

Artist Statement

Anita Dube

It started unexpectedly as one by one some of us were asked if we would participate in International workshops in Zambia, in the U.K., in Namibia, in South Africa, in New York etc.

And before we realized it, we were hooked not only on the concept but also to the responsibility of setting up the first one in India using our (happy) experiences and imagining happier one here on home ground which we could tint with our knowledge of a particular context and forge into something significant with our commitment and sheer hard work.

This was Khoj '97' our difficult coming together, test of our varying capacities; ideologically synchronous as well as diachronous, but focused towards an autonomous open ended umbrella organization led by artists for artists. Our aim was basically to function as an experimental art laboratory that would bring artists together from different parts of the country, from the sub continent and from around the globe, setting up a cooperative non-hierarchical work situation where dialogue, exchange and transfer of information, energy and skills could take place as an intensely lived experience. Khoj is an emblem of our vision of working together in difficult situations, somehow pushing against the establishment grain under the rubric of creating sensitizing encounters, opening up insularities and closures to address the binary polarizations that have hardened into unchangeable positions both inside and outside.

Khoj then is a search that seeks to question through an Art Workshop these divides: The urban vs the provincial: the post modern vs, the modern: the female: the left vs. the right: the visible vs.the invisible – on the basis of class and privilege in our cultural spaces, as also the absence of a dialogue with our sub continental neighbors – Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Khoj also seeks a non-Euro-American tilt within cultural discourse, more connected within cultural discourse, more connected with contemporary art practices/practitioners in Africa, the Asia Pacific, Latin America, China, Australia etc, to assist each other's processes of cultural empowerment and assertions of specific locations as vital and meaningful. Khoj is a process: dynamic, changing, evolving both structurally and conceptually, that sees itself as an alternative. One among many, a group initiative that functions outside state or institutional control, outside bureaucratic apathy and the cynical market driven art scene. Khoj believes that it is critically different.

The cooperative structure of Khoj has been conceptually modeled on successful workshops in Africa and the UK. The first of these – the Triangle Workshop in 1982 by the sculptor Anthony Caro and the collector Robert Loder. Subsequently in 1985 Thupelo, another workshop started in Johannesburg, through the initiative of South African Artists. This played a significant role in bringing together artists from different regions and backgrounds during the apartheid years. Thereafter workshops mushroomed in Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique, Zambia, Senegal, Jamaica and in the UK. Like Khoj, flagged off in India in November 1997, new workshops are being inaugurated elsewhere in Cuba, Australia, Kenya, Uganda and Nigeria. All these have been guided by the Triangle Arts Trust based in London, whose mission it is to expand the workshop chain which is a kind of movement with a vast primary network in Africa. Its direction is towards and empowerment of third

world artists and their multicultural bonding outside and white bias, for an exchange and flow of information along lines. A spirit of fostering respect for cultural, linguistic, geo-political, sexual and racial difference is the philosophical core of these workshops, as is the opening up of platforms and spaces to the hitherto unseen and unheard. Khoj celebrates the ingrained liberation impulse within this workshop structure and seeks to make it more and more historically sensitive, context and need specific; hands-on, barrier-less and open-ended.

With lights illuminating the Delhi skyline and crackers creating a din, Khoj started to happen on Diwali night at the party to celebrate the arrival of early overseas artist and friends from different parts of India. The fact that we had done it, that Khoj would happen despite all odds, suddenly got to all of us from the working group there. One by one came, Yoba Jonathan from Namibia; David Kolaone from South Africa; Luddenyi Omega from Kenya; Simon Callery, Stephen Hughes and Anna Kindersley from London, Wendy Teakel landed from Australia, Kuis Gomez from Cuba and Iftikhar Dadi from Pakistan. Ten of them in total - our overseas artists with their different otherness myths, that two weeks of and intensive workshop was to somewhat wear out. And twelve of us from India were there to speak in our multiple tongues of a plurality that not be easily package into pan-indian terms. Ajay Desai, Subodh Gupta, Manisha Parekh, Prithpal Singh Ladi and Anita Dube were from Delhi and from the working group. There was also Jyotee Kolte and Sudershan Shetty from Mumbai. Gargi Raina and Surendran Bair from Baroda, Radhika Vaiyanathan from Chennai, Walter D'Souza from Ahmedabad and C.K. Rajan from Hyderabad. Modinagar was where we were heading, 55 Kms from Delhi, a town that had grown around a group of industries founded by the late Gujarmal Modi in the Nehruvian days of independent India. There was Sikribagh, the venue for Khoj, an old bungalow built in quasi-colonial feudal style. Amidst acres of land, Mango trees and a pond – an idyll in the midst of the now decaying industrial city, a refuge in some ways for concentrated work but nevertheless close to the feverish reality of a small town and its changing fortunes Generously offered to Khoj for the work-shop by SK Modi, Sikribagh was to create encounters of many kinds. The first for the group was a chance meeting with Aas Mohammad, an entrepreneur with a small foundry and forging workshop along with ancillary assembling units. A skilled and practical craftsman Aas and his brother Yasin were to become the technical mainstays of the workshop assisting almost every artist to realize what they had impetuously imagined.

