

Artist Statements

Transportraits

Report: Transportraits workshop at KHOJ

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Introduction: project outlines

Transportraits is a media art project based on participatory video work, carried out in three different cities: Delhi (India), Marseilles (France), and Helsinki (Finland)

The project deals with changes in the urban environment and the way the inhabitants experience these changes.

The main support for treating the subject is portrait, especially the relationship between the figure and the background in it. That allows us to reflect on the link between a person and his environment.

The work process consists of three parts.

1. Workshops with the inhabitants:

In each city, we organise a workshop with 5 to 10 inhabitants, over about two week's time, in which we discuss and conceive video works with the participants. The participants make video and sound portraits, first of themselves (figure) and then of places in the city they consider important for them (background). We work on memories and feelings linked to those places.

2. Video work based on the footage from the cities

After the workshops, we'll recollect the material and later on, in postproduction, edit two videos: one mixing the portraits of people from different cities, the other mixing their living spaces. We'll also create a sound piece based on the recordings made in the workshops, mixed with sounds of the cities

3. Installation

The result will be an installation where the edited videos are projected separately on translucent screens, in a way that they form a third picture on the wall behind the screens. The third picture is the final portrait, where the figure and the background are brought together so people are seen in their environment.

Workshop in Delhi, forming the groups

The first workshop of the project was held at KHOJ and surrounding Khirki village neighbourhood in March over a period of 20 days. Recent urban changes in the area were visible in the first sight, especially a huge mall just across the road dominating the view from almost every possible point of view.

Over the first couple of days we were getting to know the neighbourhood, some of its inhabitants and looking for potential participants for the workshop. As KHOJ is an established structure in the area, we had the benefit of already existing relationships with the neighbours which made "breaking the ice" much easier. Aastha from KHOJ staff did the first introductions and showed us the main points of the area, which made it much easier to start working.

We talked to people in public space such as parks, shops and streets, aiming to find people from different age and social groups. As the project deals with the individual's position and feelings, leaving social and political questions in the background, we wanted to have participants with different life situations and points of view on the area.

Both of us being foreigners, translation and cultural guidance were necessary for us... In this stage as well as throughout the whole project we were assisted by Rikimi Madhukailya who translated our dialogues with people and was a very important help making contacts with people and getting them involved with the project.

After talking to different kinds of people about the changes in the neighbourhood and their feelings about them, we started inviting participants to workshops.

We ended up forming various small groups of up to 3 people, making the use of video camera easier and also because mixing participants of very different social classes might have been problematic.

We started working in total with around 11-12 people, of which 7 went through the whole process.

The participants were from different backgrounds: village elders belonging to old and traditional families of the older part of the village: young men from the same families, girls from the Nepalese community, a young woman working at the laundry shop and a young housewife.

First sessions, use of video camera and autoportraits

As expected, the workshop sessions with each group were very different. We started always by teaching some basic video skills. Except for one of the young men, the participants had never used a video camera. We showed some the participants some basic functions of the camera and the tripod, and encouraged them to do different exercises having to do with different ways of displaying a person, trying to vary the frame, camera level, shoot size, light etc. We reflected with them on how the use of these factors can change the way we perceive a person.

The participants became quickly familiar with the camera as well as the fact of seeing their own image. The fact of doing something an activity together helped also to create a relaxed and confident atmosphere that was important for the next step:

After the exercises we started the first part of the shooting, the autoportraits. While during the camera exercises the participants had been filming each other, in the autoportrait they were themselves posing, but also directing the shot. We told them to decide the way they wanted to be shown, the constraint being that they had to be filmed in a single shot, without camera movements, against a white wall. Within these limits, they were free to give instructions to another participant that was operating; choose the angle, frame, light etc of the shot, as well as to hold objects, do actions etc in the image. People chose very different ways of showing themselves, some standing still, others jogging or executing complicated choreographies

Memories of the places

At this stage, we had done about two sessions with each small group and they were relatively relaxed about filming, recording sound as well as being filmed and recorded. We had asked them to choose a place to film in their neighbourhood, then to decide what to tell about the place and about their own relationship with it, and the difference between the past and the present.

In this project, we are especially interested in feelings and memories in a personal level, not looking for especially for "bad" or "good" things about the changes, but wanting to know how each person relates to these changes and how (if) he adapts to them.

People had many interesting and touching things to tell about the places in their environment. The village elders, who obviously have memories from a long period of time, said they were themselves moved by thinking about the history of the places in relation with their own life changes.

Some parts of the recorded texts (translated)

One of the elders about a well that is now dry:

"We used to take a bath in the drains which were filled with the water going to the paddy land, and people used to wash clothes, too. The entire village, all Chauhans had one single well. All the women, men and kids used to come there; it was difficult to find a place to bathe.

Everybody used to keep their clothes all over, here there. It was like a fair, a daily fair.

It was great fun. People didn't have soap, if somebody got one and left it there and go to bath the others would come and use it.

During the boundary war the only transistor of the village used to be kept on the well.

There are lots of differences, between our childhood days and now. We used to go there in our childhood; our children have never been there. My youngest son is 27, he has never seen that, and after we have started having hand pumps all the activities have shifted to our individual houses.

We don't go there to see it, but see it whenever we cross that way and feel sad that "what a well it was!", we used to take bath and all. I feel it all has become useless, just useless."

Girl (Lakshmi) about ground and woods, become the new mall:

"When we used to go there, we used to play. There were fruit plants; we used to go there every day to get fruit. Then the half of the space was given to the Muslim graveyard. They didn't like that the mall was being built there, and they had a fight. They kept quiet when the government said that it was an illegally occupied land. Then they broke those big big graves and made the mall.

Some liked that, some didn't. Mostly people didn't as it is not considered auspicious in the religion."

"I've entered a number of times, they've made it quite well, and everybody goes there to roam. You should also come with us. The stairs in the mall that take you automatically to the top are my favourite.

And the shops there are really expensive, there's nothing which we can afford. I went there with Geeta's mummy and mine elder brother. We've been to a sandal shop. Geeta's mummy asked the price of a sandal. They said 4500 rp. Geeta's mother said we can run the whole family for a month.

We go there roam and see stuff, they let you enter but you only roam and come back."

Among other places chosen: A schoolyard that used to be open and now has a gate, by a girl (Geeta). A former water reservoir that is at present a huge building site, by an elder (Mr Chauhan) A street by the mall that used to be dangerous and now has light and is safer, by a young woman (Mamta)

Filming places

After the discussions and recordings, the last step was to film the place each person had talked about. We encouraged them to think about what to show about the place, related to their own recorded words about the memories, the present, themselves; and then, according to that to decide how to film the place.

We helped them with technical details, and after each shooting, of course viewed the footage with them to see if they were happy with the result, which they usually were.

We gave the participants printed stills of the footage, especially of their autoportraits, and are at present editing small dvd samples for everyone, of their own footage.

The other workshops will take place in Helsinki in August and in Marseilles in September, after which we will move to phase 2, post-production