

Exhibition in Process By :- Caroline Gausden

The debate at KHOJ in January 2009 when I arrived to try and piece together an Indian perspective on what I would cautiously describe as socially engaged, dialogical practice in Contemporary art was surrounding the problem of exhibition making. The discussion involved looking back on five years of community based activities to the beginnings of their outreach programme with Aastha Chuahan and trying to come up with a strategy for presenting this work. Aastha has been more or less continuously involved in conceiving, facilitating and collaborating the numerous community projects that now form a rich back catalogue in the KHOJ archive. Despite this significant catalogue the energy behind the talk was neither self congratulatory nor complacent, instead, there was a sense that questions still need to be answered. Pooja Sood director at KHOJ sets out a basis for discussion - for her the question is no longer why artists choose socially engaged work but the 'politics of representation' that accompany that work and also, importantly for me, the role critical writing can play. Increasingly as process based work is more and more a feature of contemporary practice the feeling is that the critical framework needs to change to accommodate this, in interview Pooja clarifies this by saying: 'the role of art writing should move beyond being an observation/critique of the art work and may in fact generate ideas for art production' (Pooja, Filament catalogue)

Due to the timing of my arrival I felt I could make a small step towards this goal by asking for an informal interview/conversation with Aastha around the issue of exhibition making in her particular context while she was still in the process of developing one. In a practice founded on the principles of dialogical exchange it seemed to make most sense that critical reflection should have conversational roots. I wanted the perspective to go beyond a description of the results of discussion, which are inevitably also present in the writing, to try and capture the discussion itself as a key element in process: the invisible space between people where ideas are generated and shared.

In conversation the politics of representation are certainly an issue for Aastha who feels that maybe the element of reflection is sometimes lost in the hectic energy of completing the project, the double edge of which is that in reflection often the hectic energy and magic of the project is lost: 'how do you capture all the laboratory experiments that go into making the project? I don't know how you do that. I don't know how you do that even for KHOJ ...since the primary concern at KHOJ is experimentation and exchange with that the energy is immense but when it is replicated on the website – or in a written article some of that magic dies...For my own projects when I write about them –sometimes I quote the conversations and sometimes little anecdotes, but the energy of the engagement is hard to replicate after the action.. If I'm showing the toys I can't even explain to you the kind of energy there is when 45 kids are clamoring over little pieces of clay and going berserk with the kind of toys they make. You know?' (Aastha, 09)

More than that there is a fear of getting the balance right between the emphasis on documentation and the process of collaboration, as if sometimes it feels as though projects are conceived merely for the documentation which is not what Aastha wants from the community work she has been partner to: And if It is just a video or photograph it becomes another level of complication. Photographs are tricky - sometimes you feel like was the act done for the photograph or the photograph done for the act? Very tricky. (Aastha, 09)So as we talk, despite Pooja's helpful outline, it seems impossible for the question of motive for doing this 'kind of work' to be entirely bypassed. One of the possible reasons for this ongoing

concern to analyse motive is the role of trust in a collaborative practice – something that takes time to develop within a community and is built upon a careful process of listening to the thoughts and fears of those participating. In many ways then the collaborative artist's concern for motive is a reflection of the participant's concern. Describing one of the first community projects initiated by KHOJ , a mural designed by six artists with the street community, Aastha mentions her pivotal decision not to paint after going through the consultation and design stages. Instead she choose to be a mediator and listener to the huge amount of debate on the street the Mural sparked up.

One of the fundamental issues for the community was the artists' motivation: So we did have a lot of audience and great conversation around what's going on. At first it was hard for them to understand that there would be no ulterior motive that it would happen just because it did. I remember one guy on a cycle came and stopped and asked if we were painting an advertisement? I said no. What is it? So I said we're artists and we're here so its the least we can do; - is pretty up the street you know. So he thought for a while and said if you are genuinely doing it for just that then well god bless you. But it took him a while to sort of say ok... but then repeatedly that's what has happened. That's why its easier for me now after almost 4 years because people have realised there is nothing happening, that there is no hidden agenda. (Aastha, 09)

In another way too much focus on documentation could jeopardize this trust giving projects an insincere feel with artists thinking ahead to the exhibition rather than being engaged in the nuances of the moment. Yet the problem then in retrospect is the difficulty in representing a process based practice where in some cases the finished works are only half the story and the artist is left feeling as though some of the 'magic is lost'.

