

Critic's Essay Peers Residency 2005

THE NEW WAVE

PEERS: the KHOJ Student Residency is a platform, which provides an invaluable opportunity for exchange and dialogue. As a forum that aims to actively push the envelope of contemporary art practice mediated through practices that foreground qualities of experimentation, invention, research and critical debate, KHOJ positions PEERS as a model for practice as research within the ambit of the visual arts, i.e. practicing artists are the ones asking and answering the questions that are raised through the course of the art making. This could well be a generation of new knowledge that emerges from the study of art within the practice setting i.e. research conducted through the practice of art itself.

Art colleges across India produce 50 odd students in the fields of fine art painting, sculpture, printmaking and now new media art. Post College is a trying time, with students struggling to make ends meet whilst simultaneously making sense of their emerging visual vocabulary.

This is also a crucial time, a great many graduates flounder for want of guidance, support and encouragement. Some colleges such as MSU Baroda, JJ School of Art, Mumbai, Srishti School of Art & Design, Bangalore and Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan are able to network their students, but a majority of colleges more or less wash their hands of their students once they graduate. In addition there is no network across the country that allows students to access the work of contemporaries/peers in other cities, states etc. In addition there are a great many young artists in the country who are actively seeking a platform that allows them to explore and test the limits of their practice. PEERS, and the interaction generated through association with the program, are vital to this representation. Not all colleges allow students the space to explore new trajectories and push the limits of their practice, the result of which, very often is art that suffocates before it begins.

PEERS provides students space, encouragement and opportunity to look at their practice in an analytic manner. An opportunity to be part of a group of peers who are all proof of the fact that art is not all like it was taught in art school. As an artist I have most enjoyed collecting information that verifies what I already know and extends my knowledge further regarding the problems that I face in my practice every day. PEERS is a space where students/artists are able to access information and knowledge on a variety of issues/preoccupations and more importantly they are able to contribute to it actively.

Participation in such a network helps to nurture the art student as artist/professional, and to maintain an inquiring attitude in daily practice. While it is true that art has always been perceived as a field of individual vision, creativity and talent and a majority of artists by nature work in isolation, nothing is created in a vacuum. An artist's perception of their environment is strongly influenced by the exchanges that he or she has with their peers in the form of informal and formal networking, dialogue and exchange. Without these, an artist's view of their working context is incomplete and abstracted from real engagement with contextual information and feedback about their practice.

For artists, isolation from the cultural sphere or from peers is detrimental to artistic creativity and genius so highly lauded. Isolation, (beyond what may be essential), prevents artists from interacting with each other as other professionals do in all spheres across the board. It keeps them from accessing resources that are available already. At its worst, Isolation fosters asphyxiation and closure to change.

As a result, establishing forums and a social framework for discourse among artists is as important as providing them space to live and work. It helps engender more confidence amongst artists willing to take new risks and generates a different "regard" concerning their own work or the discipline, a form of recognition of "life beyond my borders".

Forums such as KHOJ that encourage and actively support experimentation are vital to the growth and development of any artistic community. They help fight stagnation and complacency and cultivate a sense of curiosity, discovery and learning. In the contemporary Indian scenario of mushrooming galleries and commercial spaces where more often than not, the focus is on production and sales rather than artistic freedom, their presence is more than supportive, it is imperative.

For me personally, the Peers 2005 KHOJ Student Residency was particularly exciting because it provided an opportunity of interaction with contemporaries across a variety of disciplines and geographies. The Peers represent a wide cross-section of diverse and distinct Indian art institutions and the residency offered a rare insight into their ideology and practices.

For four weeks the International Artists Studios in Khirkee became a site of dialogue, discussion, exploration and research undertaken with enthusiasm and a sense of adventure.

With the resources of the KHOJ Artists Studios at their disposal, the artists have had access to an extensive archive, infrastructure and perhaps more significantly the inputs and mentorship of a wide network of artists. Over a period of four weeks the Peers have come to further explore their practice, both individually and in collaboration.

PEERS Practice

Himanshu, JJ School of Art, Mumbai / Painting

If you realize you're invisible, that does tend to make you more of an activist than if you think you're in with a fair chance like everybody else.

Narrator, storyteller, informer, activist. Himanshu's work is an investigation into the connectedness of art and life and its inherent dichotomies. Stimulated and fired by the philosophies of the Conceptualists he questions "art practice" as it exists in India today. Is there any validity to an art culture that promotes and does all it can to sustain the aggressive marketing of art objects to an elite few? Can one justify the value of art that circulates largely through partisan galleries and curators and that would seem to be doing nothing to affect real change but rather panders to a rich and elite clientele's caprice? Questions that Himanshu puts to himself, questions that he hopes we will consider.

