

ARTISTIC INTERVENTION IN PUBLIC SPACES

Nancy Adajania

The quest for alternative public spaces for a display of art, as also the need to make art accessible to a wider audience, was first strongly articulated by artists of leftist tendency, as in the 1970s, when Navjot Altaf and Vivan Sundaram organized mobile art exhibitions in colleges, factories, and railway stations, working towards a new definition of engaged post-colonial subjectivity.

For instance, Navjot had deconstructed the hierarchy both of means and meaning, produced by such public art interactions. When Navjot Altaf was practicing her art, an alternative art practice in the 1970s, along with Vivan Sundaram and others, what she was trying to do is try and come to terms with A, the fact that you have to reconcile art with activism, but also B, as a woman artist, how does she reconcile Marxism and its lack of gender nuance with her practice as a woman?

This was a problem that she had to face at that time. So she went along with the other male artists and put up posters on the roads, in railway stations, etc. But there was always a question that remained unanswered. It was only later on that women artists took up the question of gender as well. I suppose in orthodox Marxism there wasn't enough space to explore gender because the question of class was more important than gender.

I am giving all these historical situations because I believe that young artists today do not have any influence of the history of such alternative art practices that happened before. Therefore many times the lessons that were learned from such practices in different kinds of situations are not known to the younger people and many a times they are using old and outdated forms of resistance which senior artists have used and outgrown. So I think it's very important that we document aspects of history for which at that time there was no name.

Today we talk about public art, but at that time the discourse did not have a name. Many times in orthodox art history when the discourse doesn't have a name, it is just erased. I believe that it is our work as theorists or as critics to be able to bring in those discourses which may not have had a name but which did exist and perhaps even redefined those categories. I won't go into the various details about Altaf and others. She worked with writers, journalists, and activists. They were involved in activities of a leftist youth organisation called Priyom (Progressive Youth Movement), which is a very important historical moment as well. Among the other things they were doing was to look for urgent public spaces where art could be made available to wider audiences.

As you can see, all the things that younger artists are talking about today were also questions that were being raised by these senior artists. To this end, they painted propaganda posters and helped organize exhibitions of contemporary art in colleges, schools, labour camps, etc. But such solidarities were event-based, and a gap existed between the artists and the activists. Not all members of Priyom saw art as a valuable agent of political change. Moreover, even reasonably priced prints made by socially conscious artists were not bought by the workers. This is very important because you would think that because the prices of those prints were lowered the workers from the labour camps or from the railway stations would come and buy those. Actually, they were bought by fellow artists or by writers or others. A lot of these insights came through talking to these artists and by critically engaging with them, asking them questions about their work. Because I'm not just interested in describing what happened before in history, but questioning it. Therefore, this is my thesis, that what happened even at that time was that they still treated art as

an object, as a commodity. It may not be in the art market where it's bought and sold, it moves out from the gallery economy, but it still is a fixation on the artwork as a commodity. I think this is an important insight as we go further into the 80s. What really happened is that in a way they were always therefore talking on behalf of others. They were not really engaging with those underprivileged others that they wanted to tag along with them. I would therefore infer that artists of that period did not think of other kinds of exchange other than the monetary. They unwittingly fell into the same trap of commodity fetishism that they had opposed in the first place. After all, a painting or a print sold to a worker still remains a commodity.

During the 80s and 90s, artists like Vivan Sundaram , Rimzon, Valsan Kolleri, Umesh, Navjot Altaf, Soman, Subodh Gupta, Kalkur, and now Shilpa Gupta, have experimented with a wide variety of media and materials, and they've encouraged themselves in the making of site-specific art in parks, bookshops, in streets, village gardens, and community spaces as well. Instead of being cool surveyors of the site in question, they've often committed themselves to collaborate with the inhabitants of the localities where they work, or with professionals from other disciplines, so as to be able to give art a sense of placeness. Yoram Hazony read this as a shift in accent from space to place and a corresponding collapse of the insular and privileged category of the viewer into the more inclusive roles of the participant and user.

