burden of history, literature and narrative.





Atul Dodiya, *Cracks in Mondrian - Hyderabad*, 2004–2005. Acrylic with marble dust on canvas and PVC pipe, 78 x 78 in.

The abstract strokes disrupts the documentary nature of the image and thus encourage the viewer to adopt a formalist view of the painting and neutralise its historical function.

### *The Museum and Aesthetic Differentiation*

Dodiya's juxtaposition of the anticolonial struggle and Western formalism teases out the tension between the two discourses. In the following I will underscore the historical relation between western abstraction and colonialism by analyzing the genealogy of aesthetics. The quest for autonomous artistic expression did not emerge with the avant-garde movements of the 20th century nor with the artistic inventions of impressionism and post-impressionism in the second half of the 19th century. These developments were enabled by a discourse, which was already commanding new ways in which art was perceived (Abrams 138–9).

The invention of the nonrepresentational, the “discovery” of the canvas “flatness” and the formalist approach to the artwork were possible by social and theoretical developments which reached their culmination in the 18th century in the writing of Joseph Addison and Emmanuel Kant (Abrams 139). Abrams argues that the 18th century’s new theory of “art-as-such” was based on three principles: (1) the interchangeability of the term “art” with the term “fine-arts”, whereby the five disciplines of “poetry (or literature), painting, sculpture, music and architecture” (Abrams 135) are not examined and theorized separately but seen as expressing the unique essence of the artwork. (2) The experience of the artwork is conceived as a “disinterested” contemplation, “without reference to its truth or its utility or its morality” (Abrams 135). (3) The work of art is seen “as an object that is self-sufficient, autonomous, independent.” (Abrams 136)

While these characteristics were perceived in the last centuries as expressing universal and eternal truths, Abrams seek to explain this theoretical shift through "external [i.e. social or historical] factors" (Abrams 141). Abrams views the artistic revolution of the 18th century as a shift from a theoretical engagement with forms of making to analysis of the way of perceiving the work. This philosophical change was possible due to the new social conditions under which the artwork was viewed. During this period art became increasingly accessible to a wider public (Abrams 144).

The emergence of the bourgeoisie and new technologies led to the democratization of connoisseurship: wider circulation of literature commissioned by publishers and not by the nobility, establishment of magazines, public libraries, organization of public concerts etc. The artwork's new locations necessitated a new theory which verbalized, theorized and made sense of this new experience. But these developments were also charged with a strong sense of displacement. The artworks were circulated in a world that became increasingly migratory and mobile.

*"Through the Renaissance and later, works of music, painting, and sculpture had been produced mainly to order, on commissions by a churchman, prince, wealthy merchant, town council, or guild; very often they were produced for a specific function or occasion, religious or secular; and the accomplished work had been experienced by some members of its audience, no doubt, as the occasion for what we now call an "aesthetic experience," but at the same time as thoroughly embedded in a particular institution or event, and as an integral component in a complex of human activities and functions. Now, however, the new institution of the public concert might include pieces, both vocal and instrumental, that had originally served to intensify sacred feelings in a religious ceremony, or to add splendor and gaiety to a private or public celebration, or to provide melodic rhythms for social dancing – together with new pieces written for the concert hall itself. There exist numerous paintings that represent a room in an eighteenth century gallery or museum.*

*One can see that the display side by side statuary that was both ancient and recent, pagan and Christian, sacred and profane... All such products, in the new modes of public distribution or display, have been pulled out of their intended contexts, stripped of their diverse religious, social, and political functions, and given a single uniform new role: as items to be read or listened to or looked at simply as a poem, a musical piece, a statue, a painting.*

*Suppose, while you are looking at the painting of the Madonna and Child in its original location in a chapel, you are asked: "What's the painting for?" A manifest answer is: "To illustrate, beautifully and expressively, an article of faith, and thereby to heighten devotion." Now suppose that the same painting moved to the wall of a museum and hung, let's say, next to a representation of Leda and the Swan. To the question "What's it for?" the obvious answer now is: "To be contemplated, admired, and enjoyed." Note that each of these is a valid answer to the same question – within the institutional setting in which that question is asked." (Abrams 148-9).*

Making art public does not only democratise the artwork by making it accessible, but entails displacement and a new regime of perception. At the same time that the artwork emerged as an artwork (and not as poem, painting, sculpture etc.), it was displaced from its context. Abrams believes that the new way of viewing art is as legitimate as the old one. But this claim is obviously problematic for cultures which strive to find their unique voice in the aftermath of colonialism. The establishment of the aesthetic discourse did not only displace the artwork but blocked the possibility of it being reclaimed by its world.

In difference from Abrams who applies sociological method to analyse the emergence of a new discourse by giving priority to a materialist historical narrative which explains theoretical transformation, Has-Georg Gadamer explains the emergence of the new spaces of the museum, the library, the theatre etc. as possible by and through a new kind of discourse.

"Whereas for Abrams the museum led to the creation of a new theory, for Gadamer the museum, was the external manifestation of "aesthetic differentiation."

*"The 'aesthetic differentiation' performed by aesthetic consciousness also creates an external existence for itself. It proves its productivity by reserving special sites for simultaneity: the "universal library" in the sphere of literature, the museum, the theater, the concert hall, etc. It is important to see how this differs from what came before. The museum, for example, is not simply a collection that has been made public. Rather, the older collections... reflected the choice of a particular taste and contained primarily the works of the same "school," which was considered exemplary. A museum, however, is a collection of such collections and characteristically finds its perfection in concealing the fact that it grew out of such collections, either by historically rearranging the whole or by expanding it to be as comprehensive as possible. Thus through "aesthetic differentiation" the work loses its place and the world to which it belongs insofar as it belongs instead to aesthetic consciousness." (Gadamer 75-6)*

The museum manifests a new logic of seeing the artwork. While older collections were based on a particular taste, which maintains affinity between the artwork and the cultural setting in which it was seen, the museum assumes a neutral appearance. In a similar manner, Michel Foucault underscores the displacement which is engendered by the museum and the modern endeavour to transgress time and the particularity of taste:

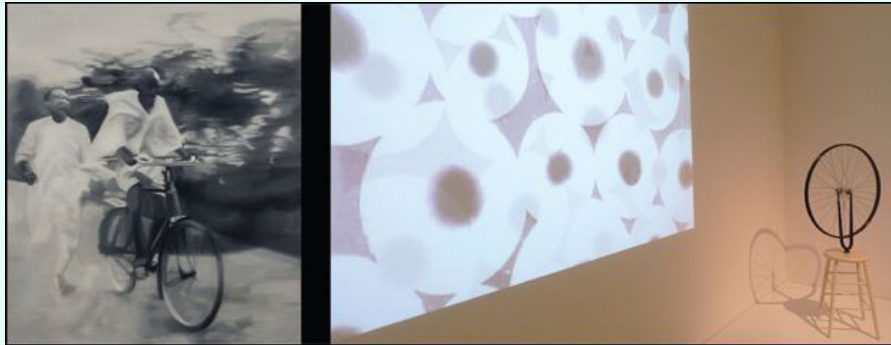
*"From a general standpoint, in a society like ours heterotopias and heterochronies are structured and distributed in a relatively complex fashion. First of all, there are heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time, for example museums and libraries, Museums and libraries have become heterotopias in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit, whereas in the seventeenth century, even at the end of the century, museums and libraries were the expression of an individual choice. By contrast, the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing*

*a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are proper to western culture of the nineteenth century." (Foucault 7)*

### **Museum Order vs Curiosity**

Dodiya's canvases manifest the questionable mechanism of aesthetic differentiation and modernity's claim to universality. The museum is able to accumulate "all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes" only by alienating Dodiya's history. Nevertheless, the shift from particularity of taste to the modern museum was more complex and gradual. In the following I will argue that it was directly linked to Europe's encounter with its other and analyse Dodiya's respond to these developments by viewing his cabinets of curiosity. Dodiya's engagement with cabinets begun in 2002 with his work Broken Branches (Hoskote 65) and continued in other works such as Meditation (with open eyes) 2011 and Somersault in Sandalwood Sky (2012).

