

LETTER FROM KATHMANDU

Ancient and Modern

One of the main venues of the Kathmandu Triennale 2017, the Taragaon Museum, is set inside a cluster of modernist rooms designed by Carl Pruscha in the late 1950s. This is situated within the gated compound of the luxury Hyatt Regency complex: the large hotel, neat houses and a plush green lawn. The art world's proximity to privilege and wealth is rather neatly established as we drive in from a city otherwise torn apart by the earthquake of 2015; a city of split-open roads, where it is not uncommon to find a building with one wall missing, a tarpaulin curtain flapping in its place.

In the gardens of the museum, an Oscar Murillo flag with the words 'The Europeans are coming' repeatedly scrawled over in red ink shifts softly in the breeze. A rather pointed critique of the European presence at the Triennale, it raises questions over local representation. 'We had two earthquakes and over 400 aftershocks, so people were scared to come, but Philippe (van Cauteren) came for Photo Kathmandu in 2016. He was so compassionate about what was happening here that we decided to invite him to be our Triennale curator,' said Sangeeta Thapa, director of the Siddhartha Art Foundation, one of the main organisers of the event. The Triennale receives little support from the state or its institutions, and the task of gathering funds is shouldered by Thapa and the members of her team. Van Cauteren brought along a curatorial team from Ghent's SMAK Museum, of which he is artistic director, and delivered international visibility for the event – a tactical choice, certainly, by the Nepalese organisers. Van Cauteren also pulled in big-name artists like Francis Alys, who was named patron, and the blockbuster artist Cai Guo-Qiang, whose performance could not take place due to Nepal's longstanding ban on gunpowder. This is not much of a surprise in a nation just few years on from a civil war – especially since Guo-Qiang's performance required enough gunpowder to potentially blow up the entire city.

In a country where over a hundred thousand people are still living in makeshift housing, it is difficult to ascertain what kind of cultural production requires urgent funding from the state. It is also difficult to uncritically celebrate the Triennale model, an import itself, as the right one for the context, or even as one that is of interest to its larger host community. The Triennale is surely a step towards stimulating a nascent, and otherwise slow contemporary art scene in Kathmandu, as well as a way to potentially foster economic support for artists producing work in the city.



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However, there is a noticeable disconnect between the historically rich artistic traditions, such as traditional Pohwa and Thangka painting, and the emerging contemporary art scene.

On visiting the studio and academy of Lok Chitrakar, a Pohwa painter from a long line of

painters of the Chitrakar family, what is immediately clear is a dedication to technique and process. Where traditional painting has previously been tied to caste, or was the exclusive privilege of men, Chitrakar's academy is full of young women and men of several castes and class backgrounds.



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Lee Kit
Untitled 2017 installed
 at Taragon Museum

existing condition of the
 Kasthamandap temple
 from which Kathmandu
 gets its name

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 Michael Candy film
 screening
 Basantapur, 24 March

Oscar Murillo
*The Europeans are
 Coming 2017*

‘People think there is nothing new in traditional painting, but there is, each painter brings his or her own innovation to the canvas,’ Chitrakar tells me. ‘But this is a freedom guided by discipline,’ he adds. We spend quite some time with an unfinished work, seven years in the making. The tools required, and the skills of composition, he explains, are based on a rigorous training. Yet, on the painterly plane, there is little flexibility outside scriptural tradition. Although the lack of freedom is not a quality that is abhorrent to the tradition, contemporary art perhaps provides a suitable respite from the formal constraints of traditional disciplines. But contemporary art is entangled in power structures of its own. Cultural practices in the subcontinent are often just as much about interpersonal dynamics as they are about material qualities, and this requires a rethinking of existing models and the creation of new frameworks.

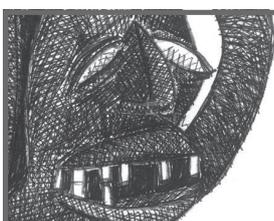
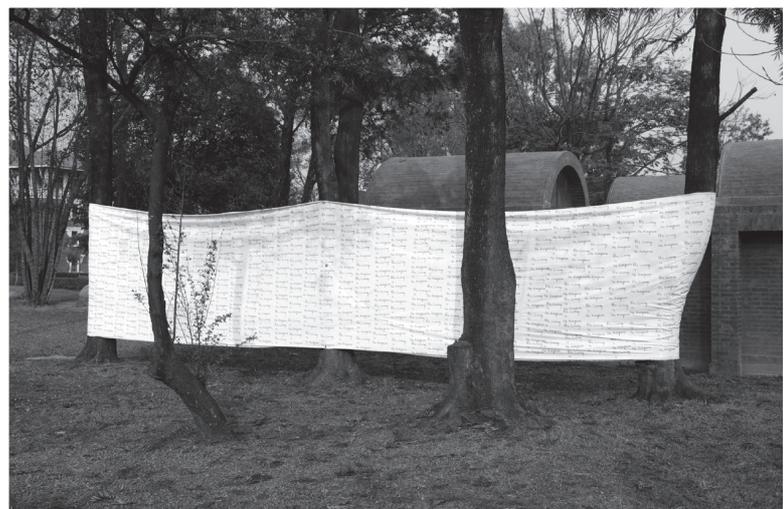
Over 750 monuments, temples and social spaces were damaged by the earthquake, more than a hundred of which have totally collapsed. ‘With the case of heritage we feel that if there is a local person leading the [rebuilding and conservation] efforts, and if they have grown up with that living culture, it is more likely that they will handle it with the right measures,’ says Alok Tuladar, one of the chief activists and organisers involved with the ‘Campaign to Rebuild Kasthamandap’, the temple from which Kathmandu gets its name. I enquire about what he means by ‘living culture’, a phrase that strongly echoes the early writing of Martinican scholar Edouard Glissant. Tuladar answers, ‘These are living buildings that people are attached to, with many religious, and often non-religious, cultural and social activities; like performing their cultural songs and dances.’ Tuladar is part of an activist group comprising

young architects and members of the Newari community like him (indigenous people of the Kathmandu valley), for whom the conservation and rebuilding of fallen monuments is an effort not only to preserve history but also to lead towards a cultural rejuvenation. For Glissant, culture and its history are ‘intangible’ and a way to establish ‘continuous, open resistance’. The site of Kasthamandap is now simply a plot of land, with a fence and a lock. However, rituals progress undeterred, with temple paraphernalia still being placed around it: marigold flowers, incense and small silver-plated coins. This is not a city made static by trauma, but one that carries on. Resistance, at its best, perhaps looks like this.

There is certainly a lack of art centres and galleries in Kathmandu that pay attention to contemporary art practices, meaning that most art of the ‘contemporary’ kind is primarily produced on demand. This seems to mirror the

way in which the traditional painterly forms have been co-opted by a self-orientalising tourism industry (as is the case with many countries in the subcontinent), where work like Chitrakar’s is primarily purchased by foreigners. It is an easy sell. ‘The only history that matters is what stays relevant,’ says young Nepali Triennale artist Karan Shrestha when asked about the local scene. ‘Culture isn’t really living right now,’ he suggests, ‘but begs to be reinvented to stay alive.’ The scene in Kathmandu thus hangs between two extremes: a still-developing contemporary practice, and an ancient one carrying with it the burden of heritage and its precious intangibility. The task at hand? For them to meet amicably. ■

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