COLLECTIVES, LOCALITIES, NETWORKS

A Translocal Ethnography of Emerging Contemporary Art Field(s) in Nepal and Bangladesh

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Heidelberg Studies on Transculturality – 10

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This publication was accepted as a dissertation in the year 2019 under the title "Collectives, Localities, and Networks—A Translocal Approach to the Emerging Contemporary Art Field(s) of Nepal and Bangladesh" in the subject anthropology at the Faculty of Behavioural and Cultural Studies of Heidelberg University.

Cover illustration: Marlène Harles, Photo Kathmandu, 2015, Nepal

To my families

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Note on Anonymization, Transliteration, and Translation

The focus on contemporary art requires me to talk about specific artworks, art related programs, and institutions. It is neither possible to omit the names of the creators of artworks nor the heads of the programs or institutions, as they are matters of public record. Most importantly however, anonymization denies rightful authorship of these artworks and initiatives. For this reason, I consciously chose not to anonymize my sources, as is otherwise customary in anthropology.

Following this note is a list of transcribed interviews conducted in the frame of my research.

The references to interviews in the text read as follows: AR, XXX, month and year. AR (audio record), GA (go-along), PE (personal exchange via e-mail or Facebook Messenger), XXX (initials of my interlocutor's name), month and year in which I conducted the interview. Informal conversations recorded in my field diary are marked as FDE (field diary excerpt), month and year, along with initials where known.

I refrain from mentioning the name of my interview or conversation partner whenever anonymization is possible and necessary. This pertains to cases in which statements are not in direct relation to a specific artwork or project and potentially detrimental (for political or socio-cultural reasons) to the person who uttered them. The anonymized interviews are not included in the list. In the case of anonymization, the respective reference looks as follows: AR, A, year. A (anonymous), year in which I conducted the interview.

Unless part of a quote, I have transliterated all Bengali and Nepali words and phrases according to their pronunciation for ease of reading. Further, I wrote well-established terms according to common spelling in English (such as rickshaw, rather than *rikaśā*; chowk, rather than *chauk*).

Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

List of Transcribed Interviews

	Interview Partner	Code	Date
1	Amrit Karki	–	January 13, 2016
2	Anisuzzaman Sohel	AS	September 16, 2015
3	Artlab (Kiran Maharjan & Abhishek Kansakar)	KM / AbK	March 14, 2016
4	ArTree (Hit Man Gurung & Sheelasha Rajbhandari)	–	April 2, 2014
5	ArTree (Hit Man Gurung, Sheelasha Rajbhandari & Arjun Khaling)	HG / SR / ArK	September 2, 2013
6	Artudio (Kailash K Shrestha)	KKS	September 4, 2013
7	Bengal Art Lounge (Hadrien Diez)	HD	August 25, 2015
8	Bidhata KC	–	August 16, 2013
9	Bidhata KC	–	April 1, 2014
10	Bindu (Saurganga Darshandhari & Prithvi Shrestha)	–	January 6, 2016
11	Bindu (Saurganga Darshandhari & Soroj Bajracharya)	–	April 22, 2014
12	Binod Pradhan	–	August 23, 2013
13	Gobinda Dangol	–	December 21, 2015
14	Jupiter Pradhan	–	August 27, 2013
15	Kabir Ahmed Massum Chisty	–	August 28, 2015
16	Krishna Manandhar	–	April 29, 2014
17	Kurchi Dasgupta	–	August 29, 2013
18	Lala Rukh Selim	–	September 1, 2015
19	Luva Nahid Choudhury	LC	September 9, 2015
20	Madan Chitrakar	MC	September 10, 2013

	Interview Partner	Code	Date
21	Madan Chitrakar	MC	March 18, 2016
22	Mahbubur Rahman	MR	February 27, 2015
23	Manoj Babu Mishra (Saurganga Darshandhari, Prithivi Shrestha & Roshan Mishra)	–	February 19, 2016
24	Munem Wasif	MW	September 2, 2015
25	Mustafa Zaman	MZ	September 15, 2015
26	NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati	NGK	December 10, 2016
27	Nazrul Islam	NI	August 8, 2015
28	Nhooja Tuladhar	NT	January 7, 2016
29	Nisar Hossain	NH	September 3, 2015
30	Park Gallery (Neera Joshi Pradhan & Navin Joshi)	NJP / NJ	May 2, 2014
31	Ragini Upadhyay Grela	–	December 16, 2015
32	Rajeeb Samdani	RS	September 10, 2015
33	Ramesh Khanal	–	April 10, 2014
34	Reetu Sattar	–	February 24, 2015
35	Sangeeta Thapa	ST	August 28, 2013
36	Sangeeta Thapa	ST	May 5, 2014
37	Sanjeev Maharjan	–	March 19, 2014
38	Shahidul Alam	SA	September 23, 2015
39	Shimul Saha	SSa	September 22, 2014
40	Sujan Chitrakar	SC	December 20, 2015
41	Sujan Dangol	SD	January 27, 2016
42	Sunil Sigdel	SSi	December 2, 2015
43	Suraj Ratna Shakya & Shikhar Bhattarai	–	September 17, 2013
44	Sushma Shakya	–	August 22, 2013

	Interview Partner	Code	Date
45	Tanzim Wahab	TW	November 9, 2015
46	Tayeba Begum Lipi	TBL	March 20 & 21, 2017
47	Tayeba Begum Lipi & Mahbubur Rahman	TBL / MR	February 19, 2015
48	Yasmin Jahan Nupur	YJN	August 28, 2015
49	Yuki Poudyal	YP	August 16 & 19, 2013

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Acknowledgements

Points of Departure:
Collectives, Localities, Networks

After spending the whole day installing our booth, we should be ready for the opening of Unseen Amsterdam. *The photography fair's 2017 edition will start tomorrow. Lars Willumeit, an independent curator and photo editor from Germany, comes over for a final check on the set-up of the Nepal Picture Library. I met Willumeit, who also trained as an anthropologist, in 2015 at the* Chobi Mela, *an international photography festival in Dhaka, where he gave a lecture on photo editing, and a workshop on photographic documentation. Now, he is the curator of CO-OP, a newly established platform at* Unseen, *dedicated to "cutting edge" artist collectives and artist-run initiatives from all over the world.*

At the 2015 Chobi Mela, *Willumeit also met NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati, co-founder of photo.circle (PC), a platform for photography based in Kathmandu. They connected, and Willumeit returned to the region as a workshop instructor for the 2016 edition of* Photo Kathmandu. *Excited about the work the platform does for photography in Nepal, he invited photo.circle's initiative, the Nepal Picture Library (NPL), to exhibit at the photography fair in Amsterdam. I came from Germany to assist with the set-up and the running of the booth, because I was psyched about the opportunity to get away from my desk and back into the "field," but also because the collective was only able to send one of its members from Nepal to the Netherlands (thanks to a grant by the Prince Claus Fund).*

Our stall is located in the far-right corner of the large building. It consists of two tables, one to showcase recent PC publications and a series of postcards and prints from different NPL collections, and the other to display an exhibition entitled Retelling Histories. *Coincidentally, this is the same exhibition of private family albums and formal studio portraiture that was exhibited during* Chobi Mela *2015 and then travelled, in a different constitution, to the first edition of* Photo Kathmandu. *On the back wall, we installed* The Family Album *(2017), a work by Bikas Shrestha, who used a photograph from the Mukunda Bahadur Shrestha collection of NPL to demonstrate the effect of labor migration on family dynamics in Nepal. Over sixteen replications of the same family portrait taken in 1930, the artist gradually and meticulously cut out more and more able-bodied men and women, until in the last image, only the "toothless" (the old and very young members of the family) remain.*

From our booth, I walk over to the opposite end of the building, past eleven artist collectives from Yogyakarta to Zurich, to reach Munem Wasif and Shimul

Saha; the artists came to Amsterdam to represent the Britto Arts Trust (britto *in Bengali means "circle"), the first contemporary artist collective in Bangladesh. Like for photo.circle, the connection between Willumeit and the Britto Arts Trust (Britto) was forged during* Chobi Mela *2015, where Britto's co-founder Mahbubur Rahman and Pathshala faculty member Munem Wasif were co-curators. At* Unseen*, Britto is showing photography-based work by Wasif and Saha, as well as by fellow Britto members Manir Mrittik, Najmun Nahar Keya, and Mollar Sagar (as part of the film program).*

Sipping on our coffees, we muse about the fact that we are now meeting in Amsterdam. We update each other on people we know and reminisce about past events. We agree that it is quite ironic that artist collectives from Nepal and Bangladesh have collaborated in so many ways over the past decade, but that they now find each other at opposite sides of a building in Amsterdam. Next time, we agree, we should make sure we have adjacent booths. But then, we would have to put a thin line in-between the two spaces and call it India—just to represent the 27km stretch separating the two nations in "real life"—we joke.

This scene from the sixth edition of *Unseen Amsterdam* highlights the main observations that marked the beginning of my ethnographic research and that shape the organization of this book. Over the past two decades, a young generation of artists from Nepal and Bangladesh (born between 1969 and 1989) to which the members of PC and Britto belong, have pushed into new spaces; the artists claim a place in international art events, foster cross-disciplinary exchange through workshops, and shape emerging formats such as public arts projects and festivals.[1] The members of Britto have initiated a neighborhood-specific public art project in Old Dhaka entitled *1mile²*. They repeatedly collaborate with the *Dhaka Art Summit (DAS)*, a large-scale perennial event dedicated to the promotion of contemporary art from the region. They facilitated Bangladesh's first pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* in 2011. Building on the international workshops set up under the South Asian Network for the Arts (SANA), an arts-centered exchange program under the patronage of the London-based Triangle Arts Trust, they also sustain exchange with like-minded artists across the contested national borders of South Asia.[2] The Kathmandu-based artist-led initiative PC has organized

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1   To a certain extent, the artists grew along with this book. When I started my research in 2013, most of the artists were in their late twenties or early to mid-thirties. Many had only recently graduated or were at the beginning of their careers as artists. Over the past years however, they have grown and matured, and most importantly, a new young young generation has followed, leaving their mark on the field of art. Fully aware of these developments, I nevertheless refer to the actors as the young generation since this remains the mindset with which I started this book.

2   SANA (2000–2011) connected five South Asian collectives: KHOJ (India), Vasl (Pakistan), Sutra (Nepal), Theerta (Sri Lanka), and Britto (Bangladesh). Its patron organization, the Triangle Arts Trust, is a non-profit art institution founded in New York City in 1982 by British sculptor Anthony Caro and businessperson Robert Loder. The institution's flagship program is a perennial artist workshop—initially with artists from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada

numerous exhibitions in locations all over Nepal, from open-air rest stops near traffic junctions to high-end shopping malls. In the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake, its members rallied together a large network of people to coordinate basic relief and later the same year organized the initial edition of Photo Kathmandu *(PKTM),* a biennial photography festival combining archival and contemporary photography. The NPL, their flagship project, grew from the idea to create a multifaceted and inclusive visual repository for photographers working in and on Nepal. By calling on families to donate albums and private collections, the collective has digitized more than 60,000 photographs.[3] Art Fairs, such as *Unseen Amsterdam*, constitute only one of the many avenues that these artist collectives have started to tap into.[4] The members of Britto, PC, and other collectives in focus here are not only increasingly mobile, but also motile; they are able to move both physically and virtually, and to overcome physical, social, and institutional boundaries.[5] With their initiatives, the collectives engage different "sectorial publics" in and outside established spaces for the production and display of art;[6] they engage socio-cultural issues from visual heritage to urbanization, and they operate in varying localities situated across different scales (urban, regional, national). They mark a situation of transcultural contact and exchange that has been widely declared the global art world or the global contemporary.[7]

This notion of global contemporaneity celebrates the co-presence and synchronicity of diverse art worlds under the sign of globalization.[8]

(hence the name "triangle")—now bringing together artists from all over the world. "Mission and History," Triangle Arts Association, accessed January 31, 2023, https://www.triangleartsnyc.org/mission-and-history.

3   See "about," accessed July 22, 2023, https://www.nepalpicturelibrary.org/about/.

4   See Lars Willumeit, "Collecting Collectives: On Multiple Multitides," in *Unseen Magazine*, ed. Emilia van Lynden (Amsterdam: Idea Books, 2017), 8–12. *Unseen Amsterdam* describes itself as a "platform for contemporary photography." It was established in 2012 and exclusively focuses on new directions in the medium of photography. The three-day event, which takes place every September at Westergasfabriek, a large former gas production factory in the west of Amsterdam, comprises different formats, including a fair, a book market, an exhibition, a presentation and talk hub, as well as the 2017 newly added CO-OP space for artist collectives. "Home," Unseen Amsterdam, accessed March 15, 2021, https://unseenamsterdam.com/.

5   John Clark, "Asian Artists as Long-Distance Cultural Specialists in the Formation of Modernities," in *Asia through Art and Anthropology: Cultural Translation across Borders*, ed. Fuyubi Nakamura, Morgan Perkins, and Olivier Krischer (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 21.

6   Nina Möntmann, *Kunst als sozialer Raum: Andrea Fraser, Martha Rosler, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Renée Green* (Cologne: Walter König, 2002).

7   See Charlotte Bydler, *The Global Art World, Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2004); Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, ed., *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009); Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel, ed., *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Karlsruhe: MIT Press, 2013); Thomas Fillitz, "Anthropology and Discourses on Global Art," *Social Anthropology / Anthropologie Sociale* 23, no. 3 (2015).

8   Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, *Global Contemporary.*

Thereby, however, it also conceals asymmetries between established art locales (New York, London, Paris—as the site of major auction houses and other art institutions) and new entries.[9] Among the thirteen collectives present at *Unseen Amsterdam* in 2017, only four are based outside Western Europe: Ruang MES 56 from Indonesia, Colectivo +1 from Columbia, NPL from Nepal, and Britto from Bangladesh. While this points to the persisting role of Europe in the artistic field on a proclaimed global scale, it also signalizes ongoing regional shifts within Asia. Rather than artists from South Asia's "central court" India,[10] or Asia's "principal international [art market] hub" China,[11] curator Willumeit invited collectives from Nepal and Bangladesh. *CM* has become an important node for the forging and sustaining of alliances within the worldwide photographic community; both Britto and PC, as well as Willumeit, were able to compound upon the social and cultural capital they gathered during this event.

How do we begin to map a changing, dynamic contemporary situation in which large-scale international events outside the established art locales come to play an important role for the translocal movement of social capital within the network of contemporary art? How do we theorize a situation in which artists from outside the art world's confirmed locales proactively claim their space within not a global, but a multi-scalar contemporaneity? How do we, at the same time, recognize the art world's constant quest for new entries to the canon, its excitement for the different, the singular, the "deracinated" synchronous global?[12]

Artist collectives have emerged as an important driving force in the art field, particularly in South Asia. The fact that the organizing team of *Unseen* decided to add CO-OP, a space exclusively designed for artist collectives, highlights both the art market's desire for the newness that collectives (in contrast to high-profile individual artists) represent, and the recognition artist-led initiatives have received for their artistic and cultural work. Their selection for an event dedicated exclusively to new directions in photography bears testimony to the collectives' ability to produce in-demand cutting-edge work.

This book uses anthropology's strength to describe and understand cultural processes through the words and actions of the actors themselves. From my first fieldwork at the pavilion of the People's Republic of Bangladesh in Venice in 2011 to my last record at *Unseen Amsterdam* in 2017, I followed (intellectually and physically) the notion of contemporary art through the daily fabric of life, from artists' individual and collective

9 Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, *Global Contemporary,* 182.
10 Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, no. 6 (2002): 650.
11 Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, *Global Contemporary.*
12 Clare Harris, "In and Out of Place: Tibetan Artists' Travels in the Contemporary Art World," in Nakamura, Perkins, and Krischer, *Asia through Art and Anthropology*, 33–34.

socio-cultural practices to their ideological and physical production of their environments. The situations I discuss outline what contemporaneity can mean beyond universally aimed and eventually homogenizing theories, such as the global contemporary, as well as beyond an anthropological relativism that reduces itself to describing what others conceive as art within the context of their visual culture.[13] The act of art production cannot be separated from the socio-cultural and political context in which it happens, and locality remains a crucial component in the ethnographic analysis of cultural production and identity formation.[14] Yet, both the locality and the culture in question need to be understood in terms of socio-cultural, spatial and disciplinary mobilities, circuits of exchange, contact, and entanglement—as constantly made and remade.[15] The artists I worked with draw on their socio-cultural environment to create their pieces. Yet, this environment is not a monolithic, bounded, and territorially circumscribed space. Due to their own mobility and motility, visual references and inspirations are in constant flux, so when artists like Shrestha, whose work was exhibited in Amsterdam, draw on their socio-cultural environment they give form to the tension between situatedness and connectedness. Shrestha transfers the abstract numbers of Nepal's ongoing labor migration—for instance the high dependence on remittances (23 % of the GDP in 2009) or the number of Nepali citizens living abroad (at least one member in 29 % of households)—into a visually tangible representation.[16] By gradually

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13 For a large part of the twentieth century, the study of art in anthropology was focused on the mediation of non-Western objects to a Western public; "the emergence of relativist anthropology [put] an emphasis on placing [these] objects in specific lived contexts." James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 228. This strategy established the objects's otherness. Objects were classified according to "their" context, which effectively meant in opposition to the Euro-American value system; they were comprised as "primitive art" (as opposed to the Western category of "fine art"), as artefacts serving a specific function (as having use value, rather than aesthetic value), or as sacred (as opposed to secular) objects. See Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins, "The Anthropology of Art: A Reflection on its History and Contemporary Practice," in *The Anthropology of Art: A Reader*, ed. Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins (Malden: Blackwell, 2006); Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy, "Introduction: Rethinking Visual Anthropology," in *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, ed. Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers, "The Traffic in Art and Culture: An Introduction," in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, ed. George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); James Peoples and Garrick Bailey, "Art and the Aesthetic," in *Essentials of Cultural Anthropology*, ed. James Peoples and Garrick Bailey, (Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011); Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*; Maruška Svašek*, Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production* (London: Pluto Press, 2007); Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1927).
14 See Howard Morphy, "Foreword," in Nakamura, Perkins, and Krischer, *Asia through Art and Anthropology*, xv–xvii, xvii.
15 See Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna, "Understanding Transculturalism," in *Transcultural Modernisms*, ed. Model House Research Group (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 25.
16 Bandita Sijapati and Amrita Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal: An Analysis of Existing Policies and Institutional Mechanisms* (Kathmandu: Himal Books, 2012), 3.

removing all able-bodied family members from the historical portrait and only leaving the young and old, he illustrates the effects of Nepal's current economic policy, and offers a new vantage point from which to rethink economic processes that shape the national imaginary.