Ranjit Hoskote traces Dodiya's cabinets to the "august genealogy going back to the Wunderkammer, the 'cabinet of curiosities' that reached the acme of its popularity in the 17th and 18th centuries[.]" (Hoskote 65), and argues that this artistic strategy derives from Dodiya's encyclopaedist's desire to encompass the world. In addition to this explanation, I argue that the cabinets serve Dodiya as a new model for exhibiting and viewing art which is based on an old form of collecting. And in this manner Dodiya was able to overcome aesthetic oppression.



Atul Dodiya, *Cycling from Gujarat Vidyapith to Sabarmati Ashram*, 2013. Courtesy Vadehra Art Gallery.

The modern museum did not emerge only from collections that displayed private taste, as Gadamer and Foucault argue, but also from the cabinets of curiosities which rather than expressing their cultural specificity, display a sense of curiosity and wonderment in the face of the other. For instance, the British Museum, which was one of the earliest to emerge as a "national institution" in the eighteenth century (Abrams 147), was formed from the cabinet of curiosities of the royal physician Hans Sloane and "retained these multiple senses of curiosity when it opened." (Delbourgo 5) James Delbourgo analyses two motives of curiosity in Sloane's writing:

*"[A]t least two understandings of curiosity became important in this period [seventeenth century]. The first was linked to the practice of precise observation in order to produce reliable matters of fact... This form of curiosity was morally and epistemologically sure: it was linked to a pious appreciation of the divine order in all created things, that made them intelligible to human reason... But curiosity was ambiguous. It retained associations with fascination for the prodigious and unexplained, and a restless childlike passion for anything novel, that could challenge notions of rational or divine order and existing knowledge systems." (Delbourgo 4-5)*

The 18th century does not only mark a shift from culturally specific taste to a detached perspective, but a transformation between two orders which were directly connected to the project of colonialism. The cabinet of curiosities and the modern museum embody two different responses to the cultural otherness that Europe discovered in the colonies. While the cabinets of curiosities try to provoke in their viewers a sense of wonder in the face of the other, the museum endeavours to organize, classify, taxonomize and order the cabinets.

The museum in its pursuit for knowledge – and hence for control and power – has to order the disorder created by the cabinets and efface the puzzlement provoked by the presence of the other. But while classification and taxonomy are part of the effort of the museum to represent the other, a new and universal category of the artwork-as-such enabled the assemblage of artefacts belonging to different cultures. If curiosity juxtaposed different objects in order to shock the viewer, the aesthetic regime facilitates their accumulation by viewing them as works of art. The aesthetic gaze does more than passively reflecting the new status of the artwork, but actively appeased the anxieties arising from the (dis)order of curiosity and the encounter of Europe with other cultures.

By creating an ontology of the artwork which simultaneously detaches the work from its cultural location, function and meaning and establishes a universal mode of appreciating it aesthetically, eighteenth century European philosophers were able to propose a powerful mechanism through which any artwork could be appreciated and valued. Accordingly, Dodiya's cabinets of curiosities do not only represents a passion to encompass the world, but in parallel they try to do the opposite. Dodiya tries to restore the older (dis)order of the cabinet of curiosities that does not provide the viewers with control over the artefacts but "hit" them with their wonder [1].

How to view Dodiya's Painted Photographs/ Paintings Photographed in light of the above analysis of aesthetics? The diptychs can be seen in two different ways which correspond to two historical modes of collecting and viewing artworks. They can either be read as an assemblages of heterogeneous artefacts which disobey an intercommon logic, or viewed jointly by highlighting the common formal qualities of the images. The eclectic compositions of the series' diptychs, the two panels which refuse to become one, can in fact be seen in unity if one adopts an formalist perspective: The deck's grill behind Gandhi visually resonates with Mondrian's grid, and the railways lines in Collecting for the Harijan meet the lines of another painting by Mondrian. Giacometti's La Main imitates the hand which is extended to Gandhi while he is Collecting for the Harijan and Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel is placed alongside a photographic image of Gandhi Cycling from Gujarat Vidyapith to Sabarmati Ashram . In this manner Dodiya unfolds the apparatus of aesthetics, which in order to create the universal perception of art and a globalized category of the artwork has to efface its relation with its world.

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1. This seems to me to be the reason why Dodiya's first set of cabinets, Broken Branches, dealt with the 2002 riots in Gujarat. Instead of providing a "logic" that led to the clash between Hindus and Muslims, Dodiya chose to present these events in their bewildering terror.

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### **About the Author: Achia Anzi**

Born in Israel, 1979, **Achia Anzi** did his MFA & BFA in Sculpture from the University of Rajasthan, in 2004- 2010, Diploma and BA in Urdu Honors, from The National Council for Promotion of the Urdu, in 2008. He also obtained MA in History of Art from the National Museum Institute, New Delhi, 2011 and has been living in India for the last 13 years.

Achia Anzi is a visiting professor of Hebrew at Jawaharlal Nehru University and lives and works in Delhi.

## Jyoti Dhar

### *Grasping at the Untold*

A few months ago, I asked the respected artist, art historian and lecturer at the University of Jaffna, T. Shanaathanan what he thought of the state of art criticism in Sri Lanka. He simply replied, "We don't even have the A, B, C of art history, so what to talk of art criticism?" [1] It's a response worth reflecting on, when trying to write about artists from this topographically idyllic, ethnically diverse and politically fraught island; with a paradoxical 2000 year-old visual art history and nascent 'contemporary art scene.' Particularly in a place which has seen successive historical ruptures in the form of colonialism (Portuguese, Dutch and British) and civil war (1983-2009) – resulting in breaks of epistemic lineages and erasures of archival records – perhaps it is just as essential to chronicle as it is to critique.

When writing about art histories in South Asia, researching, documenting, analyzing and contextualizing generally goes hand in hand. What somewhat intensifies this experience in Sri Lanka, is the relative prominence of anecdotal evidence over academic art texts. This means that it can often feel like grasping in the dark, clutching at fragments, fleshing out the who, what and where of the artist, before even getting to the why and how. Exceptions to this include (largely biographical) material on the illustrious '43 Group [2], a group of nine affluent men, who unabashedly re-invented modernism within the Ceylonese context [3]. The next cultural legacy to be equally celebrated and disseminated is arguably that of architect Geoffrey Bawa, artist Barbara Sansoni, designer Ena De Silva and sculptor Laki Senanayake; a cohort that was active in newly independent Sri Lanka from the 1960s onward.

Somewhere in between and overlapping these two well-known groups – existing on the fringes of the '43 Group, associated with the Melbourne Art Classes in the 1950s and central to the Young Artists' Group (1957-76) [4] – are comparatively overlooked figures such as Sybil Keyt, Sita Kulasekara,

Sushila Wijeyasuriya and Swanee Jayawardene. Having first come across these intriguing artists by accident, whilst reading an old copy of "Options" [5] magazine, it seemed like a fitting focal point from which to ask: In the face of fragmented resources, how do we best identify and contextualize the practice of artists who contributed to, and continued the lineages of, modernism in Sri Lanka [6]? Who were the artists written into these canons and who were left out? How do we begin to problematize and plot courses through such knowns and unknowns?

In her exhibition "Reclaiming Histories: A Retrospective of Women's Art," (2000) [7] artist Anoli Perera brought to light the work of 40 women artists, including Keyt, Kulasekera, Wijeyasuriya and Jayawardene. Aptly held at the Sapumal Foundation, a former meeting ground of the modernist '43 Group and Secretary Harry Pieris's old home, Perera's mighty endeavour sought to re-calibrate and unsettle our understanding of accepted and regurgitated positions on art in Sri Lanka. Spanning artists from the time of modernism to post-modernism, Perera likened the exhibition to a first "archeological dig." [8] Sixteen years later seemed a decent distance from which to assess if there was any more information available on these artists, to delve deeper into their practice and explore how they may have influenced others.



