

Peers 2008 Project Book

The search begins The ‘search’ begins. It has been a couple of weeks since we, a group of six young practitioners of Art have arrived in the Khojspace. We have been soaking its warmth and energy for some time, before we discovered ourselves right in the middle of all that is happening in the capital city. Away from the serene, peaceful and self congratulatory space of academia...the safe and comfortable cages of marketplace...it has been a fortnight of exchange and dialogue in their most productive sense. It virtually took no time to embrace the newfound community, connected through the strings of a common conviction towards work and a similar approach towards the field of cultural practice. What more, it enabled us to breathe fresh air after a long time, knowing that there is after all a space to go wrong, experiments unmade, if the passion is there to proceed on our own searching lines. As the wise say, the success of a journey is not just in reaching your destination; the walk should worth too! However, speaking about ‘search’, the word which epitomizes Khoj in the larger context of cultural practice all around the globe, it is important to pause for a moment and see what it is all about. Aren’t we all in search of something? Isn’t it true that we all search in our own different ways, each search worthy enough to be made? Then what is it that makes all these searches less special, with regards to the space they occupy in the field of artistic enquiries? I believe it is a question worth asking, and though it cannot be answered in a simple way, certain perspectives may help us.

Notes on a search Peers, the Khoj Student Residency Program, is a platform which “provides young art practitioners an opportunity for exchange and dialogue”. As a forum, it “aims to intervene into the field of contemporary cultural practice with active experimentation, research and critical debate”. Now this is also the claim of thousand other ‘workshops’ organized in different parts of the globe with different aims. What then necessitates Peers to ‘search’, while other workshops seem to have found their ways! Perhaps to understand the problem, one has to investigate the idea of search itself at the first place. It is true that we all search, but it is equally true that all searches are not equal in appearance. Usually we search something which is absent, something we is not there where we expect it to be. A search, seen in this way is an act of completion, resurrecting a sign that is lost in our field of vision. The orgy of searches that we encounter everyday in the leading art institutions of our nation is a result of this. How many times have we encountered a student painfully labouring away towards the completion of the task she is expected to fulfil? The prized road or the avenue she takes is admittedly of her own choice, but the destination is always there, etched over the field where she eventually arrives. A search made under obligations is not one you may wish to remember for long. Then there is also a search which takes place in the introspective and relatively autonomous domain of ‘other spaces’. These attempts can best be understood as ‘meditations on territories’. Here what necessitates a search is a realization of space, or a platform which enables one to see the field from a ‘critical distance’. The much celebrated alternative art institutions usually function with such a bind. What is significant in their cases is the curious fact that the critical distance which separates them from the mainstream and provides an oppositional status, proves to be of no real resistance in the long run. It happens so because these institutions willingly shy away from real interventions which have the potential of reterritorializing the field in an unforeseen manner. Instead they nourish and celebrate ‘difference’, serving as ‘flyovers’ which precede the mainstream at the cost of passive collaboration. Thankfully, our experience of khoj and the peers program has been otherwise! Clearing some of the misconceptions some of us have towards

alternative art practices in India, the ‘search’ which began here in Khoj a good ten years ago, is not narrow enough to put in the abovementioned categories. Primarily a workspace, the building resembles a laboratory more than anything that comes in your mind. Yet, unlike a laboratory where a scientist intends to search something only to find it later, here practitioners also came to search with a chilling uncertainty of what they have found so far. This very uncertainty of what is found also leads to the refusal to settle with the obvious, which together marks the character of Khoj. The willingness to lay bare the violent avenues of trials and errors adds to its warmth and energy, and anyone who visits the khojspace for the first time cannot fail to recognize the momentum going for it. We were no exceptions either. The selection of the five young artists for peers 2008 is a case in point. The practitioners with all similarities and difference make a curious contrast among themselves as far as their [visual] language is concerned. It is significant that some of them have gone much beyond the limitations of their respective disciplines. What is even more interesting is that the rest, though happily settled within the boundaries of their field of enquiry, use newer imaginations to move beyond the conventional language. The ‘searches’, it may be seen, is multilayered in each case, and the fact that khoj decides to initiate a dialogue between them, should stand for the fact that it [khoj] is willing to move ahead of the comfortable status of being alternative.

