

PAINTING WITH LIVE COLOURS

Art has the potential to point to the future through experimenting and struggling with the contemporary by opposing it defiantly. While the art market has become internationally commercialised, artists regain their autonomy by breaking free of restricting formats—working on the human scale in reality—where their practice touches upon questions of ethics and aesthetics in different forms, society is driven forward and alternative infrastructures are frequently created. The Indian art scene is no exception, immersed as it is in a sub-continent with such a multitude of cultures, religions, languages, and phases of modernising converging. Moving into the 21st century, the question of how infrastructure is organised will become a defining factor of the future in India and artists may have a say in precisely that.

Keywords: Activism, Arte Útil, Alternative Infrastructure, Contemporary Art, Delhi

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WALA

The Hindi word wala (m.), wali (f.) has no exact equivalent in English and bears several meanings. One of the most common is to designate an object or a person according to a specific property or feature. Hence an auto-rickshaw driver is an auto-wala and a tea vendor is a chai-wala, which can be translated as «the one with an auto» or «the one with chai». Playing with the versatility of the word as a designator for people who are known for their profession, the Delhi based artist group WALA¹ (Akansha Rastogi, Sujit Mallik and Paribartana Mohanty) leave the prefix open in order to open up a space for various contexts, formats, shapes, and associations from which they can let their practice develop. According to their website: «WALA sees itself as producer of situations, encounters, devices, formats that allow dialogues to occur with or without artists' presence.»

Performing in the Neighbourhood

When I met him for the first time in 2013, Sujit was living in a flat right across the border from North East Delhi in Ghaziabad, technically already in the state of Uttar Pradesh. He explained to me, that the house used to be surrounded by heaps of trash the neighbours used to throw from their balconies into the open space between buildings. Even though he tried to persuade them verbally to stop that habit, the waste kept piling up. Eventually, he decided to show how serious he was and made a performance by going out in the greatest midday heat during summer—a time when one tries to avoid stepping out of the shade—and dug up that mountain of trash with a shovel. According to him, it was this radical intervention, involving his bodily fight against the merciless heat of the sun, that won his neighbours over, made them change their minds and ultimately allowed the space to be cleared.

Escaping Art

At the same time, he mentioned his dissatisfaction as a painter, that usually one person ended up owning his work and the more attention he received, the more people started to try and influence him and his work. Even though he had an individual art practice, the work became an eclectic work of a collective, in which he was not able to recognise himself. His way out of these pitfalls was to start growing plants on the roof top, which had been an empty concrete surface up to this point, and slowly but surely start a lush garden that would attract insects and birds and create a friendlier microclimate. His work could not be owned in a strict sense and it was his intention to give it, in the shape of saplings and plants, away to his neighbours, for them to grow more plants and green their roof. When he had to move out of the flat, he was asked to remove his «forest», which was dissolved—though some plants had grown too large and could not be removed any longer so had to remain there—and distributed among the people living around him, turning more roof tops into beautiful gardens. The occupation with gardening led him to think and work deeper on the topics of land and soil, their significance and conservation. Out of that process came the urge to deal with the reality beyond his enclosed garden-space on farmland, by becoming saag-wala (saag = greens, spinach, and other leafy vegetables) or «the one with greens».

Saag-Wala

He started to cultivate 1 acre of land together with a friend and moved later to a bigger 2-hectare patch in Loni with 2 hectares. By the time of my visit Saag-Wala in 2018, it had grown into a multidisciplinary collective that had a multitude of ideas, experiments, and operations concerned with organic crops, food safety and the relationship between farmers and consumers, and now understood itself as a body of

¹ <https://walacollective.wordpress.com/>

solution-finders rather than growers. A vegetable store was set up, in which fresh produce was packaged and delivered to subscribers, community meetings were held, and ideas discussed for educating workers, farmers, and consumers. Financing models were tried out, in which supporters could invest in land and get their interest back in produce. The price per kilogram for all crops was uniformly fixed at 62.52 rupees throughout the entire year. This was about a fifth of the price of other organic sellers, putting it within reach of middle- and lower-income families, who could budget for it throughout the entire year as the cost was only 2.52 rupees higher than inorganically grown vegetables. Though this service would only be granted to subscribers, who would regularly visit the farm—not to work—but to interact with the farmers. This helped in dealing with complaints and preventing subscription cuts. The idea being: when a farmer takes care of a family, the family must take care of the farmer, in order for she*he not to feel alone.

Live Colours

As a saag-wala, again nobody was able to privately own his practice. His work dissolved into the effort

of a publicly communicated collective, the odd twist here being that it became fully his own. Sujit recalled the difficulties of his former art practice. The worst part for him was the search for an accurate design to communicate his idea in a medium like painting, sculpture, or performance. To come up with a narrative that fit into the frame. Furthermore, after finishing a painting, the question of «what comes next?» arose immediately. As a consequence, he started to experiment with what he called live colours rather than the dead colours of his former practice. The colours left the restricting boundaries of the frame and the first step into this direction took place during a residence, in which he had a live chicken in a gallery space as a work with live colours. Now the greens in the fields were the live colours he was working with. A plant in his story became a plant in real life. In his own words, the question of art depends on the idea of the work and the space in which it is taking place. His narrative and reality were now overlapping and the colours themselves had their own life, they were growing, changing, dying and at the same time nourishing, connecting and transforming people. How he designed the community and the structure to maintain the



