

Critic Note

By:- Virginia Whiles

THE FIFTH ANNUAL ROUND OF THE KHOJ WORKSHOP stunned all participants by its state of grace... it was as if we were in a sanctuary, detached from the insanity of the world a twar outside. The proximity of that chaos generated a tacit accord to be nice to each other, but such harmony made the task quite difficult for the resident critic to stir a cutting - edge debate! From the beginning the jolly coach ride out from Delhi to Modinagar (dubbed later by Nataraj Sharma as the "benign busload of arty types"), felt more like a day trip recalling scenarios such as "Bhaji goes to Blackpool" or "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest". The group's mindset seemed clear ; to treat this as a working break, away from the ongoing mindless violence.

Sikribagh, the site of the workshop, is the formerly luxurious, now slightly seedy, bungalow villa of the Modi family; post-independence entrepreneurs responsible for Modinagar's main industries of sugar, cotton and steel. The collapse of these led to chronic local unemployment and the town barely survives as a bazaar framing the desperate hooting of heavy-duty vehicles which pollute the divisive highway. Apparently conscious of their feudal burden, the Modis are enlightened patrons of the Arts and Sikribagh comes to life once a year, aroused by the kiss of Khoj to be transformed for two weeks into the hub of the universe of 21 bangra - rapping artists and their very patient "attendants. Activities as diverse and peculiar as scattering the lawns with used plastic plates, hanging up wet tea-bags on washing lines, salting the front drive into a heart-shaped map of the world, filling a tent with a monumental pink mattress. attaching peacock feathers to the fans, converting a bed room into the hanging gardens of Babylon or making a bombsite at the front gate were all contemplated with utter equanimity by the Modi employees, conditioned after five years to the "artistic license" granted to the privileged guests (or inmates?)

Dormitory arrangements comfortably accomodated the artists coming from thirteen different countries. It is fascinating to observe the ease with which some can follow Virginia Woolfe's wise advice on leaving beds unmade in order to prioritise work whereas others need to tidy their limited personal space before moving into the studio areas. Since the hardest part of communal living lies in the sharing of domestic chores, we were lucky to be spoilt by the attentive service, complete with delicious vegetarian meals.

Once installed, the site was inspected; were we guests at a country house party a la "Regle du jeu". or "inmates" investigating the exercise grounds ? Unused to the etiquette of either experience, artists went about cordially appropriating spaces in ways resembling certain tribal rituals of claiming territory; a practice nominated by western urban jargon as "bagging or tagging" (according to class status). With one or two exceptions, most artists came with no pre-planned projects, in the hope of finding inspiration "in situ". As Freda Gutmann put it: "Without fixed expectations, with the idea of letting it develop from a common spirit." Several spoke of their attraction to the possibility of change offered by chance, through meetings with the unexpected or experiences of the unfamiliar. The issue of identity sets itself on the agenda of such an intense course in inter-cultural relations. Initially it seemed to concern those artists coming to India for the first time. As was the case for the majority of the non-Indian artists. Suddenly the nation of the "exotic was reversed as the British artist Hew Locke said:

"Here we become "the other". "(Such cultural surprises were to inform the evening discussions during the artists slideshows.)

By the second day, the spacious terrace and gardens of Sikribagh were humming with activity. Terrains had been negotiated with good-tempered tact and whilst some artists appeared to be quietly pre-meditating others were already busting and hustling twixt the bungalow and the bazaar. Auto rickshaws began to screech in and out, interrupting the rural calm with their urban aggro. Gradually a pattern was set of regular practice structured by mealtimes during which participants eagerly exchanged comments and ideas: the ideal environment to make work in a community. The one notable cultural difference lay in the attitude towards having domestic help. Whereas this evidently forms part of daily life for the (mainly middle-class) artists from the subcontinent, it was seen as a complex issue by several of the westerners. However, the issue of collaborating with local artisans seemed less fraught: whereas most male artists would appear to treat the issue primarily as a business arrangement, there were several examples of female artists showing more concern with the ethics of naming the artisans who worked on their pieces.

Curiously though, when it came to consumerism, any gender distinction disappeared in the shared enthusiasm for the fabulous pop-kitsch to be found in the local bazaar. Like Surrealist "wanabees", all the artists paid regular visits to the market in the hope of experiencing the "found object" ritual. Since propitious meetings with mysterious commodities have transformed the art world, maybe a chance rendezvous around the corner in Modinagar which could rocket the artist to Dokumenta stardom. But we were all too well-behaved to cite such ambitions, the aura of the workshop excluded art-world rivalry by its implicit "fellowship". (Though whether such bonding between 21 artists can outlast two weeks is an open question).

Daily visits to the bazaar thus served as the chief contact with the outside world. Was this a sign of postmodern complicity with consumerism to the point of uncritical fetishism ?