The [Re] searchers Prayas Abhinav, arguably the most dynamic of us all, is a researcher in CEMA [Centre for Experimental Media Arts], Sristi College of Art, Design and Technology, Bangalore. His work cuts across several disciplines and has the fluidity of a performance in space inherent within. His experiments with the new media can best be understood as attempts to intervene in the public space with creative interactions and dialogue. A prolific writer and a well received documentary filmmaker; Prayas’ intervention in the sphere of public art practice is playful and creative at the same time. One of his current projects, ‘petpuja’, is an attempt to intervene in the food and nutritional system within a community. He initiates the idea of growing vegetables in the unused spaces of a city, followed by creative methods of watering the plants with self-invented tools and objects. The project in process re-draws the cartography of the city, keeping it open for the public who willingly joins the fun. The sense of playfulness is evident in his further initiatives too, where he throws open roadside parties with the accumulated vegetables, sharing and connecting with the community. Partly gestural, partly functional, his project has the elasticity of a performance that is willingly shared by people whom he wants to reach out to. **Sandeep Pisalkar** is about to complete his masters’ degree with sculpture as specialization from the M.S. University of Baroda. His sculptures are unique and playful, and from a distance, they appear like curious ‘composite creatures’. The sense of being composite in nature arises from a certain incompatibility among the parts that belong to his sculptural bodies. It happens so because he carefully plays with the signs that we attribute to any object, especially its associations with history. A distant object from the past always carries a set of relations attached to its image, and whenever those relations get disrupted, we feel as if our sense of time and space has collapsed. Sandeep succeeds in creating this feeling of collapse by fusing the parts of two objects with different historical associations [a charkha with a neon thread, a paduka with embossed electronic circuits, a motorbike with the wheels and the seat of a bullock cart etc]. But what absolutely bewilders us in his objects is the fact that they turn out to be functional too [the bike gives a mileage of 40km/hr; the antique looking portable metal water cooler self-regulates its temperature!]. This very quality of usefulness, along with a stark and simple aesthetic prompted me to state earlier that his works are more like ‘composite creatures’ which have a

spirit of their own. **Nisha Nair** is a final year student of K.R.V.A, an institute of Architecture, Mumbai. She has been doing architectural projects in the cityscape with an interventional outlook, taking into account the ever changing relations of place and space within a city. Some of her works present us with models of buildings which are imagined and realized in the context of space they occupy in relation to the local inhabitants. Her other works involve a re-drawing of the territories of a given architecture, which suddenly comes to life when seen from a different perspective. Interestingly enough, these experiments on a cityscape have also led her towards an illustrative, part factual- part fictional account of a stranger in a city, whose negotiation in space serves as a bright, experiential account of a citizen-subject in a contemporary urban setting. The very fact that her work belongs to the cross section of so many things that concern us, makes our interaction all the more interesting and productive. **Manmeet Sandhu** is about to complete her masters' degree from the Govt. college of Art, Chandigarh. Though she had painting as specialization in her college, her works extend far beyond the confines of her discipline. She uses several materials and ready made objects [sometimes dead creatures, too] to evoke the desired visual and sensory impact that is so strongly characteristic of her works. Some of her works deal with issues of femininity and the disciplining of a gendered body, with the extreme measures like female circumcision etc. sharp and cutting in appearance, these works nearly halt and disrupt the 'aesthetic' expectations with which one looks at the representation of a gendered body. She does so with a poignant invocation of mutation and violence over the bodyscape, sometimes with the very physical act of stitching, tearing and mutating the mass of forms with which she works. The very quality of sensory communication in her work resists any detached enjoyment on part of the viewers, forcing them to come out from the domain of the aesthetic and enter the realm of the political. **Aatiya thakur** has finished her bachelors' degree from Srinagar, with sculpture as her special subject. The city where everyone lives with a perpetual anxiety renders itself transparent in the various signs he uses in her sculptural meditations. The shapes and forms, etched and sometimes engraved with personal symbols and metaphors bring a quality of angst in her works. Some of her installations make use of objects like barbed wires and empty bottles, which we were told later, are used to trace vibrations of footsteps in the military dominated areas. Some of her works are relatively more personal and introspective in nature, and it is significant that she articulates her experience of the political through the personal, using it as a carrier of social sensibilities. Her other works, which include formal enquiries into the shapes and forms of nature, have a distinct simplicity and serenity which is quite a treat to watch.

