

## ROOTEDNESS: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF COLLABORATION IN CONTEMPORARY ART IN INDIA.

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### Abstract

Collaboration is the key to the creative future of South Asian Art. Artists create a sense of belonging by transforming spaces, through representation, and by helping to nurture healthy, vibrant, and joyful communities where people feel welcome. This paper reviews my teaching experience in Fall 2024 at the Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology, in Bangaluru, South India titled: Collaborative Curating: Multi-Disciplinary Approaches, and its 3 group-curated exhibitions that challenge highly politicised subjects such as caste, free speech, and environmental degradation. These three exhibitions serve as case studies for three curatorial approaches: authoritarian, friendship-based, and antagonistic. All of them were most productive for rootedness and belonging.

**Keywords:** Indian contemporary art, artistic collaboration, rootedness, curating, graduate art education.

Collaboration is the key to the creative future of South Asian Art. Self-organised collectives of artists, curators, creatives, and activists are the force that will fuel the region's artistic momentum. Artists collaborate to create a sense of belonging by transforming spaces, through representation, and through public projects that positively impact their communities. They want to feel safe and ensure safety for others. In doing so they create togetherness, affiliation, connection, and kinship – the forms of situated knowledges, vital to understanding and becoming-with the realities of their place.

South Asian history is comprised of significant collaborations. Here, agrarian cooperation meant that collective efforts were rewarded with equal distribution of resources and profits were reinvested in the communities. Every harvest was celebrated with craftworks made collectively. For these communities, land was not a resource to exploit, it was the property of their ancestors and gods. It was the centre of life and spirit: its roots. Mahatma Gandhi reflected these values in his positive regard for Socialism. In contemporary India, the values of Marxist communalism are powerfully represented by the Communist government in Kerala State and the stunning success they have had in boasting social well-being compared to other Indian States. Contemporary social and artistic collectives draw on this historical rootedness in land and spirituality by activating resistances, and ecological perspectives in powerful, interpersonal ways. They know a specifically Indigenous mode of

relationality grounded in deep cultural and spiritual interconnectedness. (Hujatnika, 2020.)

Similarly, my desire for collectivity is rooted in history. As a Russian-born, New York City-based curator, my collaborative projects grew out of the utopian strivings of the early Russian avant-garde to build a classless community. I hold a deep respect for their idealistic aspirations. Brooklyn House of Kulture, the arts non-profit I founded in 2010, was inspired by their efforts to deliver culture to the most distant parts of Russia.<sup>i</sup> BHK was a personal endeavour to work collectively. Under its umbrella, I curated twenty exhibitions in the network of Brooklyn Public Libraries. Although I was the sole curator, my exhibitions engaged librarians, visitors, and many emerging artists. Since that time, I have understood collaboration as a complex effort to nurture an equilibrium of relationships. BHK was my way to put down roots in New York City, at a time when I was still a new immigrant. I was anxious to add my own mark to the vibrant art scene of Brooklyn and to find my community of place-makers and knowledge caretakers. The artists who I exhibited, like me transnational individuals, became my community.

I was given the opportunity to reflect on my personal experiences by teaching collaborative skills as part of my Fulbright-Nehru Senior Research and Teaching Award, in India. With the lessons I learned in the past, I began a five-week class with thirteen senior students, titled Collaborative Curating: Multi-Disciplinary Approaches, at Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Bengaluru. All my students were women, from middle-income families and upper caste. They lived close to campus in one of the suburbs of Bengaluru. <sup>ii</sup> Three curatorial and ten visual arts students conceptualised and unveiled three exhibitions: Art on Trial, Walk This Way, Something is Missing. All three exhibitions took place on campus, intending to establish learning communities, a sense of ownership and belonging. Unexpectedly, exhibitions revealed three methods of collaboration: leadership, friendship-based, and conflict situation.

In Art on Trial student curator, who had prior curatorial experience, adopted a curator-managerial role and exhibited work by two students and five professional artists. all of whom address violations of human rights in India. The exhibition was displayed in vacant office spaces. The curator was able to find sponsorship to pay artists' participation fees - a remarkable accomplishment especially in the context of virtually non-existent funding for the arts, and the short lead time. Her administrative success produced diversity and professional quality in the artwork displayed.

An exhilarating performance by the artist Dimple Shah was the highlight of the exhibition. Shah spread fine-grained turmeric onto a white floor cloth to 'delineate a sacred space and

to nurture faith in the healing environment,' as she explained in her statement.<sup>iii</sup> She performed ritual dance, while making sounds through the morchang iv creating a link between traditional and contemporary practices. (See Fig.1).