One of the historical contexts of recent public art in India is the gradual shift in the centre of gravity of resistance politics from the left to a change in the political spectrum towards NGO activism. Some of the younger artists have not had any political radicalization because the years in which they went to college were also the years when you did not have those kinds of campus politics, when you did not have any kinds of protests or strikes. So at the most what they would have in a festival is perhaps a Malhar kind of thing in Bombay which is sponsored by the public. And therefore for them to be able to formulate a tactical approach to their art making and towards a more collaborative public art remains a difficult question for them to resolve. And also therefore their solidarities and other groups of underprivileged people, almost users of public space, has become more a matter of convenience today, rather than resulted in an active production of a multi-look. Not just a dialogue, but a multi-look, because there are multiple users of public spaces.

The real problem is that the old habits of privileging the production of an artwork, rather than making an audience, and I emphasize making an audience, continue. In such a model, the artist's genius is more important than the phenomenon of art with all its interactive, inter-texture, and collegial dimensions. So the context gets killed even before it has been addressed. Our art world has a very strong insider syndrome. It, very quickly, because the institutional controls remain in the hands of the whole establishment, commodifies even alternative approaches to conventional art history and domesticates them with entrenched patterns of organization, curatorship, exhibition, and response. Individual artists have tried to push the form, but there is no realization of the critical sociality of art.

The question that is never asked is— What is the ontological status of the artwork? Who is it for? What is its immediate environment? I'd just like to now show you a few images. This is basically about the World Social Forum held in Mumbai, which was a very important event, and everybody has read about it in the media. It was a huge media circus, of course. I was coming back from my mother's house and going into the suburbs, by chance travelling by the same train which was painted by artists for the World Social Forum. Here is my diary entry on that experience:

“The recent memory of a suburban train at Bombay's Churchgate station cuts across my mindscape. Its official coat of chocolate brown has disappeared under neat Victorian compositions.

These mute paintings do nothing for me or for other passengers rushing into the compartments. I hang out at the entrance and scan the paintings in the compartments adjacent to mine. The artists deem to dilute their blue-chip styles with some anaemic social realism or obvious political commentary. A gentle nudge and the train starts. The sounds that I'd dropped off a moment ago return. At the concourse, the not-yet-home passengers cheer a game of cricket on overhead TV screens. Closer up, some sway, others sigh. A lover's hand waves soundly, and then an abrupt clench. One outstretched hand pulls another one up, a passenger barely manages to jump aboard. Inside, women knit, talk, pray, and sort coriander leaves. Some roll their eyes on spotting smutty graffiti, others dream. Chemical air, sweat, fatigue, a normal day that art in a public space did not even touch, let alone change. Indian artists are chronic victims of the gallery complex. When invited to step outside the zone of comfort, they unconsciously treat the street or the public terrain as a proxy gallery. Thus a train is only a surface to be painted on, not a site of conscious displacement from routine art practice. Although a group of Indian artists painted this train as part of the ongoing events of the World Social Forum, they might just as well have painted something similar for any other charitable cause or a post-catastrophic situation. It is ironic then that while the activists and cultural workers at the WSF shouted themselves hoarse about the negative impact of globalization and neo-colonialism, the media service publicizing these events did not point out that such cultural agents as activists can and often do behave like civilians by filling public spaces with artworks that only pretend to speak in the name and aspirations of an imaginary public."

The Heritage Quarter, which is in South Bombay, where you have a museum, you have galleries, they wanted people to be able to come to that space and enjoy art, not just in the galleries, but also in the streets. And ironically, what has happened over the years with the Kala Ghoda Art Festival is what I call the gallerization of public space. So instead of having works within the gallery, art galleries have higher stalls in the public space, on the pavements. So you have little galleries on the pavements. Again, there is no conscious understanding of the people who are there, who work there, etc. Are they restaurateurs? Are they people from the informal economy? What are their aspirations? What are they looking for?