The Ongoing Search The first week was fast, busy and restless for all of us. We all started working right from day one, and I admit that it doesn't sound romantic since we are supposed to 'exchange [ideas], debate [views] and experiment [work]', and do all that in that expected order. But then, human mind is not an empty bucket which is to be filled in order to water plants. Nobody works in that way, for we always form a hypothesis of the possible [and from the available] things that can be done, and then go ahead with our trials and errors until the feedback is satisfactory. So our 'searches' began from the day one, and what is really good in that is the fact that our plans have changed radically during the course of interaction and exchange. So the search remained there, but it did not remain the same anymore. During the first week of our stay, we were accompanied to a couple of exhibitions and studios. Our visit to the Fluxus show in NGMA was memorable. The word Fluxus, as we know, means 'to flow' in Latin, and it is this quality of a free flowing experiment which impressed us most in the exhibition. The exhibition showcased works of artists from various fields [art, music, literature, architecture and urban

planning...only to name a few] who came together on the same platform around the sixties with a common conviction of doing things outside petty aesthetic and commercial practices. However, their anti-art sensibilities differed from dada, for their aspirations were more towards positive social exchange and communication. I personally found the sound installation with the pieces of John Cage, Nam June Paik and Beuys quite impressive. However, the show was followed by a dismal performance of some of the pieces by a group of artists, where except a couple of pieces, the rest were proved to be hopelessly oscillating between artistic and anti-artistic sensibilities, with a pinch of reluctance and over too casual attitudes which perhaps the originators of the Fluxus group would have disapproved of. However, the experience was worth in its totality. On the third day we visited Chandni Chowk. We enjoyed losing ourselves in the narrow streets with shapes and smells of every kind seeping into our senses from all directions. We felt like little kids in a candy shop [of course the difference is there, since none of us mistook the electric wires for noodles], and Sandeep bought himself a couple of weird looking electronic objects which god knows of what use. Prayas headed for petpuja, towards the parthawali gali, and we had a small visit to the Jama Mosque. A day later, some of us set out to explore the area around khidkee, where the khoj studio is...and the exploration initiated a number of ideas which are still being debated upon. Another day, [since everything is happening so fast, please forgive me on losing my sense of time. I simply cannot remember the dates!] We visited the solo show of Ashutosh Bharadwaj in Vadhera, and George Martin in Palette Art gallery. With hyper-real figuration and sleek abstraction becoming the linguistic trend today, these two exhibitions had their bright spots and tiring elements at the same time. On the other hand, a relatively less initiated [into the gloss and finesse of hyper-realism] artist, Sambhavi Singh who had a show in Talwar art gallery touched some of us with the simplicity and sincerity in her works. Besides these shows, we also visited the studio of sculptor [and now a painter too] Ram Bali Chauhan and enjoyed his world of skeletons. Although his display [we only saw photographs though] seemed to have lacked the touch of a coup de grace, as meditations on the body, his works stand on their own. It also feels nice to say that the first week of our stay in khoj was also marked by a pleasant surprise. It rained every now and then, washing away all the anxiety which we had towards Delhi summer. The climate is lovely, the atmosphere pleasant...and all that one has to do is to join in the rhythm. We, the six young minds, are just doing that..

Parvez Kabir
Critic in Residence Peers 2008