Critic Note

Colouring Outside the Lines: by Rahul Bhattacharya

The workshop was conceived and coordinated by Saba Qizilbash, an artist, and art educator with a long running engagement in community arts programming, in collaboration with KHOJ International Artist Association, which has over the years shown emerged as a key platform for promoting experimentation and exchange in contemporary art practice. Saba Qizilbash wants to develop ‘Colouring Outside the Lines’ as a model visual arts workshop series designed to pedagogically intervene, and introduce inter-cultural conflict management strategies between ‘demographies’ that have had a history of shared culture, yet live in a conflict torn present, which have resulted in minimum inter-cultural accessibility and creative exchange.

The first workshop of the series was framed as a weeklong collaborative residency, which brought together art students from Srinagar and Lahore to work on collaborative art projects at the KHOJ Studios in Delhi. The workshop attempted to include artists from Kashmir within the frame of current processes of peace and creative exchange between the artist communities of Delhi and Lahore, and engage them in a progressive dialogue on contemporary issues in art, media created myths, stereotypes and preconceived images of the ‘other’. In the course of the workshop, issues surrounding identity, culture, demarcations and freedom were raised, hotly debated and eventually left open ended. Seven students from the School of Visual Arts, BNU, Lahore, were paired with five recent graduates of Institute of Fine Arts and Music, Srinagar. The two groups of students spent one week in Delhi sharing ideas, meals and living spaces.

As a workshop orientated towards the partnering of young art student communities through first hand communication and exchange, a critical evaluation of the workshop necessitates that one engages with the pedagogical value of the intervention rather than be limited by the lure of judging the finished art works that were displayed on the open day. As a pedagogical intervention the workshop faced certain critical challenges. The two groups of students came from two very different kinds of art school backgrounds, and from very different age groups.

The students from BNU Lahore were second year undergraduate students of a very elitist art college, exposed to a very contemporary definition of artistic practice, at an early stage of their art education they have been exposed to ‘new media art’, and have begun to understand art almost entirely as a ‘play’ within contextual frameworks. The students from Kashmir on the other hand were post-graduate students exposed almost entirely to the traditional academic definition of artistic practice, and their art education has been centered on sharpening their skills in old media. It soon became evident that more than the cultural differences regional lines; the lines of differences were much sharper in the realms of class, exposure, and understanding of art.

From day one the differences were played out. Reflective of their training, the students of Institute of Fine Arts and Music, Srinagar, showed a keen interest in making paintings, collages and similar traditional mediums, the BNU students flashed ideas involving interdisciplinary approaches - combining film, installations and performance art. The articulation of differences finally emerged in the portfolio sharing session in which questions on originality, contextuality and appropriation were raised. The Kashmiri students questioned:
“How is it your art if you have used references of ready made objects and popular images?” this question emerged as the ‘keynote’ for the pedagogical intervention of the workshop.

Though it was clear right from the onset, that an in-depth understanding of such divergent approaches was something which could not be accomplish within a short week, but the ability to accept non-traditional modes of art, as ‘art’, and acknowledgement of the older academic approach as still being relevant, was definitely a step ahead. That set the platform towards developing an orientation in working collaboratively across ‘the lines’.

However, the workshop was framed so tightly around the Indo-Pak- Kashmir issues that a narrow understanding of conflict resolution marked nearly all the artworks produced in the course of the week. A simplistic use of colour symbology and a naïve understanding conflict and conflict resolution reflected in the work produced. Somehow one gets a feeling that Saba Qizilbash imagined that the aims of intercultural conflict management could be achieved simply by putting in two groups from diverse cultures together and pushing them towards working collaboratively.

Though this modus did succeed in generating important pedagogical dialogues art practices, it generated only a superficial understanding of the specific inter-regional conflict, which was the contextual location of the workshop. One can claim that the conflict resolution is beyond the narrow definition of politics, and that it can be achieved through strong ‘people to people’ contacts, however it is also easy to generate a ‘feel good’ seeing two groups of students working together and sharing fun. A critical engagement with the ‘value’ of the pedagogical intervention will be possible only if one maps the ‘take home quotient’.