Beyond this the collaborative artist still has to find a position amongst art background peers. Sandwiched between community and art world one critic asks Aastha if she is in fact trying to bridge the gap between the two, to which her response is: '..the disparity is such, and I'm not trying to bridge the gap – its impossible to – in India there is caste, race, income I mean the diversity and the layers are so immense that anything I do or say will be ridiculously simplified.. So many layers..its on a conversational level that it makes sense to me .' (Aastha, 09)

It is clear then that the exhibition of this kind of work is not an anthropological mapping exercise for the private contemplation of a well-trained gallery audience. Although, discussion with the artist reveals that over her time here she has gained a thorough grasp of the complex issues a community of this nature, a place of multiple perspectives and voices changing from street to street, has to offer. Apart from Aastha's conversational insight into these perspectives the 2006 project, DELHILOVESME, initiated by Navjot Altaf in association with Khoj also seems particularly relevant not just for its keen sociological engagement but also for bringing to the critical forefront the question of who the exhibition is for? In a similar vein to Aastha's practice Navjot writes of her practice: ..the work emerges out of extended dialogical and personal interaction with the groups of people and individuals; the dialogue becomes two-way and interactive which respects and invites multiple points of views. (Navjot, KHOJ Website)

The work in this case was based around the development with Kirkee community residents of a series of stickers that would be installed, with the consent of drivers, on auto rickshaws that would then spread the word around the city. But to consider the stickers alone as 'the work' is,

Navjot points out, to gravely misunderstand her practice. Instead, echoing Aastha, it is the conversation at different stages of the process that is central: For me, how the entire process brought a number of people into conversation at various stages / levels itself is a work of art. To understand this work and the situation in a larger context is to recognize that process and all associated activities. (Navjot, KHOJ Website)

Given this, documentation and display of these conversations would seem to be of utmost importance along with more widely public aspect of displaying the stickers themselves. It is here however that Khoj receives most criticism from the artist. The entire process, from audio recordings of community perspectives on the changing nature of Delhi to video footage of stickers getting installed, was to be screened on the outside wall of the studio on an open day that also showcased other public art projects. Navjot voices disappointment at the lack of real openness with other public art project displays closed to the community audience. Navjot sees the exhibition of process as a continuation of the project, 'the last phase of the dialogical exchange', and a chance to further invite participants: ..for a dialogue / critical understanding / approach to public art , any dialogue between the artist and the participant / viewer whose contribution was integral to the process was crucial at the time when both artist and the participant / viewer heard and watched the documentation of the entire process together.(Navjot, KHOJ Website)

For her in this case the final phase seemed a little neglected in KHOJ 's attention - a critical ghost that rather than bury KHOJ seems keen to remember. And for me this ties in with a previous critical interest in exploring the process by which exhibition curating can be incorporated into collaborative practice. Certainly for Aastha there is a big difference between white cube displays for art audience and exhibitions embedded in the community surroundings that produced them. Talking of Zariyein, an extensive research based project that began as a public billboard of memories built around photographs taken by artists and community participants and collaboratively curated, Aastha says: One of the things we found interesting was that people started to leave messages about the jobs and services they could offer which is a good thing because then it takes on its own new life. When you display work in communities like this, because there is no preconception the reaction is always nice and refreshing, how people treat the work in that neutral space is always different. Whether it is the priest making up stories to explain to the visitors at the temple, what the installation is or whether it is Mohan hairdresser who claims that his family of barbers have collected the scissors- the real collaborative ownership/ authorship over the work is only justified if they are willing to incorporate the work into their lives/shops and claim it as theirs. (Aastha,09)