My research is firmly situated within the larger field of transcultural studies, drawing on Fernando Ortiz's explorations to find a processual, non-linear understanding of cultural transformations in Cuba, during and after colonialism.[17] Transculturality as a dynamic and processual concept operates both as research perspective and object, allowing me to transgress the idea of historically grown and delimited cultural spaces as given, and highlighting instead the transgressive and translatory qualities of cultural production.[18] More specifically directed to the analysis of locality is the concept of translocality.[19] It is an intermediary concept that gives access to different scales of inter-linkages and transgressions rather than playing them against each other. The notions of locality and boundary are socially and culturally produced and thus contingent upon contexts of heightened mobility.[20] Their scale and meaning for the actors in question (including the researcher) are constantly shifting and therefore need to be questioned and evaluated for each situation. Their circumscription can reach from specific neighborhoods to entire countries, depending on the contextual frame of reference. So can the meanings and values attached to them.[21] Scale does not refer to a measurable geographical unit, but to the spatial scope of actions.[22] Different scales of locality activate different claims, rhetorics, motivations, and strategies.[23] So rather than territorially bounded units, different scales of localities pertain to an abstraction of social actions. What is in focus is not the twenty-five kilometer stretch of

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17 Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar,* trans. Harriet De Onis (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

18 Laila Abu-Er-Rub, Christiane Brosius, Sebastian Meurer, Diamantis Panagi-otopoulos, and Susan Richter, "Introduction: Engaging Transculturality," in *Engaging Transculturality: Concepts, Key Terms, Case Studies*, ed. Laila Abu-Er-Rub, Christiane Brosius, Sebastian Meurer, Diamantis Panagiotopoulos, and Susan Richter (London: Routledge, 2019), xxviii–xxix.

19 Ulrike Freitag and Achim von Oppen, "Introduction: 'Translocality': An Approach to Connection and Transfer in Area Studies," in *Translocality: The Study of Globalising Processes from a Southern Perspective*, ed. Ulrike Freitag and Achim von Oppen (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta, ed., *Translocal Geographies: Spaces, Places, Connections* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Clemens Greiner, "Patterns of Translocality: Migration, Livelihoods and Identity in North-west Namibia," *Sociologus* 60, no. 2 (2010).

20 Freitag and von Oppen, "Introduction," 6–9.

21 See Abu-Er-Rub et al., "Introduction: Engaging Transculturality"; Monica Juneja, "'A Very Civil Idea...': Art History and World-Making—With and Beyond the Nation," in Abu-Er-Rub et al., *Engaging Transculturality*; Greiner, "Patterns of Translocality."

22 See Biao Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography: An Approach for Critical Engagement with Migration and Social Change," *Ethnography* 14, no. 3 (2013): 284–285, 290.

23 Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography," 284, 290; Anna Tsing, "Conclusion: The Global Situation," in *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader*, ed. Jonathan X. Inda and Renato Rosaldo (Malden: Blackwell, 2002), 453–485.

Indian territory between Nepal and Bangladesh that we joked about during *Unseen Amsterdam*, but how hegemonic nationalities shape economic and social policies, and for instance complicate exchange between Nepali and Bangladeshi artists. It is about how powerful art institutions in certain countries continue to frame the art field more than others, and about how artists have to provide passports when they travel. So rather than celebrating the art world as "placeless utopia" where artists and curators are free to circulate, and notions of nationality, religion, and ethnicity do not matter, this book is a strategy to talk about when and how scales of locality are invoked, by whom, and to what end.[24] For instance, when artists from the non-West are treated as spokespeople for a specific national culture,[25] while their Euro-American colleagues are located in a presumed global visual culture, it is important to acknowledge that anthropology's long standing tradition of reading art within its bounded locality-culture context bears the responsibility. Other culprits in this regard are grand theories, such as Pierre Bourdieu's or Howard Becker's, which positioned seemingly closed-off (nationally) bounded art fields or worlds. Transculturality offers an alternative approach to contemporaneity beyond this vocabulary. Every situation I discuss, and every conception of locality (mine and that of my research partners), is invariably connected to regulations, claims, and rhetoric. Further, these situations—localities situated across a variety of scales (urban, regional, national)—are interconnected through the mobility of people, things, and ideas. Therefore, they are constantly in translation and the parameters for their boundaries need to be set anew.

It would be a mistake to assume that artists are inactive subjects in these processes, that they now lead nomadic lives and create artworks about rootedness and mobility—that they make culture, while we as anthropologists, sociologists, or art historians analyze their cultural productions. On the contrary, artists play an active part in translation and shaping processes. Much like anthropologists, they are "long-distance cultural specialists."[26] I acknowledge this by calling them my research partners, and more importantly, by making their (trans-)cultural brokerage my primary research focus. What role do collective effort and collaborative action play in the emergence of a new generation of contemporary artists that increasingly claims the right to contribute to the production of its localities, and thus also its artistic fields? Or, in other words, how do the young generations' collective, artistic practices help us (as human beings and researchers) to rethink notions of locality? The artist collectives I worked with do not merely push into new spaces. They increasingly claim the right to contribute to the mental and physical shaping of their localities. Their cultural practices transcend different worlds; they transgress

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24 Harris, "In and Out of Place," 33–34.
25 Néstor García Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself: Anthropology for a Society without a Story Line*, trans. David Frye (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 47.
26 Clare Harris, "The Buddha Goes Global: Some Thoughts towards a Transnational Art History," *Art History* 29, no. 4 (2006): 698–720, 699.

distinct boundaries, from fostering exchange across South Asia's contested borders, marked by colonialism and partition, to engaging with spaces commonly not perceived as spaces of artistic production.[27] They transmit knowledge between different visual discourses, thereby both proactively and unconsciously changing the discourses they enter or to which they return. However, this is not a matter of linear transmission or translation, from the visual discourse they have emerged from (been educated and socialized in) to that of an other (national, regional, or global). Much like localities and cultures, visual discourses are not territorially bounded, but related to flows of knowledge, education, media, practice, traditions.[28] This means that the values and norms indicating one discourse are always already in relation to other visual discourses, thus constantly being relativized, negotiated, changed. Often artists are not aware of the effect their physical and virtual mobility has on these visual discourses. At other times, they consciously use their works or projects to question hegemonic narratives of national identity, religion, and gender roles. Their activities raise questions about the kind of localities circumscribed and presented in exhibition formats such as the *DAS* or the *Venice Biennale*, as well as about the actors making and controlling these claims. The artists in this book generate dialogical spaces in and through their artworks; they open up new forms of knowledge production, of understanding, of negotiating, and of interdependence.

Underlying these observations about artist collectives in Nepal and Bangladesh is a tension between notions of situatedness and connectedness, autonomy and transgression. This not only pertains to the relation between locality and mobility / motility, but also to the way collectivity and collaborative action are understood. Artists have individual reasons to join collectives: access to further education, workshops, studio space, creative outlets, contact to like-minded people, or opportunities to exhibit and sell their work. The format of the collective enables artists to engage and take position in contemporary discourses, to assert themselves *vis-à-vis* established institutions (national academies, galleries, and foundations), and thus claim agency as a "local community" in shaping the conditions for the art practice in their artistic field.[29] Initiatives like the *PKTM* festival or public art projects like *1mile²* aim towards a collective advancement of contemporary art, the strengthening of group-identity (as artists, as photographers, or as creatives), the generation of social, cultural, and economic capital, and socio-political change.[30] The situatedness or groundedness

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27 Harris, "The Buddha Goes Global," 699.
28 Compare to Clark, "Asian Artists," 21.
29 Tayeba Begum Lipi, "Extending and Expanding the Idea and Space," in *SANA: South Asian Network for the Arts*, ed. Pooja Sood (New York: Ford Foundation, 2014), 167–173, 172.
30 In line with Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical explorations, I discern three different types of capital: economic, social, and cultural. Economic capital, in this case, comprises the monetary resources artists have at their disposal, through their family background, the sale of artworks, commissions, or full-time occupations.

within individual or local needs however, is only ever temporary; it is dislocated, reevaluated, transgressed, and (re)situated with every contact and (inter)action. Beyond collectives like PC or Britto, there is a larger sense of artistic commonality, a need for artists to feel connected and supported across large geographical distances, especially in localities that cannot rely on the economic and infrastructural support of well-established art institutions. What is needed is an analytic framework that recognizes the tension between a desire for autonomy—to act from and for a local community—and an urgency to connect to a wider, multi-scalar network of contemporary art. Focusing on collaborative practices from a transcultural practice and through anthropological methods, especially participant observation and semi-structured interviews, allows for this framework.

When I invoke the term community, I mean neither a territorially bounded group of people that share a system of cultural traits and values,[31] nor the type of utopian, egalitarian community in which power asymmetries based on ethnicity, nationality, class, sexuality, or gender have been overcome in the name of art, as Clare Harris has described.[32] I posit an imaginary, contemporary collectivity that allows for the tension to persist between artists celebrated or commodified on account of their newness and difference, and artists connecting (not for a lack of difference but) because of similar ways of approaching life through art.

Compared to art history or philosophy, and given its preference for emic viewpoints, anthropology seems rather ill equipped to offer a new definition of art. Due to its long-term qualitative approach however, it allows access to "the kind of experimental knowledge that lets you talk convincingly, from the gut, about what it feels like" to be a member of the contemporary fields of art in(between) Bangladesh and Nepal.[33] In other words,

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This capital can be put towards collective acquisitions, for example, such as real estate or equipment. Bourdieu defines social capital as the "aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition." Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 248–249. This could be connections to other artists, curators, key players in art, or funding institutions, which the collective shares among its members. Cultural capital, acquired through formal education or home background, represents the knowledge that allows individuals, for instance, to recognize and understand "legitimate" works of art. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2010 [1984]); Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital,"; Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009 [1993]).

31 See Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport, "Prologue: The Book's Questions," in *The Trouble with Community: Anthropological Reflections on Movement, Identity and Collectivity*, ed. Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 1–10, 3; Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, (Chinester: Ellis Horwood & Tavistock, 1985), 15.

32 Harris, "The Buddha Goes Global," 33–34.

33 Russell H. Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006), 342.

long-term participant observation offers insight into where and when contemporary art happens, against what its practices are directed, and which borders it tries to transgress. I use art as a heuristic device, an analytical and connective force, which serves as a tool for the critical engagement with different scales of localities, boundaries, and communities, and which connects artists via their critical engagement with these concepts. Through my case studies, I trace a notion of contemporaneity that (like locality and culture) is processual, grown within a visual discourse marked by exchange and mobility. It is shaped by relations between institutions and individuals, and specific to the situations in which it is invoked.[34] This alternative contemporaneity is not confined to the autonomous space of the artist studio or the museum. Rather, its symbolic production emerges from a network of interconnected situations, such as the large-scale perennial event, the public space, the gallery, and a historical building.[35] Artists are researchers and thinkers, actively negotiating the diverse claims to these localities. They make use of vernacular visual histories and architectural heritage in order to ask new questions, or old questions anew. Contemporary art is a place where questions are translated and retranslated;[36] it arises from a contestation of fine art curriculums and canons as well as current socio-political discourses.

Bringing together collectives, localities, and networks, this book adds to current theoretical debates on contemporary art and processes of global connectedness from the perspective of transculturality and is anchored within anthropological research. In the remainder of this introduction, I map contemporary cultural production beyond all-encompassing universalist theories to offer an alternative actor-centered perspective on globalization processes. The collectives and their initiatives are key in my analysis of a multi-scalar contemporary art field built on a tension between autonomy and connectedness. My ethnography is firmly based within a transcultural research frame. Therein, I contribute to the development of a more nuanced discussion of the still crucial notion of locality by looking at it through the transgressive and transcultural brokerage of contemporary artists. Lastly, I propose a reconfiguration of multi-sited ethnography from the perspective of recent theories on translocality. I present scale and network as analytical tools that allow me to reconcile anthropology's commitment to locality and its interest in global processes.

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34 See Svašek, *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production*, 6.
35 Bourdieu considers art production to be the result of a material and symbolic production. The latter is realized by a set of agents including critics and museum and gallery managers, and allows the beholder or consumer to recognize an artwork's value as such. The term consumer refers to all actors that offer legitimacy to the art production by supporting, visiting, participating in, reading about, and following artists and their work. Bourdieu differentiates three types of consumers: other producers of artworks, the elites or dominant class, and the "popular" or ordinary consumers. Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 35, 50.
36 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 112.

COLLECTIVES

The generation of artists I am interested in marks a specific set of people: the vast majority received a secondary education from a fine arts institution, and either grew up in an urban, middle class environment, or settled in the city during or after their studies. This narrow focus excludes a large number of other artists in Nepal and Bangladesh, from older generations of artists to producers of art commonly categorized as religious and/or traditional. Within this still large set of interest here, I followed those artists that are (or were at some point in their life) actively involved with collectives, or at the least regularly participated in collaborative formats.[37]

During my preliminary research, the term collective was an emic category that the actors I was interested in used to describe themselves on their websites, social media accounts, and in program descriptions. The more I wanted to grasp what this collectivity meant in terms of everyday practices, the broader the notion became. Sometimes the only common denominator was some kind of collaborative activity created by artists for the benefit of other artists. This is due to the fact that the regularity of activities was, and still is, heavily dependent on available funding and members' individual (artistic or private) engagements and schedules. Formally, the collectives are registered either as NGOs, trusts, or non-business entities, but with each initiative and event I observed, the dynamic within changed: the frequency of meetings varied, hanging-out spaces shifted, members left, and others joined. There were times during my research when it felt like Britto barely existed, with all its members involved in their own personal projects. At other times, residencies, workshops, lectures, and group exhibitions happened simultaneously, creating a huge buzz for all participants. Further, the character of the collectives is contingent on the physical form they take. In 2012, Britto inaugurated Britto Space, a multi-purpose gallery, workshop, and guest room in a semi-commercial building on Green Road in Dhaka. PC has its own offices in Patan, one of the three cities in the Kathmandu valley, which it regularly uses as workshop space or as a hang out spot for staff and friends.[38] A twenty-minute walk away, Bindu—A Space for Artists (Bindu) operates from co-founders Saurganga Darshandhari and Prithvi Shrestha's apartment-cum-studio, offering a place for hanging out, for residencies, and talks. Further, most collectives run through a variety of avatars over the years. Drik (Sanskrit for "vision") for instance was founded in 1989 by photographer Shahidul

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37 I conducted interviews with fifty-nine artists overall, but throughout my research (2013–2017) shared interactions and conversations with more than two hundred artists in Nepal and Bangladesh.

38 The Kathmandu valley (roughly 30 × 35 km) houses the three major cities of the country: Kathmandu, Patan (Lalitpur), and Bhaktapur. Patan and Kathmandu have grown so extensively that the transition from one to the other is no longer clearly visible. In common usage, the term Kathmandu (and by extension the city) thus often comprises the entire urbanized part of the valley, including all three cities.

Alam as a space for photography in Dhaka. It started as a darkroom and a studio, to which a gallery and a library were added. Today Drik is a multi-layered organization, comprising Bangladesh's first school for photography, the Pathshala South Asia Media Institute, a photography agency Majority World, and the biennially organized *CM*. Depending on the shape they take in a particular situation, the forms of collectivity I encountered could thus be described through affective notions (friendship or family), terms pertaining to their form (centers, spaces, or networks), or to their durability (institution or complicity). However, these concepts only proved useful when describing specific activities and formats, not the collaboration as a more durable entity.

"Complicity," as argued by cultural theorist Gesa Ziemer, marks an intensive relationship between a small, heterogeneous circle of creative and inspired people, who come together to realize a common goal.[39] They operate pragmatically, swiftly, and imaginatively. Once the common goal is achieved, however, they break apart, much like criminals planning and succeeding at robbing a bank. While Ziemer's work on complicity remains one of the only theoretical engagements with notions of collective creativity, it proves ill fitted to discuss long-term connections. Likewise, Grant H. Kester's more descriptive approach, which is directed towards site-specific collaborative projects, does not allow him to reach a circumscription of what collective practice, beyond the realization of a specific project, entails.[40] Hans Peter Thurn traces a longer history of collaborations from *Künstlergruppen* (artist groups), *Künstlergemeinschaften* (artist communities), and *Künstlerkolonien* (artist colonies) and focuses on the values that motivate such alliances, notably shared views, interests, and aims.[41] He asserts that the intensive exchange of ideas, the collaboration in works or exhibitions, as well as the mutual encouragement and support of like-minded people boosts creativity. He however concludes that the collective is often a transitional phase—a strategy of self-empowerment between graduating and launching a successful individual career. Like Ziemer and Kester, he treats the eventual end of most alliances like a natural progression. Richard Florida's notion of the "creative class" is directed to a seemingly more enduring group of creatives.[42] Beyond acknowledging their existence at the interface of art, the global market, and a rapid, global expansion of neoliberal mechanisms, however, Florida does not offer much of an explanation as to how different members of this "creative class" interact with localities and their infrastructure.