The cleaned space



Sujit, Baba-ji and Pawan Kumar Dubey visiting farmers in Loni



A crop sample



Gardening on the roof top. Paribartana Mohanty and Sujit Mallik



Sujit at his farm in Loni



Cooking performance with organic vegetables from saag-wala



Checking seeds



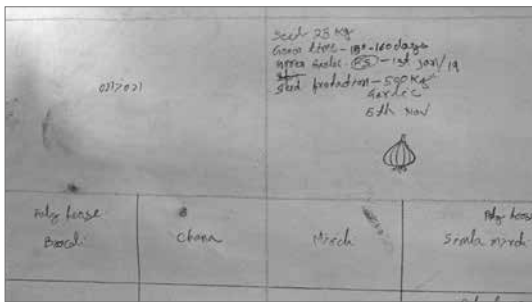
Visiting the fields



Pumpkins in the field



Sujit, Baba-ji, Pawan Kumar Dubey



Field plan on canvas



Cauliflower

system and the quality became the art. Not only was he living a story in his realm of reality, the domain of his story expanded as people started to talk about his endeavour and became involved in it. This resonates greatly with Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of Relational Aesthetics: «... the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.» (Bourriaud 2002: 13)

The Distance between Art and Reality

Sujit's journey, his dissatisfactions, obstructions, and responses and with all that the development of his art practice, moves progressively along the lines Cuban artist Tania Bruguera described in her presentation² on the occasion of the Verbier Art Summit 2019,³ as the distance between art and reality. A distance that opens up a space for different strategies, forms and functions of art while putting the artist as well as the audience in different positions and relations to each other. That distance stretches from a complete separation between the poles of art and reality to a congruent match of both. In it, the function of art reaches from representation to presentation and implementation of an idea. In all stages of this spectrum, different forms and functions of art practices create a different intertwining between aesthetics and ethics.

Arte Útil

It is notably Bruguera's interest to work at the end of the scale, in which the artist is an initiator, the artwork becomes a case study, results are implemented, and the former spectator turns into a user. A practice she calls Arte Útil⁴, which can be summed up in her demand: «I don't want an art that points at a thing, I want an art that is the thing» (Thompson 2012: 21). In this overlapping between art and the thing, I see a match with Sujit's desire to paint with live colours. The parallels become even more stark in her explanation of Arte Útil. «Arte Útil is not art for institutions, but art for the people: it is art that enters people's houses, people's lives. We work on the human scale ... we have to stop asking ourselves in what medium and with which materials I would do my art, where I will do it, how I would package, circulate, or sell it, and, every time we begin a new artwork, start asking ourselves the question «what am I doing this art for?»» (Malzacher 2014: 299–300)

The Future-Wali*a

In Bruguera's terms, art is action and hence to be understood as a verb. And where there is action, there is activism close by. A field in which the curator and theorist Nato Thompson has observed a shift from

the tactical to the strategic (Thompson 2014: 152) in the last two decades. The tactical being best represented by a trespasser, who is dancing on the ground owned by others, creating meaning in relation to the power structure in place for the sake of a gesture. And the strategic coming into play when one controls the use of a space over a long period of time and is able to create enduring structures and infrastructures. Exactly the field, to which Sujit explained his art has shifted. Considering that art has the potential to freely experiment and point toward a possible future by «... cracking open the ailments of the contemporary by cracking open the limits of art» (Olma 2018: 94), I would not be surprised to see more alternative infrastructures to be implemented by artists. Hence, will the art-wali*a be the future-wali*a by becoming the infrastructure-wali*a?

ABSTRACT:

MALEN MIT LEBENDIGEN FARBEN

Kunst hat das Potenzial, durch Experimentieren und Auseinandersetzung in die Zukunft zu verweisen, indem sie sich ihr trotzig entgegenstellt. Während der Kunstmarkt international kommerzialisiert ist, gewinnen Künstler/innen ihre Autonomie zurück, indem sie aus einschränkenden Formaten ausbrechen. Sie arbeiten in sozialer und humaner Realität, wo ihre Praxis Fragen der Ethik und Ästhetik in verschiedenen Formen tangiert, die Gesellschaft vorantreibt und häufig alternative Infrastrukturen schafft. Die indische Kunstszene ist in dieser Hinsicht keine Ausnahme. Sie ist eingebettet in einen Subkontinent, auf dem eine Vielzahl von Kulturen, Religionen, Sprachen und Phasen der Modernisierung aufeinandertreffen. Auf dem Weg ins 21. Jahrhundert wird die Frage, wie die Infrastruktur organisiert wird, zu einem bestimmenden Faktor der Zukunft in Indien werden, und Künstler/innen können dies mitbestimmen.

Keywords: Aktivismus, Arte Útil, Alternative Infrastruktur, Delhi, Zeitgenössische Kunst

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viRq8GmOMYM>

3 <https://www.verbierartsummit.org/2019>

4 <https://museumartutil.net/>



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Raphael Perret has a diploma in interactive media and an MAS in scenography. He runs a research-based art practice, from which works in various mediums and formats from installation, video, photography to sculpture develop. Over the past years, he has worked extensively on the topic of e-waste recycling in India. He has awarded himself the liberty to go beyond art and become engaged in real life.

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