This comment encapsulated for me the feeling that if you want to try and create a retrospective exhibition of collaborative practice then the curating should be in the same spirit – collaborative. Possibly then the refreshing reactions of the community can find their way into the gallery with the viewer/participant adding an energy and life to the display that could be otherwise absent. Having discussed this idea to Aastha in conversation leading up to an exhibition of this type I was very keen to witness the results. The Exhibition

Aastha Chauhan teamed up with Vishal Rawlley, who had recently been involved in a project with school children in Kirkee, to produce the exhibition and in its playful aspect it reflects his practice as well as her own. His project with the community surrounding KHOJ was an attempt to create a visual iconography for the community with the community 'to combat the one way traffic that exists in creating icons' (Vishal, KHOJ Website). The project centred itself on Kirkee area's Monday Market an important community event that the children at the

local school – most now old hands at participation with KHOJ , made their own stalls for and representations of goods for sale. The playful aspect of the project revolved around putting the mini economy into practice with participants buying and selling their representations over time until a best retailer could be established. Vishal writes of the project

'the end products of this exercise shall become valuable public documents about this society'.
(Vishal, KHOJ Website)

As I read this I think of archaeological museum displays with rows of glass cabinets lined up in an attempt to recreate a past age through the everyday tools of life. I am also reminded of all the representational politics this kind of Museum display can create in its encouragement of the receptive passive viewer who accepts knowledge as one way traffic and cannot help but feel that even this blurb on the KHOJ website may be a little tongue in cheek or at least not the whole picture of this process based event.

The statement becomes a link to Aastha's work on another project, Khirkee Kholo, a series of workshops developed in collaboration with Delhi based sculpture Tulsī Ram which has already featured in the peers residency exhibition, Filament, curated Latika Gupta. In Filament the workshop are presented as a series of glass cases containing neat rows of clay artifacts from a different world that can be glimpsed at via a speeded up video of the workshop process embedded into the covered display case. The workshops that lead to the presentation involved bringing clay every day to the park and facilitating local kids experimentation with the medium. When Aastha talks about this project she is keen to stress the practical aspects of it. A lot of the parents here are part of a population of migrant workers without the means for day care etc so one motivation was giving the kids a place to go, something to do while their parents are working. This reasoning eschews the highly theoretical basis of some engaged practice that seems to develop an art concept first and meet community needs second, not that Aastha paints a picture of her practice as world changing or healing, being always careful not to underestimate the complexity of the community and consequently its needs. Instead having fun is sited as an important factor and in this way she also becomes a reflection of the priorities of the project's participants who like most children are keen enemies of boredom where ever it may exist. So it makes sense that the items made from clay are toys, sometimes things from everyday life like buses and phones and at other times more fantastical items like dinosaurs, repeated as often happens with idea sharing and collaborative enterprise. The objects seem to represent a marriage of the fictional and practical in the name of play and in this way are a good reflection of the practice they stem from.

However the display for this most recent exhibition differs from the version seen in the Filament project in one key respect – the display cases are open. Aastha explains - I didn't want the objects to be picked up by an audience that didn't own them - almost as if the glass is stressing the artificial separation that can exist between practice and exhibition. In fact in conversation Aastha is keen to stress exhibiting in general as far from a fundamental part of her practice, baffled by an idea of 'relational aesthetic' that does not relate to anything beyond white cube environment, 'the whole incestuous art scene' - the realm of pure ideas without practical application. But in the case of this particular exhibition the participants themselves have provided the impetus for creating a display:

'..because the students have been asking me to do an exhibition for them and they have never really had an exhibition at their school – they have never had an annual day at their school or

got a certificate for the work that they do.. It will be a fun thing to do and they will be able to see for themselves that from line drawing on newspapers, to photographic collages to making toys they have come a long way.' (Aastha,09)