A lot of the people do come to the Jehangir Art Gallery as we know in Bombay because it's the most public space. Even a bus conductor may just walk into the gallery during a small break at a museum. Why is it that none of these collective energies of the people, their aspirations, were not tapped at all? Instead you have these little, small mini-galleries which fix themselves onto the pavements.

The democratization of art practice is not an easy idea to achieve, especially when artists are perceived as an elite community engaged in a practice that is not comprehensible to the masses, except in terms of its high economic profile. This situation is further complicated by a highly divided and politicized society marked by differences of caste, class, ethnic and religious identities, competing interests, milieus, and specific local assumptions and experiences. Therefore, public art in the Indian context needs to be seen as one among other political and cultural practices, not as some kind of elite or unique cultural practice. It can neither be understood only as an institutional critique of the commercial gallery system, nor as an isolated search for alternative spaces. Rather, it should be seen as an exploration of alternative attitudes, tactics, and vocabulary. We do have organizations and artist initiatives like Samarth and Open Circle as well, and they have done extremely important work, especially to fight against the forces of communalism and Hindu majoritarianism, and definitely one commends the kind of work that Samarth has done. But I still do believe, and this is my position, that perhaps what Samarth and Open Circle have not been able to do is to create a counter-symbology, counter-forms, which can act as forms of resistance against the Hindu

majoritarian rule. The whole point about the right wing is that they are brutal, ferocious, that they use technology and use forms of mobilization far ahead of anybody else. We have new media practices today from the 1990s onwards, amongst the Indian artist community. I just wanted to remind you that the right wing started using the video and audio facilities right from the time of the Kapadia Yagna and Ayodhya, etc. They were widely disseminating via all these various technologies. The very DCM Toyota in which Lal Krishna Advani travelled, had an air conditioner, it had projectors, it had a proper audio microphone, etc. They are the ones who not only have grassroots-level connections, but they also tap into technology to spread their venom.

Now, my point is, we don't have to counter it by being bloody, ferocious, or brutal. No. I'm not looking for mass mobilization for an art practice. But what I'm talking about is that we have not been able to create alternative forms of symbology. I think, counter symbology is extremely important. I don't think we have been able to do that. From there, I'd like to go on to artists who, not in the urban spaces, but in rural spaces, for example, like Navjot Altaf, who's been able to create alternative forms.

An artist like Navjot Altaf, her interactions with sculptures in wood and metal in the village of Kondagaon, Bastar, Central India have resulted in productive, collaborative, and cooperative artworks, some of which are site-specific. Underground for the project 'Self-Exploration' 2002, Navjot has facilitated both site-oriented projects as well as bell-metal sculpture workshops for women artists. Navjot redesigned existing public spaces where women, men and children meet daily. With the help of women artists, Anita Shantibar et al, she chose hand pump sites that were ensconced in unhygienic conditions without proper drainage facilities. What you have here is a hand pump in the centre of this fabricated structure. Navjot, along with not only the other sculptors of Gondwana, but even the villagers, decided to create an outer shell for the hand pump. They put their minds together and decided what kind of form they wanted. They came up with the idea of this Egyptian symbol of water, which is this M design that you can see. They also decided that there would be a structure whereby the women would not have to go right down on their knees to pick up the water pots and hurt their spines, which they normally do. So there was this outer structure where on top of the outer shell, you can keep your pots balanced and pick them up. Secondly, they created a drain so that all the extra water at the hand pump, which was wasted, would go into the nala, into the fields.

So what's happening here is truly a collaboration. Collaboration, I think, is not about being condescending. It's not about looking down on others, whether they're underprivileged or unequal. It is about transforming yourself. As my favourite poet, Rilke, said, change yourself. To me, that is an extremely important and perhaps an impossible activity in today's time, but that's what is necessary. It's about being able to change yourself by coming into contact with others.