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39 Gesa Ziemer, *Komplizenschaft: Neue Perspektiven auf Kollektivität* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013), 9–11.
40 Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
41 Hans P. Thurn, "Die Sozialität des Solitären," *Kunstforum International* 116 (1991).
42 Richard Florida, "Cities and the Creative Class," in *The Urban Sociology Reader*, ed. Jan Lin and Christopher Mele (London: Routledge, 2010); Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class, Revisited* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

Instead of attempting a theoretical adjustment of one of these concepts to make it productive for long-term analysis, I decided to use the artists' self-chosen term "collective" as a heuristic device—a *Denkfigur* (model or figure of thought) for collective effort and a potential for creative process.[43] The openness of the notion allowed me to gradually establish characteristics that I could then use to analyze how each collective works in the particular situations I studied. Over time, it became clear that the collectives and what connects or differentiates them are more than the sum of situational instances of social, joint, and directed acting. My case studies show that fluid forms of contact can lead to more sustained relations.[44] These relations rely on a tension between affinity and autonomy. The collective is a mode of togetherness that offers artists support and companionship. This support is characterized in terms of access to economic, social, and cultural capital, but also in collaboratively organizing programs and sharing the responsibilities of planning, execution, and outcome. Collaboration consists in a mutual understanding of the demands and challenges of art practice beyond specific projects. It manifests in the formal exchange of knowledge during workshops as well as in the casual sharing of news and stories while hanging out. It can lead to long-lasting friendships, even marriages, but also to fallouts and feuds.

At the same time, the collective offers autonomy, especially in the material and conceptual production of artworks, but also in life in general. The collectives I looked at are based on an underlying belief in democratic values (freedom of speech, equality, critical thinking, common good). They are inclusive of different ethnicities, languages, religions, and, to a certain extent, political beliefs. Membership is based on affinity—the conscious decision to focus on collectively furthering the practice of contemporary art. Based on this autonomy, collectives also allow for (even encourage) behaviors less accepted within the family or the wider society. Collective spaces are often considered safe spaces in which artists are free to break with religious and socio-cultural norms such as wearing clothes considered inappropriate in other social situations, or consuming illegal or unaccepted substances. Nevertheless, the collectives are neither a replacement

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43 See Rachel Mader, "Einleitung," in *Kollektive Autorschaft in der Kunst: Alternatives Handeln und Denkmodell*, ed. Rachel Mader (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), 8.

44 Christian Kravagna expands on Mary Louise Pratt's definition of the "contact zone" as "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict," and applies it to the art practice. He stresses the collaborative factor and defines "contact" in relation to *Begegnung* (encounter), *Austausch* (exchange), and *Allianz* (alliance). He emphasizes the transgression of colonial and cultural boundaries, as well as the "de-centered," "multilateral," and "intentional" nature of artistic contact. This understanding stands in contrast to the term impact, which Kravagna relates to forms of European modernist "cultural appropriation" and inspiration. Christian Kravagna, *Transmoderne: Eine Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts* (Berlin: b_books, 2017), 50; Mary L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 5–6.

for, nor in competition with kinship relations. Rather, they offer a counter-balance—a place to take a break from family responsibilities. Collectives are not free of rules either; membership comes with a set of responsibilities and loyalties. These include the willingness to contribute time and physical and mental energy in the realization of projects, the sharing of social, cultural, and on occasion also economic capital, as well as the commitment to mutual respect, loyalty, and trust.

A similar tension of autonomy and affinity is at work on a bigger scale in the relation between different collectives. It is here that the idea of a "border-transgressing artist community" emerges—an idea or potentiality that contemporary artists are connected through their art practice while simultaneously assuming their own position in the field. Beyond the collective, I thus needed a theoretical frame to grasp an emerging understanding of contemporaneity through this tension between autonomy and relatedness on different scales.

In *Art Beyond Itself,* Néstor García Canclini describes a new contemporary situation in which "art has left its autonomy behind."[45] Artists have been incorporated into a large-scale art market and proactively insert themselves into society. Therefore, they have to find new strategies for creative transgression and critical dissent that neither spectacularize socio-political issues in order to force the reaction of their audience, nor risk trapping them in an infernal circle of transgressions that have no effect on the status quo. Our task as researchers, Canclini contends, is to map frictions and to outline how creators negotiate the meaning of their works in relation to cultural industries. He makes it clear that the "postautonomous condition" is not a radically new stage and that the autonomy of art still plays a role.[46] Yet, grand theories based entirely on an autonomous logic are not suitable to deal with this new condition. When Bourdieu and Becker wrote about autonomous circuits and the boundaries of art and literature, they were dealing only with museums in the centers of the art world and not with the transcultural connections of over two hundred biennales and art fairs.[47] Bourdieu's attempts to organize art in terms of aesthetic prescriptions, codified knowledge, and self-justifiable effects was, and remains, especially unconvincing. According to Canclini, Bourdieu stretched the logic of the field as entirely autonomous too far, thus limiting himself in dealing with innovation, the creative role of individuals, and the links between the art field and society.[48] However, I agree with Canclini when he concedes that we should neither proclaim the death of art and its autonomy because much of art is found outside the field, nor turn our backs on pieces of knowledge and methods that can still be useful.[49]

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45 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself,* 20.
46 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 180.
47 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 19.
48 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 178.
49 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 19.

Howard Becker rightly asserted that every artistic creation depends on an extensive division of labor. He emphasized the need for a system of art-related professionals, which he comprises as an "art world."[50] He borrows the term from Arthur Danto but extends the notion from Danto's New York-centered "artworld" to a plurality of "art worlds," recognizing a more dynamic, pluri-centric notion of the actors and institutions involved in the artistic practice.[51] Becker's extension of the concept does not go far enough, however, as it neither allows a nuanced approach to different scales of relatedness, nor to the characteristics of these relations.[52] Further, he focuses solely on the professional system, thereby ignoring other kinds of support.[53] Many of my interview partners use the term friendship to describe the support they receive from fellow artists. Friendship here is an "idiom of affinity and togetherness."[54] It describes a relationship that proactively highlights similarities (same occupation, interests, class) over differences that could possibly separate.[55] These similarities are the basis for emotional and cognitive support, which range from empathy for personal struggles to practice-related feedback. It is an emphasis on similarities that allows artists to identify with a wider artist community. Both idioms—friendship and the artist community—differ from the art world in that (like the collective) they are emic categories, and that they emphasize affective qualities (shared creative values and needs) over more formal, professional, and economically-driven relations. The artist community that my interview partners refer to is comprised of "real," face-to-face relations (people who regularly meet at art events, in school, or in workshops) and potential interactions, based on the idea that like-minded artists can be found anywhere in the world and that there is knowledge to be gained from fostering exchange with such artists. Emic notions help me describe the way that artists emotionally qualify certain relationships and demarcate them from others, but they are not sufficient to describe the large set of multi-scalar connections in which my research partners engage.

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50 Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 13.
51 Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964).
52 The use of the term relatedness in anthropology marks an attempt to rethink the narrow, often biologically determined definitions of kinship—a central focus in anthropology since the establishment of the field—to account for new models of family life, or, for instance, the changes brought forth by reproductive technologies. It has, as I wish to emphasize, also allowed anthropologists to focus on other types of relations, such as "fictive kinship" or friendship, following Amit Desai and Evan Killick. Amit Desai and Evan Killick, ed., *The Ways of Friendship: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Berghahn Books 2013 [2010]), 2; Daniel Miller, "The Ideology of Friendship in the Era of Facebook," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 1 (June 2017); Janet Carsten, *After Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
53 See Svašek, *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production*, 94–95.
54 Claudia Barcellos Rezende, "Building Affinity Through Friendship," in *The Anthropology of Friendship*, ed. Sandra Bell and Simon Coleman (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 92–93.
55 Rezende, "Building Affinity Through Friendship."

In contrast to Canclini's critical assessment, I comprehend Bourdieu's field theory as hinging on a tension between autonomy and relation. Bourdieu describes a field balanced between a heteronomous (as completely subject to external laws of economic and political profit) and an autonomous (as completely autonomous from these laws) principle of hierarchization.[56] His conception of relative autonomy calls attention to the fact that the production of art is not only shaped by internal rules (from within the artistic field), but also subject to external laws of economic profit and political power. In other words, the positions that actors and their artworks take in the field are always subject to both internal aesthetic and external economic and political values. He offers a valid approach to both intimate object-environment relations and the larger frame in which these are embedded. My initial concern with Bourdieu was thus not about how relational or relative his conception of the field is, but about its entanglement with the scale of the national. Larissa Buchholz already aptly argued that concepts like society or power cannot simply be scaled up from their context of origin in Western nationally circumscribed societies to the global scale.[57] Bourdieu does account for a transposition of his theory from one nation-state to the other, but not from one scale to another, nor for the changes in theoretical architecture that this would demand.[58]

The increased interconnectedness in(between) the contemporary artistic field(s), pushed by a young generation of contemporary artists in Nepal and Bangladesh, is not merely an opening up of two art fields to influences from outside (styles, materials, formats, and so on). Likewise, it is not the establishment of networks of exchange beyond the national frame with supranationally operating institutions (such as the Prince Claus Fund or the Ford Foundation). It is the emergence of a new contemporary artistic field that is not bound to one (national or international) scale. It is translocal; it has effects on and activates actors and institutions within the same city, the region, the country, and on other continents. How do we salvage Bourdieu's relational theory for an approach to this emergence? How do we write about art field(s) from a transcultural perspective and in the context of a multi-scalar oriented contemporaneity that is able to account for both short-term, energetic forms of collaboration and more long-term connections?

Buchholz demonstrates that the field theory can be refitted for a translocal approach to show how globally operating fields remain articulated and interdependent despite markets and socio-political topics encroaching on their autonomy.[59] Her method consists of an analytical reduction of Bourdieu's field to three defining and scale-invariant characteristics: first,

56 Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*.
57 Larissa Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field? Theorizing Fields Beyond the Nation-State," *The Sociological Review* 64, no. 2 (2016).
58 Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field?" 31–34.
59 Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field?"

the belief that art practice is distinctive, independent, and more valuable than other practices; second, the establishment of a hierarchy that gives legitimacy through peer criteria (as opposed to external principles of evaluation); and third, the formation of a distinctive institutional infrastructure. The notion of autonomy she distills from Bourdieu is the relative autonomy of a field governed by a logic distinctive to that field. This logic describes the way in which people see the world and devise categories and hierarchies through specific training or education. Nevertheless, this type of functional autonomy based on a sphere of specialized practice is not absolute, nor does it preclude external influences. Furthermore, it is not sufficient to accurately comprehend a field operating on a multi-continental scale of geographic expansion. Buchholz thus proposes a second kind of autonomy: a vertical autonomy that is different to the autonomy of other field levels in meaning and direction, but not in a hierarchical manner. Applying this vertical autonomy to her own research, Buchholz is able to show that new forms of transnational or global capital bring new institutional practices of classifying and assessing artistic recognition; there are new conceptions of value in global terms, new principles of hierarchy, and new types of global capital.[60]

Buchholz's approach to global art circuits takes an institutional perspective, but she indicates that vertical autonomy could be used for a theorization of the strategies of agents, oriented towards different field levels and thus enacting different meanings in relation to these levels.[61] The fact that nearly all my research partners graduated from a fine arts institution seems to indicate that a fine arts degree has become a prerequisite to enter the field. The art school is where prospective artists learn the values particular to the field, where they become fluent in a distinctive practice, as opposed to other fields such as literature, medicine, or business management. Further, there are specific institutions dedicated to art in Nepal and Bangladesh. Museums, galleries, and especially the national academies, which, through their annual national exhibitions, exhibit, judge, and award art in a peer-reviewed process. However, the emerging generation of contemporary artists in focus here is no longer dependent on the values and hierarchies prescribed by these nationally structured fields. The collectives adopt a multi-positionality in a multi-scalar field. They offer new ways for education by organizing workshops and bringing in educators from other fields and localities. Through events like *1mile²* or *PKTM*, artists are no longer limited to the national exhibitions as peer-reviewed legitimacy. By positioning themselves on multiple scales, they access a new network of peers, from their fellow collective members to international curators that give their practice value. Nevertheless, this is not about discarding the national frame. On the contrary, my research partners have no issue with participating in the national

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60 Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field?" 41–43.
61 Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field?" 43–44.

exhibitions while simultaneously engaging with the SANA and the *Venice Biennale*. Hence, there is a relative autonomous logic of competition at play in the nationally circumscribed localities of Nepal and Bangladesh, sustained by the education system and other national art institutions. But emerging from that field is a contemporary situation characterized by actors that consciously claim multi-positionality and a multi-scalar scope of action.

On a more critical note, Buchholz fails to consider that the absence of hierarchy and directionality do not necessarily entail an absence of friction, especially in the contestation of value. In Buchholz' explorations, value exclusively indicates economic competition. In my observations, value is a more open category that is co-defined by the artists and the collective depending on the situation. Buchholz (and Canclini) comprehend the global market as a new crucial actor in determining symbolic and economic value within the global field. I do not deny the markets' power in these processes of value negotiation. I suggest that here, too, focusing on the tension between autonomy and connectedness allows us to consider the artists' agency within global circuits of capital. Depending on the aim and scope of the project (the context of the situation), artists have the agency to choose which circuits they connect to and from which they want to stay autonomous. Most collectives operate on a non-profit basis and are based on a non-hierarchical ideal of equal status and reciprocity. In many cases, social and cultural capital are emphasized over economic capital. This is especially the case in collective projects, which are often directed towards collective goals. In workshops for instance, the collectives often remain autonomous from the market and focus on experimentation and process, rather than on a finished product. In exhibitions, performances, or talks, the collective members may also choose to address their views on national, urban, and gender identities, thereby seeking to engage with diverse members of the society or to influence wider socio-political discourses. They act as part of a civil society that promotes values such as equality, autonomy, freedom, and contract,[62] and through specific actions try to influence public policy.[63] Nevertheless, these strategies should not be interpreted as a utopic leftist ideal of collectivity nor as a binary opposition to a capitalist market. They are part of ongoing negotiations over the value of art in which the artists are actively taking part. They are neither autonomous from, nor entirely determined by the market. In order to sharpen this discussion on artists' agency, I propose to look at artists as transcultural brokers.

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62 See Partha Chatterjee, "On Civil and Political Society in Post-Colonial Democracies," in *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, ed. Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 172.

63 See Charles Taylor, "Invoking Civil Society," in *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*, ed. Robert E. Goodin and Philip Pettit (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 66.

(TRANS)CULTURAL BROKERS

Eric Wolf first used the term broker to describe actors who, using a canny manipulation of culture-specific social ties, mediate between the scale of the community and the nation.[64] Their position within an arena of continuously changing friendships and alliances allows these actors to gain access to social, economic, and cultural capital. However, theirs is also a dangerous position, as the brokers represent competition for other power holders. Brokers assume nodes of contact that connect between scales of the local and the national and between different scales of power. They must serve both sides, balancing a tension without ever fully resolving it, as their own usefulness depends on this tension to persist.[65] While Wolf locates cultural brokerage between different scales of the same cultural context, Marc von der Höh, Nikolas Jaspert, and Jenny Oesterle develop three types of cross-cultural brokerage.[66] The first concerns people who live in and communicate with a cultural environment different from their own, such as migrants or merchants. The second type pertains to people who deliberately convey messages from one cultural environment into another, diplomats or missionaries for instance. The last comprises people who mediate between two cultural spheres without fully being part of either, such as Jewish traders in medieval Muslim or Christian courts. The scholars further distinguish between latent transference, as a byproduct of other activities (trade or pilgrimage), and manifest or intentional transference of cultural messages.[67] Clare Harris introduces the idea of the itinerant artist as a long-distance cultural specialist, i.e., cultural producers whose practices transcend different worlds. Rather than of bounded cultures, like Wolf, von der Höh, Jaspert, and Oesterle, Harris refers to the "cultural logic" of one place or field. This logic is not erased on departure from its field and remains as a memory and an "eminently transportable toolbox of art praxis" that can be reused over space and time.[68] Harris' main goal is to show that this transmission of visual information does not necessarily happen along the central axis of Euro–America, as is often assumed within hegemonic globalization discourses; it is multidirectional and can begin and end in diverse sites. In contrast to the previously mentioned scholars, John Clark introduces a third virtual or imagined space for a synthetic visual discourse between visual cultures.[69] He argues that when artists, as technical specialists, carry knowledge from one local visual discourse into

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64 Eric R. Wolf, "Aspects of Group Relations in a Complex Society: Mexico," *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 6 (1956).
65 Wolf, "Aspects of Group Relations," 1076.
66 Marc von der Höh, Nikolas Jaspert, and Jenny R. Oesterle, "Courts, Brokers and Brokerage in the Medieval Mediterranean," in *Cultural Brokers at Mediterranean Courts in the Middle Ages*, ed. Marc von der Höh, Nikolas Jaspert, and Jenny R. Oesterle (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2013).
67 Von der Höh, Jaspert, and Oesterle, "Courts, Brokers and Brokerage," 23–24.
68 Harris, "The Buddha Goes Global," 699.
69 Clark, "Asian Artists."

that of an Other, into an imaginary third space, or back into their originating discourse, the latter loses its hegemony. Its sovereignty and determination for the production of art are relativized as its values now exist in relation to those of other systems.[70] Whereas Harris opens up the possibility of seeing art producers as cultural brokers, Clark's notion is by far the most useful in a transcultural approach. He shows that mobile artists do not actually leave one discourse to enter another while mediating between the two. Instead of taking elements (or tools as Harris calls them) from one grounded sphere to another, they create a third virtual space with elements of the diverse discourses they encounter. From this third visual space, the discourse they emerged from (shaped by upbringing, media consumption, formal education, etc.) is relativized and changed. Therefore, artists often experience being "outside" their originating discourse as a freedom, an undominated space in-between where imagination and art-discursive realization are unrestrained.[71] Clark's notion of brokerage thus opens the venturing of artists into new spaces as a site of analysis. It might explain why artists feel creatively inspired by their travels and why they consciously expose themselves to new elements of visual culture. It offers a lens to look at large-scale events, international workshops, and art parties as crucial nodes of connection. Transcultural brokerage helps artists relativize, negotiate, and rethink knowledge they have gained in their field and, in the process, create something new.[72] Further, transcultural mediation or brokerage is not about resolving the tension between two discourses or scales that are conceived as separate (local–global or Nepal–Bangladesh), it is, as Wolf argued, about keeping this tension alive. Through the tension, artists gain not only creative impulses but also access to capital, which they then can mediate to other actors in the field. Collectives especially facilitate communication between their members and other members of the art world (from fellow artists to biennale directors). Thereby they negotiate religious, linguistic, and socio-economic differences while often marking that cultural difference through their presence.[73] Contemporary artists both proactively and unconsciously use art as a medium to change the discourses they enter or return to as well as to transgress hegemonic and normative notions of culture and locality. However, this is not a matter of linear translation from the visual discourse they emerged from (were educated or socialized in) to that of an Other (national, regional, or global) discursive context. Much like localities and cultures, visual discourses are not territorially bounded; they relate to flows of knowledge, education, media, and practice traditions.[74]

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70 Clark, "Asian Artists," 21.
71 Clark, "Asian Artists," 21–22.
72 Carola May and Anja Saretzki, "Interkulturelle versus transkulturelle Räume des Kulturtourismus," in *Kulturelle Übersetzer: Kunst und Kulturmanagement im transkulturellen Kontext*, ed. Christiane Dätsch (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 393.
73 Von der Höh, Jaspert, and Oesterle, "Courts, Brokers and Brokerage."
74 Clark, "Asian Artists," 21.

