

FESTIVAL

Photo Kathmandu 2018

Under the full moon of an early winter night during Photo Kathmandu 2018, a girl band by the name of DidiBahini (a play on the word for sister in Nepali) closed their set with a folk song and a crisp little chorus: 'Men, *move aside*, we need to make space for ourselves.' The song, from Kalikot, West Nepal, got the audience up on its feet – its heady pace perfectly fitting for the scene. We were at Khapinchhen, venue of Bunu Dhungana's arresting series of photographs, 'Confrontations', 2018, in which the artist disobediently inserts herself into gestures that are unfamiliar (and contentious) to the gaze of Nepali patriarchy. She 'says things that are not supposed to be said, and makes visible what is meant to stay out of sight', so the wall text explains. On the opening day of the festival, Dhungana took to the streets to paint a red *tika* onto people's foreheads. In a layered display of photography, film, sound and installation across 18 venues, Photo Kathmandu 2018 consistently kept its focus on 'gender, power, identity, patriarchy and sexuality', the theme for this third edition.

One of the most sprawling and ambitious projects in this regard was 'The Public Life of Women: A Feminist Memory Project', where photographs of women with confident stares and defiant postures filled up the winding lanes of Patan, the oldest part of the city. Collected from the personal archives of over a 120 families, the photographs brought to life the otherwise private lives of a group of revolutionary Nepali women who spent their lives organising and mobilising on behalf of the Communist Party of Nepal, the Nepali Congress, the Rashtriya Prajatantra Party and others across the political spectrum. Many lived in exile in neighbouring countries. 'They would sometimes leave behind their families,' Diwas Raja Kc, one of the curators of the project, tells me, 'leaving in the dead of the night. It's difficult to ask the question as to why they gave up everything for a life underground, so we never do. Instead, we want to build an archive that permeates the dominant historical narrative with images of the bravery and determination of their lives, and the lived realities of their politics.' The project works so well because of the simplicity of its approach: it inserts unexpected photographs of women into a popular imagination where their identities have been otherwise erased. In what is somewhat incidental to this premise, the photographs themselves are richly saturated and

totally stunning: leather jackets are worn over smartly folded Saris as women in military boots stand in patches of forest or fields, city squares and podiums – raising their arms in exclamation as they deliver speeches.

On one afternoon, while festival attendees were busy at the several talks and events that ran in tandem during the festival, a small group of us met in a circular room with a matching round table to discuss the continued incarceration of photojournalist and educator Shahidul Alam in Dhaka, Bangladesh, who has been charged under section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act for being critical of the government on Facebook during a series of road safety protests in the city (Artnotes *AM420*). Around 30 officers in plainclothes, who entered Alam's house under the false pretense that a student wanted to speak with him about her work, had roughly picked him up from his home in the middle of the night on 5 August 2018. On the day that the group of us met in Kathmandu, Alam had been held without bail or a proper hearing for close to 90 days. He has since been released on bail. We met to strategise and regroup, but also to draw up what a South Asian solidarity may look like in a subcontinent riddled with similar instances of censorship and gratuitous violence. In attendance at this meeting were representatives from World Press Photo, Himal Southasia, prominent artists and photographers, as well as members from local and international press, including Al Jazeera and *Nepali Times*. 'We know we are being watched,' said one attendee, 'the question is, can we watch *back*?' The meeting was exhilarating and full of political promise, somehow fulfilling what the phrase 'South Asia' can stand for: an attempt to take back the collective history of a subcontinent defined by the (arbitrarily drawn up) borders of its nation states and, most importantly, to collectively navigate regional struggles. 'I guess we are all, together, caught in a psychological prison of censorship under our variously fascist states,' said another attendee, 'it is only together that we may resist this.'

Small photo festivals have a special energy: at Photo Kathmandu it was immediately apparent that this was a festival *for* the Kathmandu valley and for South Asia. In the absence of formal institutional art spaces in the city (which only has a handful of galleries and museums) something very particular happens that is otherwise rare in the subcontinent: everyone gets along, and the sense of community is strong and deeply moving. When I first met festival director NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati I was disarmed by her honesty and quiet dedication to a festival that persists despite the regional complexities of inadequate infrastructure, funding and, of course, increasing

censorship. The first edition took place in 2015. In April that year, an earthquake rocked the country. The team, already in the planning stages, immediately got involved with relief work, but still decided to go ahead with the festival. 'Everyone needed inspiration,' Kakshapati explained. 'We decided that the curatorial approach would not touch the earthquake, as the topic was oversaturated. We started in a simple way: with The Nepal Photo Project, which was an attempt to counter the imagery of Nepal as a torn-up state.' The first festival was thus full of works in and about Nepal by both Nepali and non-Nepali photographers and artists in order to subvert the dominant narrative (which is run primarily by the development organisations in the country). All spaces were, and continue to be, public spaces in an attempt to bridge the gap between local audiences and the exhibited work. The primary ambition for Kakshapati and her team is to look at conflicts from a regional, indigenous perspective. Kakshapati adds, 'We want to showcase material and build energy around it. We are a process, not a final outcome.'

Kathmandu is a site that draws huge developmental funding, and the presence of international aid agencies is pervasive: a characteristic sight around the city are blue UN cars speeding off in all directions. As a response to this, Photo Kathmandu provides the country, and the subcontinent, a potential that is ripe for the arts to do something important and poignant – oftentimes simply by existing. ■

'Photo Kathmandu 2018' took place from 12 October to 16 November.

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