It is certain that shopping as a site of fantasy now seems to permeate not only life but art, and not only in the west either. Most contemporary artists operating within the "globalized" art world are aware of Duchamp's revelation of the readymade and play with this concept. The difficulty lies in making it relevant rather than sentimental.

The age old debate about art and craft still comes up with the employment of artisans by artists. Apart from the gender differences described above, it appeared at KHOJ that most artists were at ease with situation, described as a mutual learning experience by Sharma, and by one or two craftsmen to me as enjoyable, (even including the inevitable quibbling over payment). This theme provided material for the artist Tania Bruguera who set out to raise questions around the notion of "authorship" in her demanding piece).

If the work was hard the play was even more energetic! Every night after the slide sessions were over, the artists turned to dance as a sort of cathartic release... never had we experienced such wild shamanic cavorting with such pleasure! Rajkumar, the adivasi tribal artist, outshone everyone with his brilliant bhangra gyrations. It was as if the darkness of events outside could only be lightened by performance rather than with words. At the time we were dealing with the crisis by concentrating on with work (and play). The ambiance of sharing such a refuge led towards a certain detachment from the events as illustrated by the disinterest in the media (only one pocket radio and the odd newspaper brought in from outside), But it also stimulated activity. With hindsight I am convinced that it affected

us more than we suspected and I suggest this transpires on the pieces made or readymade. As I remember from talking with artists from Sarajevo at the time of the Bosnian war, the doubt, raised by questions like Adorno's as to the ethics of creating after the holocaust, seemed to be dissipated by the commitment to making art as a form of resistance to the imposed passivity. The works produced during this fifth KHOJ workshop may well be interpreted as various "forms of resistance" to the current crisis. I suggest a review of them under four headings: Domestic, Popular Culture, Environmental, Social Violence.

Domestic

Within this section I would include the works by Lipi, Kristine Michael, Fred Latherrade, Gigi Scaria and Yang Shu.

Tayeba Begum Lipi had constructed a paper house which contained smaller paper houses : "Overruled by the big house's vast stomach", she painted different religious symbols on the walls of the houses and focused on a big chair as the throne, implying, she said, that power corrupts through its political play with religious factions, denying their common humanity.

Kristine Michael made a huge quilt to cover the big day-bed in the main salon. Inspired by the local "cottage" industry of quilt making, she hired local seamstresses and embroiderers to assist in the fabrication of an ornate tableau as homage to feminine iconography: popular and religious. Its rich kitsch of colours and texture captured the myriad of signs denoting the pressures of the gaze to fulfill the stereotypical feminine icon: baubles and bangles, beads and bras, all from consumerism and desire, worked on with evident pleasure by the women artisans giggling together over its overt yet delicate lasciviousness. Kristine's concern over recognition for their participation lead to the embroidering of the women's names on the quilt (unlike the notorious world maps, produced in the seventies by Boetti, with no mention of the Afghani women who embroidered them for months on end).

Fred Latherrade was the camp comedian. A French Charlie Chaplin, mixing Hollywood sentimentality with Duchampian irony in his construction of a gigantic pink bed entitled; "Highway to love" which he placed inside the workers tent. His other piece was a meticulous replica of a bottle pouring whisky into a glass which he placed on the mantle-piece above the workshop evening bar: thus paying his respects to the site of many a heated debate (over the drinks check- list rather than intellectual theory..)

Yang Shu's expressionist calligraphy camouflaged an outhouse, transforming it into a Chinese hut. It was extraordinary to watch him work, immobile and concentrated for ages, as if following his traditional heritage of recalling a vision in tranquility, then leaping into action to streak graffiti across the entire wall surface. Reading the occasional English fragments of his text intimated that his outpourings represented a Dadaist harangue about art and life. Yang Shu's exuberance may be understood by the fact that graffiti is strictly forbidden on public walls in China.

Gigi Scaria built a spiral staircase: with the help of a local carpenter he made it in sections which could come in handy for any other bungalow in need of Scaria's magical conversion into a two storey house. It was placed in the centre of the inner courtyard and appeared to pierce the ceiling and carry on spiraling to nowhere (or to the heavens). A world map was slipping down the last steps, perhaps in replacement of Duchamp's nude? Popular Culture

Under this heading come certain crossovers with other sections such as Kristine Michael's quilt piece or Hew Lock's bedroom installation in which the paper labyrinth has niches lighting up fetishistic dolls, bought in the bazaar and collaged with newspaper texts about the British Royal Family. Montri Toemsombat from Thailand wore a teddy bear rucksack which sang out when pressed by the visitors he escorted round the estate in the buffalo cart (or planned to do until the buffalo refused to budge when decorated with peacock feathers may be he felt he was being taken for a ride?)