Theertha International Artists' Association archives. Photo: Jyoti Dhar.

In searching through the Sapumal Foundation, Women and Media Collective and Theertha International Artists' Association archives – much of which is not digitized – it quickly became clear that many of the texts contained very similar material.

Also, since the time of Perera's pursuit, Kulasekera and Jayawardene have both passed away, octogenarian Keyt resides more in Australia and Wijeyasuriya limits public engagement. As such, there seemed to be less information available than before. However, conversations with practitioners including Jagath Weerasinghe, Chandragupta Thenuwara, Noeline Fernando, Anoli Perera, Channa Daswatte, Rohan De Soysa, Kumudini Samuel, Smriti Daniel, Menika van der Poorten and Sharmini Pereira proved generous and revelatory of some unexpected connections.

For example we know that Richard Gabriel, the last surviving member of the '43 Group, was married to Kulasekera; a "quiet and unassuming" [9] artist trained at the Government College of Fine Arts in Madras. She was said to have made "restrained paintings" [10] such as "Figures by the Beach," [11] using soft pastels, woodcuts and oils.

Less discussed, is that in 1949, Kulasekera was invited by Cora Abraham to start teaching at what was to become known as the Melbourne Art Classes.[12] These initially took place in a garage opposite '43 Group member W J G Beling's house and Ivan Peries also taught here.[13] The hallmark of these classes was said to be "freedom" [14] – in terms of discipline (e.g. painting, pottery and batik) and direction (harnessing the subconscious and borrowing from nature).

The Young Artists' Group was born out of the Melbourne Art Classes, by former students such as Keyt and Jayawardene, and was started in 1957. Members would meet every Sunday in Abraham's studio-home and go sketching to Colombo harbour and zoo as well as historical sites in Kandy, Anuradhapura and Matara. Keyt, who travelled a lot to India, was also interested in painting architectural buildings, Rajasthan landscapes and Mughal monuments. Jayawardene, on the other hand, was an artist, designer and teacher, who avidly experimented with batik techniques. One of the most striking paintings on display at the Sapumal foundation today, titled "Trees" and signed "1956," is of her geometrically abstracted landscape of palm tree leaves, shards of light and white spaces.[15]





Swanee Jayawardene, *Trees*, 1956. Oil on Board.



Sushila Wijesuriya, *Flower Sellers*, 1953. Oil on Canvas.

Jayawardene and Wijeyasuriya exhibited together in 1953, and off the back of that with the '43 Group in 1954. Wijeyasuriya had attended St. Martin's school of Art and was known for her supposedly "over-abstracted forms" and "solid draughtsmanship,"[16] as can be seen in her oil painting "Flower Sellers." [17] Kulasekera also exhibited with the '43 Group in London in 1952 and took part in several ad hoc studio exhibitions with them in 1962-4 alongside Neville Weeraratne and Keyt. Where it gets interesting is that Bawa had a close relationship with Keyt and Weeraratne, and would attend Abraham's exhibitions. De Silva was also good friends with Abraham, whereas Senanayake spent time in her classes.[18] Therefore the Melbourne Art Classes seem to provide a link between these groups of modernists in the field of art, architecture, sculpture and design in 1940s-60s Sri Lanka.

However, what the conversations were between these key figures, or how this translated to the propulsion of modernist ideas at the time, is harder to ascertain. In the case of the '43 Group, though little seems to be published or recorded about the theoretical positions they took, multiple examples of their work serve as insights into their practice and outlook.[19] Similarly, in the case of Bawa, Sansoni, Senanayake and De Silva, the island is littered with examples of their individual and collective projects.[20] However, in the case of those who fall in between histories, such as Kulasekera, Keyt, Jayawardene and Wijeyasuriya – what they were thinking or why they fell from prominence remain unanswered questions. Was it simply because they weren't 'radical or committed' enough, as some have suggested?[21] Or was it more to do with the social conditions for women in art at the time?[22]



Noeline Fernando going through her personal archives. Photo: Jyoti Dhar.

In looking back, how do we make sure not to overstate the position of things as they really were? And yet, how do we attempt to present the work of such figures through new lenses? For example, another key aspect that surfaces when trying to widen the scope and contextualize these artistic practices in relation to other disciplines, is that 'the distinction between fine arts and applied arts' was deeply ingrained during this era. [23] Though some fascinating examples of overlaps between modernist art and architecture in Sri Lanka do exist – such as that of architect Minnette De Silva [24] who cited Picasso, Henri Cartier-Bresson and George Keyt as key influences, or George Keyt himself who worked on the Gotami Vihara murals for architect Andrew Boyd in 1939 – it would be overreaching to situate these collaborations as 'interdisciplinary'. [25]

Young Artists' Group member Noeline Fernando tells us that later on Barbara Sansoni [26] was one of the first artists to break down such barriers between art and craft, and helped others to "broaden their outlook." Today, many of these key stories, characters and moments are best explored through the memory of those such as Fernando – who can still be found teaching children art at the Sapumal Foundation. "We're lucky we met them all," she says. "They taught us there had to be a standard and substance to everything we did." One is aware though, that as these artists continue to pass away, and their estates become increasingly dispersed, it will be even harder to piece together these narratives. At this point, instead of hastily drawing conclusions maybe we need to keep investing in asking questions, as T. Shanaathanan suggests, and accept that despite this, there will always be inevitable absences.

## Bibliography

1. As part of redressing this, T. Shanaathanan made significant pedagogical changes to the art history department at the University of Jaffna in 2010. Chandragupta Thenuwara set up a similar department at the University of Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA) in Colombo to encourage budding art historians and critics, translating several critical texts into Sinhala and Tamil.
2. Books, accessible collections and public programs on them include Neville Weeratne's "'43 Group: A Chronicle of Fifty Years in the Art of Sri Lanka," (1993), the Sapumal Foundation in Colombo and The National Trust's lecture by Rohan de Soysa on the '43 Group on September 29th 2016, respectively.
3. The British Colonial name Ceylon was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972 when it became a republic.
4. Several different dates exist for the formation and dissolution of this group. The ones cited have been confirmed by former member Noeline Fernando.
5. The article "So and So's Daughter, Sister, Wife and Mother," by Robert Crusz, published in "Options," 1st Quarter 2000, by the Women and Media Collective in Colombo, discusses the hidden legacies of women artists in Sri Lanka.
6. As the '43 Group were the first to look at approaches such as surrealism and cubism, and engage with schools including Bauhaus and Visva Bharati University, Shantiniketan, then re-interpret these ideas using local subjects, materials and traditions, it is impossible to de-link the history of abstraction from that of modernism in Sri Lanka.
7. Anoli Perera's exhibition "Reclaiming Histories: A Retrospective Exhibition of Women's Art," (2000) was held in conjunction with Vaibhavi Academy of Fine Arts (VAFA) and Women in Visual Arts (WIVA).
8. Perera, A. Women Artists in Sri Lanka: Are they Carriers of a Woman's Burden? Ed. Perera, S., South Asia Journal for Culture, Vol. 2, Colombo, 2008, Colombo Institute for the Advanced Study of Society and Culture and Theertha International Artists' Collective.
9. Weeraratne, N., "Remembering the quiet Sita Gabriel," The Island newspaper, August 19 2001.
10. Weeraratne, N., "'43 Group: A Chronicle of Fifty Years in the Art of Sri Lanka," 1993, Melbourne, Lantana.
11. "Figures by the beach" (Pastel on board) is an undated painting on display at the Sapumal Foundation, gifted by Richard and Angelo Gabriel.
12. This was named after the street in which they took place, Melbourne Avenue in Bambalapitiya, Colombo.
13. Ivan Peries and Justin Daraniyagala were apparently explorative of two different forms of abstraction and their commitment to these attitudes is said to have informed the practices of those such as Kulasekera and Wijesuriya.
14. Dhar, J., Fernando, N., Interview in September 2016.
15. Jayawardene was a pupil of Harry Pieris's. She mysteriously lost all her pre-1970s work to an art dealer in Colombo. She later passed away in 2010.
16. Weeraratne, N., The Sapumal Foundation Collection, A Select Catalogue, 2009, Colombo, The Sapumal Foundation. These remarks were made by '43 Group member and cartoonist Aubrey Collette in response to work exhibited with the group in 1954.
17. "Flower Sellers," Oil on Canvas, is an undated painting on display at the Sapumal Foundation in Colombo.
18. Weeraratne, N., The Artist in Every Child, The Legacy of Cora Abraham, 2015, Colombo, Gunaratne. De Silva's son, Anil Jayasuriya and Sansoni's daughter-in-law, Nazreen Sansoni also later attended these classes.
19. Among factors that make the '43 Group's work distinct from other South Asian modernisms, is that it began earlier; though the group's first formal meeting was in August 1943, experiments with modernism in Sri Lanka began in the 1930s, spurred by the exposure of artists such as Lionel Wendt to modernism in Europe in the 1920s.
20. A wonderful example of the four of them working together on a project is the Bentota Beach Hotel built in 1968.
21. Dhar, J., Weerasinghe, J. Interview in September 2016.
22. Ibid 6.
23. Dhar, J., Daswatte, C., Interview in September 2016.
24. Minnette De Silva is an intriguing character; the first woman to attend Sir J J school of Architecture in Bombay; the first 'Sri Lankan to build a modernist building in the country' and the co-founder of Marg Magazine.
25. It was only much later that crossovers between art and craft, for example, were theoretically positioned by artists such as Anoli Perera. This is not to say, however, that modernists did not engage with other disciplines; Lionel Wendt was interested in Kandyan dancing; Beling was a trained architect and George Keyt was a poet and writer amongst other examples.
26. Sansoni created the commercially successful Barefoot concept in 1958, re-inventing handloom design into a ubiquitous hybrid style in Sri Lanka. She also made a number of architectural drawings for Geoffrey Bawa and went on numerous sketching trips with his brother and artist friend, Bevis Bawa and Donald Friend, respectively.

