

Critic Note

The Thread and the Knot: Language as Border and Barrier - Nancy Adajania

We descend from our air-conditioned bus. Squishing through muck, we enter a ship-breaking yard in Bombay's Reay Road area that has not and perhaps never will see the cautionary banners of Greenpeace. Blue, ochre and rust are the predominant colours. The air is heavy. Organs that once belonged to ships are scattered around. Anchors far vaster than a human being lie maimed. Statistics are given to us and mafia connections whispered about, as we stumble through this reclaimed land whose warehouses once stored coal and timber for the city's textile mills.

This is just one of the journeys we make en route to the Jindal Vijaynagar Steel Ltd. factory at Vasind, 70 km from Mumbai. We rest our tired feet at the Jindal guesthouse, the site of the KHOJ International Artists Workshop this year. The 22 local and international participating artists had already broken the ice during an occasionally overwhelming but very stimulating two-day journey through Mumbai's colonial and post-industrial landscapes.

As critic-in-residence, I encountered many moments of gratifying unease: discourses were cheerfully derailed because we spoke across languages; the personal impacted the theoretical; differences in cultural and art-historical time-lines made us readjust our understanding of medium, genre, the aesthetic and the political. Dodging slippages and misunderstandings, we celebrated quiet friendship and genuine affection, only to return to noisy argument! Unforeseen emotional dangers and cultural insecurities were written into our script.

There are many layers of alienation among people, cultures, nationalities, political backgrounds and languages. And I'm afraid that even the knowledge of a language does not necessarily translate as insight, empathy, or true reading. Legere and ligare, to read and to tie up, are closely related. The Sanskrit sutra (aphorism, literally thread) grows into a grantha (text, literally knot). So when sometimes people read loosely, they cannot tie anything together: they skip stitches, stumble over the loom and fall down, their heads draped in ill-gathered strands. And sometimes a conversational insight glows like dew woven from the morning air, light, transparent and alas short-lived, but nevertheless intensely alive. You could not have expected otherwise, of such a diverse group. In such a scenario, identitarian politics were thankfully not enacted through the cliché's of victimology. Rather, subject positions were inverted or even invented to problematise issues of race, gender, caste and class.

On the Open Day, Somapala Pothupitiya walked around in a faux-ancestral costume: a painted black face sporting a bejewelled headgear made from plastic scrubbers and rope. "The Dress Made to my Measurement" symbolised a narrative of betweenness, of complex self-denial and hard-won affirmation. Pala disclaimed his caste identity as a ritual dancer because it would have condemned him to lifelong subservience. As a Fine-Arts graduate, he negotiated his identity as a contemporary artist inhabiting a third space that neither negates the past nor deifies the Western canon.

Tracey Rose's collaborative performance with Pala was a remarkable intercultural exchange. Rose's leitmotif is masquerade; her work has affinities with the oeuvres of Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura. Dressed in a green sari, Tracey tossed her lyrics with queenly disdain. Pala accompanied her haunting song with a slow drumbeat. At first, her narration sounded like a Sanskrit chant, or was it

a tribal chant? Disoriented, we tried to catch the words before they disappeared in a crescendo. I held on to "mujhe tumhare sparsh ki zaroorat hain" ("I need your touch"). Not opera or dance drama, then, but a Hindi film song peppered with Urdu! We were mesmerised, we tripped gladly through this mock-operatic universe of shifting language, context and meaning. Later we found out that Mariam Suhail and others had translated the song, "Weekend Special", into Hindi for their South African colleague. Pala and Rose had evolved the mock-operatic beat in conversation.

Gilbert Caty never stayed within the confines of the campus. You would find the French artist in a liquor bar in the market, drinking with the workers. His performance took place there, at his favourite site: he narrated the adventures of the god Bushtrou: "fucking god and a liar" Caty would point to his T-shirt, which carried a scan of a rectal orifice and break the word "Bushtrou" into two: "bouche" in French meaning "mouth" and "trou" meaning "hole". He kissed viewers on the forehead: the vertical mark of his painted lips echoed the rectal print. The Indian mind would associate the mark with the sacred red tika. Caty had marked the people with a tattoo spelling solidarity and affection, but which also satirises the misuse of religion by political charlatans. The artist likens Bushtrou to President Bush, who has arrogated god-like powers to himself and terrorised the world in the name of eliminating "Islamic terrorism". Bushtrou's is only one among the many mythologies in Caty's fictional archive of anonymous artists, deities and historical relics. Caty is a trickster-god whose on- and off-duty performances testify to an agenda of "life as art". He asserts: "I didn't want to stay in the wonderful and protected Jindal space, I wanted to meet India."