Fig.1. Dimple Shah, Performance documentation. Bangalore: SMI campus. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Highlights of the student contribution included: an embroidered iconic pointed finger of Dr. Ambedkar, which symbolically reinforced the meaning of democracy.<sup>v</sup> Two banners, blue and orange, together titled: 'What is right of right'. The orange banner carried embroidery. 'I can't display this without being called \_\_\_\_.' In reference to the orange colour that became a symbol of Hindutva reactionary movement (Sengupta, 2023). The blue banner displayed 'Don't conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.' This was the student's personal motto expressing her desire to give back to her community. The group curator shared with me her challenges of working on campus and the expanded sense of rootedness and belonging.

The exhibition Walk This Way exposed the collapsing eco-system of Bangalore's Lake Gantiganahalli. Students created paper cutouts of the butterflies and birds that still find their way into this remnant of nature that soon would be consumed by the sprawling metropolis. They projected images of the lake landscape onto the classroom walls thus creating an immersive and personal experience in an otherwise bare classroom. They scattered trash around the room to reflect the environmental neglect of the area. This group had initially included a plan to lead a guided walk to the lake, complemented by their narration of the neighbourhood history. Although circumstances prevented this, the exhibition conveyed that the lake is shared refuge for students and neighbours alike.<sup>vi</sup> (See Fig. 2).



Fig.2 Art On Trial, documentation of student exhibition. Bangalore: SMI campus. Photo Courtesy of Srishti Manipl Institute of Art Design and Technology.



Fig.3 Walk This Way, documentation of the exhibition. Bangalore: SMI campus. Photo Courtesy of SMI.

The students who produced Walk This Way entered the project as friends, which ensured the equality of their collaboration and allowed them to combine their different points of view into a productive force. Students in this group drew inspiration from our discussion of India's much loved, Raqs Media Collective, and their successful collaboration over the past thirty years: 'Disagreeing, when necessary, and agreeing, whenever possible. And by continuing to know that agreements and disagreements did not cancel each other out in a

zero--sum game, but spiralled instead to new levels of connectedness.’(Raqs, 2018). Similarly, but in another geographic context, the Russian curator Victor Misiano described a similar situation when, in 1992, a group of Russian artists befriended a group of Ljubljana artists in the process of producing an exhibition together. Misiano describes the creative tensions that developed by both criticism and creation, confrontation and care, and the friendships that evolved as a result. (Franceschini, 2013: 135) Misiano continued that ‘Friendship also becomes the final shelter for culture in the situation of escalating political oppression.’ (Franceschini, 2013: 250) vii Perhaps his words will be helpful for artists in India as well. (See Fig. 3).

The fact that Walk This Way took place in the classroom, where we conducted our class discussions and lectures, ‘institutionalised’ student friendship by providing space within the institution and by making it into the culminating part of their learning process. Offering suggestions for the next cohort, one student wrote ‘Demonstrate patience when opposing opinions or ideas arise. Listen carefully!’ This exhibition deepened students’ roots on campus.

Something is Missing was a great success, especially in the way it reveals the conflict within curatorial collaboration. The exhibition sprawled through either bathrooms, populating them with drawings and photographs inspired by reflections on their identity. The works were sourced by an open call circulated among current Srishti students. (See Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 Something is Missing, documentation of the exhibition. Bangalore: SMI campus. Photo Courtesy of SMI.



Several contextually important facts shaped the idea of the bathroom being a suitable space for an exhibition. As part of the class, we examined the work by Russian artist Ilya Kabakov's work for Documenta 9 in 1992, where he re-created the entire interior of a Soviet communal apartment inside a toilet that he built on site. (Boym, 2023). In the context of India, students were already familiar with the bathroom as a symbol of progress and democracy. Historically, the question of sanitation in India has been a focus of public policies and many NGOs' efforts. The two visionaries of India's future, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar could only agree on the issue of issue of sanitation. (Akhilsh, 2021). Students were introduced to the South Asian archive of bathroom signs titled *unRestroom*, mapping change in representations of gender & accessibility to sanitation in the region.viii Today, LGBTQ+ citizens fight for their own spaces by protesting against gendered bathrooms.ix The bathroom remains a gender identity battlefield in India, and was an ideal venue for students' reflections on their identity through art.

Use of the institutional bathrooms was a challenge. Students needed multiple approvals. They contacted janitors with the request to keep the artworks intact for the duration of the exhibition. Although many artworks were taken down almost right away. The art installation was ad-hoc since female students needed to enter male bathrooms surreptitiously to hang the artworks. Many works were hastily attached to the bathroom mirrors, which ensured their visibility, since it was the first thing people saw entered the bathroom. Many left their responses written on the mirrors. *Something is Missing* created a dialogical space for questioning the gendered nature of Indian society (which bathrooms are the mirrors of). As the Croatian painter, Dure Sedar said, 'The collective work cannot be seen as a form only as an effort,' highlighting the importance of the process rather than its final result, which is in the curatorial field – a well-organised and displayed exhibition.