## About the Author: Jyoti Dhar

**Jyoti Dhar** is an art critic currently based in Colombo. Over the last decade, her focus has been on contemporary art from the Middle East and South Asia. She is a contributing editor for ArtAsiaPacific, a columnist for The Sunday Times in Sri Lanka and a contributor to Artforum. Dhar is the recipient of Forbes India's 'Emerging Art Writer of the Year' award 2014. In New Delhi, she was critic-in-residence for "In Context II: public.art.ecology" with Khoj as well as rapporteur and editor of "City as Studio" programs 02 and 03 with Sarai. In Dubai, she curated the DIFC's art collection, "In Decay" at Carbon 12 gallery and several exhibitions at Bagash Art Gallery.

## Meenakshi Thirukode

### *Kumar Vaidya: Through the Lens of Erasure and Invisibility*

The exploration of Kumar Vaidya's practice requires that we maneuver through his artistic practice by acknowledging the fixed ways we perceive and construct art history. From that point on what does an attempt to situate his work (or relocate from) re-imagined art histories entail? Often times, the basis of analysis, critique and extrapolation rests heavily on the validation of a practice by associating it to a chronological, and thereby a monolith art historicity. While this has been challenged and confronted when looking at a body/bodies of work within an artists practice, art history itself remains largely a binary. It is essentially a 'rooted' [1] set of annotations. And so what it beckons is a re-imagination. Art history, must be seen as malleable, floating and as a set of relations between the visible and the invisible narrative. The invisible here might never be discovered and the visible might be a re-articulation of what has already occurred in the past. And yet it is this ambiguity, this nature of ideas and stories and moments that can float and find associations in a rhizomatic [2] way, that will lend a more nuanced look at Vaidya's practice. One must also note here that Vaidya's practice evokes a visual and formal aesthetic that tends to elicit very obvious ways of being seen and consumed by the 'audience' as well as by the artist himself.

Kumar Vaidya born in 1964, studied at the Sir J J School of Art, Mumbai before training at the Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris on a French government scholarship in 1993. In his early canvases from the 1980's, Kumar Vaidya covers the surface with strokes of color in a free wheeling gesture. The paints are smudged, layered, and in parts, seemingly scratched from the surface. Undulating forms and pockets of erasure and addition dominate the formal aesthetic.



Kumar Vaidya, *Untitled*, c.1980's. Oil on Canvas. Image courtesy the artist.

In these early works a certain familiarity exists – perhaps from the dominance of a certain way of seeing located in a school of thought within 'Abstraction' in the context of Indian modernist art histories. What is interesting is that given a lack of engagement with the artists work in a critical lens, this familiarity is a bias on part of the viewer. Either trained to look through the critics lens whose 'eye' shifts through many chronologies in a discipline or genre, or from the gaze of a viewer who has invariably been conditioned to find certain associations given that 'abstraction' is now a framework ubiquitous outside of academia; names like S H Raza, thanks to the dominance of a market-centric visibility, invoke immediate associations and comparisons of artists that have a similar formal language.

Vaidya's work however in the 90's and 2000's evolves into two trajectories – one where he worked on architectural surfaces – covering entire walls of office spaces and homes while the other was the large-scale two-dimensional canvas. In his more ambitious architectural paintings, Vaidya takes on a performative role – every gesture and application of paint is thought out and yet, simultaneously evokes the fluidity reminiscent in his early canvases. In perhaps Richter like notions of the erasure or 'blur' as something that "makes all the parts a closer fit", Vaidya's is a long, deliberate process that is captured in a rare video accessed from the archive of the artist. Paint is applied and removed in strokes that are deliberate in order to produce lines and angles that belie the number of layers on the surface. An illusion occurs, where the viewer can't easily discern the top coating from the very first, thereby referencing an illusion reminiscent of the principles of perspective coupled with the language that was the pre-occupation of movements such as op-art. Vaidya in essence takes from art histories, not necessarily privileging one over the other, and does something more with it – something that is more visceral in the experience of the work rather than just engaging with it at a formal aesthetic level.



Kumar Vaidya, *Untitled*, c.1980's. Oil on Canvas. Image courtesy the artist.

This process finds its way into large scale canvases as well. While the dimensions are more constricted, the method and process still remain the same. Paintings move from mural-like to one that is more textural.

In particular, Vaidya predates a younger generation of artists working with notions of color, light and material in South Asia within the theories of abstraction in method, process and scale. In the contemporary moment, one that remains fluid in terms of how we contextualize practices, there is a tendency to use material other than oils or acrylics as a way to move away or push forward one's practice from perhaps what would seem 'traditional' to the more conceptual within this genre. Vaidya's canvases and interventions, where he still sticks to the use of oils and acrylics, tend to traverse such dilemmas of belonging or un-belonging. This could be a consequence of the 'invisibility' of his work and its analysis within structured ways of understanding his practice.

One also has to consider both the geographical and cultural context of the artist himself as well as the fixed linearity of art history to which the artist unwittingly situates himself in order to be visible. It is therefore important to think of these narratives existing as multiplicities rather than the singular rootedness of authority. With this self-awareness, what then happens to the growth of a practice? What does it do for its audience? How does it simultaneously reject associations without the fear of being rendered invisible or too narrowed down into histories 'white male gaze' narratives? How does one adapt and synthesize a practice like Vaidya's who has largely remained outside of these forms of pedagogy?

There is a beckoning here to not just look at a chronological reading and instead to think of practice as a set of connections, much like Vaidya's own compositions that present themselves in the now.



Artist Kumar Vaidya working on site, undated image from the artist's personal archive.