By working outside the traditional domain of aesthetic production, Himanshu blurs the boundaries between art and non-art i.e. between art and life. It is within this blurring that he has identified the potential for art to have a broader, deeper, interdisciplinary and participatory purpose. Himanshu worked on several projects simultaneously. He produced a booklet that was a compilation of thoughts, ideas and impressions garnered from a wide array of sources which functions as a sort of "subversive" text expounding upon and making obvious the innate fallibility of statements such as "Great Art would have us believe that only "Great Artists", as it defines them, produce "Art".

Interaction with people, conversation, debate were a vital part of his research during the residency as much as his wanderings through the city. 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 people he met along the way, Himanshu accumulated a mass of images that he then proceeded to edit, print and return to the people he photographed. Their subsequent active involvement renders the project very specific and personal to the site and to the subject.

The nature of such participatory art projects and the line sometimes walked by artists / activists is a tricky one, Being an artist may be part of one's identity but it's not the whole thing. So even when an artist is "doing" activism, he/she brings her aesthetic self to the project on hand, or so one should hope, otherwise it would seem that such activism would be best left to the trained activist. Likewise the nature of the "artwork" becomes hard to define and even harder to quantify. Himanshu's experiences through the residencies, his conversations with and photos of people, might seem less like art and more like a documentation of process. This raises interesting questions of the nature of documentation, the nature of the artwork and whether participatory art practice requires new forms of presentation and consumption.

Bhupal SN School. Hyderabad Central University. Andhra Pradesh / Painting

Spaces within spaces, windows to other worlds. Looking beyond, breaking free from tradition and institutionalization.

Inspiration, dreams, feelings and thoughts are the fodder on which the artist feeds. Equally, the creative spirit's environment, individuals, relationships and the impressions created by these are fundamental to the development and articulation of a visual vocabulary. Bhupal draws from his experience to create works that become markers of his development as an individual and as an artist. Recent work has developed this theme further by incorporating found objects that function as specific indicators of his surroundings but more significantly hold the key to associated memories that serve to add a further layer to the visual reading.

Over the course of the residency, Bhupal was challenged to take his work beyond what he had been doing for 6 years in Hyderabad. Discussions with the other PEERS on the possibility of taking work out of the gallery space and into more public domains were imbibed and resulted in

a piece which while attempting to break out of its mold, remained persistently rooted in his prior practice.

Bhupal's final piece was a series of identical canvases with painted depictions of everyday banalities montaged against the trompe loiel backdrop of a Romanesque window arch, a metaphor for academia, which he was trying to leave behind him. While the result was a fractured mosaic, stiff in its execution and rendered brittle by its fragmentation, yet it was a step forward, and he was perhaps aiming for a horizon that was no longer as distant as it might have been.

Rajesh Ram, College of Art and Crafts, Patna, Bihar / Sculpture

My reality, my experience, my world. Innocence, play, curiosity and discovery. Childhood: an idyllic state!! Not for the girl child.

The human figure as muse. From depictions of anthropomorphic mythological figures to astonishingly realistic fiberglass installations of wrestling children, the body continues to be a site of discovery and inspiration. Shaping and molding the diverse media of sculpture and painting with remarkable facility, Rajesh explores the innocence, latent strength and playfulness of childhood.

A universal rite of passage, childhood is that period that holds seminal memories of the people, places and events that go on to shape us as adults. Rajesh is drawn by the irrepressible curiosity, trust and sense of wonder that most children share. Perhaps the one true state of self-satisfaction, we grow out of it with frightening speed and forget only too soon a time of learning, growth, and development. Rajesh seeks to remind us of what we have forgotten and to make us relive however briefly a period in our lives that we should revisit more often.

The innocence and playfulness that epitomises the idealized childhood, took a darker twist during PEERS. Rajesh chose to focus on the plight of the girl child in India. Bright glittering India, where our economic growth rate is so celebrated and we are expected to overtake the United States by 2050, our so called educated middle and upper middle class no longer content with aborting female fetuses, are now able to select the sex of their child before it is an embryo!