These are the pilla gudi, which again, Navjot and all the sculptors and the villagers have designed. Pillagudis are basically rectangles for children. One of the sculptors decided to design it, and then all of them worked together on it. Inside this rafter-like structure, you have mirrors. So the children would go inside, and they would look up, and they would be sort of unbalanced by the idea that they've seen their own faces there, and sometimes it would almost feel very shaky. I think that it's a very interesting metaphor of not just seeing yourself in what you've made, but also been being slightly utilized and not knowing on what kind of ground we were standing. And that's the kind of edge that Navjot the other artists have been able to produce. Rather than just making a work and plonking it down on a traffic island.

And I want to now set Navjot's interactions in the rural area with an example reflecting on an urban heritage site, namely the Asiatic Library in Bombay. I'm sure everybody knows about this very important monument. What you see here are the Asiatic Library steps. I'll just give you a little background about this project. During the bicentenary celebrations, they decided they wanted to involve artists in this event and that the artists would make public works using this monument. Many proposals were made and two artists were chosen by the bicentenary committee. One was Vidya Kamath, whose work you can see here now, and the other was Sharmila Samant. Now, why I'm giving this example is not to tell you about the success or failure of an artwork, but about the complexities of negotiation. As Dr. Kakar was also talking about, how do you make it cling to attention? It's an extremely complex example and therefore I just wanted to dip into this particular project to talk about the risks involved and also the consequences faced by the artist.

This was a time when you had the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, it was also the time when the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune was ransacked by the Sambhaji Brigade. So it was a very tough political situation. And at that time the poet Dilip Chitre, who was being harassed by the Sambhaji Brigade and others because of Shivaji in the Laine case, he wrote a text about tolerating intolerance. Vidya Kamath, who is a regular user of this library, has a degree in comparative mythology. She is also an artist. She always found this bit strange. This was a place where, of course, it's a central library where all the people use it. There's also the Asiatic people who have the committee which has all these rare manuscripts, maps, coins, etc. So, she's completely in touch with this space and what she wanted to do was to not make a work within it, within the monument or outside it, on the street. She decided to choose the kind of threshold space, just between the staircase, which takes you outside of this building, and the space, the door which takes you inside. She put up these wooden banners, which people would be able to see from the street, as well as those walking inside. She quoted Dilip Chitre's text in English and in Marathi. She created these red vinyl banners because she wanted to sort of contrast this from the titanium white of the Asiatic library. She had these very humble poses of a woman, almost like bloodied, reddened. Of course she was commenting on censorship, intolerance, etc.

What happens next? Three days later, she finds that her window banners are not there. She went to the committee and found out. She wanted to ask, what happened? The Asiatic Hindu Committee people were extremely scared and perplexed because this was a huge public event and they did not want any problems. Finally they went to the police station to find out whether it was just an act of some miscreants who very carefully pulled down these banners. Or was somebody giving a political message by pulling down these tolerating intolerance bans? First of all, of course, the police station did not want to say anything. But after repeated inquiries, they owned up to the fact that it was they who had actually pulled down these panels. Everybody was shocked as to what was the reason. During the conversation, they realized that the policemen did not know that this was art. I think this is a very important point because we're talking about reaffirmation of categories. We're talking about making a work in public space. You have the policemen who are like agents of colonial power, very clear. Their censorship acts are a throwback to the British colonial rule. We all know that. So they don't know what is this. Is this art? They're not sure about it. The point that they knew is that they saw something written about the Bamiyan Buddhas. And now, the local population, the people who work within the library, are people who are from the Dalit community, they are Neo-Buddhas. So the police, on their own, without talking to the new Buddhists who actually work in this library and who have no problem with these banners, decided on their own that these banners should be taken out because otherwise they could be a riot or a controversy. The reason why I'm unpacking this is really to be able to understand what are the risks that both sides are taking while making this event.

So you have these empty strings and no banners. With a lot of difficulty then they had to negotiate with the police and explain to them. Finally, they decided to put the banners back. What is important is what the media did when this event happened. They wrote a lot of articles about this great public space artwork. But when this happened, there was no mention in the media. Because what I'm trying to say is that it is not even considered as something which is meant to be written about, questioned, etc. This is a truly important example to show who governs the public space. Do we really still have absolutely silent colonial laws, legislations, and even a mindset which actually regulates this public space? So then who is this work meant for?