Kiran Subbaiah from Bangalore is a sombre version of Caty, but no less irreverent towards unexamined truths whether in art or in life. He surprised us during the slide presentations by not revealing anything about his own work. Instead, he treated us to a performance. We sat there annoyed, as he treated us like a bunch of school kids, chalking out three stories or "morality" lessons on the blackboard. Subbaiah's fiction was actually a recension of Sibram Chakravarty's stories. A Bengali writer, Chakravarty remained unpublished; his works spread mainly by word of mouth. Tagore's contemporary, he never received the recognition he deserved. An animated discussion fanned out into the issues of marginal versus mainstream literature, authorship and copyright, and ended with a conversation about copyleft. Such an energetic response to Subbaiah's carefully cultivated adversarial stance may have surprised the artist himself; or was he simply playing Kiran/anti-Kiran to burst the bubble of the "artist-as-genius?"

No one at the workshop was what he or she seemed to be. As the early Descartes wrote: "Larvatus Prodeo" ("I proceed, wearing a mask"). Suresh Kumar from Bangalore employed digital technology available at streetside photoshops to fashion his identity as a trader in perishables, but also as a social worker. You saw his identity inscribed on visiting cards and in digitally manipulated photographs: image-agents of socio-economic and cultural mobility. Another participant shifted identity constantly: the guard at the gate was never sure whether he was one person or two hiding in one shirt, an incongruity in a green hat, pyjamas and a buttoned, full-sleeved white shirt. Not to mention the heavy moustache that appeared and vanished alternately. Shezad Dawood had hatched this plot in London. He had walked out of Mumbai Airport as the part-Austrian, part-Bengali Jorg Banerjee. The fictive Jorg's mixed parentage echoes the artist's own plural identity: he is part-Indian and part-Pakistani, and has an Irish Catholic stepmother.

But Shez/Jorg did not carry his multiple-hyphenated identity like a chip on the shoulder. Consider the set of photographs depicting Jorg's stylizations of everyday gestures (falling, washing a paintbrush), titled "From the Series: Performances for No-one". Jorg did not perform for a specific art event or an

audience: he entered and left Shez's body at will. Jorg is Shez's tactical self. Shez does not wish to be trapped in a minority or ethnic identity; he deals with his hybridity performatively, confusing people with the predicaments he inhabits, rather than helping them consume the fruits of cultural guilt. What shines through is the role of the artist as an illuminator of complexity.

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Like Shez, Parastou Forouhar, an Iranian artist living in Germany, does not aspire to be an alien plant in the hothouse of a tokenly inclusive European art scene. She employs familiar, seemingly identifiable symbols of her parent culture (veils, miniatures, calligrams), but subverts them with an insinuated sexuality, or reduces them to a graphic pattern where they lose all meaning and become intriguing, inexplicable, multivalent. At Khoj, her digital images of a bull painted over with what looked like Perso-Arabic calligraphy made viewers wince at first: one inevitable association was that of "Muslim" markings on a "Hindu" symbol. A hybrid sign, the painted bull stood there like a sphinx without a secret: the calligraphy did not mean anything in particular; there was no code to crack. Instead, people came face-to-face with their own prejudices and preconceptions. Forouhar's take on multiculturalism is an aporia, set against the prizes to be won in the global art world's tournaments of politically correct individual symbolism and national representation.

Annalee Davis, who comes from a family of plantation owners in Barbados, chose to represent herself and her work through the position of a "White Creole", a racial contradiction-in-terms that she examined in the light of a highly fragmented Caribbean identity. The validity of such a position was debatable, but it has to be understood in the historical context of the Caribbean, which is multi-racial and has witnessed many waves of immigration "whether oppressors or oppressed, labourers or privileged settlers. Serendipitously, the artist found a plastic tablecloth that doubled as a map in the local Vasind market. This map, on which she marked the migratory patterns in and out of the West Indies since the 1600s, became the basis of her work, titled "Spinal Adjustment". Davis' cartographic gesture reinforced her sense of disquiet with the way maps are drawn and histories are inscribed. The map that Davis found seems to have left out Barbados as well as some of the other Caribbean islands. Strangely, being absent from the map gave the artist the power to imagine her country in a renewed manner, as a not-yet, waiting to be born and realised.