Freda Guttman took her Polaroid camera along to one of the Modi primary schools where some of the artists spent a session with the children making paintings and ceramics. Her project was to do two portraits of each child, giving one to the child and aligning the other in rows framed by marigolds and ochre paint on the wall of the dining room at Sikribagh. It was a dual homage: to the Modi dynasty and to the material culture icon of the family album.

Tania Bruguera was one of several artists shopping in the bazaar to be seduced into buying bagfuls of cut-out mirrors. Together with the women embroiderers, she sewed hundreds of them into one side of a grandiose scarlet costume. This she wore for her performance at the British Council soiree, When she lay prostrate in the doorway as everyone walked over her. The other side of the costume was adorned with used teabags, but the memory of walking on either mirrors or tea-bags was utterly lost in the anxiety of harming her body.

Juan der Hairabedian made hundreds of ceramic tiles. They were inscribed with flowing lines which he filled with coloured cement and mixed spices to register his first strong olfactory impressions of India. With no overall pattern the design could multiply or change according to its placement. Juan's intention was to scatter the tiles between the house and the bazaar where he wanted to set up a stall in order to say he had sold his work in India, (especially since rupees suddenly appeared almost more valuable than the rapidly declining Argentinean peso!)

Imran Qureshi created a mosaic within a mosaic by painting circles of miniature style plant forms over the patterned floor of the courtyard. Their indigo hues made them oscillate across the floor and up the walls like a dance of spinning tops. The juxtaposition of this piece with Gigi's spiral staircase gave the courtyard an aura of a "Castle in Spain".

Nataraj Sharma's piece was inspired by the "jolly bus ride". With the assistance of a local welder he constructed a four foot high bus. Describing the welder's craftsmanship as brilliant, he enthused how it had transformed his machine drawings into a curved pipe structure which related perfectly to his vision of a home produced toy. (Formerly in metal, now almost all toys were plastic in the bazaar "Toys for the Boys" is a familiar theme in contemporary art). Natraj took profile photos of all the artists, had them enlarged locally and then cut them out to fix them in the windows. The piece became an effigy for the group: the bus of wondrous fools!

Tania Bruguera recounted the content of a previous performance (her vision of the Cuban struggles) to the teenage son of the washerwoman. Over ten days she worked with him (and translators) as he rewrote the original tale, transforming it into a drama which was then enacted to the Open Day public by his schoolmates with himself as director and leading man. This was an ambitious performance project with many ramifications. The spectators were seduced by the spectacular nature of its Bollywood style melodrama which included patriotism and sacrifice as themes, complete with ear "splitting fire crackers in the gun battles! Tania's aim to "indigenize" her concept, not by "relocation" but by translation, appeared to want to distance the practice of performance in a Brechtian manner.

Performing and directing were blurred here in an exercise which begged uncomfortable questions as to power relations.

Environmental

Bitra Fayyazi's concern with ecology leads her to notice the incredible waste caused by the use of plastic crockery after each meal. Very soon she persuaded the kitchen staff to participate in her stocking up of the garbage with which she littered the lawns on the open day, not a particularly popular piece with the Modi personnel, but one which certainly provoked debate. As she said: "It's a self-critique as well, I make litter too but I try and gather it anywhere I see it, even with the mountain climbers in Iran the litter is terrible inter-action is to try and provoke an engagement with others, their interpretations affect my work but there is a need to repeat the messages about waste, to keep on so as to make things change."

Ruth Watson's spectacular ground installation at the house entrance was done in cooking salt bought in several fifty kilo bags from the bazaar. It represented a map of the world in the shape of a heart, based on Ptolemy's projections which found their renewal in the Renaissance humanist reading of the cosmos. Through researching the history of map-making, her work illustrates how their ideological construction is embedded (particularly since colonialism) in the familiar fetters of knowledge and power. Ruth's glistening "imago-mundi" reversed such traditional western mapping of the earth by placing the southern hemisphere at the top, challenging the dominant politics of representation. The use of salt recalled the Gandhian resistance to British oppression; as a New Zealander living in Australia, Ruth is particularly interested in how indigenous interpretations of land rights can interrupt the hegemonic perspective. Apart from its mix of "geo-poet-ics", this piece revealed just how difficult it is to revise a conditioned reading of a world map.

Anjum Singh collected coke bottles which she then carefully painted pink and installed in a mushroom mound in the middle of a field. The flower effect linked up with her previous neo-pop pieces in which consumerism is gendered through a banalisation of the feminine stereotype by way of "classical" colours and forms. The "pretty-woman" aesthetics of this piece disguised a grim scenario wherein the American monopolization of the soft drinks industry in India could lead to genetically modified "bottle-plants".

