

# LETTER FROM BANGALORE

## Foreign Bodies

As part of a residency hosted by TAJ&SKE projects in Bangalore, we held a dinner rather naively titled 'Arts and Activism' with the hope of putting two disparate yet not dissimilar groups from the city in conversation with one another: the artists and the activists. A poorly situated £16.5m (₹1,380 crore) steel flyover proposed by the central government to connect the city to its airport was discussed. The activists, primarily from a small tech start-up, Jhatkaa, had just returned from a successful campaign, stalling the project that would have resulted in the loss of over 800 ancient trees along the Western Ghats. Jhatkaa has since been appointed to the 'Tree Committee for Bangalore' by the Bangalore municipal administration, the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagra Palike. The BBMP is surprisingly forthcoming with local initiatives, quick to get involved as soon as an opportunity for publicity presents itself. This is clearly the case with the BBMP's support of ST+ART India, which brings together the work of both international and national artists and illustrators. More often than not, they are international street artists, making work that rarely engages with its local context, devoid of political, social or cultural relevance. Yet the BBMP continues to sign over permissions for them to paint astonishingly large public facades. Censorship, under the moral-policing eye of the current government, is rampant. In one instance where a Bangalore-based artist filed a proposal to depict a celebrated local goddess, the request was met with disapproval over some partial nudity.

The question of the political potential of public art in India is a difficult one, hardly contained within a discussion of populist work, but in a country with little arts infrastructure or funding each initiative must be considered carefully, especially when it comes to the handling of public space. Public space in an Indian city cannot be easily generalised, as complex stratifications and social structures exist at every stage, the dynamics of which must be carefully examined on a local scale. Another such initiative is the Art in Transit scheme undertaken by private art school, the Shrishti Institute of Art, Design & Technology, which, in collaboration with the Bangalore



Metro Rail Corporation Ltd, carries out an aggressive programme of beautification of the brand new metro stations, barely yet in use. Its mission statement outlines an aim 'to create meaningful artistic interventions and discourse in spaces of transience', although it remains unclear how these discourses are being generated.

Critical discourse is perhaps what is lacking most in the metropolitan cities of India, particularly in the arts. The question of how to generate critical discourse within the city is thus an interesting one, and one perhaps at the root of several independent art spaces that exist as a result. One of them, the collective Maraa, founded in the early 2000s, has been engaged with generating public intellectual discourse around issues of gender, caste, sexuality and identity. From my conversation with founding member Ekta Mittal, it became apparent that creating situations for such discussions to occur in a meaningful and sustainable way is the chief difficulty.

At the ambitious Kochi Student's Biennale this year, which runs alongside the main Biennale (Reviews AM403), a small, dark warehouse contains the work of a few students from the Bharti Vidyapeeth College of Fine Arts, Pune, a government school. In one room of the college over the three-month duration of the show, each student meticulously hand-grinds his or her work – sculptures, paintings and even entire portfolios – into a collective pile of



dust. A strong gesture, certainly, indicative of their deep frustration with the arts institution, where work is often approached in a dogmatic way. These students rarely have critical conversations about what they produce – hence a project to challenge notions of 'good' or 'bad' work in a very basic way.

I was at a presentation late last year of *Bhinna Vinyasa*, a contemporary



**Bhinna Vinyasa**  
*Multiple Assemblages*  
2017 performance

'Arts and Activism' dinner hosted by Dani Admiss and Skye Arundhati Thomas at TAJ&SKE, November 2016

Maraa media and art collective invite children to make artwork at Cubbon Park



Bharatnatayam performance produced by the Attakkalari Centre for Movement Arts in Bangalore, and what was immediately apparent was the strength of its discourse and its startling contemporaneity. Bharatnatayam, an ancient dance practice like so many other Indian art practices, is inherently tied to ritual. In a political climate of extreme right-wing Hindu nationalism, conversations around words like 'tradition' become especially difficult, although they

are at once necessary and immediate. The right wing is particularly invested in maintaining rhetoric around 'unbroken traditionalisms', which ultimately uphold a harsh patriarchy and elements of the caste system. Furthermore, an unbroken tradition is one that suspends itself in time, often refusing any kind of update. *Bhinna Vinyasa* did not pander to such demands and was instead a striking version of what a conversation between modernity and tradition could be: fresh, gripping and risky. The performance depended on the support of the Goethe Institut/MaxMuller Bhavan, and as a gesture of collaboration it contained an overlaid soundtrack by German artist Martin Lutz, a second-time resident of the Institut's 'bangaloRESidency'. The soundscape consisted of auto-rickshaw horns and other general traffic noise nestled between atonal music, which was unfortunately a rather simplistic rendition of the 'Indian streetscape'; it served more to interfere with *Bhinna Vinyasa* than to add to it. However, this particular residency has been tremendously influential in developing projects across the city, and is indicative of the success of collaborating with foreign funding bodies in this way. In fact, it maintains a kind of monopoly over the scene in Bangalore, often providing funding to independent spaces that would otherwise

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struggle to exist. An example of this is 1Shanti Road, where residents produce work for a tri-monthly in-house show.

It is hardly a secret, and yet always comes as a surprise, that the Indian art market sustains itself on the resale of modernist work from back rooms. The irony, of course, is that against a political climate of advanced Hindu nationalism, the modernists stand out awkwardly and rather shamelessly. For independent spaces that do not have access to these transactions, funding bodies become integral to the work that they are able to produce. Thus, institutions like the Goethe Institut, the British Council and the Alliance Française, amongst others, maintain a strong grip on the cultural landscape of the country. However, Indian institutions need to be critical of the funding they receive, and what it is that they aim to provide, while foreign bodies ought to maintain an openness to and awareness of the local contexts of the cities that they look to enter. ■

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