It is important to note that not all artists are cultural brokers or broker culturally all the time. The discourse from which they emerged is a site of discoursal stability, i.e., relatively autonomous. It is not a closed, settled field or a site of denial of change/variation. Staying overseas, participating in residencies abroad or joining international education programs facilitates experimentation with the patterns of this discourse, but the experience is not the same for every artist. Traveling does not automatically make artists specialists in two or more cultural/visual discourses,[75] nor are the artists the only people involved in brokering. Wolf broaches the potential for friction when he elaborates on the competition between brokers and other power holders.[76] In the artistic field, this could be collectors, curators, or foundations who have their own agendas and broker accordingly. Further, artists are not always in control of the cultural elements they broker; in biennales and exhibitions they might involuntarily be treated as spokespeople for specific national cultures and be expected to broker certain styles or motifs by curators, audiences, or the media. Lastly, cultural brokerage is contingent upon mobility, but mobility does not always necessarily involve the physical mobility of people. For a transcultural perspective, it is important to consider motility as well as actual mobility.[77] Motility is the ability to move both physically and virtually; to see if an artist is able to move across expanded geographical distances allows for instance access to information on their financial resources, the validity of their passport, their access to digital media, their social connections as well as their cultural capital. This in turn can influence the content and scope of their brokerage.

The transdisciplinary field of mobilities has focused on the complex and dynamic entanglements caused by the movement of ideas, people, and objects. It has shown that there are different kinds of mobilities, from the sociological canon to the spatial mobilities of humans, objects, information, and images, as well the means (transport, infrastructure, and technologies) enabling this mobility.[78] I want to guide attention to three types of mobilities relevant for transcultural brokerage: disciplinary, socio-cultural, and spatial mobilities. As part of their claim to shape the locality in which they dwell or work, contemporary artists contest the existing art infrastructure. Especially the still vastly eurocentric fine arts framework with its canon of European masters is subject to their critique. As a result, my research partners cultivate disciplinary mobilities. Chapters three and four of this book deal with these disciplinary mobilities through specific case studies: on the one hand, my research partners express an interest in the often marginalized national and regional art histories of Nepal and Bangladesh. On the

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75 Clark, "Asian Artists," 21–22.
76 Wolf, "Aspects of Group Relations," 1071–1072, 1076.
77 Clark, "Asian Artists," 21–22.
78 See Mimi Sheller, "The New Mobilities Paradigm for a Live Sociology," *Current Sociology Review* 62, no. 6 (2014); John Urry, "Mobile Sociology," *The British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 1 (2010).

other hand, they aim to break free from the medium-specific organization of the university and college departments. Activities organized by artist-led initiatives have become a site where new mediums (installation, performance, digital art)[79] can be tested and where exchange with disciplines outside the art canon (theater, music, or photography)[80] can happen. Further, discursive practices such as artist talks, workshops, "art writing," and other forms of mediation are increasingly part of the art practice.[81] Artists do not focus on making artworks. They want to shape the discursive field around them. While the majority of fine arts curricula in place in Nepal and Bangladesh emphasize manual training, the collectives have become a space of, and for, art-related activities.

In a similar line, the artists I focus on stimulate socio-cultural mobilities. They question prevailing asymmetries (such as between Hindus and Muslims in Bangladesh, or between high-caste Brahmins and ethnic minorities in Nepal) and actively foster social inclusivity and transcultural exchange. All the case studies presented in this book contain instances of this type of brokerage, but chapter five discusses the collectives' strategies in more detail: the initiatives, for instance, seek unconventional exhibition spaces outside predominantly middle class neighborhoods and established art spaces in order to foster socio-cultural diversity and break up established boundaries. Further, the collectives' own constitution reflects their transgression of hegemonic socio-cultural hierarchies. Without exception, all the artist-run initiatives I worked with comprised members from diverse ethnicities and religions; they included atheists, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus of different castes and social backgrounds. Thereby, they differ from other fields of art production, such as "traditional" *Mithila* or *Thanka / Poubha* painting. These practices and the related transfer of knowledge largely remain organized according to

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79 I use the plural form mediums to refer exclusively to artistic materials. In contrast, I use the plural form "media" to describe means of communication such as television, radio, or newspapers. "New mediums" are artistic practices that crosscut the boundaries of the classic fine art mediums such as painting, sculpture, and printmaking. The notion is an umbrella term for a variety of practices such as mixed media, installation, performance, and new media art. It can also refer to projects or works that transcend the discipline of visual arts in a broader sense such as those engaging music, theater, or dance. In contrast, the term new media refers to a variety of media that can be created and displayed through digital electronic devices (digital images, digital video, e-books, and so on).

80 In both Nepal and Bangladesh, photography remains excluded from the governmental fine arts curriculum at the time of my research.

81 David Carrier uses the term "art writing" to refer "to texts by both art critics and art historians." He opposes art writing to art making, however, assuming that both the artwork and the text form a unit of discourse in art writing; they cannot be considered independently. David Carrier, *Artwriting* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 141. I use the term art writing to refer to the diverse forms of writings about art, including newspaper articles, catalog texts, artist statements, biographical accounts, and, in a wider sense, any recorded research into art history. See Marcus and Myers, "Traffic in Art and Culture."

religious and caste affiliation.[82] However, in the field of contemporary art, fine arts education institutions and artist-led organizations are responsible for knowledge transfer, thus effectively cutting across older social hierarchies based on religion and caste, a topic on which I will elaborate in chapter three. The artists gain access to novel resources (social, economic, and cultural capital) broadening their scope of action formerly limited by attributes preset by birth.

The spatial, disciplinary, and socio-cultural mobilities that artists engage in are the prerequisite for their cultural brokerage. Sometimes their brokerage is latent, for instance when their inclusive constitution crosscuts more traditional patterns of socio-cultural organization. Sometimes it is made manifest, for example, when they actively seek out different "sectorial publics" in art events, especially audiences that, due to their socio-economic background, have not been part of that field.[83]

EMERGING CONTEMPORANEITY

I use the term emerging in relation to the contemporary art practice I observed in Nepal and Bangladesh. However, I do not want to imply that there have not been mobilities in these localities before; I want to emphasize the fact that through recent mobilities and motilities, artists actively engage multiple scales, including scales that have not previously been accessed by artists from Nepal and Bangladesh to this extent. "Emerging" also indicates a set of reflections—on art education, on the politics of representation, on national identity, on urbanization, and on the role of art in these processes—that have become a constitutive part of the young generation's art practice. Looking at these contemporary practices through the lens of art as a connective and transgressive force allows me to map alternative notions of a multi-scalar contemporaneity that help relativize existing theories of the global contemporary.

In *Between Art and Anthropology*, Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright discuss the changing interrelations between anthropologists and their

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82 *Mithila* is a form of art practiced primarily in the Mithila region of Bihar in India, and in the Tarai region of Nepal. The colorful, ornamental paintings are traditionally created by women on ceremonial occasions, especially marriages. Today however, *Mithila* contains a variety of scenes and motifs from daily life and is practiced by both men and women; artist S. C. Suman for instance is known for his contemporary interpretations of *Mithila*, which have been exhibited at the Siddhartha Art Gallery in Kathmandu four times since 2007. *Paubha* is a painting tradition practiced by the Newar caste of the Chitrakars in the Kathmandu valley. The religious paintings typically represent one central deity of the Buddhist / Hindu pantheon. In comparison to the *Thanka* tradition*,* which supposedly originated in Yarlung valley of central Tibet, and which is painted on silk cloth, *Poubha* is painted on cotton cloth. See "Mithila Cosmos IV: Kalpavriksha," Catalog, S. C. Suman, accessed September 4, 2022, http://scsuman.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/mithila_cosmos_IV_Kalpavriksha.pdf; Madan Chitrakar, *Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany* (Kathmandu: Teba-Chi (TBC) Studies Centre, 2012), 35, 40–41, 69.

83 Möntmann, *Kunst als sozialer Raum*.

research partners due to global flows of information, media, and capital.[84] They highlight the need to investigate the terms on which non-Western artists are made visible.[85] Although I agree that the terms of visibility are an important subject matter for anthropologists,[86] the scene they set is misleading. Their underlying premise is a rather settled Euro-American-centric art world with artists from the periphery crossing (or being crossed) in and out of this center.[87] Anthropology's role, so it would seem, is still to observe and mediate the terms of these entrances. This premise is an outcome of the history of differentiation of the fields of art history and art and anthropology.[88] It ties in with a narrative of globalization told almost exclusively from a Western perspective, in which the entrance of the Other into the field of cultural production has become a marker of change towards a new contemporary global art. Gerardo Mosquera poignantly summarizes this by arguing that the centers of the art world collect and categorize art from the periphery at will, and after "repackaging" it, take charge in "exhibiting the peripheries in the peripheries."[89] He concludes that this mechanism creates a divide between "curating cultures and curated cultures … [which] provokes the art of the curated cultures to adapt in order to satisfy the preferences of the curating culture."[90] The formalization of two distinct blocks (self–other, West–non-West, center–periphery) not only fixes existing asymmetries, it also reduces art practitioners in the so-called periphery to mere imitators, compelled to reproduce a Western perspective on globalization and the art field. Expressions of the bias in this narrative vary from Okwui Enwezor's

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84 Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, ed., *Between Art and Anthropology: Contemporary Ethnographic Practice* (Oxford: Berg, 2010).

85 Schneider and Wright, *Between Art and Anthropology*; Möntmann, *Kunst als sozialer Raum*, 3–5.

86 See for instance Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

87 The center/periphery binary is prevalently used to describe the relationship between what is perceived as a developed, modern metropolis and its less developed "other." As such, it has been central to the colonial, postcolonial, and development discourses. Liechty for instance refers to the paired term in order to describe the position of Nepal as the "always-becoming end of the global development spectrum." Mark Liechty, *Out Here in Kathmandu: Modernity on the Global Periphery* (Kathmandu: Martin Chautari, 2010), 4. The binary is often used as a spatial metaphor, in which the old colonial powers or "the West" are seen as the center, and the colonized or "the Global South" as the periphery.

88 The scope of this introduction does not allow me to adequately present the ongoing shifts in art history. A brief outline of the concepts of global art or global contemporary is nevertheless important here because the vocabulary and rhetoric used in the anthropology of art draw from this discourse. For a detailed genesis of global art history, and a valid critique notably of Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg's approaches, see Monica Juneja, "Global Art History and the 'Burden of Representation,'" in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting and Julia T. S. Binter (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011); Juneja, "Understanding Transculturalism."

89 Gerardo Mosquera, "Some Problems in Transcultural Curating," in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher and Rasheed Araeen (London: Kala Press, 1994), 135.

90 Mosquera, "Some Problems in Transcultural Curating," 135.

token role as "the first non-Western artistic director" of both *documenta* 11 and the 56th *Venice Biennale*,[91] to the celebration of the *Havanna Biennale*'s success among the established biennale vanguards, to the reference to Jean-Hubert Martin's exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* (1989, Centre George Pompidou in Paris) as "the first event of global art."[92] The enumeration of these events as forerunners of a new global condition marks the Otherness of the actors involved, instead of taking their attempts at brokering this difference seriously. Anthropology, with its actor-centered approach is perfectly positioned to offer a nuanced, transcultural perspective on the scopes, motivations, and challenges of contemporary actors in the art field. However, it needs to overcome totalizing narratives of cultural globalization.

The idea of a global contemporary only supposedly marks a renegotiation of center and periphery. According to its main advocates, the concept emphasizes the interconnectedness of pluralized art worlds, and its world-encompassing quality aims at contesting the privilege of the Euro-American interpretative authority.[93] Hans Belting for instance, likens global art to the global worldwide net, explaining that it is omnipresent, yet not universal in content or message; it allows for free access to, and thus for a personal response to, the world.[94] There are positive outcomes of the "global art world" concept, such as the recognition of diversity and the emphasis on similarities between art practices throughout the world. But ideas of co-presence and synchronicity conceal asymmetries and reduce the complexity of translocal connections to a linear link between center and periphery. Monica Juneja has shown that advocates of the global contemporary fail to examine the qualities of relationalities in the "new geo-aesthetic" of globally networked artworlds; instead, they comprise the global contemporary as an "unproblematic dissolution of hierarchies."[95] The potentiality of this totalizing geo-aesthetic theory to carry a diffusionist rhetoric and further hierarchizing mechanisms is best illustrated by the discourse on the proliferation of global forms.[96] Next to the "white cube," the curator, the international workshop, and new mediums such as performance art, the large-scale art event has been claimed as one of the main effects of "the postcolonial conditions of the contemporary world."[97] For Paul O'Neill temporary group exhibitions are crucial

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91 Niru Ratnam, "Art and Globalisation," in *Themes in Contemporary Art*, ed. Gillian Perry and Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 278.
92 Hans Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate," in Belting and Buddensieg, *Global Art World*, 58.
93 Belting and Buddensieg, *Global Art World*; Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, *Global Contemporary;* Bydler, *Global Art World;* Thomas Fillitz, "Anthropology and Discourses on Global Art."
94 Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art," 39–40.
95 Juneja, "'A Very Civil Idea…'" 294.
96 See Hans Belting, "From World Art to Global Art: View on a New Panorama," in Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, *Global Contemporary*; Bydler, *Global Art World*; Ratnam, "Art and Globalisation."
97 Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 70–73.

tools for the mediation, experience, and historicization of contemporary art.[98] Charlotte Bydler calls the large-scale exhibition contemporary art's "flagship event."[99] The perennial repetition of events (hence the name biennial as shorthand for many formats) or the touring of exhibitions to different venues make the global contemporary framework durable. Individual events in distinct places are perceived as connected on a global map or in a global art calendar by a mobile art world composed of curators, collectors, and art critics.[100] However, the metaphors of the map and the calendar represent a bird's-eye perspective that brings more than 350 art events around the world into one field of vision.[101] This field of vision may reflect synchronicity and co-presence on its surface, but its internal logic is hierarchical and historically tied to colonial expansion. Within the calendar, some events are more important than others: the *Venice Biennale* is considered the vantage point—the *grande dame*[102] or the "ur-biennial"—for the global propagation of similar formats.[103] A narrative of replication follows the linear development of perennial exhibitions from a first wave of post-World War II events, such as the *São Paulo Biennale* (1951) or the *documenta* (1955), to the *Havana Biennale* (1984), and the significant increase of similar formats in the nineties.[104] This narrative often culminates in a perception of a "saturation" of the present art scene,[105] a veritable "biennial industry."[106] This perspective creates a global "canon of exhibitions" in relation to which every emerging event is seen and ordered.[107] Recently established or upcoming large-scale international exhibitions are appraised by their aim "to propagate a certain will to globality," i.e., their ambition to

98 Paul O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse," in *The Biennial Reader*, ed. Elena Filipovic, Solveig Øvstebø, and Marieke van Hal (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 242–243. O'Neill understands "group exhibitions" or "group shows" as any form of exhibition that is not a "monographic presentation," and that brings together multiple artists for one specific event, be it an exhibition, a festival, or a biennale.

99 Bydler, *Global Art World*, 244–245.

100 Bydler, *Global Art World,* 244–245; Samdani Art Foundation, ed., *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed. (Dhaka: Samdani Art Foundation, 2014).

