

Artist Statements

Khirki kholo

5th May 2008

Coca-cola bottle caps, shoelaces, empty cigarette boxes, gutka packets, match-sticks, straw, pebbles, can become a car, a plane, a dinosaur, the sun, a multitude of objects/toys. Initiated in collaboration with Tulsi Ram, the project finds its premise in this need for play and invention.

I have noticed children in the neighborhood make fantastic toys from waste material, cardboard strips with coke caps as wheels, gutka packets beaten together into a fan, ...so we thought of providing simple red clay to them to make their own toys. For two months, every evening we met at the Khirki village park and made clay toys. These were baked once every two weeks and given back to the children.

It was integral to the project to be located centrally, accessible to everyone. This time we chose to extend the geography of our project a little and moved to Khirki Village. My relationship with the village has mostly been with the retired elderly gentlemen who have ample time and ample stories. They gather in the evenings to play cards under a tree at the extreme end of the local village park. They were all open to the idea of letting us use the park for our project. One even offered to let us use his terrace to dry the clay toys, one offered the pump house to store our equipment, one allowed us to use water from his house.

We baked many little clay huts, snowmen, cars, mobile phones, dinosaurs, dogs, birds, supermen, fruit baskets, flowers, snakes, chulhas (clay oven) and all kinds of food. The timing of the workshop couldn't have been better as many children/ participants were in Delhi visiting their uncles/ grandparents for the summer break.

Toys were baked, broken, stolen, snatched, taken home, and exchanged. We managed to document the objects and each is a reference to a special memory/ dream/story; ... but the energy and the enthusiasm of sweating it out under the neem tree, making armies of toys, is a hard thing to document.

16th may 2008 Aastha Chauhan

Construction-Destruction

The untimely thunder-storms/hail/rains have definitely calmed the mercury down. But they have also destroyed a number of the toys that we had laid out to dry. The clay cannot be baked until it is bone dry, but these rainfalls have either destroyed some toys, or not allowed them to dry sufficiently.

The children were a little disappointed, but recovered very very quickly. Infact I am still brooding over the lost work, but the children come everyday with the same amount of enthusiasm. The rains have obviously not dampened their spirits.

The few toys we had protected from the natural disasters were also found broken today. Sonu said he saw some young (bihari) boys hanging around the pump house, trying to open the window. That explains the big rocks that we found thrown on the toys.

The children ofcourse have stopped worrying about the works they made earlier and dive into each evening with a fresh energy, modeling bigger and better each day.

Meanwhile Tulsi and I worry, about when we will get 8 hours of sunshine to light the kiln and fire the toys, we worry about who broke the toys, we worry about how we will store more toys in the already cramped pump house.

I think we are drawing our energy from the children now. It's contagious!

26th May

Aastha Chauhan

Baking the Toys

Inspite of the fact that the odds were against us (rain, broken toys) we still had three large buckets full of toys ready to be baked. On the 20th of May Tulsi and I set out to procure all the things required to set up the kiln. The most important and hard to find was enough uppla (cow dung cakes). The reason for this sudden drop in supplyit has been estimated; Delhi has 2,811 colonies which house unauthorized dairys . The government had ordered that all such colonies be shifted to the Capital's outskirts like Ghazipur and Bhalswa. Hence there are not enough cows around to provide the fuel we required.

Akshay, one of the participants offered to help. His aunt's neighbor had one cow hidden away on a tiny plot in the middle of high rise builder constructions. We realized how upset these people were at being separated from their beloved pets. These domesticated animals are more than just a source of income for them; they an integral part of their lives.

By the time we set the kiln on fire it was late in the evening. The toys needed 8-10 hours of firing and at no point did we find ourselves alone. Late into the night, some children came to check on the progress. The elders of the village went out of their way to help us; one retired potter even stepped up to give us useful advice on firing the toys. Early morning when Tulsi went to extract the baked toys from the ashes of the kiln, some children were patiently waiting for him to open the kiln.

A number of toys had broken during the firing, as they were not joined properly at the edge, or there was a trapped air-bubble. Technical glitches that they will soon begin to overcome with each successive foundry. We still rescued over 100 **toys**, after the rains, the vandalism, the technical faults, against all odds literally. We decided to document/photograph them well.

I thought of asking [Pradeep Dasgupta](#) (renowned photographer, his studio is next door to KHOJ) for suggestions on lighting. He saw the toys and without hesitation offered to click the photographs himself. We were beyond thrilled. To have Pradeep involved meant two things, first that the documentation would be Super and more importantly, progressively the neighborhood is getting involved in this project.

Later when we gave the the toys back, there was complete mayhem. Toys were baked, broken, stolen, snatched, taken home, and exchanged

1st June

Aastha Chauhan