

Project Report

Khirkee-ki-Khoj: Shop Make-over Project

As part of the larger KHOJ Community Arts Project initiative, eleven artists have chosen to explore uncharted territory (at least as far as some of their individual practices are concerned) and venture boldly forth into the realm of community art. The site? Khirkee village, more specifically, the street KHOJ calls home. The project engages with the shopkeepers who are the primary residents of the street, and entails a group of two or three artists working in collaboration with a shopkeeper, establishing a rapport, exchanging ideas and developing a collective method of art-making.

We thought it might be a good idea to get a flavour of each other's practice before we began our individual projects in earnest. A slide talk and presentation was organized at the KHOJ Studios on July 27 and Anita Dube and Pooja Sood provided valuable inputs and feedback on the work and the nascent proposals. The slide show was very interesting; many of us were completely unfamiliar with each others' practice and I think all of us came out of the three hour session with a far better understanding of where the other was coming from.

Following the presentations, we had a brainstorming session with Anita who put community art into perspective for us. She strongly suggested we approach the community project as a linguistic exercise as much as a conceptual one. She explained how the intention must be to facilitate real exchange, of language, dialogue and vocabularies both visual and spoken. The challenges are not to be taken lightly; visual communication is not the only potential hurdle. Differences must be acknowledged and dealt with. A lot of us are more at home in English than in Hindi, the lingua franca of the Khirkee community. Anita pointed out that we must become conscious of the fact that we come from a background of privilege, which has opened some doors for them, but in so doing has closed others.

A successful community art project initiates and actively nurtures an interface between the artist and the participants/community members. When the artist has the time to facilitate discussions that encompass the personal, political and social. When the artist succeeds in creating an engagement in a creative process and a participation in some form of discourse on the aesthetics, form, function, context, audience and site of the project. When this happens, when there is a clear process, then community art is at its best.

It is equally vital that the artist have the community's trust. They must be assured that what the artist brings with him/her, i.e. a knowledge base, and experience is entirely nonthreatening. The artist does not dictate, does not impose, if the community is to let the artist in, the artist in turn must respect and reciprocate that trust and vulnerability. **Vinima, Manil and Sakshi** are working with the **K.T. Hair Draser Saloon**. Their interactions with the shop owner K.T. have been very successful. K.T. is a young ambitious businessman who wants his shop to be "the" place to have one hair cut. Dialogues with the artists have brought a number of ideas to the fore. They plan to use a variety of materials such as sequins, mirrors, blades, CD's etc to create a glittering, shifting facade. The only request put to them was they create an "item" (Bollywood slang, an item song/number is performed to the stalls/front benches usually by a scantily clad female gyrating to fast music.) for him, i.e. something that grabs the customers attention and entices them to bring their custom to his shop. Anita and Pooja observed that it raises very interesting questions about how deeply trade and commerce are dictated by the media and by the ubiquitous and oh so popular products of Bollywood.

Aastha and Prabhat are working with the **Jha Pan Bhandar**. Taking photographs of the people who frequent these shops they will then invite them to tear and cut up the images to create a montage. This brings us back to the shifting of vocabularies. There has been a perceptible shift in cultural representation from graffiti / painting on the wall to posters and the moving picture. We are more visually literate today than we ever have been, however the nature of that literacy varies tremendously. To the layman, a printed photograph has great value, a small slice of celebrity. Photographing members of the Khirkee community and their subsequent active involvement renders the project very specific and personal to the site and to the subject.

Sonia, Ram and Rohini are working with the **Mohan Haircutting Barber Shop**. Mr. Mohan has been wonderfully receptive and welcoming allowing us to come and work with complete impunity, which in turn demands responsibility. Employing the products and refuse of the barber's shop, i.e. scissors and old blades, we hope to create a large installation that will stand against his wall surface. The choice of material is vital to the project. Barber's scissors are particular nasty looking, bringing to mind images of violence and of a certain cruelty. These will be used to fashion a form that will be deliberately sensual, creating a sharp contrast to the hard-edged forms. Significantly Mohan Haircutting is a "male only" barber's shop. Anita suggested we try and explore the sensual/suggestive aspect of such a space. She observed there is a certain unexpected, or perhaps not so unexpected, eroticism about such male dominated situations where men come to be "beautified", to have their hair stroked, patted and caressed.

The artist's role within a cultural landscape negotiates a wide gamut. At one end of the spectrum are those people who go about their lives, doing things without any intervention from artists, cultural development or cultural programs. At the other end we have the artists who work exclusively within studio spaces, or at the most out of galleries, and whose work is not particularly reflective of the culture of community life. What we hope to explore through the Khirkee Community art projects is the section in between, where people, communities and artists choose to work with each other in a variety of ways. The role of the artist is negotiable and communities have a very strong part to play in negotiating where they'd like the artist to be when they invite her or him to their community.

Community art expresses, interprets, and creates new understandings between people of a community as facilitated by the artist. It is important to note that it is the process that is most significant and takes necessary precedence over the artistic product or outcome. The projects are exciting and we believe they are important as part of a community development process, as a means to connect artists with the community, to encourage participation in the arts and to demonstrate the relevance of the arts to every day life. If ever there was an opportunity to return art (and thereby importance) to the local and reinstate recognition of that community, it is this.

We do realise that we have a long way to go before we completely understand the complexities and indeed the pitfalls of community art, and we do not take the responsibilities that go hand in hand with such intervention lightly. Out of the safe cocoons of our studios working in unfamiliar territory, we hope to present something new, and by presenting anything that is unfamiliar territory, there is a process -- there is also a protocol -- and the process is one of learning and understanding the issues and the challenges of what it is that we are doing.

Artist's Groups and their Khirkee Community collaborators:

Aastha Chauhan & Prabhat with the Jai Pan Bhandar

Ram Bali Chauhan, Rohini Devasher & Sonia Mehra Chawla with Mohan Haircutting Barber's Shop

Manil Gupta, Sakshi Gupta & Vinima with K.T. Hair Draser Barber's Shop

Rishi with Gambhir

Rohini Devasher