101 The Biennale Foundation lists over 250 biennials, not including other formats, such as art fairs or summits. See "Directory of Biennials," Biennial Foundation, accessed February 05, 2023, https://biennialfoundation.org/network/biennial-map/.

102 Bydler, *Global Art World*, 100.

103 Caroline A. Jones, "Biennial Culture: A Longer History," in Filipovic, Øvstebø, and van Hal, *The Biennial Reader*, 69.

104 O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 242–243; Nikos Papastergiadis and Meredith Martin, "Art Biennales and Cities as Platforms for Global Dialogue," in *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere,* ed. Liana Giorgi, Monica Sassatelli, and Gerard Delanty (London: Routledge, 2011), 48–49; Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, *Global Contemporary,* 100–101.

105 Adele Tan, "Festivalizing Performance: Snapshots of an Alternative Circuit," in Belting and Binter, *Global Studies*, 120.

106 Bydler, *Global Art World*.

107 Lewis Biggs, "'Art, Money, Parties' and Liverpool Biennial," in *Art, Money, Parties: New Institutions in the Political Economy of Contemporary Art*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 42.

tie in with a global contemporary discourse,[108] because, as O'Neill argues, "the periphery still has to follow the discourse of the center … in search of legitimization."[109] This frame has become a rule of thumb for the analysis of large-scale art events and it overshadows and obscures the reference frames, motives, and counter-discourses intended by the organizers. It creates a totalizing frame that turns emerging art fields such as Nepal and Bangladesh into consumers of a global contemporaneity. Instead of using the global art world as a monolithic frame whose dominant form, the perennial festival, is consumed, negotiated, and incorporated locally, research needs to focus on artists as proactive producers and reflective analysts of the contemporary condition. This research should include investigating local motivations and meanings, power plays, and rhythms, and should be tied in with observations on national, regional, and global circuits.

I therefore propose an alternative understanding of contemporaneity on the basis of the translocal and multi-scalar positionings and practices of artists and their initiatives. Rather than looking at how space (whether as globalization or locality) affects artists, how it influences their artworks, and how this relation is perceived by curators, audiences, and critics, I look at how artists analyze, produce, and broker these spaces. How do they perceive and circumscribe their localities? What do they make visible and to what ends? In line with George E. Marcus, I argue for a closer collaboration and complicity between anthropologists and artists—to conceive of both as creative practitioners, who broker visual culture while being mobile and thereby break the sovereignty of the discourse they emerged from.[110] Artists, like anthropologists, possess a sensitiveness for the fabric of life and how ongoing processes, such as urbanization, the consolidation of national identities, or the advance of digital media, affect it.

In her claim for an "ethnographic turn" in contemporary art scholarship, Fiona Siegenthaler brings attention to the ability of ethnography to follow mobile actors into diverse spaces; ethnography, especially based on participant observation, is free of the confinement of representational spaces and institutions.[111] She further argues that art, rather than concerning objects, is increasingly about practice and social relations, both core interests in the field of anthropology. This focus on practice highlights the agency of the artist (and other actors involved in the production of art) and recognizes these actors as active agents in shaping localities. There are several examples of scholars who focus on the agency of artists and their attempt to contest and reshape more hegemonic notions of space. Thomas Fillitz for instance focuses on artist biographies from the Ivory

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108   Okwui Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form," in Filipovic, Øvstebø, and van Hal, *The Biennial Reader*, 438.
109   O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 258.
110   George E. Marcus, "Affinities: Fieldwork in Anthropology Today and the Ethnographic in Artwork," in Schneider and Wright, *Between Art and Anthropology*.
111   Fiona Siegenthaler, "Towards an Ethnographic Turn in Contemporary Art Scholarship," *Critical Arts* 27, no. 6 (2013).

Coast and Benin.[112] He demonstrates that these artists' artworks are visible manifestations of their physical and socio-cultural environment, as well as the meaning they ascribe to these environments. David Pinder traces the vital role of artists in developing critical approaches to the cultural geographies of urban spaces and cities, and in challenging the norms on how these spaces are represented.[113] Christiane Brosius focuses on how artists, through their engagement with urban fabrics and societal change, bring forth alternative visions of the city in their art projects.[114] Finally, Cathrine Bublatzky, in her ethnography of the international traveling exhibition *Indian Highway* (2008–2012), discusses power relations, the politics of representation, and the notion of "Indianness."[115]

(TRANS)LOCALITIES

In her conclusion to *The Anthropology of Globalization* reader, Anna Tsing emphasizes the importance of locality in anthropology: "culture, specificity, and place making" remain the discipline's area of expertise.[116] Therefore, it is important to stay committed to locality, despite "the biggest world-making dreams and schemes."[117] If anthropologists stay wary of the tropes of globalization theories, especially the perceived dichotomy between the global and the local, the discipline can make a valuable contribution to a nuanced and dynamic conception of contemporary geographies.[118] Fourteen years after the publication of the reader, Alain Mueller ascertains a continued naturalization of a place–culture congruence and an underlying struggle "to bridge the gap between localized, situational inquiry, and the study of large-scale systems" in anthropology.[119] Both appeals refer to persistent tropes in globalization studies: globalization has primarily been discussed in economic terms (as flows of capital and labor), whereas culture has played a marginal role. This has led to the assumption that economic globalization constitutes a cause for change, whereas shifts in culture are merely consequential.[120] Further, global and local continue to be conceived as opposites. This becomes most obvious in the use of local as a noun—as locality—thus

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112 Thomas Fillitz, *Zeitgenössische Kunst aus Afrika: 14 Gegenwartskünstler aus Côte d'Ivoire und Bénin* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2002).

113 David Pinder, "Arts of Urban Exploration," *Cultural Geographies* 12, no. 4 (2005).

114 Christiane Brosius, "Emplacing and Excavating the City: Art, Ecology and Public Space in New Delhi," *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015).

115 Cathrine Bublatzky, *Along the Indian Highway: An Ethnography of an International Travelling Exhibition* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2020).

116 Tsing, "Conclusion: The Global Situation," 464.

117 Tsing, "Conclusion: The Global Situation," 472.

118 Tsing, "Conclusion: The Global Situation," 464, 467.

119 Alain Mueller, "Beyond Ethnographic Scriptocentrism: Modelling Multi-Scalar Processes, Networks, and Relationships," *Anthropological Theory* 16, no. 1 (2016): 103.

120 Lydia Haustein, *Global Ions: Globale Bildinszenierung und kulturelle Identität* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2008), 145–146; Ratnam, "Art and Globalisation," 287.

grammatically describing a situation or a place, and global as globalization to mark its processual, deterritorialized, and fluid nature. Global thus comes to connote a "transcending of place," while local is marked as a "making of places."[121] Because the scholarly engagement with culture remains attached to a conception of territorialized locality, it is not surprising that cultural shifts are seen as a consequence of (economic) globalization. Locality or local culture (as territorially fixed) is conceived as the context in which the global (as fluid formations, global flows) is consumed, negotiated, and incorporated.[122] The effects of these tropes are visible in the "contextualizing practice" of the global contemporary frame, which fixes localities of large-scale art events around the world in place; they become particular versions of what is perceived as a globally transportable format.[123] Events, whether the *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* or the *Yinchuan Biennale* in China, are encased as temporary and locally organized events that connect to global networks.[124] Dhaka for instance is on the calendar of the global art world for a few days every two years when the *DAS* takes place, and the capital city becomes the context in which the global format of the biennale is temporarily fixed. This makes events comparable not only against the form, but also against other local implementations.

The global–local divide is accompanied by a hierarchizing practice between localities: throughout my research, I was confronted with conceptions of Nepal and Bangladesh as objects of developmentalist intervention, and victims of natural catastrophes and political instability. Mark Liechty refers to a "standard preface" in many official portrayals of Nepal as a "poor, landlocked, and under-developed nation." He follows by asserting that, "even Bangladesh, the poster child of Asian poverty," is more fortunate.[125] Nepal was closed to foreigners, including researchers, from the beginning of the Shah rule in 1768 until the abolition of the Rana regime in 1951.[126] This remoteness additionally fostered the notion of a *terra incognita*[127] and Nepal became known as a "beautiful and relatively unspoiled country."[128] Gérard Toffin claims that "Nepal has become the

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121 Tsing, "Conclusion: The Global Situation," 464.
122 Tsing, "Conclusion: The Global Situation," 464.
123 Jeremy Valentine, "Art and Empire: Aesthetic Autonomy, Organisational Mediation and Contextualising Practices," in Harris, *Art, Money, Parties*, 209.
124 O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 244.
125 Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in Kathmandu* (Kathmandu: Martin Chautari, 2008), 39.
126 Ram B. Chhetri, "Anthropology in Nepal: A Short History of Research, Teaching and Practice," in *Anthropology and Sociology of Nepal: Taking Stock of Teaching, Research, and Practice*, ed. Ram B. Chhetri, Tulsi R. Pandey, and L. P. Uprety (Kathmandu: Central Department of Sociology / Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, 2010), 2.
127 Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, ed., *Contributions to the Anthropology of Nepal: Proceedings of a Symposium Held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, June / July 1973* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1974), 1.
128 Gerald Berreman, "Himalayan Anthropology: What, Wither, and Weather," in *Himalayan Anthropology: The Indo-Tibetan Interface*, ed. James F. Fisher (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978), 70.

land of the 'last': the last shamans, the last transhumant shepherds, the last Hindu kingdom, the last example of Indian Buddhism in the world."[129] These labels have marked Nepal as "not modern" and "not developed," and have thereby repeatedly Othered its people. Despite Liechty's propitious note, Bangladesh is struggling with a similar image problem. The 2016 *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh* starts with a comparable "standard preface": "Once described as a 'test case for development,' the country has achieved significant social and economic progress in the past decades."[130] This is followed by a list of all the challenges Bangladesh is currently facing (from a high population density to underdeveloped infrastructure), despite which it has managed "positive developments." These portrayals of Nepal and Bangladesh as periphery—as objects of developmentalist intervention—have a significant influence on the type of research supported and conducted in these countries. According to the German Project Information System (GEPRIS), the overwhelming majority of the thirty research projects funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and carried out in Bangladesh in 2018 are on environmental change, pollution, megacities, water, and the textile industry. The majority of the sixty-nine projects funded on Nepal are related to religion or ritual, natural catastrophes, and environmental and political change.[131] Throughout my research, I frequently had to defend why I was looking at contemporary art, rather than at issues of development, religion, or the environment.

THE REGION / THE NATION

Underlying these classifying and hierarchizing tropes is a historically grown academic scholarship that continues to determine the kind of research being done by regulating the subdivision of institutional areas of focus and the attribution of funding. This sectioning is in crucial need of theoretical rethinking, and the transgressive and translatory qualities of the cultural production by artists working in and on Nepal and Bangladesh present a strong case study from which to continue this rethinking started by transcultural studies.

The national circumscriptions of locality in South Asia are largely subsumed—and marginalized—within a wider academic focus on the region or the area. Area studies, as the specific fields of scholarship that emerged notably in North America after World War II, have been subject to much

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129 Gérard Toffin, *Imagination and Realities: Nepal Between Past and Present* (New Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 2016), 47–48.

130 Ali Riaz and Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman, "Introduction," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*, ed. Ali Riaz and Mohammad S. Rahman (London: Routledge, 2016), 1.

131 See "GEPRIS – Geförderte Projekte der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft," GEPRIS, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, accessed August 27, 2018, http://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/OCTOPUS. In comparison, in 2018, there were 333 projects funded on India, and 3763 on Germany.

critique in the past three decades.[132] Willem van Schendel criticized the common understanding of areas as internally consistent and territorially bounded geographical units as one of the academic tradition's main predicaments.[133] He argues that areas are not only sites of knowledge production that lead to "transnational scholarly lineages, circles of referencing, or structures of authority" but also produce "geographies of ignorance."[134] These studies do not produce "true area specialists," but experts of sub-regions who present their findings as representations of an imagined socio-cultural and political areal essence.[135]

South Asia is physically bound by its seemingly natural demarcation as a subcontinent, it reflects the extension of the British colonial sphere, it is constructed on the basis of mid-twentieth century states, and thus lends itself to be comprised as a region.[136] This regional coherence is reinforced by the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which fosters economic and cultural cooperation among its member states. Since its establishment as an academic area, South Asia has shaped the scientific landscape through the formation of institutes (like the Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge 1964 or the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University 1962), publications (e.g., *Journal of South Asian Studies*, published since 1971 under the authority of the South Asian Studies Association of Australia), and regular international conferences.[137] Although the region commonly circumscribes eight countries, India plays the role of central court in this academic field: most of the research in and on South Asia focuses on India and sub-regional scholars present their findings as *partes pro toto*. In other words, India has come to stand for South Asia and other countries like Nepal and Bangladesh are

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132 The critique of "area studies" has produced ample literature across the humanities and social sciences. A cohesive discussion of the respective positions is beyond the scope of this book. In the following, I direct my focus to the critical reflections of Willem van Schendel and Sara Shneiderman as I feel they are most relevant for my research. Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing"; Sara Shneiderman, "Are the Central Himalayas in Zomia? Some Scholarly and Political Considerations Across Time and Space," *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 2 (2010). For a systematic analysis of the challenges and opportunities of area studies today, refer to Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge, ed., *Area Studies at the Crossroads: Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn,* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). See also Shane J. Barter, "Area Studies, Asian Studies, and the Pacific Basin," *Geographical Review* 105, no. 1 (2015); Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Anti-Area Studies," *Communal / Plural* 8, no. 1 (2000); James D. Sidaway, "Geography, Globalization, and the Problematic of Area Studies," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, no. 4 (2013).
133 Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 650.
134 Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 654.
135 Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 657–658.
136 Toffin, *Imagination and Realities*, 30; Sinderpal Singh, *Framing "South Asia": Whose Imagined Region?* (Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2002); van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 655.
137 See Jackie Assayag and Véronique Bénéï, ed., *Remapping Knowledge: The Making of South Asian Studies in India, Europe and America, 19th–20th Centuries* (Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective, 2005).

restrained in an academic periphery.[138] India's dominant position has further caused a thematic deadlock. Based on the research interests of Indologists and scholars of Islamic and Buddhist studies, who continue to play a decisive role in the field, the region is sectioned according to religious and language commonalities.[139] Consequently, research on Bangladesh often takes place either within the framework of "Muslim South Asia" or within the wider setting of the region of Bengal shaped primarily by Hinduism. In the former, it is often subsumed into Pakistan, of which its territory was part from 1947–1971.[140] In the latter, it is marginal to India, of which it was part before 1947.[141]

Nepal's treatment as "something of a backwater in South Asian studies" is most likely the result of a conscious disregard of the country's political histories.[142] By denying the role of colonialism—and thus also postcolonial discourse—in Nepal, the country and its inhabitants are seemingly stuck in a scholarly induced "historical and political vacuum."[143] Accordingly, Nepal is often included in Himalayan studies with a focus on its highland regions. Its southern lowlands *(Tarai)* are overlooked.[144] This neglect is extremely problematic as it feeds into current debates of national identity, such as the claim for recognition (and / or ethnic and territorial autonomy) by the Madhesi people in this region.[145] These debates result from the end of the civil war in Nepal (1996–2006), the abolishment of the monarchy in 2005, and thus the end of the Hindu kingdom. These events brought forth a slow but charged dismantling of Nepali nationalism.[146] During the past fifteen years, notably in the process of writing the new Constitution, Nepal has seen an intense and violent negotiation of its new democratic and republican national identity, which—based on Hindu religion, Hindu monarchy,

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138 Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 650, 657–658.
139 Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 657.
140 For instance, Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
141 For instance, Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).
142 Mary Des Chene, "Is Nepal in South Asia? The Condition of Non-Postcoloniality," *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 12, no. 2 (2007): 218.
143 Shneiderman, "Are the Central Himalayas in Zomia?" 295–296.
144 Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing"; Shneiderman, "Are the Central Himalayas in Zomia?"
145 The term *Tarai* refers to the fertile lowlands located between the Himalayan foothills and the Indo-Gangetic alluvial plane. Madhesi originally circumscribed the inhabitants of the Tarai. Madhes, synonymous with Tarai, was under the control of the Mughal emperors and British East India Company. After Prithvi Narayan Shah's conquest (mid-eighteenth century), this territory was integrated into the newly unified Nepal. In the course of the last century, the denomination Madhesi shifted from a primarily geographical to an ethnical meaning. Today, the term refers to an ethnic community (or a group of ethnic communities) defined notably in close relation to India and in opposition to the hill regions of Nepal. Commonalities of dress (most notably the *dhoti*), caste composition, language, and food preferences are the most visible attributes of this common identity. Kalpana Jha, *The Madhesi Upsurge and the Contested Idea of Nepal* (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 38–39, 71.
146 Jha, *Madhesi Upsurge*, 1.

and the Nepali language—was used to forcefully (and violently) unite the country after Prithivi Narayan Shah's mid-eighteenth-century conquest. Citizens, politicians, and members of the civil society are engaged in a continuous struggle to bring together more than ten religions, 125 ethnic groups / castes, and 123 languages divided across three vastly different geographical zones: high Himalayan Mountains, mid-range hills, and lowland Tarai.[147] That 50.27 % of the total population of Nepal live in the Tarai region, while only 6.73 % live in the high mountains, points to the problematic of a Himalayan-centered approach.[148]

Besides being geographically determined, academically grown circumscriptions often emphasize cultural commonalities. Hence, even while trying to transgress the nation-state as the sole regulatory agent (and focus on the wider region instead), area studies maintain a territorially cohesive notion of culture. Sara Shneiderman for instance focuses on Tibeto-Burman speech communities, Buddhism and Hinduism as "powerful shaping forces," rice cultivation, and trans-regional trade as socio-economic and cultural commonalities in the highland Himalayas.[149] Such categorizations not only foster exclusive notions of belonging, but often also preclude a joint analysis of localities that do not fit these criteria, such as Nepal and Bangladesh. Religiously, Bangladesh is recognized as a Muslim-majority country (90.4 %), with Hindus (8.5 %), Buddhists (< 1 %), and Christians (< 1 %) as its main minorities.[150] Due to the importance of the Bengali language in the struggle for independence—Bangladesh literally means "the country of Bengali speakers"—Bengali remains unchallenged as main language.[151] Together, these two indicators lead to a perception of Bangladesh as a rather culturally homogenous nation, ignoring that this apparent unity is the result of a well-crafted academic and political hegemony.