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1. Rooted, is used here in the manner referred to by Edouard Glissant in his essay 'Poetics of Relation'. The root he describes "is unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this they (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari) propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other.", Edouard Glissant , Poetics of Relation, trans. by Betsy Wing, (The University of Michigan Press),11.
2. Ibid

## About the Author: Meenakshi Thirukode

**Meenakshi Thirukode** is currently a FICA Inlaks 2016-17 scholar at the MRes Curatorial/Knowledge, Goldsmiths, University of London. She is also the Curatorial Director at Exhibit 320 and its non-profit space 1After320. She is the co-founder Project For Empty Space, a non-profit which brings public art to abandoned and unusual urban spaces. Thirukode graduated with honors from the Masters program at Christies, in New York. She has written for both, local and international publications including ArtAsiaPacific, Art India, Whitewall Magazine, Fuschia Tree and The Hindu Newspaper, on contemporary art from South Asia. She has also curated exhibitions on South Asian contemporary art in New York and India. Thirukode has served on the board of the South Asian Women's Creative Collective (SAWCC) and Christies Alumni Board. She recently was the director of the New Media for Bushwick Film Festival, where she oversaw the setting up the department in its inaugural year at the 2013 festival and curating its program.



## Zeenat Nagree

### *Yasmin Jahan Nupur: Dancing in the Non-Spaces of Performance*

The colonial discovery of the stupas at Sanchi took place sometime in 1818 when General Taylor stumbled upon a ruin overrun with vegetation. Taylor's wanderings brought into existence a site that appeared not to have existed for centuries. Curiosity regarding the hidden contents of the outwardly shapeless stupas prompted plunder that exceeded the structure's tenacity. By 1851, when General Cunningham, who would go on to become the archaeological surveyor to the British government of India a decade later, dismantled parts of the stupa in search of what lay within, destruction had become the norm of engagement:

*"The persons who tried to open the great Sanchi Tope in 1822 made a large breach on the south-west side, and carried the excavation to the foundation, but they failed in reaching the centre of the building. The Tope was thus partly ruined without any discovery having been made to repay its destruction." [1]*

While Cunningham seemed to be cognizant of the violence of the treasure-seekers, his search for buried valuables in turn violated the site's structural logic. Of his own actions, Cunningham simply reported—"a shaft was sunk in the centre." [2]

The excavation of history can be indistinguishable from the desire for possession.

## *After Disappearances*

The writing of art history in the not-West must contend with phantoms whose genealogies cannot be clearly traced. Some questions, among others: Do ideas exist if they have not been named?

Can we inhabit a mode of thought in the absence of an existing structure? Can the destruction of the past continue as an invisible process into the present?

When Partha Chatterjee uses a possessive pronoun to claim a relationship with modernity, he multiplies and fractures the equation between aspiration and experience:

*"There must be something in the very process of our becoming modern that continues to lead us, even in our acceptance of modernity, to a certain skepticism about its values and consequences." [3]*

While we are still looking for a sealed capsule of the past to unpack, the phantoms knock at our door. If we instead adopt destruction as a methodology, perhaps we can finally dance among the ruins?

## *No-context Pedagogy [4]*

Despite the absence of troves of evidence to construct a long history of performance art in the subcontinent, the desire to live in the contemporary moment cannot be suppressed. While it may be possible to make claims about firsts, to find moments of origin, tracing networks that eviscerate anxieties of influence is also a current survival strategy. Nevertheless, a change in the method of excavation: As Mieke Bal asks while writing a preposterous history, "Who illuminates—helps us understand—whom?" [5]

Foraging in the forests of Kanha, for the “aesthetics of self-preservation,” Yasmin Jahan Nupur has been inhabiting transitory pedagogical frameworks that build upon the absence of formal structures.

Some of her recent works have developed in workshops curated collectively by Nikhil Chopra, Jana Prepeluh, and Madhavi Gore. [6] Nupur’s actions address over and over again the complexities of moving within a non-existent pedagogical context, rearranging compatriots, friends, and mentors, and questioning the possibilities of teaching itself. In a Santhal community centre, Nupur climbed up on a parapet close to the roof while members dance and made music below. Nupur created her own rhythm and gestures in the brackets of a folk performance. There is the desire to create perpendicular to tradition. The collaboration, *Yanyeh* (2016) acknowledges Nupur’s status as an uninvited guest, in white, trying to blend into the walls.

### *Then, Reappearances*

At the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, during *Relationship with Architecture* (2015), Nupur occupied the crevices within the building for six hours. This duration was filled with moments of rest and movement. While Nupur found alignments between the surfaces of her body and that of the building, the two could not ever fully coincide. Her attempt to close the gap between body and architecture was an ongoing, incomplete process, as if she was forcing the structure to open up, to create space for performance in its sweeping curves and corners. Buildings represent the aspirations of building—in this case, a national culture of art-making. Can a building’s role within the community expand with the weight of a body?



Artist Kumar Vaidya working on site, undated image from the artist's personal archive.



Yasmin Jahan Nupur, *Sat on a Chair*, 2014. Performance at the Dhaka Art Summit, Dhaka, 2014. Courtesy of the artist and Samdani Art Foundation.

The performance followed up on *Nupur's Sat on the Chair* (2014), during which the artist was still for three hours, suspended from a column, looking ahead, testing the structure's tenacity through her silent presence. Alternating between hiding her body within the building of the Shilpakala Academy, and presenting it as a sculptural object, Nupur's intervention in this site of the display of national identity may have left physical traces.

In a historic speech on the 7th of March 1971 in Dhaka, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman called for the foundation of Bangladesh in defiance of the government in West Pakistan, "Our national assembly will sit. We will draw up the constitution there. We will build this country." But, the building had already begun for another nation. In an interview on the plans for the parliamentary building of the second legislative capital of Pakistan, Dhaka, in 1964, Kahn stated:

*"On the night of the third day, I fell out of bed with the idea which is still the prevailing idea of the plan. This came simply from the realization that assembly is of a transcendent nature. Men came to assemble to touch the spirit of commonness, and I thought this must be expressible." [7]*

A commonness that remains murky. A no man's land in which Nupur stands with a white flag. [8]

The building continued. The Shilpakala Academy was established through an act of parliament in 1974 to promote the new nation's culture. Nupur adds her weight to this structure built for assembly, reminding the onlooker that it was meant to be a vessel to hold bodies, bodies that built it, bodies that were imagined to form a commonness, and even those bodies that have been violently destroyed for differing visions of national culture.

The construction of a history and the making of a nation require building, but what of the desire to possess, the accompanying destruction?

### ***Score for a Past Performance***

Extrapolations from *Another crazy thing I can do, dance!* (2016): [6]

1. Dance
2. Dance, even if you don't know how to
3. Dance with strangers
4. Dance with the structure
5. Dance to leave a trace
6. Dance

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1. Alexander Cunningham, *The Bhilsa topes; or, Buddhist monuments of central India: comprising a brief historical sketch of the rise, progress, and decline of Buddhism; with an account of the opening and examination of the various groups of topes around Bhilsa* (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1854): 269.
2. *Ibid*, 297.
3. Partha Chatterjee, *Our Modernity* (Rotterdam: Sephis/Codesria, 1997): 14.
4. See Nancy Adajania's discussion of no-context media. Nancy Adajania, "New Media Overtures Before New Media Practice in India," *Domus India* 4 no. 3 (January 2015): 36-7.
5. Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999): 3.
6. Nikhil Chopra, Madhavi Gore, and Jana Prepeluh conducted a performance art workshop at the Kanha National Park and Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh, in November 2015. The theme of the workshop was "Aesthetics of self-preservation." A few months earlier, in April 2015, Chopra, Gore and Prepeluh curated a workshop in Dhaka as part of the events leading upto the Dhaka Art Summit. Relationship with Architecture was developed during the Dhaka workshop, as well as Another crazy thing I can do, dance!, Nupur's presentation for the 2016 Dhaka Art Summit. Chopra and Gore, along with Romain Loustau, are co-founders of Heritage Hotel Art Spaces, an artist-run residency space for live art in Goa started in October 2014.

7. Louis Kahn quoted in Sarah Ksiazek, "Architectural Culture in the Fifties: Louis Kahn and the National Assembly Complex in Dhaka," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 52 no. 4 (December 1993): 416.
8. *Flying the White Flag in No Man's Land*, 2011.