Many of these concerns were discussed at a seminar that I conceptualised, "Space Available: Strategies of Accommodation", and which was held at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay, at the conclusion of KHOJ. The seminar was aimed at creating a dialogue between the local audience and the workshop participants. The first session was devoted to issues related to Public Art, and to art in public contexts, with an introductory lecture by the critic-in-residence.

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A number of site-specific and context-sensitive works were produced during the workshop. In the lawn surrounding the guesthouse in Vasind, an ornate chair rests under the shade of a shimmering tree. In keeping with the prim and proper environment of the site, this well-behaved chair relieves itself by peeing into a channel. Bombay-based sculptor Sudarshan Shetty knows how to make inanimate objects talk: tables tumble with an uncanny precision, chairs grow dark brooding wings and trumpets tremble with blood. These soaking, leaking objects resemble convulsing bodies that have lost control and yet desire to sing and fly. The chair cuts a perfect irony vis a vis its environment, it resembles a kitschy gargoyle fountain and bears the stance of a plump cupid frozen in time and space. On the

other hand, Raghunath, the artist from Cochin, gave vent to a Dionysiac impulse, making an animated sculpture of dancing men.

An unidentifiable creature made a special appearance on the guesthouse lawn: a boy in a silver suit and helmet with a satchel, his stance that of a lazy beachcomber. But don't be fooled, he wears an anti-contamination suit and reads a magazine on biological and chemical terror. This unidentifiable creature takes on a life of its own, eats with us in the dining room and sleeps with the other artists. The banalisation of violence comes full circle. Through this lifelike sculpture, the Pakistani artist Mariam Suhail took more than a tongue-in-cheek look at the paranoia that violence produces. Bangladeshi artist Shulekha Chaudhury commented on the little narratives of domestic violence, the psychology and power dynamics of gender relations.

Turning the corner, you found that the white guesthouse walls had grown frills. Walls camouflaged as curtains: Prajakta Potnis' handiwork. Potnis explores the archaeology of objects in her paintings, in which a hair-band deepens into a well and a hair-clip can bite you without drawing blood. She creates a delicate frisson between object and surface; in her work at Khoj, she extended her practice beyond the canvas for the first time. The other Bombay-based artists like Riyas Komu and Krishnamachari Bose created accomplished paintings in their signature styles.

The value of an artist-run-initiative like Khoj is that it liberates its participants from the constraints of an art camp. At Khoj, the artist is not obliged to submit a finished commodity, but rather, has the freedom to explore, experiment and even fail. Sunil Gawde, a painter and installer, let leaves fall on his wet canvas, messing up its carefully cultivated symmetry. Whether this worked or not is another question; what is important is that he pushed himself beyond the usual boundaries of his studio practice.

Another extension of artistic vocabulary was displayed during a slide presentation by the South Korean artist Ligyung, who stretches the logic of spectation to the point where it bursts the conventional ways of producing and receiving art. She realigns the gallery site, not to stage an exhibition within it, but to turn it inside out: to displace the easy hand-in-glove between white cube and work of art. In her work, the gallery itself becomes a work of art: one that is repeatedly created and contested by every individual's act of viewing. In some of her recent works, we see how light, which acts as the essential condition of viewing in the gallery space, short-circuits the viewer's sight. The viewer walks into an empty gallery and is attracted like a moth to the bulbs; her/his eyes die for a few moments as they stare into the blue light exploding from powerful arcs. This play with visual perception feeds off Rothko's cathedralesque suites of abstract paintings and the Judeo-Christian mythology of fall, remorse, grace and revelation.