My research is firmly rooted within transcultural studies, allowing me to retrace, critically reflect, and eventually transgress these academic (South Asian Studies, Himalayan Studies) and political (Nepali nationalism, and Bengali or Bangladeshi nationalism) dissections. The superposition of culture and territory has lasting effects on how different nations and their citizens are portrayed. Scholars, politicians, journalists, and artists alike often perceive borders as defining (and to a certain extent confining) culture. This is as clear from the two separate bodies of literature for research on Nepal and Bangladesh—each situated in its own academic lineages and circles of referencing—as it is from preconceived naturalized

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147 See Jha, *Madhesi Upsurge*, 2–3. Depending on the circumscription, nineteen to twenty-eight percent of those are Madhesi.

148 Central Bureau of Statistics, *2015 Statistical Year Book Nepal* (Kathmandu: Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016), xi–xii, accessed September 1, 2022, https://nepal indata.com/resource/STATISTICAL-YEAR-BOOK-NEPAL-2015/.

149 Shneiderman, "Are the Central Himalayas in Zomia?" 294.

150 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, "Population & Housing Census 2011: National Volume 3: Urban Area Report," unpublished manuscript, last modified August 2014, accessed June 19, 2021, PDF file, https://bit.ly/2O1dhJR.

151 Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 32–33.

(Nepal is mountainous, Bangladesh is flat) or cultural (Bangladeshis are Muslim, Nepalis are Hindu or Buddhist) communalities. Instead of presuming established communalities, the transcultural perspective allows me to examine which values and practices actually foster contact. Which understanding of contemporary art, which formats and mediums, which visions are shared, critically discussed, and tested between artists from Nepal and Bangladesh? This is not to say that there are no borders—that knowledge, ideas, and practices are flowing freely—but that these borders are dynamically "performed, acted, and discussed."[152] The historical units and boundaries drawn by scholarship and the entangled political claims over territory are not as fixed and refined as they appear. Focusing on the spatial and cultural displacements of peoples, ideas, and objects reveals the constant making and remaking of such boundaries and circumscriptions of localities.[153] Translocality, with its emphasis in *trans*gression and *trans*formation, is a more specific tool to look at the (re)creation of local distinctions, instead of playing them against each other.[154] It de-essentializes the notion of the local and uses it as an analytical tool, looked at from the perspective of spatial movements.[155] It emphasizes the interlinkages and transgressions of different localities on diverse scales beyond the national and regional—for instance between Dhaka and Kathmandu, or between Kathmandu and its hinterland. But it also draws attention to asymmetries, to blocked or contested flows. When are artists or ideas not free to move? Are there mechanisms in place to prevent such movement? By whom were they established and to what end?

THE CITY

Most of my research partners live and work in the city. They interact with its art-specific and its more general infrastructure on a daily basis, but they also proactively use the city as a creative space. Through their artworks and projects, they address issues of urbanization, environmental pollution, or the preservation of heritage and thus claim the right to co-determine the city as locality. Like the region, the city has been subject to academic delimitation and sectioning. Jennifer Robinson sees one explanation in the West's strategy to establish itself as modern, as opposed to "others" and "elsewheres" that are conceived as "not modern."[156] Her understanding of modernity as "valorisation and celebration of innovation and novelty" calls for a rejection of old, traditional materials, beliefs, and practices. Her notion of development is led by an aspiration to better life in the city for which

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152   Abu-Er-Rub et al., "Introduction: Engaging Transculturality," xxvi.
153   Juneja, "Understanding Transculturalism," 28–29.
154   Freitag and von Oppen, "Introduction"; see Brickell and Datta, *Translocal Geographies*; Greiner, "Patterns of Translocality."
155   Freitag and von Oppen, "Introduction," 9.
156   Jennifer Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (London: Routledge, 2006), 4.

reason certain cultural practices (considered un-modern or un-innovative) need to disappear.[157] The hierarchization resulting from this strategy led to the perception of many Euro-American cities as innovative and creative, while others have been marked as elsewheres. For decades, the capital city of Bangladesh has been identified by a lack of proper planning and safety: density, traffic chaos, the smell of burning trash, and "slumization" mark its portrayal as megacity by national and international media, NGOs, development agencies, and often also the city's inhabitants.[158] Kathmandu's rapid urbanization in the aftermath of the civil war and the ongoing rural-to-urban migration make it vulnerable to a similar rhetoric. Thomas Bell for instance provides a list, reaching from "planning failures" to "the shit in the river," of Kathmandu's modern environmental disasters.[159] The depiction of cities as sites of "desolate placelessness"[160] or "disenchanted worlds"[161] is part of a wider trope of "dividing, categorising and assuming hierarchical relations"[162] prevalent in urban studies in the past few decades. It is apparent in the terms "megacities" and "global cities" for instance.[163] On the one hand, wealthy global cities are qualified by success and the achievement of modernity. On the other hand, poor megacities are characterized by things they lack. This global–megacity divide represents a Western-centric viewpoint, which "stress[es] specialisation and sectoral clustering as the basis for creativity and innovation," leaving many cities outside the West with rather pessimistic growth prognoses.[164] This mirrors Roberta Comunion's more specific critique of the "creative cities" discourse.[165] She traces this

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157 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 4; Jennifer Robinson, "Cities in a World of Cities: The Comparative Gesture," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35, no. 1 (2011): 3.
158 See Ananya Roy, "Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35, no. 2 (2011): 224. Roy explains how slums have become one of the biggest identifiers for the Third World or megacities. For examples of similar portrayals of Dhaka, see Erik German and Solana Pyn, "Dhaka: Fastest Growing Megacity in the World," *Global Post*, September 8, 2010, accessed June 20, 2021, https://theworld.org/stories/2010-09-08/dhaka-fastest-growing-megacity-world; Habibul H. Khondker, "Dhaka: Megacity of Despair," *Global Dialogue*, November 29, 2010, accessed September 7, 2022, https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/dhaka-megacity-of-despair. According to the most recent census (2011) in Bangladesh, 8,906,039 out of a total population of 144,043,697 live in Dhaka Metropolitan City. This amounts to a density of 28,185 people per square kilometer. See Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, "Population & Housing Census 2011."
159 Thomas Bell, *Kathmandu* (Gurgaon: Random House India 2015 [2014]), 275.
160 John Friedmann, "Place and Place-Making in Cities: A Global Perspective," *Planning Theory & Practice* 11, no. 2 (2010): 150.
161 Max Weber, quoted in Toffin, *Imagination and Realities*, 96.
162 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 2; see also Neil Brenner, "Stereotypes, Archetypes, and Prototypes: Three Uses of Superlatives in Contemporary Urban Studies," *City and Community* 2, no. 3 (2003).
163 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 4–5.
164 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 11.
165 Roberta Comunian, "Rethinking the Creative City: The Role of Complexity, Networks and Interactions in the Urban Creative Economy," *Urban Studies* 48, no. 6 (2011): 1158.

understanding of creativity—as innovative practice, as tool for economic development, and as image branding—back to the *European Capital of Culture* concept. One of the latest and most prominent applications of this concept is Richard Florida's circumscription of the "creative class" which highlights the main problem of this discourse:[166] creativity, understood as the marketable and sellable production of "meaningful new forms"—as a tool for economic development—has the potential to serve as a hierarchizing category, declaring certain cities, or certain areas in the city, more creative than others.[167]

What is needed is a more subtle approach to creative interventions and the city as a locality—an analysis that goes beyond the identification and description of Dhaka (and possibly Kathmandu) as failed megacities in contrast to economically viable, creative global cities. This is especially important since many of the artists I worked with have an ambiguous relation to the city. On the one hand, many of my case studies show the city, its intensity, the close contact to like-minded artists, and the proximity of the art infrastructure as creatively invigorating. On the other hand, the social immediacy of neighbors, family members, and colleagues, paired with traffic jams and air pollution, can also be suffocating. This ambiguity offers an incentive to reconsider tropes of development, modernity, and globalization, and to approach the city as a more dynamically constituted locality. For me, locality means the lived experience and perception of a place in space and time; it is the frame that I set for my analysis of specific situations. This can be a living room, a building, a neighborhood, or an area in, or even a whole, city. For the people I write about, locality can have a similarly diverse set of meanings, depending on what their ambition and scope of action is. This implies that the meaning of locality is always dependent upon the perspective of the respective onlooker, and thus needs to be (re)analyzed for each situation. The concept of translocality allows me to take the contemporary artists' claim to shape, represent, and mediate the various scales of locality in which they dwell and operate seriously. Their proactive engagement with the city urges me to scrutinize geographically and culturally cohesive ascriptions of areas, to overcome oversimplified hierarchical classifications of cities, and to question top-down, generalizing frames of globalization. Translocality is an intermediary concept that allows the analysis of connections beyond the dichotomy of what is usually considered local and global. It recognizes the local, in this case the city, as more than "a place where globalization is experienced by social actors."[168] The city is only one node in an invisible network of localities in which contemporaneity emerges. The prefix "trans" does not necessarily refer to geographical space, it also marks the importance of the time factor: not

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166 Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*; Florida, "Cities and the Creative Class."
167 Florida, "Cities and the Creative Class," 293–294.
168 Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta, "Introduction: Translocal Geographies," in *Translocal Geographies: Spaces, Places, Connections*, ed. Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 5.

all mobility happens at the same pace. Sometimes rhythms change from one neighborhood to another depending for instance on the infrastructure available; in Dhaka travelling by foot on smaller roads can be faster that travelling on large but congested main traffic axes. This pace changes the way people experience these spaces. Similarly, moments of immobility may only be perceived as such from within, but with distance may reveal great changes.[169] Translocality sharpens the mind for the identification of socio-economic asymmetries, but it does not presuppose hierarchies between different scales or places based on these asymmetries. Therefore, it allows me to see not only all cities,[170] but all localities, as autonomous and creative. Nevertheless, this autonomy remains related to connectedness: localities cannot be studied as self-contained units, as microcosms from within which all things can be explained.[171] They, their inhabitants, conceptions, and representations, are always connected to those of other localities. Here the notion of scale, and complemental to it, network, is crucial.

My understanding of scale is based on Biao Xiang's definition as "the spatial reach of the actions."[172] His notion of the emergent scale, "the scope of coordination and mobilization that arises from collective actions which in turn generates new capacity for the actors," alludes to the mobility and reach of collaborative action at the center of my research.[173] Xiang recognizes that actions taken on or directed towards different scales follow different logics and patterns. These actions use different tools and touch different discourses. Scale is thus, in his understanding, not a geographical unit, but an analytical abstraction to grasp individual and collective strategies and processes of social change.[174] Anna Tsing proposes a similar application of scale as a tool for an informed investigation of globalization processes:

> First, I would pay close attention to ideologies of scale, that is, cultural claims about locality, regionality, and globality; about stasis and circulation; and about networks and strategies of proliferation. I would track rhetorics of scale as well as contests over what will count as relevant scales. Second, I would break down the units of culture and political economy through which we make sense of events and social processes. Instead of looking for world-wrapping evolutionary stages, logics, and epistemes, I would begin by finding what I call "projects," that is, relatively coherent bundles of ideas and practices as realized in particular times and places. The choice of what counts as a project depends on what one is trying to learn

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169 Brickell and Datta, "Introduction," 9–10.
170 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.
171 Freitag and von Oppen, "Introduction," 6.
172 Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography," 284, 290.
173 Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography," 284–285.
174 Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography," 284–285.

about, but, in each case, to identify projects is to maintain a commitment to localization, even of the biggest world-making dreams and schemes.[175]

This investigation, Tsing suggests, takes into account the "ideologies of scale"—that is, the cultural claims and rhetorics employed in the use of spatial vocabulary—and approaches these in relation to specific projects. Scale is thus an abstraction of social actions, a tool to scrutinize the different claims, rhetorics, motivations, logics, and strategies of actors in relation to different localities. What do artists, festival organizers, and institutions mean when they want to establish something "on the global map," or when they want to address the local community? What claims do researchers, including myself, make when we present a practice, a belief, or an action as global?

NETWORKS

A translocal perspective usually requires multi-sited fieldwork or … mobile fieldwork.[176]

The rethinking of the anthropological and art historical approaches to contemporary art from the perspective of transculturality requires a complementary use of theory and method. My approach is based on the foregrounding of actors and their practices; by following my research partners' movements in and through different scales of locality, I am compelled to repeatedly reconsider my own conception of existing research frames and contexts. Complementary to scale, I use network as a tool to grasp the multitude of connections that bind collectives, artists, artworks, ideas, knowledge, and localities on different scales within the fields of practice of contemporary art, and with other fields. It is a methodological tool I adopted during my fieldwork to follow the notion of contemporary art, as well as an abstracted image of the social, spatial, and ideological entanglements that I encountered.

The notion of the network is one of the most widely employed tools to approach the analysis of connections.[177] Its application has generated

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175 Tsing, "Conclusion: The Global Situation," 472.
176 Freitag and von Oppen, "Introduction" 19.
177 Clyde Mitchell is one of the first anthropologists to use the concept of networks as an analytical tool. He bases his definition of networks on Katz's statement that networks are "the set of persons who can get in touch with each other." In opposition to Katz however, Mitchell argues that the common use of the word "network" is better grasped by focusing on the connections, rather than the people who are connected by them. The "network" then is a "set of linkages among persons and contacts." He elaborates that the contributors to his edited volume define "a social network [as] a net in which there are no loops but in which the arcs may be given values. In other words, it is thought of as being finite, but there may be several links in either direction between the persons in the network and these links may be accorded different qualities or values."

an array of different, sometimes antagonistic *modes d'emploi*. The social network analysis (SNL), which grew from the 1930s to the 1950s out of the popularity of network as an analytical concept, is a structural approach based on the study of interaction between social actors.[178] Relations are seen as expressions of the connections between different agents, they consist "of a body of qualitative measures of network structure."[179] SNL's most renowned antagonist is the actor-network theory (ANT) developed in the framework of Science and Technology Studies (STS) by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law, among others.[180] Despite its name, Latour comprehends ANT as a tool, rather than a full-blown theory, for observing and describing things.[181] Both ANT and SNA grew out of very distinct scientific needs and thus speak to disparate scientific communities. However, anthropology has always been at the crossroads between the two, no doubt because both approaches, no matter their different *modes d'emploi*, represent attempts to reconcile localized, situational inquiry with an analysis of large-scale systems. This attempt constitutes a valid reason to continue working with the knowledge both fields have generated. Rather than seeing localized inquiry and the study of large-scale systems as antagonistic research foci in need of reconciliation, I propose, both should be considered different scales within a network. The knowledge generated from SNL and ANT, combined with the notion of scale, offers ways to rethink multi-sited ethnography from a transcultural perspective by accounting for different scopes of action, emerging mobilities, and sites of research.

J. Clyde Mitchell, "The Concept and Use of Social Networks," in *Social Networks in Urban Situations: Analyses of Personal Relationship in Central African Towns*, ed. J. Clyde Mitchell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969), 4–5; Fred E. Katz, "Social Participation and Social Structure," *Social Forces* 45, no. 2 (1966): 203. For a comprehensive overview of the development and history of network analysis in the social sciences, see Linton Freeman, *The Development of Social Network Analysis: A Study in the Sociology of Science* (Vancouver: Empirical Press, 2011).

178 Freeman, *The Development of Social Network Analysis*, 2.
179 John Scott and Peter J. Carrington, ed., *The SAGE Handbook of Social Network Analysis* (London: Sage, 2011), 3–4.
180 Lilla Vicsek, Gábor Király, and Hanna Kónya, "Networks in the Social Sciences: Comparing Actor-Network Theory and Social Network Analysis," *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 7, no. 2 (2016): 78.
181 In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour emphasizes that a "network is a concept, not a thing out there. It is a tool to help describe something, not what is being described." In sum, he retains three earlier features of "networks" and adds a fourth: he specifies that (a) a point-to-point connection is being established which is physically traceable and thus can be recorded empirically; (b) such a connection leaves empty most of what is not connected. (c) It is not made "for free," but requires work; (d) a network is not made of nylon thread, words, or any durable substance but is the trace left behind by some moving agent. It has to be traced anew by the passage of another vehicle, another circulating entity. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern,* trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications," *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996); Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 128, 131–132.