## About the Author: Zeenat Nagree

**Zeenat Nagree** first approached art writing through journalism. After acquiring a Bachelor's degree in Mass Media from the University of Mumbai, she edited the art pages of Time Out Mumbai for over two years. Last year, Nagree authored the catalogue for The Škoda Prize for Indian Contemporary Art. Now a Text Editor with ART India, Nagree seeks to immerse herself in the field of art criticism.

## Somak Ghoshal

### *The Poetics of Absence and Presence in Parul Gupta's Art: A Case for Revisiting Theories and Histories of Abstraction*

Let me begin with a disclaimer and a clarification. The case study at the heart of this brief reflection on abstract art in South Asia is the work of the Delhi-based artist, Parul Gupta. But this essay is, by no means, either a detailed survey of her complex and evolving style or an attempt to trace the wide range of practices carried out by artists from the region working in this genre. Rather, it is only a statement of my personal discomfort with the way we, who are living and working in the arts in South Asia, are conditioned to create, look at and process abstraction in our arts – through an overwhelmingly Western perspective, ignoring the local histories that flow into our practices and, worse still, by divorcing our gaze from that part of our sensibility which is honed by music, theatre, literature and other performance cultures. My theoretical frame is informed by these twin concerns.

'Whether one knows art history or not, art begins pre-intellectually, beyond language,' art critic Jerry Saltz recently wrote in a polemical essay in the *Vulture*. His statement is a reaction to the tyrannical hold of art history on our responses to contemporary art and feels strikingly resonant especially in the case of abstract art.

The story of contemporary abstract art, like most other spheres of cultural production, is really one of Western hegemony. Not only is it seen as originating in the West, but its practice in other parts of the world is often defined in relation to the legacies of twentieth century modernism from Britain, North America and Europe.

For a majority of makers and consumers of art from South Asia, as well as their counterparts in other non-Western countries, a crucial challenge therefore is to create an idiom that is sufficiently original, without being burdened with pre-existing aesthetic frameworks that already influence its semantics.

The question naturally arises: Is it possible to experience the truth of art emerging from this part of the world without having it mediated through the history and theory of Western art? In what sense, and by what means, can we recover the story of South Asian art (and I invoke this term to refer to geographical origins rather than specific characteristics) without falling back on the narratives that have tyrannized our eye for a century and more?

A work of figurative art may be able to signal its uniqueness relatively easily by its sheer rootedness to a location and culture. You could look at Jamini Roy's signature style of figures with spindly eyes and be reminded of Kalighat pata-chitra. But in the case of abstract art, locational specificities may get diffused by its aesthetic universality. An artist may evoke geometric patterns as allusions to the styles of weaving prevalent in, say, the states of Orissa or Chhattisgarh in India. However, a viewer unaware of these places and their folk traditions might make sense of the squares and triangles by recalling Mondrian or Malevich or Bridget Riley. In this sense, abstract art can turn into a double-edged sword, at once liberating the eye from the rigors of the specific but also constantly harking back to models and traditions set by generations of artists and art historians.

How do we teach ourselves to look art through a lens that is not overwhelmingly, ubiquitously Eurocentric? Is there a vocabulary that enables us to talk about art in terms not circumscribed by theory, history and jargon?

The answer to these questions came to me, once again, in the opening paragraph of Saltz's essay I mention above. The relevant passage is worth quoting in detail.

These days our definition of [art] is mainly art informed by other art and art history. Especially in the last two centuries — and tenaciously of late — art has examined its own essences, ordinances, techniques, tools, materials, presentational modes, and forms. To be thought of as an artist someone must self-identify as one and make what they think of as art. This center cannot hold. Why? It is far too tight to let real art breathe.

For art to breathe freely, it must be allowed to emerge from the subliminal recesses of the mind, where literature, music, theatre, movies and a cluster of related activities come home to roost along with autobiography, lived experience, memory and desire. It must begin, as Saltz puts it, 'pre-intellectually', in the realm of the senses, emotions and feelings, only later to be forged into its distinct shape and destiny in the smithy of the intellect.

A couple of years ago, when I saw the Delhi-based artist Parul Gupta's work for the first time, I felt an instant affinity with her practice because of my personal obsession with minimalism and austerity. In hindsight, after reading Saltz's essay and trying to formulate a response to abstract art in South Asia, I find myself drifting back to her work and its binaries contained in it: frozen rigidities of lines and angles brought to life by the warmth of a fluid interpolation of light.

Triggered by my initial reaction to Gupta's art, several associations came to mind: the sharp lines and angularity of her compositions reminded me of Nasreen Mohamedi's cryptic work, often existing in the nebulous zone between drawing and photography.



Parul Gupta, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2015. Display image. Courtesy of Exhibit320.

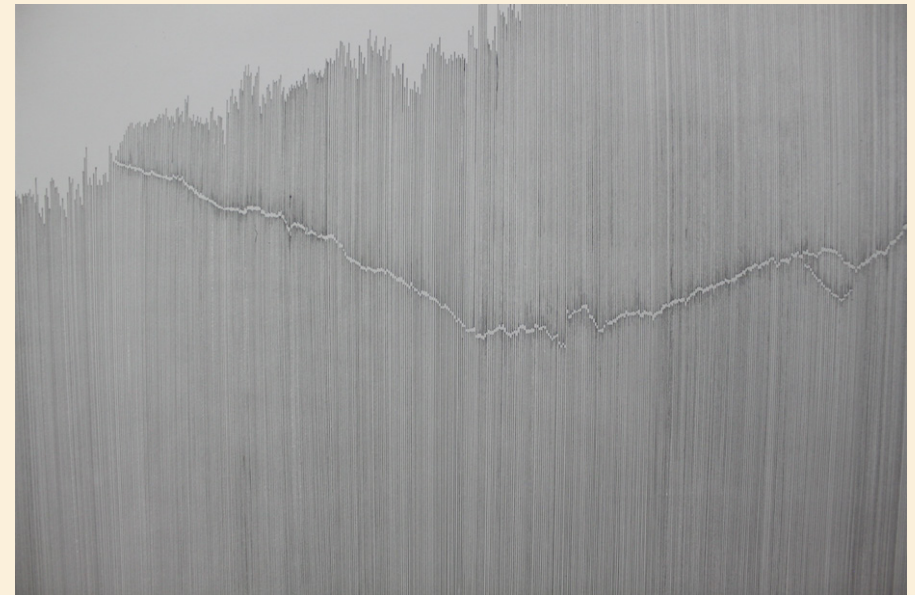
As I went down that rabbit hole, I stumbled upon memories of Cornelia Parker's spiky sculptures, the hair- and wire-based installations of Mona Hatoum, and the dizzying Op Art of Bridget Riley.

As you would expect, my thoughts did not remain confined to the world of the plastic arts alone. The beauty of free associations, and their excitement, is in their ability to open the floodgates to the bizarre and the arbitrary in the human mind.

So, while skimming the surface of the work, I thought of enclosed spaces, the sharp edge of a knife, the fragility of sticks, creases on a piece of paper, the brittleness of mortal objects – all the coordinates of the physical world her work seemed to be referring to.

I also recalled art historian Rosalind Krauss's famous meditation on the predominance of grids in Western art, the interlocking planes of the Panopticon described by the philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, and later theorized by Michel Foucault, the totalizing system of Piranesi's prisons of the imagination, the linearity of Le Corbusier's architectural vision, and a poem by Wallace Stevens, 'Long and Sluggish Lines', I had read long ago but had tucked away in a corner of my mind.

In the last instance, the poet, writing in his seventies, is looking on a winter scene through his window and notices smoke coiling out of a neighbour's chimney, describing wispy lines on the horizon. 'The life of the poem in the mind has not yet begun,' Stevens writes, almost in a reverie, a line that seems to me to beautifully capture the process of creating as well as the struggle to make sense of a work of abstract art.



Parul Gupta, pen drawing, oil pastel on acid-free paper. Courtesy of Exhibit320.