Some artists at KHOJ felt stifled by the anaesthetised environs of the factory precincts and were curious to explore what lay outside the walls of the guarded and gated enclave. While Caty made trips to the liquor bar and the market, Deniz Gul from Turkey visited the local barber's shop. She apprenticed herself to the barber to learn how to shave. By this deliberate act, she wished to question the binaries of self/ Other and native/ foreigner, as well as the dogma of gender-specific vocations and the fear of being invaded by the virus of fear through the touch-and-transfer mechanisms of everyday life. The artist had chosen a difficult and even dangerous task "that of breaking cultural barriers by placing herself in a subservient economic role that is rendered ambivalent by the fact that she is a "white", "Western" woman acting it out. The phenomenology of Gul playing barber in the Vasind market was intricate: the barber saw her as a free agent who could, by reason of race and

look, manage an act impermissible to local women. And ironically, the white, Western woman belongs to a country that is ambivalent about its own cultural identity between East and West, Islam and European modernity. To Gul, again, the fraught nature of intimacy was foregrounded in her close-shave approach to the Other.

But the practical detailing of the project brought about some very serious introspection for Gul, and a sobering and enlightening experience for all of us. It is one thing to symbolically cross borders, but when it gets messy "as when Gul was learning to shave customers at a barber's shop without gloves" factors beyond the artistic come into play. To step out of the white cube is to embrace all the variability of the open social field. To court intimacy is also to court risk. For instance, Gul was warned that she could leave herself open to hepatitis infection, if not worse.

On the Open Day, Gul sealed the guesthouse windows with photographs of gloved hands shaving the wall. The images were stunning in their oneiric, monochromal beauty, but also appeared brutal and hard-edged as the blade ominously drew blood from the wall. By blocking the windows of the guesthouse where all of us lived together, Gul shook us free of our complacency, making us question the limits of intercultural exchange. Some might say that Gul's was a foolhardy gesture, and that such extreme gestures are not necessary to understand people across borders. Which brings us to the question: Can we really bridge the gap between ourselves and the other? Is it possible to "meet India", as Caty wished to, when you cannot even begin to understand the class/caste and religious complexities of this conflict-ridden society? By showing the walls bleeding, Gul is asking us to be careful not of the Other, but of ourselves "to be alert to our hidden, unsuspected strengths, which can even draw blood from concrete and lime."

Indian artists, too, formulate their specific relationship to the country that is their base and context. Ayisha Abraham did not try to "meet India" through direct interaction; she chose, instead, to document reality from a carefully calibrated distance. The picture-perfect view of the majestic mountain framed from a window of the guesthouse was transferred onto a TV screen and also employed as a screen saver on the laptop. What this televisual and virtual documentation leaves out, deliberately, is the tribal family living in a hut beyond the wall of the factory premises, where a child plays under the watchful gaze of his mother. The viewer will chance upon this sliver of reality when s/he moves closer to the window, shifting the given frame to encounter the fragile human presence against the rock hard mountain. Abraham makes the materials of daily life vulnerable, provoking the viewer to ask whether reality is a given or a construct. She urges us to investigate beyond the romanticism of confidence and aspiration that surrounds us in an age of globalisation, where object-surfaces conceal the detail and melancholia of processes. Paula Sengupta was equally enamoured by the sublimity of the mountain and constructed a Buddhist shrine to frame its beauty and aura. Flags of plaited steel scrap made in collaboration with the factory workers, screen-printed banners carrying the local children's wishes, and a stupa paid respect to the grandeur of this iconic mountain.

Graphic novelist Sarnath Banerjee negotiated with a different kind of betweenness, switching between interior and neighbourhood spaces in his ongoing project, which is set in the office district of Dalhousie Square in Kolkata, where his father worked. In his project, we find an aerial view of the office stairwell turning into a labyrinth. A blurb reads: "Every building has a folklore." By definition, folklore is subversive, ironic, humorous; it celebrates pastiche, parody and the simultaneity of spaces and times. Banerjee brings the vidhushak's cunning to the 25-year history of the graphic novel genre, a literary and counter-ethnographic vibrancy suggestive of Rushdie and Haruki Murakami. In one of these panels, Banerjee's grandfather summons our attention: "Don't believe everything you see."

Quite another folklore of an infamous variety was being enacted at the dance bars of Bombay when they were closed down by the State. Anup Mathew Thomas from Bangalore documented the life of dance bars bereft of customers, patiently waiting for the strobe lights to change and clothe the empty dance floors. In Anup's framing, these so-called dens of vice ironically look perfectly innocent exuding a deep melancholia.

I have tried to unravel some of the knots of the workshop weave, made new ones to provoke further thought and debate.

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