   The development of multi-sited ethnography resulted from the renego-
tiation of spatial relations, brought on by an interest in theories of globali-
zation. It was also an answer to practical issues of a changing field; actors
became more mobile (anthropological interest in migration and diaspora)
and locales became too big to measure on foot (anthropological interest
in cities). In this sense, multi-sited ethnography represented a break with
the conventional understanding of fieldwork as a long-term stay in one
particular locality. Instead, it offered a "revival of a sophisticated practice of
constructivism."[182] As a technique of construction, Marcus proposed "trac-
ing," by which he meant a "following," of people, of things, of metaphors,
of stories, of biographies, or of conflicts from the analyzed community's
point of view, to different sites of research.[183] Since Marcus' initial outline,
many scholars have tried to refine the method, often by either reaffirm-
ing the importance of in-depth localized research, or by emphasizing the
importance of flows[184] and in-between spaces.[185] Mark-Anthony Falzon
for instance maintained that perhaps the lack of depth or "thickness" in
multi-sited ethnography managed to capture the way people themselves
experience contemporary life best,[186] and that "understanding the shallow"
could produce depth. Appadurai declared the need for a "transnational
anthropology" that would study the dynamics of "deterritorialization."[187]
Later, he added a focus on localities as a "product of incessant effort" and
as "temporary negotiations" produced by the circulation of forms and the
work of imagination.[188] Even though Falzon and Appadurai raised valid
points about multi-sitedness, their writings only reinforced the antagonis-
tic use of situated localities or sites, and the deterritorialized, transcen-
dental space of global flows (i.e., globalization). Further, the majority of
researchers have failed to open the black boxes that constitute transna-
tional connections and global flows.[189]

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182 George E. Marcus, "Ethnography In/Of the World System: The Emergence of
     Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (October 1995):
     105.
183 Marcus, "Ethnography In/Of the World System," 105.
184 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Min-
     neapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 49.
185 Ulf Hannerz, "Transnational Research," in *Handbook of Methods in Cultural
     Anthropology*, ed. H. Russel Bernard (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1998), 247.
186 Mark-Anthony Falzon, "Introduction: Multi-Sited Ethnography: Theory, Praxis
     and Locality in Contemporary Research," in *Multi-Sited Ethnography: Theory,
     Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research*, ed. Mark-Anthony Falzon (Farnham:
     Ashgate, 2009), 9.
187 Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 49.
188 Arjun Appadurai, "How Histories Make Geographies: Circulation and Context in
     a Global Perspective," *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 10, 12.
189 Mueller, "Beyond Ethnographic Scriptocentrism," 103; based on Michel Callon
     and Bruno Latour, "Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How Actors Macrostructure
     Reality, and How Sociologists Help Them to Do So," in *Advances in Social The-
     ory and Methodology: Toward an Integration of Micro- and Macro-Sociologies*, ed.
     Karin Knorr-Cetina and Aaron V. Cicourel (Boston: Routledge, 1981).

Alain Mueller's solution to this impasse is a shift in perspective that gives equal weight to the local and to circulations through the notion of the network:

> Accounting for the multi-scalar cluster of relations, which the proposed model was intended to represent, required engaging in ethnographic work at its "local" nodal points. In other words, it meant "situationalizing" flows and ceasing to see them as transcendental spaces. ... The two dimensions of my network model—the interconnectedness of all interactions, and the situatedness of all connections—when understood through their mutual and recursive relations encourage the analyst to give equal weight to "local" situations *and* to circulation, by acknowledging that neither of these dimensions can exist without the other: they are inextricable and inseparable.[190]

Mueller argues for a methodological situationalizing of flows and a recognition of the "interconnectedness of all interactions."[191] His own course of action is twofold, consisting of a multiplication of sites of inquiry and the adoption of a polymorphic research approach. Unfortunately, Mueller's article was published in 2016, too late to have had an effect on my initial methodological conception. Yet, his research focus on the music-based youth subculture of hardcore punk was marked by similar increased mobilities, multiple scales of interactions, and translocal interconnections as those I observed during my explorative fieldwork in Nepal and Bangladesh (August–October 2013). My recognition of the "interconnectedness of all interactions" and the "situatedness of all connections" derived from my attempt to adapt ideas from network theories to a translocal perspective, as well as from my aim to offer an alternative notion of multi-scalar contemporaneity through the artists' negotiations of locality in their artworks and initiatives. The network I trace is not a fixed model, but an abstracted image of the complexity of social, material, and geographical relations I observed at a particular moment and from a particular perspective. Rather than spanning taxonomical space, like a map or a grid, the network takes the shape of a matrix that can be made to operate on different scales. Networks are not "things-out-there";[192] they are a methodological tool that helps me grasp and visualize my field of research. Unlike the field which relates actors to existing social structures, markets, and specific art infrastructures, the network is an artificial matrix which for the purpose of this book comprises

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190 Mueller, "Beyond Ethnographic Scriptocentrism," 110.
191 Mueller, "Beyond Ethnographic Scriptocentrism," 110; see also Andreas Hepp, "Translocal Media Cultures: Networks of the Media and Globalization," in *Connectivity, Networks and Flows: Conceptualizing Contemporary Communications*, ed. Andreas Hepp, Friedrich Krotz, Shaun Moores, and Carsten Winter (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2008), 40.
192 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 131.

all these elements. It is dynamic, unbound, and processual, and can only be grasped through the different claims, rhetorics, motivations, and strategies in relation to the spatial terminology that actors within the field employ or to which they refer. Similar to Mueller's strategy, this led me to multiply my research sites in terms of geographical expansion and scale, and to explore methods beyond the more traditionally ethnographic tools.

Due to increased mobility, the anthropologist's presence is no longer limited to physical face-to-face inquiry and direct observation in the field; anthropologists can now draw information from online activities, contact people via e-mail, and check in on Facebook.[193] More than increased mobility or decreased physical distance, this is about a different kind of rapprochement. Working with urban, mostly middle class, university-educated, contemporary artists meant working with people who use the same communication channels that I do. These are people who have access to the same movies, who consume similar foods, and very often participate in the same discourses. It is important to acknowledge these similarities because they facilitated my entrance into people's lives, they defined my choice of methodology, and they influenced the manner and intensity of the relationships I formed. It is as important to recognize existing asymmetries. One of the most important asymmetries is my privileged access to economic and informational resources through my affiliation with a German university and its well-appointed library. It is by means of this privilege that my research began. In the frame of a class on contemporary art, I visited the first Bangladesh pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* in 2011.[194] Through Britto, the main force behind this pavilion, I became interested in the contemporary art field in South Asia. Facebook pages, blogs, and internet presence led me to artist collectives, activities, and their interconnections. The internet became an important site of research and it remained so throughout the data collection, processing, and compilation period. In my offline research, I followed artists connected with Britto to Chittagong, Rajshahi, and Narayanganj. Due to my timeframe, the frequent nation-wide *hartals* (general strike) preventing long distance travelling, and the density of events in Dhaka, I spent the majority of my fieldwork (five months between 2014 and 2016) in the capital city. Nepal's contemporary artistic field (artists and art infrastructure, from education institutions to exhibition spaces) is concentrated in the Kathmandu valley. I did travel to Pokhara (approximately 200 km west of Kathmandu) to meet

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193   Jane F. Collier, "The Waxing and Waning of 'Subfields' in North American Sociocultural Anthropology," in *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, ed. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

194   The class at the Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies (HCTS) was entitled "The Global Contemporary: Exhibitions and Art from Anthropological Perspective." It took place during the Summer Semester of 2011, was led by Christiane Brosius and Catherine Bublatzky, and included an excursion to the *Venice Biennale*, notably to do research on the Indian pavilion curated by Ranjit Hoskote for a seminar project.

one artist and followed a group of artists to a residency in Mustang (north-west of Kathmandu, bordering Tibet), but here too the majority of my research was carried out in the capital (eleven and a half months between 2014 and 2017). In line with my overall research question, I remained open about what locality meant and let my research partners guide me through the spaces and scales of their movements. I followed them to places beyond my main field sites (such as different cities and villages) and to hitherto unknown spaces within these field sites, such as the contested heritage buildings in Old Dhaka or the *bāhāhs* (courtyards) and *tols* (neigh-borhoods) in Kathmandu.

During my fieldwork, I took extensive notes (about observations, con-versations, daily happenings), made audio and visual recordings (such as photographs, fast sketches, outlines) and actively participated in a variety of situations. I volunteered with *1mile²* and the *PKTM* festival, agreed to write several catalog texts, assisted in setting up exhibitions, led two work-shops,[195] and presented my research in the form of a lecture at Kathmandu University (KU). I interacted with artists on a regular basis and participated in their activities, which allowed me to ask and repeat questions in various situations and examine verbal testimonies alongside executed practices. Participant observation is not a fail-safe method for misinterpretations or a guarantee for a holistic analysis, but it enabled me to build a reference framework that I could read against more formally acquired data. I col-lected and recorded seventy-two interviews with artists, educators, and representatives of art institutions (foundations, galleries) using a variety of interviewing styles, depending on my respective interview partner, the timeframe, and the space for each interview.[196] I had a roughly drafted questionnaire, but studio visits were largely open-ended.[197] The informa-tion I was able to obtain from these methods was however often limited; people do not usually comment or reflect on their everyday actions while executing them.[198] The "go-along" became a complementary tool to gain access to the artists' experience and cultural brokerage of localities. It involved accompanying one or more go-along partners on an outing, ask-ing questions inspired by a certain behavior or place along the way, and

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195   The first workshop was part of the "Curating Workshop Series" organized by the Siddhartha Arts Foundation Education Initiative and brought together key figures of the local contemporary art landscape. The second workshop was part of the PIXELATION workshop series, organized by Britto.

196   For an overview of participant observation and interview techniques, see Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 312–325.

197   I acquired a basic understanding of Bengali during my studies at the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg and started taking private Nepali lessons from my second fieldtrip (2014) onwards. These language skills allowed me to follow and participate in daily conversations, yet I rarely made use of them in direct interview situations. Nearly all the artists I interviewed were more or less fluent in English. See chapter seven for a more explicit discussion on the use of English in the arts fields of Nepal and Bangladesh.

198   Margarethe Kusenbach, "Street Phenomenology: The Go-Along as Ethnographic Research Tool," *Ethnography* 4, no. 3 (2003): 459.

listening to or even recording these explanations.[199] As I aimed to retrace a network of contemporary art from my research partners' perspective, these go-alongs were my entry to their experiences, values, and strategies to explore new spaces, conceive art projects, and negotiate access to space, materials, and ideas.

Apart from the go-along, I also adopted a more process-oriented, passive, less directed and systematic "hanging-out" approach.[200] This approach grew out of a challenge in fieldwork directly related to the new kind of rapprochement between researcher and research partner I mentioned above. During the first months of research, I noticed many occasions in which I had written in my notes where and with whom I had lunch or dinner. I accurately recorded information that I perceived to be important for my research question, such as comments on exhibitions or specific institutions. The rest of the conversations I frequently summarized as: "we/they talked about people they know," or "we/they talked about people who are not present." Upon closer examination, I realized that in those moments—lunches, dinners, parties, or idle afternoons—in which I had decided that seemingly nothing of relevance to the arts, and thus my research topic, was happening, I did not stop observing or reflecting on what I was experiencing, but I was less concentrated and allowed my mind to wander. In hindsight, these "hanging-out" situations proved to be marginal only on the surface. They appear casual and unsystematic, yet they constitute an important form of collaborative and practice-related contact. The brain keeps working, despite (or because of) the influence of food and stimulating conversations. Artists exchange information on other artists, mutual acquaintances, current projects, and events in the art field. They negotiate cultural, political, and social affinities, and discuss challenges and successes. These situations fulfill an important role in brokering cultural and social capital and are thus crucial for the constitution of a collective contemporary art identity. While I focus on some of these situations in particular in my last chapter, a considerable amount of information relating to other case studies stems from observations and notes taken while hanging-out, often recorded after the fact, from memory.

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199 Kusenbach, "Street Phenomenology," 463.
200 Deep hanging out as an ethnographic method was first mentioned by Renato Rosaldo at a Stanford conference (1994) in order to emphasize the distinctiveness and validity of anthropological ethnography in the absence of extended co-residence—one of the pillars of participant observation. The notion was taken up by James Clifford to describe the particularities of the emerging style of fieldwork in urban spaces. This fieldwork was not understood as "intensive dwelling," but as "repeated visiting" and collaborative work. Despite the vast application of "deep hanging out" in anthropology today, as Ben Walmsley accurately observes, there is little literature available. Kusenbach, "Street Phenomenology," 463. See James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 56; Ben Walmsley, "Deep Hanging Out in the Arts: An Anthropological Approach to Capturing Cultural Value," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 24, no. 2 (March 2018): 276–277.

The notion of the network shaped the organization of my research material and the structure of this book in two ways. First, inspired by ANT, I approached artworks and art projects as constitutive nodes in my constructed network. Such as in this introduction, every chapter contains an interlude—a description of a specific situation that introduces the core issues of the chapter and subsequently guides my discussion. Second, with the aim to represent both the interconnectedness of situations and the situatedness of connections, the book is divided into two parts. The first five chapters focus on specific situations or scales of locality. Throughout the respective chapters, I show how these situations are interconnected and transgressed by the collectives' transcultural brokerage. In the last two chapters, I reverse my perspective: I focus on specific connections and analyze how these become temporarily located within particular situations. I begin my investigation of an emerging translocal contemporaneity by focusing on the two localities that feature prominently in the title: the nation-states Nepal and Bangladesh. I examine how, through their artworks, artists contest the states' cultural labor to produce coherent images of the nation, and how they open spaces of encounter for a plurality of discourses on national identity. In the second chapter, I move to the locality of the city. Here, my research partners' creative place-making allows for a more holistic approach to the urban environment. My discussion of Dhaka and Kathmandu recognizes the different fabrics of spaces within the city and their interconnectedness. The third and fourth chapters focus on the field(s) of art production in Nepal and Bangladesh. Although formal fine art education has opened the practice of art to a broader socio-cultural group than the caste-based system of material production in place before, contemporary artists do not believe in the futures this education offers. Collectively, they shape new ways of knowledge transmission, for instance by teaching in the recently established private institutions. Artists increasingly contest the general authority of national institutions in values of art and culture. Rather than relying on the opportunities offered by these institutions, artists establish multi-scalar connections to actors outside the field, thus broadening their scope of action and establishing a new peer system for their art practice. The large-scale art event, discussed in chapter five, is one of the emerging avenues of the collectives to reach audiences on multiple scales and strengthen their group identity as contemporary practitioners. New powerful actors, such as the Samdani Art Foundation, can be crucial allies for the artists, but big art events can also expose competition for the same positions in the field. The last two chapters center on the qualities of the connections established by contemporary artists from Nepal and Bangladesh. Through the examples of performance art (chapter six), and digital media and English (chapter seven), I examine my research partners' preference for decentered, multilateral, and reciprocal communication. The international workshop and the hanging-out situations are crucial nodes for the shaping of affinities that lead to the conception of a collective contemporary art-based identity as community.

Chapter 1

(Trans)localities: Thinking through the Nation—Identity, History, and Contemporary Art

In the preceding introduction, I presented the different scales of locality (the region, the nation, and the city) that manifest throughout my research and analysis. I suggest that artist collectives from Bangladesh and Nepal push into and activate new spaces (from specific neighborhoods to large-scale perennial events) as locales for their artistic practice. Thereby, they claim the right to participate in the conceptualization of the locality these spaces evoke. By focusing on the *trans*gressions and *trans*formations of collaborative creative initiatives, I aim to advance a much-needed rethinking of the spatial vocabulary implicit in many globalization theories and offer a dynamic and nuanced approach to emerging contemporary art practices. The spatial mobilities and the contact fostered by artist collectives across the South Asian region and beyond expose more immobile units, such as the geographically bounded and culturally cohesive areas delimited by academic lineages, and the nation-states encompassed therein. "Nepal" and "Bangladesh" in their different incarnations as state, nationality, or nation have repeatedly been marginalized economically, politically, and scholarly as "elsewheres." Additionally, the sectioning of research foci along assumed cultural (Hindu / Buddhist / Muslim, colonized / not-colonized) or naturalized (highland / lowland) similarities has precluded the joint analysis of these countries in the past. Through their art practice, mobility, and cultural brokerage contemporary artists increasingly question the legitimacy of these exclusive and hegemonic notions. Analyzing their strategies helps me question methodological nationalisms and formulate a transcultural, multi-scalar approach to locality.

My accentuation of Nepal and Bangladesh, notably in the title of this book, is a testament to the physical and ideological importance national notions continue to hold. They also offer the subject matter for the creation of counter-narratives and alternative visions. My research partners' movements and their (art) practices are repeatedly subject to the exercise of power over nationally drawn borders (through visa and export regulations, education curricula, and so on). Further, the nation remains

a powerful identifier, especially in the frame of international art programs. In this chapter, I look at the *Venice Biennale*, famously identified and frequently criticized for its organization in national pavilions, and the *Dhaka Art Summit* (*DAS*), aiming to connect the South Asian to the wider world. Through the works of Britto Arts Trust (Britto) member Promotesh Das Pulak, and Bindu—A Space for Artists (Bindu) co-founder Sunil Sigdel, I approach the relation between contemporary art, history, and national identity. By whom, when, and to what end is the national scale evoked? How do the artists navigate these evocations? How do they contribute to more nuanced meanings of the nation as locality?

Gerd Baumann distinguishes three elements that make up the "hyphenated hybrid" of the nation-state. The "state" is the form of centralized governance. It holds a monopoly over territory as well as over coercive force. Membership is based on each individual's status as "citizen." "Nationality" represents the practice of this state; its perceivable effects, such as the obligation to pay taxes, the eligibility to hold a passport, or the need to apply for visa, are carried out through an administrative apparatus.[201] Linda Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc take a similar approach when they posit the nation-state as a hegemonic construction that marks historically legitimated power over territory.[202] For the claim to sovereignty over territory and people to work, the state needs to invest in cultural labor. Its most useful tool is the everyday practices of bureaucracy by which the state becomes physically graspable as an institution to people living in its territory.[203] The cultural labor that goes into sustaining the idea of the nation is of a different kind. In contrast to the state, Baumann contends, the nation is made up by one (or several) ethnic groups who think or are thought of as owning their own state and carry responsibility for it.[204] However, since the territorial boundaries of many modern states circumscribe a plurality of ethnicities, the states had to create a "superethnos" able to portray the nation as a unity. The legitimacy for this unity could derive from "primordial roots,"[205] "invented traditions,"[206] or "imagined communities,"[207] but it routinely involved the privilege and hence marginalization or exclusion of other ethnicities.