'Months later, during a telephone conversation, Gupta would reveal to me her own creative impulses: a prolonged phase of hair fall when she was a student in Britain, her abhorrence of most forms of noise, admiration for the work of John Cage, and the quest to make sense of silence. Her practice, grounded in the principles of architecture and geometry, uses the mode of drawing – in the broadest sense of the term – to achieve these aims.

My intention is to make the viewer question the spaces they inhabit,' Gupta told me. This questioning begins inside the immediate white cube of the gallery where they are likely to have encountered her work, but crosses other thresholds, breaking the barriers between the private and the public. The interplay of darkness and light, shadow and illumination, shading and grading that is facilitated by the act of drawing on paper is equally enriched by photography. To Gupta, making an impression on film is but an extension of tracing lines on paper, with shared synergies and affinities. The content is what matters; the technique is but subservient to the effect.

Looking at the ubiquity and dominance of the grid in Western art Krauss had written in 1979, 'the grid announces its will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse'. By lowering the barrier 'between the arts of vision and those of language', the grid, she wrote, 'has been almost totally successful in walling the visual arts into a realm of exclusive visuality and defending them against the intrusion of speech'.

The premise of her argument has been challenged variously over the last three decades, but the most fundamental blow to it is cast by Saltz's call for a 'pre-intellectual' response to art. To let ourselves to react freely to abstraction, or to any art form for that matter, the singular necessity may be to let the work get under our skin, to make ourselves vulnerable to it and, in doing so, to allow its meaning to reveal in our consciousness.

## About the Author: Somak Ghoshal

**Somak Ghoshal** was educated at Calcutta and Oxford. He has worked in publishing and media in India for the last ten years. Currently, he's a senior editor at The Huffington Post, writing mostly on politics, books and the arts.



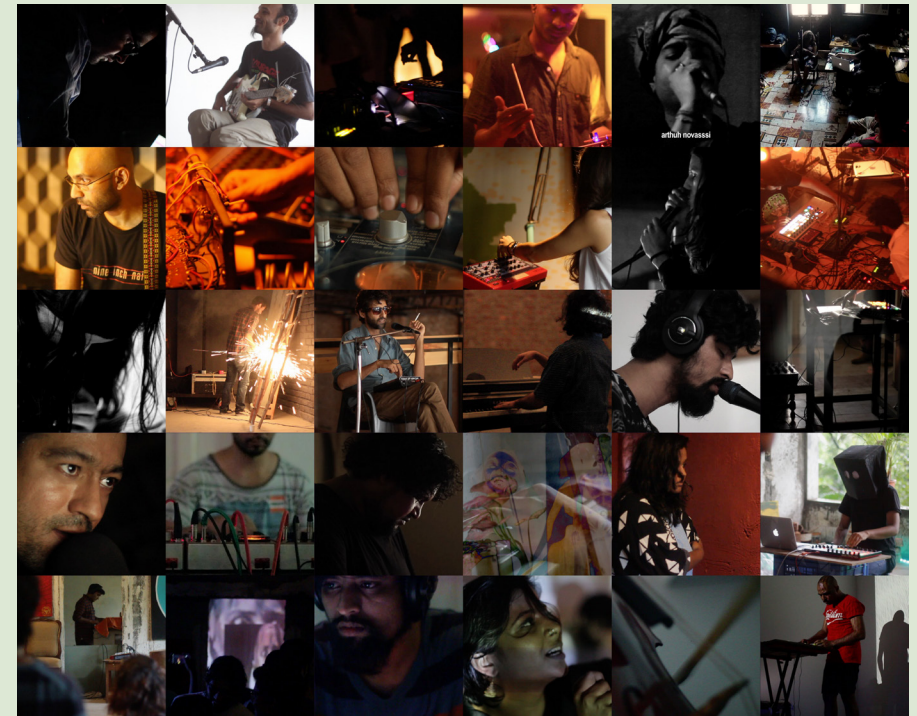
## Rana Ghose

### *The Immediacy Of Rejection: Music, Curation, and Sincerity in New India*

Pop culture tropes in the South Asian context have, post independence, been steered predominantly by two incentives; an identity premised on visual narrative via Bollywood, but perhaps more than anything else, the goal of reaching out as wide an audience as possible. Scale has always been the first and foremost objective, with risk taking being seen as a burden as opposed to an opportunity. The role of the film industry here falls outside the remit of this piece and has been addressed well elsewhere. The second, however, has not, and in light of the rise of what has been termed "indie" music in the region, would benefit from some consideration.

The term "indie" as a variation on "independent" is somewhat of a misnomer. The implication of the term is to describe music outside the realm, and the financing in particular, of Bollywood. The irony – and danger – is that, to date, this emerging culture has fallen prey to another model; corporate sponsorship and subsequent cultural appropriation for profit and brand loyalty pandering.

The ultimate outcome of this relationship between firm and artist has resulted in a sort of stunted, yet rapid, emergence of a generation of artists playing to new and engaged audiences. While the older tradition of college festivals as a means to disseminate "rock" music in the nineties was certainly a veritable rite of passage for many currently in their late twenties and thirties, India seemed to leap frog from that model into a new arena. The restopubs of urban India have been the de facto arena for showcasing live music, and as such they have played a very important role as a means to both allow musicians to grow, but also to inspire many others to play music to a public.



*REProduce Listening Room, 2016. Photo Courtesy of Rana Ghose.*

But what are the implications of this? What happens to pop culture when the brokers of audience and artist are not taking financial risks apart from those that underwrite the selling of food and beverage? What if a new, younger patron of music feels less drawn to nocturnal events where alcohol, as opposed to the experience of listening, wanes as an incentive? Can an artistic narrative coalesce away from this model as a sort of implicit rejection of the status quo and if so, what is the long term viability of this narrative?

In the context of this new South Asian musical narrative, there are two distinct generations to consider. First are a cadre who are now in their mid to late thirties. This generation likely began to make music at the turn of the 21st century, forged on a combination of nascent scenes in Delhi (i.e. the Talvin Singh inspired “cyber mehfil” [1] parties on the outskirts of Delhi in the late nineties) and Mumbai (i.e. the first iteration of the Bhavishyavani Future Soundz [2] collective). Between these two geographic poles a generation came to grips with what may be the great unifying factor in this current context of new musical performances: electronic music production. Within five years, internet connectivity became more widespread, and with this came the onset of social media – MySpace and talk forums in particular. These arenas served to connect people in different parts of the country via allowing their music to be heard and shared more widely, and within the space of forums, unedited criticism (and allegiances) to be shared and forged. It was, in essence, a sort of informal arena for assessment of this new music.

Yet the real catalyst here in terms of how this music moved out of the bedrooms of producers and into the arena of a public was the wide scale entry of the sponsorship model. If Sunburn, a large scale electronic music festival that debuted in 2007 and has since grown to accommodate over 350,000 attendees annually, was the template to assert how a beverage partner can enter the entertainment space in “indie” India, it was the smaller scale analog of this – the restobar – that brought this to the urban spaces.

By 2010, in cities like Delhi, Bangalore, and Mumbai, pockets began to form where entrepreneurs realised there was money to be made from the sustained presentation of “indie” pop culture. Unlike in other markets globally however, there was never an intermediary step. Typically, and historically, pop culture brokerage in the context of music would be fostered by an entity – typically a record label – that would take the risk of signing an artist and getting him or her the right PR opportunities to buffer taste making, with the aim of recouping their speculative investment on record sales. The underlying model was embedded in a certain risk.

In India however, the risk model surrounding “indie” music was never taken on by a third party. In fact, terming it risk might not even be appropriate.

Countless marketing studies of India focus on one aspect of the demographic nature of the country; the seemingly infinite number of young 18-22 year old people; the fabled “millennial”. This mythical creature – brand malleable, with disposable income, and connected at all times to social media – is the holy grail of an MBA just entering the office of a firm focusing on how to leverage this new pop culture into hard sales. The recipe appears simple: partner with an artist management agency, allow the restobar to stock the alcohol at a discounted rate, plaster the venue with marketing detritus, and ensure that whatever artist plays can bring in people to promote the product and “brand experience” to. Within such a model, and by construction, risks that actually forge new paths musically are not factored in, and due to a simple fact: forging new musical paths is not the ambition of a marketing executive.