From there I move on to Sharmila Samant. She had a lot of problems also while doing this work because the committee again is a man, woman rather, sorry. A lot of women who have PhDs, women from the elite section of society, who I'm sure, if they hadn't done artworks in public space, they might have got craftspersons to come and sit on the steps and perhaps make a horse or weave a carpet or something like that. But since today public artists all go wrong, and artists are seen on page three, et cetera, they must have thought, okay, let's make an artwork in this public space. They did not realize the consequences, of course, and nor did the artists. So this is a very interesting example to see that. Sharmila, when she was taken on a tour of this space, realized that there were a lot of people who were working there who felt alienated from the space and especially at that moment because they were fighting for their rights and better wages. So this is the time. There's a lot of unhappiness and dejection about their role within this space. And she decided to create a newspaper, a kind of journal, where people would bring photographs of themselves, of their own families, etc. People would get photographed in spaces within this library of their own choice, whichever part of the site that they wanted to remember, or wanted the children to remember, etc. And then she made these newspapers in Marathi, in English, etc. And she decided to put up these newspapers or journals on the tables in the Central Library, just as people would normally come and read in newspaper, people from the street, et cetera, would now be reading the histories of these people, along with pictures, photographs, etc. So she created a work in this fashion. And she had a lot of problems, because the same committee which was very happy to have public artworks, was very unhappy that the artist was actually working in collaboration with the workers, and especially those workers who are now fighting for their rights.

These are images, photographs, of the workers. Another part of this project was that, the steps of the library that we saw in the earlier photographs, she wanted to wash those steps. And she wanted to put up little pillows on that space during the opening day. Now what was the reason for this? From my conversation with her and the way I interpreted it, it was both a Gandhian device, that all these people who were part of the committee, students, volunteers, etc. would actually come and clean up the space. So cleanliness mixed with godliness in the Gandhian sense. And secondly, the fact that the Asiatic Library, which is a colonial monument, now the Central Library, is always of the aura of a temple. She wanted to, in a very Ambedkarite sense, to clean up the septic tank of Hinduism. So she decided that perhaps this was one way in which, it's not about cleaning up somebody else's garbage, but cleaning up your own minds. It's a kind of self-cleansing. These are the intentions of the artist. As the project unfolds, people are unhappy. The committee wants certain things to be done. Artists cannot negotiate that, etc. And as it unfolds, on the actual day, the artist was completely sidelined. And who takes over the committee of all these different women? So you only have all these women with their PhDs from the daily section, etc., they decided to start pretty gingerly cleaning up the steps of the library. Sharmila's idea was that actually the space would be cleaned up, there'd be little pillows with inscriptions, and the people from the street level, especially the chaiwala boys being part of the informal economy on the street, could come up and literally bridge the gap between the door and the ground, it never happened. because these women cleaned

up the steps in Delhi, they sat down there on those inscribed pillows, had a little tea party, read poems of course, in all languages to be politically correct, and then they took those pillows as souvenirs and went home. So all the other people just remained outside. The chaiwala, the others who actually formed the ancillary services of the informal economy never really got a chance to climb up these steps. I just wanted to show this because I think it's an extremely complex example.

It's not about being judgmental. In a way, we are all laughing at our own selves. It's not about laughing at somebody else. I think it's questioning our own stereotypes, our own attitudes, our ways of thinking, of how we think of ourselves and how we think of the other. In a way, what the artist perhaps would have intended is a way of bridging the gap between us and them. And I would say collectively perhaps all artists who decide to choose public art as an activity could want to dream, as you know, to borrow a phrase from Adrienne Rich, dream of a common language, a way of being able to bridge the gap between the artists and the wider community. But that in a way never happens. In the end, I would just like to say, *mind the gap*.

Original transcript from the video recorded at the Vice~Versa Seminar, Marriott Resort, Panjim-Goa on 23rd September 2005.