B.V. Suresh occupied the aviary with his hand carved wooden birds suspended in a vicious circle around the central tree whose trunk he had wrapped. He made the birds himself, claiming that as a painter, he enjoyed the time to think differently given by a manual task. He then distributed them amongst the other artists to be painted. He had chosen the gigantic bird-cage for its strange space and translucency which allowed him to work with a layering of imagery both within and without. It was a site he found relevant to the crisis and had originally thought of suspending coloured glass bottles as bombshells, but decided to use the image of birds as shadows of jets. The trunk wrapped in white cloth was intended as a pregnant form, evoking possible change. Above all Suresh hoped to avoid too literal a reading by keeping the image afloat across different spaces. As with his work in painting and film, he wanted the work to reveal itself slowly, to provoke a gradual reflection on its possible relationship to the crisis.

Sheila Makhijani's pieces were near to an "earthwork" concern with landscape and ecology: an ex-army mosquito net was suspended over part of the lake, which set up surreal visions of underwater

sleepers in need of protection. Her other piece traced the shadow of a tree's branches with a necklace of leaves and twigs drawn across the earth and around its trunk.

Rajkumar's baby boar, deftly carved with loving care from a tree trunk, was installed by the artist in a nomadic shelter built near the inner gate. He was given water and food and watched over by the carved figure of a goddess. His rosy curl of a tail and grinning chops informed the realism of his existence, treated by Rajkumar with such respect.

Suranjan Basu had discovered packaging materials in a local industry and worked for the first time with the notion of image as installation. He made block prints with strips of wood from the saw mill, per utating their order and placing them on a wall facing a field, as if in contemplation. A printmaker committed to the idea of the print as a popular and accessible art form, he gave a print to every member of the workshop.

Social Violence

Within this section comes the work of Jitish Kalat since the theme of mortality runs throughout his work. Although Modinagar felt far from the urban pressures of his native Mumbai, the potential threat of the crisis in nearby Afghanistan seeped through his installation. Placed in a bathroom, a series of poster/drawings revealed sepia skulls stained into the paper under the calligraphic title proclaiming "Lick your scream!" This initiation mantra/ yantra was duly repeated to line the corridor alongside the lavatories leading to a small room transformed into a sacred chamber. On the ground was a large outline of a human brain drawn in caste iron dust which is an inflammable powder that can spark into ignition. The tension was increased by the subtle lighting from bare bulbs swinging low and emitting the vibrations of a heart-beat. On a shelf rested upturned sugar pots found in the bazaar. Objects used by local women in their matrimonial fasting ritual.

A profound sense of the honors of war imbued the installation by Pradeep Chandrasiri. Sited near the main entrance, a mandala-like ground circle enclosed the wreckage from a bomb blast: broken limbs lay amidst fragments of shrapnel smoldering in the heat and dust Muted sounds struggled up from below. All Pradeep's work is a consequence of his own experiences of fortune whilst held as a "suspected terrorist" in a detention camp in Sri Lanka as a student in the late eighties. His slides were a revelation of how much the local art work is informed by the brutality of the struggles between Tamils and Sri Lankans.

Hew Locke's installation was inspired by the current plight of refugees. He filled his room with a maze of inscribed paper cutouts hung from a network of string. It evoked the inside of a gigantic package through which customs men would have to rummage diligently to find what they were seeking. The metaphor of the Trojan horse was brought up by Hew to describe how his work explores the connections between the myth of exoticism and the reality of surveillance. Its baroque chaos reflected both the systematic clutter of the bazaar and the indiscriminate vigilance of society's sentinels: the paradoxical anarchy of both sides.

Several installations can thus cross-reference the different categories suggested. For example, there was the small one set up by myself in collaboration with others in which a set of twelve plastic cricket bats and balls, bought in the bazaar, was neatly attached by Yang Shu across a barbed wire wall fence under which twelve artists took it in turns to write, in the twelve different languages of the group, the phrase: "War Stops Play".

In conclusion, although the process of making was prioritized in a context whose very denomination: "workshop underlines the notion of labour, the content of certain works touched on issues raised in the evening discussions. Central to these were reflections on the ways in which the concept of ethnicity can be abused, both by curators" trading on it and artists "surfing" on it, as graphically put by one participant. Another important question concerned the relationship between the artist and artisan employed as assistant / collaborator. The debate as to whether indigenous traditions are being exploited or interrogated was initiated by the modern miniature work of Imran Qureshi. This provoked interesting polemics about the need for South Asia to assume its own perspective in the global market without relying on endorsement from the west. The fifth KHOJ workshop and its following network conference in Delhi gave plenty of evidence that this is already happening, experiences of artists working, living and playing together is the deconstruction of the dominant (curatorial) discourse around cultural identity: artists are not nationalists, simply because they have a strong sense of humour. As was proposed one evening between ardent sessions of Daler Mehndi, Madonna and the Buena Vista Social Club: we have to invent our Identity!