Yoba Jonathan made a poetic bridge for ants using very simple means: a long wire with jute strings hanging from it. This he stretched from two trees across the water of the pond. A spontaneous and brotherly response to what Anita Dube was doing nearby - hanging thinly braided electric pin cloth (cut from the yardage of a single polyester saree) from the major forks in the branches of a dark mango tree with wide outstretched arms. These pink braided lines ended in a small attached bell. Close by and part of the work was the covering of the open manhole drains by a glittering woven string mat on a square metal frame.

Another significant encounter at Khoj was the presence of vast spaces, trees, water etc; the whole of Sikribagh as site, its quasi rural setting that opened up unexpected possibilities for work. And some very new and exciting work resulted from this. Luiz Gomez' solar eclipse, made from an iron sheet covering a light source which he sunk into a pit dug in the center of a green field was a very crystallized work. Then Wendy Teakel surprised us all one morning by painting a deep blood red mountain along two surfaces of a wall in the back section of the house. In front of this mountain she folded an unused maroon velvety carpet into a massive ghostly sitting figure, like the wrapped statuary of the public monuments of kings or queens. Off setting the red against the white lime coated wall and the cobalt blue of the nearby door she created a work startling presence. Radhika

Vaidyanathan was able to transform the primary stage of a basket (made by a family of basket makers and weavers who lived near the Sikribagh gate) into spiders and webs. Installed from the branches of trees in clusters and silhouetted against the pond, they had a chimerical presence.

Rini Tandon made a large spatially articulated earthwork of three circular shallow pits in the earth. These earth vessels, one like an earth. These earth vessels, one like an earth whirlpool with a suction point off center, were stained by a pink and purple dye-colour solution poured from the edges. This enhanced the fragility of the watery stain against the solidity of the earth. Subodh Gupta created an open roofed fort-tower like circular structure by piling up cow dung cakes to the height of nearly 10 feet. This cell space could be entered through a doorway bearing ritual markers.

Simon Callery worked on two wall surfaces somehow locating the difference between the controlled environment of the studio and the weathered and stained wall surfaces he chose to engage with. In the second wall using two tones of red oxide, he used the shifting moving leafy shadows from the nearby mango tree as an extraordinary extension of the work..

Another exciting encounter during Khoj was one with materials in the local market. Lifted out functionally by artists, these became repositories of memories conceptual framing, formal properties, and many more things.

Manisha Parekh used brightly coloured wool to stitch wire shapes onto stained paper and locally available stools as three dimensional structures extending her work from wall to the floor. Surendran Nair used three belts available on the road side, transforming these with a simplified aluminum casted form acting as a holder for feathers of a peacock, a peahen and a crow, A Folktale or a parable could now be enacted allegorically with these significant costume markers.

Muhammed Cadars composed bidis and cigars on a paper stained yellow, green and red - as a tongue in cheek crack at high modernism.

Stephen Hughes and C.K. Rajan chose to engage with the services of local sign painters. Stephen to produce multiple variations of "Madonna" and also small motif signs (reminiscent of election symbols) - a scooter, an umbrella, a cow an auto rickshaw etc. Painted on rounded rocks, these were placed on a square platform of ice slabs in an enigmatic installation. Rajan with an enlarged Colgate paste carton and a matchbox of ship slims wanted to monumentalize a living and permanent relationship with everyday and the functional. Iftikhar Dadi also related to the popular via images of the starlets which he placed behind the bars of brightly the bars of brightly coloured plastic combs used for removing lice. All this filled tightly into a map of Pakistan outlined by cement wall embedded with green glass shards: An ironic comment on the insidious workings of the seduction/ propaganda machinery that disallows any real contact thus maintaining a status of 'otherness'.

Many artists also worked to transform found objects and materials to their own preoccupations. Jyotee Kolte used empty beer bottles as preservative containers for fragile traces of matter: leaves, feathers, sticks etc. Ajay Desai painted on fragments of nature, especially the dried remains from a palm tree - highlighting and intensifying the ' sensation" of the fragments with colour, assembling these into a poetic wall work . P. S. Iadi transformed an old accounting machine into a typewriter that realized a personal pictographic code; while Walter D' Souza converted a wooden vault - horse like structures into perhaps the holy ghost with wings! Sudarshan Shetty used the skills of technicians

Aas and Yasin to weld a large phallic airplane - dressed in velvet, and Gargi Raina used clay as pigment to make images of water on paper.

Another significant aspect of Khoj was the visibility of differing culture- specific sensibilities evident in the attitude towards materials and processes. Even at the cost of generalizing I would like to point out the African will to Art in the spontaneous incorporation and assembling of poor and discarded materials with a scant regard for ' aesthetics' as we have come to understand it. David Kolaone, Ludenyi Omega and Yoba Jonathan could pick up junk fragments and weld them together, then paint them towards a non-formalist narrative. Old gunny cloth, used tea bags, old window/ door frames, plastic strings etc, anything was used in defiant gestures that spoke of survival in bare material conditions.

If this was one condition of spontaneity in which theater/ theatricality was absent; in the work of Luiz Gomes spontaneity appeared as a politicized process of action: the ability to act publicly and swiftly. His stringing up of an inverted work table was as much an enjoyment in the collective organization of that action, as it was subversive to catholic notions of the last supper, as it was metaphysical being airborne / suspended and marked with the names and telephone numbers of friends escaping Cuba.

These, then were briefly the highlights of Khoj ' 97. The search of course continues in our commitment to this annual event that can reveal and teach us more not only about our own practice but also that of others whom we did not previously know or understand .

The search within Khoj leads towards change .

Anita Dube

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