Their remit is simple: maximise the brand optic, and ensure that as many people – whether welcome or otherwise – see it as possible. From their perspective, the artist gets paid, the venue sells food and beverage, and their brand optic is met. Find the right artist agency – one manager has expressed that his objective is “to find the path of least resistance” – and the deal is sealed.

While there is nothing inherently flawed from a business perspective of this model, the business of pop culture is a fickle thing. The crux of pop culture permeation reflects the relative ephemera of our own lives. Our decisions are always guided by the spectre of an uncertain future. That uncertainty propels a sort of loneliness, and ultimately makes us want to belong to a community of sorts. In the pop culture space, the defining factor of how one feels an attraction to a particular community – ethereal as it may be – is that ever elusive factor: to be “cool”.

Historically, most pop culture movements were always premised on a small number of committed individuals who began to organise amongst themselves to create a community of their own – the beats, dadaists, drum and bass, punk rock, zine culture – all of these examples started small, sustained themselves via a mix of enthusiasm, hard work, and commitment, and then grew and tipped over into the mainstream – or fizzled out. But for those that did not fizzle out, the inevitable occurred. If these individuals were “simply doing their thing”, post a certain point of regular interventions the curiosity of those on the outside began to tip over. It’s a mere reflection of that base instinct – to belong – and if those previously on the “outside” did not initially understand what exactly the big deal was, there was – and is – an innate gravity to want to understand, or at the very least, to pretend to understand in order to gain access. These communities would then grow, and would then either attract investors and grow, or plateau on the basis of an ideology and remain.

In India, we are now almost ten years into a scaled model of “indie” pop culture brokerage premised on the model of sponsorship financing, or “cultural” grants rooted in the soft diplomacy space, sourced from the embassies of developed economies.

Since the deregulation of the alcohol industry and larger, more aggressive presence of firms looking to enter the pop culture brokerage space, we are now approaching a certain level of familiarity amongst patrons of what exactly it means to go out to see a show. One could argue that this familiarity is spilling over into a saturation point, and premised on a simple argument: if the generation of late twenty year olds and older grew up in a context where mobile internet access was not deemed something akin to a right, this generation of millennials grew up assuming the internet was normal. And as such, the cultivation of their tastes, expectations, and perhaps most importantly, the iterative identity politics of what it means to be "Indian", has been informed by a seemingly infinite pool of references.

Unlike the previous generation, their making this music is not informed by bootleg cassette tapes sourced from electronic markets, visiting relatives from abroad, or whatever tie ups HMV, Times Music, or other regional distributors may have had with their international counterparts. Their references are far richer, and their going to a venue to see a show presents a very different spectre of engagement. They are keenly aware of the underlying context of why these places exist, and they are very aware that more often than not it is not for the sake of the music, but rather a marketing exercise to bait their tastes. As such, this generation is effectively empowered to reject.

It is this rejection that lies at the core of what we are seeing today in urban India. Since the onset of the restobar model, the underlying incentive was to simply allow for free entry to an event.

Yet most people are more than willing to pay for a live music experience, and if anything, are waiting for it. The restobar circuit as it currently exists now is dominated by around six agencies [3], many of whom mostly focus on presenting either the artistry they formally represent, or producers from outside India. It is of course no surprise then, that patrons are reaching a point of saturation.

This culture of rejection is, of course, the best thing that could happen to this new industry. In rejecting, what we are seeing is a desire to hear music not brokered by these parties, and even more exciting than this, for musicians to find and produce their own spaces, to charge entry at the door or find alternative means to generate revenues to take on the logistics of production themselves, and ultimately, to suit the emerging demand that an essentially untapped demographic presents. In doing so, these parties are afforded complete independence – not the ruse of "indie" – but actual risk, absorbed by the value of one's own decisions, and accountable solely to themselves. The stakes are real, and in these arenas, actual development and change has the capacity to occur, based purely on finding partnerships with like minded people outside of the realm of sponsorship models and agency allegiances. In 2016 in particular, more and more similar minded, independent organisers are entering the fray, moving away from the sponsorship model and taking on these risks. [4] It is within these spaces that inspiration exists, and where real, long term change is forged. This is not a theoretical assertion.

Guided by the observations that this short essay has presented, this author has produced, at the time of this writing, fifteen events since February 2016 that are directly premised on the dynamics discussed here. As a direct response to these observations, REProduce Listening Room [5] has showcased over thirty artists over twelve different venues across six cities.

These events begin in the afternoon on a Sunday, following the course of the setting sun over five hours and six acts until nine in the evening, far removed from the assumption of nocturnal revelry as the only arena for musical engagement, combining design, the visual medium, and sound into a holistic, unique experience.

The events merge both established artists who have been performing for over fifteen years with those who have never played before at all in a seamless intervention, free of agency exclusivities, generating revenues purely by ticket sales and by retail interventions in the form of "pop up shops" and locally produced merchandise.

In doing so, and based on many conversations the author has had with these patrons, this new generation seems to have found an arena that they are instinctively drawn to; one not premised on an "entertainment" model, but rather on a sincere, uncompromising musical experience rendered sustainable by careful curation and relevant financing.

What we are seeing is an emerging capacity by a generation to navigate global trends via not merely aping pop culture tropes as was often the hallmark of the past, but adapting these tropes to suit their local realities. To state this as an act of "defiance", as some observers have suggested [6], may be extreme. However such an assertion is telling of the underlying frustration that characterises the existing model of showcasing music in the region. Less embedded in that antagonism is something more positive; there is clearly something akin to a movement with a telling momentum that is emerging, and for all the right reasons. In a pop culture space, the lifespan of pandering to the lowest common denominator for financial profit is bounded; alternative models will emerge and inspire others to feel included and welcome, and the landscape described here is proof of that.

## Bibliography

1. Refer to "High Priests of Indian Electronica" from the May 2009 issue of Rolling Stone India for some background on these nights at <https://rollingstoneindia.com/high-priests-of-indian-electronica>.
2. Refer to "How Bhavishyavani Future Soundz Shaped Mumbai's Nightlife" from the March 2014 edition of Rolling Stone India for more detail on this collective and their impact at <https://rollingstoneindia.com/bhavishyavani>.
3. The past few years has seen an influx of promoters forming, but the predominant agencies/promoters are OML, Krunk, UnMute, Submerge, Percept, and Wild City.
4. In 2016, a regular series of "properties" unfolding on rooftops, homes, and other arenas has begun to emerge – House Concert Delhi, BYOH (Bring Your Own Headphones), Living Room Sessions, Coral Sessions, an international franchise called Sofar Sounds – all of whom manage their own logistics and curation without the brokerage of agency, sponsor, or standard venue support.
5. The underlying reasoning for the series is outlined in an interview with the author at <https://www.redbull.com/in/en/music/stories/1331810936384/rana-ghose-on-forming-the-reproduce-listening-room>.
6. Refer to "Music: Sounds of Defiance" at <https://www.jabong.com/juicestyle/magazine/music-sounds-of-defiance>.

## About the Author: Rana Ghose

**Rana Ghose** is a curator, economist, writer, and filmmaker. He steers the REProduce collective, a group of twelve musicians that mostly perform in the context of electronic music production. His current focus is REProduce Listening Room, a series of interventions in non traditional spaces that engages with music and video in modular, sequential plays – taking advantage of the aesthetics of spaces as varied as former mills, bakeries, and hotels and producing them into five hour embedded experiences where up to eight different performances unfold. His doctoral research was on risk constructions in a regulatory context, and the underlying dynamics of how we explore uncertainty. The theoretical framework of this research underpins his explorations in performative spaces and the capital intensive model that generates arenas that may or may not suit the wide range of artistic expression that a country like India increasingly generates, and how patrons and sponsorship models interact within the uncertainty that the resultant incentives present. He is based in New Delhi, India.



REProduce Listening Room, 2016. Photo Courtesy of Rana Ghose.



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