Rajesh's final piece "Aparajita" translated as the "undefeated", stood as a totemic figure. Resolute and resigned, a bittersweet celebration of the girl child. Constructed of fiberglass painstakingly painted to a lifelike finish, she stood alone, afraid yet self-possessed, bracing herself for what is to come. Large vicious nail like forms suspended from the ceiling, circled and descended towards her with a sense of inevitability, just a taste of the trials and the terrors in store. Stark lighting threw her exaggerated shadow on the far wall emphasizing the slightness of her form.

Malvika Mankhotia, MSU, Baroda, Gujarat / Painting

Glamour and glitz, dirt and grime. Pretty people, pretty lights. Violation of space: personal and public. Intolerance of difference. Bottom line: all that glitters isn't gold.

Working across diverse media, including painting, photography, installation and more recently film, Malvika's practice is an exploration of the fluid nature of our reality. Preoccupations that continually surface include a conviction of the underlying unity and organic core of all matter. Beyond superficial disparities, all things, organic and inorganic alike, are essentially composed of the same fundamental building blocks. Time plays a vital role, all things being time governed and essential states of being; life, death, decay and degradation are but manifestations of time. This brings us to perception, which is relative and uniquely specific to our time and space.

Malavika explores these and related themes through her art which mirrors the belief that everything is the same and yet in a state of constant transformation. Shifting frames become a metaphor for the distortion, dissolution and reconfiguration of our reality, demonstrating the changeable nature of the world around us. Her video installation juxtaposing images of World War II, Ayodhya and the lights of Delhi by night was an attempt at making obvious the hypocrisy of society with its constantly reshuffled packs of good and evil, glitz and grime, superficiality and hard-boiled reality sung to the tune of Jim Morrison's classic Freedom Exists. We're perched headlong on the edge of boredom We're reaching for death on the end of a candle, We're trying for something that's already found us.

The video was framed within the KHOJ courtyard, red stained wax made its way through the space, a reminder perhaps of bloodshed past, present and yet to be. What is interesting is that while the fragments of footage were disturbing when viewed in isolation, they came together with jarring effect, the staccato frames mysteriously anaesthetic and passionless.

Sanhita Banerjee, Shantiniketan, W.Bengal, College of Art, New Delhi / Sculpture

I am what I am and that's all there is to that. You wouldn't notice me in any case so I'll disappear and then make it impossible for you not to see me.

A shy and retiring child Sanhita never thought herself to be particularly out of the ordinary. While most stood apart by virtue of being ~pretty", ~ugly", "intelligent", "dumb", "funny" etc. Sanhita could almost see herself fading into the background. It occurred to her that she might as well not exist for all the attention that was paid her.

In later years the questions that these feelings of loneliness and isolation raised on the nature of her existence and whether this was determined by people and circumstances outside of herself or by herself, surfaced as the central theme for her creative practice. Art became a form of release and provided a means of coming to grips with her frustrations, angst and solitude. Sanhita's practice is very expressive of this journey of self-discovery; every piece is intensely personal and specific to her immediate condition.

Seeking to place herself firmly within the piece, during the residency, Sanhita worked on a large wall work employing optical illusion to create a huge canvas of pain. A full sized hospital stretcher was cut into to give the impression of a body that is present by its absence. Alternating strips of black and white created a magnetic, hallucinatory experience of zigzag lines on both wall and stretcher that drew the viewer in while keeping them in a state of permanent visual imbalance. She intended the piece to be viewed in ultraviolet light, playing on the illusory and on

the sense of a body and self, fading in and out, there one minute and gone the next. Unfortunately the truly hallucinatory effect created by madly zigzagging glowing lines in a darkening space did not materialize entirely. Yet technical glitches aside, the room generated a sense of foreboding and the stretcher once recognized for what it was, brought a painful perspective to the experience.

The term of the Peers 2005 Residency may be complete, but the artists have taken away a great deal more than a new piece of work from the past four weeks. Amidst heated debates, shared frustrations and crucial clowning around, links have been forged, relationships made and a sense of community reinforced. Future projects are already in the making and this could be the start of forthcoming collaborations.

It has been something of an epiphany to realise that while each of the artists transmits a unique aesthetic, they are bound by deeper links of artistic purpose. While diverse backgrounds and experiences, specific art institutions and a consequent moulding to some extent or another, have shaped distinct visual vocabularies, each possesses a desire to make a difference, an ambition to push the boundaries, to try and make a dent in a self contained, often self-satisfied art world.

PEERS could well serve as the archetype for a free open art arena. An arena where channels of communication are open and information is accessible to all, where critical discussion and honest appraisals fuelled by genuine interest generate a vibrant and thriving creative community.

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Aug 2005