But the process of *Something is Missing* was a nightmare for participants. As I found out from the students' reflections after the class, they have been critical of the 'curator' for not providing the expected leadership during the project. They resented the fact that they had to do the curatorial and artistic work themselves. As Raqs Media Collective teaches us 'the making of the collective art practice can never be reduced to the division and allocation of tasks which are distributed because of reasons of their volume and the efficiencies of scale... To be a ... curatorial collective is precisely not to paint by numbers.' (Raqs, 2020) Unfortunately, this lesson was not in the minds of the 'bathroomers' during the exhibition process.

The artists in this group were guided by a formula of the curator as project manager, who has special knowledge and skills. However, their 'curator' was inexperienced in this matter, and they failed to create collaboration. Chantal Mouffe reveals the inherent nature of

antagonism within any group. 'Within the context of the political community, the opponent should be considered not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated.' (Mouffe, 2020: 69) Claire Bishop stresses that 'antagonism' is essential in democratic society and relationships constituted by art practices. (Bishop, 2021: 234) The antagonism must be embraced and analysed, as we did in the reflection after the conclusion of the semester. However, their conflict affected group relationships. Individually, it was very productive experience. The 'curator' took the lessons of Something is Missing to heart. The alternative and challenging exhibition spaces captured her interest. She is currently curating an exhibition in one of the campus elevators, challenged by the tension that arises between personal and institutionalised spaces. (See Fig 5).



Fig. 5 Something is Missing, documentation of the exhibition. Bangalore: SMI campus. Photo Courtesy of SMI.

More than in the other exhibitions, Something is Missing became a dialogical space for questioning the discriminatory space of bathrooms, politics of the exhibition display, and the relationships within the group. Through its realisation and display, the exhibition achieved the goal of every curatorial project: it triggered participation and deepened belonging.

Altogether all three exhibitions allowed students to learn about themselves. Through shared experiences of making and reflecting, students created a sense of community between themselves. It made them aware that team-work will be an important skill in their career.

Even in the disagreements between 'curators' and 'artists', their antipathies became a productive force, since it helped students to learn patience and cooperation. Working relationally requires rigorous self-reflection and prompts me to reflect on my practices. This text is my first attempt where I chronicle our negative and positive experiences as intrinsic parts of the learning and rooting community. These experiences will become a part of academic discourse, but also collective professional consciousness. Irit Rogoff said that curation is the production of knowledge. (Rogoff, 2013: 245) x class manifested itself through relationships—among artworks, between students and artworks, between the institution and its spaces and among students themselves. What happened prior and during these encounters, what can we learn from these contacts – all these facts contributed to the output of these curatorial projects. What I understand now is the fact that Collaborative curating is essential for educating professionals who will join and inspire artists collectives, designer teams, and creative alliances.

## Conclusions

In the contested reality of post-graduation, students must enter the workplace as team players. Collaboration must be taught. It requires pre-initiation through discussions and reflective surveys. Its finale entails reflection upon the process and thoughtful assessment.

## Acknowledgments

Collaborative Curating: Multi-Disciplinary Approaches class was funded by 2023-24 Fulbright-Nehru Senior scholar award to India. I would like to thank my colleagues at Srishti Manipal, Assistant Dean, Shai Heridia, Host Dean, Anil Kumar and Sathyanand Mohan, Assistant Professor, for their support and encouragement. I am grateful to my home institution, Eastern Connecticut State University, CT, USA for allowing me to fulfil my Fulbright award obligations.

## Notes

- i Agit-trains and agit-boats are some the great experiments in public arts after the Revolution that circulated over all Russia spreading Revolution and revolutionary arts.
- ii Shrishti is a private art school, with tuition fees 10 times more than a state art college. It is one of the top ten art colleges in India, which attracts students from around the country, although majority of students come from the two mega-cities - New Delhi and Mumbai.
- iii <https://dimplebshah.blogspot.com/> (Accessed: 11.05.2024).
- iv A morchang is a Rajasthani folk music instrument that produces a fixed pitch, rich in overtones.
- v Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was an Indian economist, social reformer and political leader who headed the committee drafting the Constitution of India. Ambedkar advocated for the abolition of caste system and is a venerated hero of Dalit minority.
- vi The ecological concerns are the main subjects of artistic production in India. They often serve as a proxy for such issues as caste, freedom of speech and discrimination of minorities. With democracy threatened, artists are reluctant to openly target political issues, and risk their own freedom. Even among the students, I felt the intention of using indirect criticism and avoiding overt political remarks.



vii

viii Available at: <https://lekha.cc/institution/unrestroom>

ix There are a few of gender-neutral bathrooms built recently in tourists places.

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