It follows that in the exhibition for the students the display case is open. The students don't need any instructions as to what this means – toys are readily taken out, run around the room, held up for photographs and put back elsewhere throughout the exhibition's opening afternoon. This way the objects remain fluid entities involved in conversations and subject to change, as, in turn, is the exhibit, which includes access to paints in the gallery so that participants can come in and continue their creative processes. Finally participants will also have the option of taking works home at the end of the show's run – any works unclaimed by their original makers can be taken home by anyone else in the community who may want them – so the collaborative, process based ethos of the projects is strong in the exhibition phase. It's not only glass that Aastha has removed but that age old process vs. product dilemma.;

In an exhibition that began as a desire to try and reflect five years of community engagement the curating choice of what to include, the sheer number of projects making the inclusion of everything a practical and thematic impossibility, stems from the participant voice. It is the students who have asked for the show so it is based around their works. Beyond this initial curating choice Aastha and Vishal choose to work with the students from Standard 5, in their last year at the school, who had been involved in projects since 2nd year. The process is described as follows: The kids from standard 5 came in to look at all the work we had stored here and then started the process of selecting which pieces they wanted in and which pieces could go. They were involved with every part from choosing to organizing layout, to sticking the works up. (Aastha,09)

Not surprisingly another important feature of curating with the students was the conversation it triggered:

'talking about processes from years ago, revisiting what we had done and how we have taken it forward so that connections can be made' (Aastha,09)

The theme of story telling is also present in the exhibition. Next to the up for grabs toys a booklet has been put together documenting Aastha's first project with the children in the community in 2004, Khirkee Ki Kahani, literally the story of Khirki. The attempt of this opening project, without perhaps thinking of anything long term, sets the tone for the whole engagement with the community that would follow. As children seemed to be the most enthusiastic participants initially the project is written around them and attempts to think and ask questions about friendship. This is a practical choice as best friends are very much a childhood concern but more than that the idea of friendship seems to express some principles that could be related to the outreach practice that developed. The flexible nature of friendship, its lack of transactional values or fixed terms. Essentially friends occupy a learning position in relation to each other, a listening position. Also possibly the most important feature of friendship is that it is a meeting of equals. When Aastha reflects on the results of the exhibition, its content stretching beyond the toys and stories to include photographs, sophisticated collage work, experiments in line and colour and of course the children's take on their street's visual iconography, it is this aspect that she feels more clear about. Despite producing a number of innovative workshops in the school that led to a lot of the works on display Aastha eventually stopped the classroom activities as it seemed to her that her

practice was moving towards art education. The term has hierarchical implications that Aastha is keen to avoid instead stressing the experiential knowledge that participants of all ages have been able to bring to the work:

At the end of a workshop or installation I don't want to tell people how to understand the work (Aastha,09)

The feeling is that participants can use their own knowledge base of life experience to develop meanings that are relevant to them. In this way meaning making becomes a collaborative enterprise between friends.

When trying to decide on the best way forward for an exhibition, to unravel the complex strands that go into making this kind of work Aastha muses:

That is when it gets complicated I'm not making it. Understand that – what is art? Art makes you look at the world differently and that's what I'm trying to do. But I'm not making an object to make people look at things differently its through them that they are making it for themselves. Right?(Aastha,09)

After popping all the Balloons laid out on the floor for the opening in a gesture that gave the room a Diwali like atmosphere and much running around for photographs and toys the participants were gathered together to be given certificates for their achievements. Along with this Vishal had prizes for both the Monday market competition and for the spontaneous round of games that followed these more official proceedings. Was this the hectic energy of 45 kids clamouring over each other to make toys? It seemed close, although in this last point Aastha is reticent. On the subject of the certificates there is more certainty of their importance as the hope is that through them and the exhibition participants will be able to look at themselves differently. Has the exhibition enabled Aastha to come to any conclusions on the difficult position her practice occupies? She suggests it has made it possible for her to draw a tenuous line under her time working with the students although not with the community at large. Conversations are open-ended things so rather than closure perhaps the exhibition is better viewed from an evolving critical perspective as a means of situating her practice for just a second before it once again moves and changes with the demands of her local geography.

Caroline Gausden, 09