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201 Gerd Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities* (New York: Routledge, 2010 [1999]), 30.
202 Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Langhorne: Gordon and Breach, 1994), 35.
203 Akhil Gupta and Aradhana Sharma, "Globalization and Postcolonial States," *Current Anthropology* 47, no. 2 (2006): 291.
204 Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*, 30.
205 See John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 39; Andreas Wimmer, "The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries: A Multilevel Process Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 113, no. 4 (2008): 971.
206 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
207 Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006 [1983]).

In Bangladesh, debates over national identity have largely been shaped by the *Bangalee* identity which pertains to the idea of a thousand-year-old ethnic identity, unifying people across the region of Bengal.[208] Its strong bearing on one language (Bengali) and one culture were anchored in the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.[209] Despite having served as a powerful unifying symbol during the 1971 war that led to the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan, the idea of a unified *Bengalee* identity also indicates a conscious denial of the country's multiple ethnicities, languages, and cultures.[210] Similarly, the party-less monarchical system of the Panchayat, which ruled Nepal from 1962–1990, made use of a homogenous collective understanding of national identity based on Hindu religion, Hindu monarchy, and the Nepali language. Even after the end of the Panchayat, this continues to ensure the political exclusion of Nepal's indigenous nationalities, Dalits, and lower castes in favor of high caste, urban inhabitants.[211]

Over the past decades, transnationalism has instigated an essential academic rethinking of such fixed culture-space configurations.[212] The main argument of this approach, however—to situate the state in a transnational frame and to disentangle it from the notions of territory and nation—has had little success in offering new analytical approaches to locality, global mobility, or the multiple ways actors actually engage with the "the nation" or "the state." Transnationalism maintains the focus on the national scale and thus overemphasizes (and potentially reifies) its importance in relation to notions of territory and boundary. Translocality instead focuses on mobility and scale: depending on the motility and scope of action of the actors in focus (whether internationally operating organizations or artists) and the nation-state, administrative and cultural labor have different effects and meanings. Further, the state is not the only actor engaging in the type of cultural labor that results in hegemonic ideas of nationality. When we look at the nation-state formation from a global scale, we see that actors such as internationally operating NGOs and INGOs, the media, and scholars claim and circulate their own concept of the socio-cultural and political elements that create the unity of a nation. In some cases, this concept matches the one portrayed by the state and, in others, they widely diverge depending for instance on socio-economic objectives.

208   Shafiqur Rahman, "Shahbagh: Revolution and Counter-Revolution," *Alal O Dulal*, April 1, 2013, accessed June 6, 2015, https://alalodulal.org/2013/04/01/shahbagh-rev-counter-rev/.
209   "The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh," Laws of Bangladesh, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, November 4, 1972, accessed September 1, 2022, http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-367.html.
210   Prashanta Tripura, "Identity Grabbing: The Official Position Against Indigeneity Undermines Bangladesh's 'Adibashi' Minorities," *Himal Southasian: The Bangladesh Paradox* 28, no. 3 (2015): 30–31.
211   Susan I. Hangen, *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal: Democracy in the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2010), 30.
212   Basch, Schiller, and Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound*; Gupta and Sharma, "Globalization and Postcolonial States," 279.

I have mentioned that international media as well as academic scholarship often portray Nepal and Bangladesh as elsewheres, as underdeveloped Other to a modern and innovative West.[213] In comparison to Europe and America, but also to their neighbor India, Nepal and Bangladesh are reified as infrastructural and economical elsewheres—as periphery. Bangladesh is deemed a consistent victim of floods, cyclones, and more recently the exploitative textile industry.[214] It is also "ground zero" of global climate change, resulting in a massive influx of funding for climate change adaptation programs from worldwide donor organizations.[215] Liechty uses the term periphery to expose Nepal's marginalization at the "always-becoming end of the global development spectrum."[216] Since the abolition of the Rana dynasty and the end of its policy of isolation in the 1950s, Nepal has been identified as an American-made development laboratory and as an example of failed development. Both the Nepali state and the development industry have economically profited from this portrayal.[217] Simultaneously, Nepal is imagined as a place of breathtaking Himalayan mountains, golden temples, spirituality, and charming hill villages—an imaginary comparable to the mythical land of Shangri-La described by British author James Hilton in *Lost Horizon* (1933)—notably to boost the tourism industry.[218]

The cultural labor that goes into making a nation, both by the state in question and by other actors, continues to effect the people who act and move within these circles of reference. This includes artists, curators, collectors, and art writers to whom national, local, or ethnic identities remain meaningful. A transcultural perspective on contemporaneity thus cannot be an argument for a "postnational age of carefree nomadism."[219] Instead, it needs to redefine the relationship between actors, artists, and the nation: How and why are boundaries drawn and redrawn? Which understanding of contemporary art, which formats and mediums, which visions are shared, critically discussed, and tested between artists from Nepal and Bangladesh?

In her chapter of *Engaging Transculturality,* Juneja characterizes the artist as an active agent in imagining a new form of the nation as a "realm" that is both localized and transgresses boundaries:

> These positions could perhaps ... break open the idea of the nation, conventionally characterized as a juridical, geopolitical entity, to

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213 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.
214 Colin Long, "State of Disunion: International Support for Trade Unionism in Bangladesh Must Proceed After Separating the Wheat from the Chaff," *Himal Southasian: The Bangladesh Paradox* 28, no. 3 (2015).
215 Kasia Paprocki, "Anti-Politics of Climate Change: Depoliticisation of Climate Change Undermines the Historic Reasons that Made Bangladesh Vulnerable to it," *Himal Southasian: The Bangladesh Paradox* 28, no. 3 (2015): 54–55.
216 Liechty, *Out Here in Kathmandu*, 4.
217 Bell, *Kathmandu*, 332–333, 338.
218 See Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989).
219 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 125.

conceive of it instead as an imagined conceptual realm, not territorially bounded, but one that in the imagination of artists and scholars could both be local and transgress boundaries.[220]

Through their creative practice, artists are skilled observers of the fabric of everyday life. They are able to grasp how borders between localities are manipulated and contested, and, through their artworks, mediate these processes to wider audiences. Through their participation in multiple scales of interaction, artists continue to transgress social, cultural, and political borders and thus come to act as cultural brokers. These transgressions do not consist of taking ideas or skills from one field of cultural production into another. Instead, the artists' brokerage involves the creation of a third space with elements of the diverse discourses they encounter. From this space that is neither one visual discourse nor the other they can relativize and change the discourse from which they emerged.[221] This brokerage pertains to a wider set of mediations that can be mere byproducts of participating in different events *(Venice Biennale, DAS)* or the result of a conscious negotiation of locality in artworks *(Echoed Moments in Time, My Blood, Your Script & Bull Tongue)*. Cultural brokerage can also include the accumulation and transmission of social capital, by building alliances with like-minded actors (such as the curators of the Bangladesh pavilion), and of economic capital, by using personal networks to mobilize donors. Accessing new spaces frees artists from nationally defined (art) discourses and offers new scopes of imagination and action. For instance, in the Bangladeshi pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* in 2011, Pulak conjures an image of Bangladesh in the middle of a power play over national identity rooted in tropes of a glorified victory in 1971.[222] Through the manipulation of archival photography, he offers an alternative, more humane, and inclusive identity. Nepal-based artist Sigdel's art performance at the *DAS* 2014 puts into question the popular portrayal of Nepal as a pristine and spiritual travel destination. He offers a vantage point to reconsider the locality beyond the image of brave Gorkha soldiers and beautiful mountains and addresses pressing economic and political inequalities. Through their artworks, Pulak and Sigdel create vantage points from which to rethink the national scale of locality as more open and inclusive. Thereby they connect with a wider sphere of intellectuals, activists, and members of the civil society in their respective countries who have been voicing similar claims. Both artists belong to a generation of contemporary artists that grew in and out of the South Asian Network for the Arts (SANA), which connected five South-Asian collectives KHOJ (India), Vasl (Pakistan), Sutra (Nepal), Theerta (Sri Lanka), and Britto (Bangladesh) through an array of activities between

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220 Juneja, "'A Very Civil Idea…'" 294.
221 Clark, "Asian Artists," 21–22.
222 In Bangladesh, many names have three (or more) components (for instance Promotesh Das Pulak). The latter often serves as a kind of nickname, and is often the name by which artists are known in their field.

2000–2011. The spatial, institutional, and socio-cultural mobilities made available by this network put both artists in a situation from which they can critically engage with different hegemonic, exclusivist claims to locality. Both have also benefitted from the social and cultural capital dispersed by the network, and on a smaller scale, within the collectives.

Britto is considered to be Bangladesh's "first artist run alternative arts platform."[223] It was founded in 2002, through the initiative of Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman. It is formed by a group of artists (five to six trustees, seventeen to eighteen regular members) working and living in Bangladesh with the aim of creating an alternative space for critical thinking, experimental approaches to art, and for enabling exchange between creative individuals and groups.[224] Bangladesh's participation at the *Venice Biennale* is the result of Britto's efforts.[225] Through SANA, Britto is connected to Sutra, a creative art group established in Nepal in 2003. Through workshops, residencies, and public art events, Sutra aimed at expanding the art practice in Nepal beyond conventional and traditional boundaries. The collective's focus was on experimenting with new mediums, new aesthetics, and new philosophies, while at the same time raising awareness about the cultural heritage of the country.[226] Sigdel's presence at the *DAS* is the result of the network that SANA established. The artist is also an initial member of Bindu, established in 2006 to support the development of arts in Nepal and to connect with international artists. Because he lives in Pokhara, Sigdel is no longer formally involved with the collective, but Bindu's founding members Saurganga Darshandhari and Prithvi Shreshta continue to organize residencies, talks, and events. At the time of my research, the members of Britto, Sutra, and Bindu regularly collaborated and supported each other despite the formal ending of SANA.

It is the nexus between these actors and collectives that constitutes the thread connecting not only my material, but also my theoretical and methodological approach. The type of collectivity that emerges from the

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223 Negarra A. Kudumu, "Broad Art Museum Celebrates Bangladeshi Artists Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman With Joint Exhibition," *Art Radar*, March 26, 2016, accessed June 20, 2021, https://artradarjournal.com/broad-art-museum-celebrates-bangladeshi-artists-tayeba-begum-lipi-and-mahbubur-rahman-with-joint-exhibition/.

224 For an introduction to the collective, and a list of trustees, members, and activities, see "About Britto," Britto Arts Trust, accessed June 19, 2021, http://brittoartstrust.org/home/about-britto/.

225 My visit to the Bangladesh Pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* 2011 took place two years before I began my doctoral research in 2013. My discussion here is therefore based on the exhibition catalog, retrospective interviews with the Britto founders, and the research diary I kept for the class at the department of Visual and Media Anthropology (HCTS), in the frame of which I visited the 2011 *Venice Biennale* (see fn. 194).

226 Sutra stopped organizing programs at the end of the 2000s. As a result, much of the documentation of its activities is lost. My research is based on testimonies, posters, and workshop descriptions by former members. For an overview of Sutra's activities, see also Mukesh Malla, *Uttaradhunik Nepali kala ko abhilekh* (Kathmandu: Arohan, 2009).

case studies in this chapter is based on a tension between autonomy and togetherness. The format of the collective allows Pulak and Sigdel to bene-fit from the social capital accumulated by its founders, SANA, and the Triangle Arts Trust (Triangle). And the formats established by these actors allow them to experiment with new mediums, ideas, and techniques, and thereby develop their own practice.

Interlude: *Echoed Moments in Time*

The Bangladesh pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale *is located at the foot of a bridge, in a mid-sized street right next to the Rio di Sant'Anna. At first glance, the house of the Gervasuti Foundation is smaller, but otherwise not too different from the other redbrick houses on the canal. Only a small color-ful bordure, reminiscent of rickshaw decoration, frames the entrance to the courtyard. Unlike the Arsenale,*[227] *where I spent the last two days and which felt like a huge, cramped, enclosed and confusing walk-through hallway, filled with sometimes surprising, sometimes anticipated things, my experience as a visitor of the Bangladesh pavilion is framed from the beginning; I came to see contem-porary art from Bangladesh.*

After I located the national pavilion on the specially made Biennale *map and followed a maze of streets to the Gervasuti Foundation, I walk in through the tiny entrance door, and take in Kabir Ahmed Massum Chisty's installation of colorful umbrellas entitled* Spring*. The light mood it creates is immedi-ately broken when I enter a dark, sparsely lit room and the smell of humidity enters my nostrils. I hear the squeaks of pigs—a sound I do not associate with Bangladesh and its predominantly Muslim population. Mahbubur Rahman's installation* I Was Told to Say These Words *is altogether unsettling: blank, unrendered brick walls, the word* ma *(mother) in neon blue signs, and stacked metal cages filled with pigs. The work is informed by seemingly radical opposi-tions. The pigs are "unreal"—made from fiberglass—but covered in real, smelly cow hides. The cold, neon blue light contrasts the soothing feeling inspired by the word mother. With the residual image of the neon signs still lingering in my vision, I make my way up the narrow stairs.*

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227 The Arsenale has been one of the major venues for the *Venice Biennale* since the *International Architecture Exhibition* in 1980. In 1998, the art biennale and the architecture biennale changed their organization from a sole focus on national pavilions to incorporate an international exhibition by the *Biennale* curator and collateral events, many of which are today hosted in the Arsenale. The Arsenale has an important meaning for the city of Venice: as the "largest pre-industrial production centre of the world," and due to its shipyards, depots, and work-shops, it is a "symbol of the military, economical, and political power Venice had back in time." 50,000 square meters—half of which is indoor space—of the Arsenale have become dedicated to the *Biennale*. "La Biennale di Venezia: The Organization," La Biennale di Venezia, accessed June 8, 2016, http://www.labiennale.org/en/organization; "Venues: Arsenale," La Biennale di Venezia, accessed June 8, 2016, https://www.labiennale.org/en/venues/arsenale.

Here Tayeba Begum Lipi's video installation I Wed Myself *introduces another juxtaposition: that of the bride and the groom's perspective on their wedding day. Facing the video projection, are Begum's brassieres (*Bizarre and Beautiful*) hanging from a metal shelf. I take in Kabir Ahmed Massum Chisty's self-portrait as the Medusa and Imran Hossain Piplu's cleverly conceived Utopian Museum in which he investigates the* Warrassic Period*, a time of war. Finally, I end up in front of a wall of photographs (see Fig. 1).*

The images remind me of old war photos that I would perhaps expect to find in a history museum. Due to the chipped off paint on the walls, the bare wooden beams, and the remains of a fireplace, the set-up looks more like a residential museum than a contemporary art exhibition. In one image, one can see bodies piled up on a cycle rickshaw. Young men are posing with their guns, ready to enter the fight. In another photograph, a mother is holding her baby. The figures that face the beholder stare blankly into the camera. There is something intriguing in their gaze, but I cannot put my finger on it. Only after a closer inspection, I realize that all protagonists have similar facial features— not similar: the same. The artist Pulak has photo-shopped his own face into every single digital print.

In his book *1971*, Srinath Raghavan applies himself to recount in detail the events of 1971. He traces the escalation of the conflict between East and West Pakistan, which led to Bangladesh's independence, to three long-term issues. First, West Pakistan's campaign for centralization and its conscious disregard of the unequal population distribution between East and West Pakistan. Second, the diversion of foreign aid to the Western wing and the focus on unilateral economic development. And most importantly, the government's attempt to establish Urdu as the official language in both parts of the country. The lattermost caused widespread agitation and protests among the Bengali-speaking population in the eastern part at the end of the 1940s and early 1950s. The so-called "language movement" forced Pakistan to recognize both Bengali and Urdu as state languages in 1956.[228] Other frictions persisted and a series of natural disasters in East Pakistan followed by West Pakistan's lack of response hardened the East Bengali's growing demand for self-determination.[229] The claim for larger autonomy culminated in the 1970s elections, when the Awami League, a political party founded in 1949 in East Pakistan and led by Mujibur Rahman, gained the overall majority. Unwilling to concede to the Awami League, General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan, who held power in Pakistan since the declaration of martial law in March 1969, backed West Pakistan-based Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party for Prime Minister.[230] Attempts from both sides to negotiate a diplomatic outcome of the elections failed and the

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228 Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 7–8.
229 Raghavan, *1971*, 21–33.
230 Raghavan, *1971*, 34–54.

a

b

Figure 1: Promotesh Das Pulak, *Echoed Moments in Time*, 2011.
Venice Biennale. Photo: a) author; b) courtesy of the artist.

first assembly meeting was repeatedly postponed. The conflict soon esca-
lated, and the Bangladesh War of Independence started on March 25, 1971.
The first maneuver ordered by the central government in West Pakistan
was Operation Searchlight, a violent attack on the student halls at Dhaka
University. The war ended after nine months of violence, with West Pakistan
signing an unconditional surrender on December 16, 1971.[231]

Raghavan's analysis of the 1971 war includes a detailed account of
the unfolding of events in various countries around the world (from the
United States of America to India), as well as the repercussions of the

231 Raghavan, *1971*, 235–263.

war's outcome on contemporary politics and social life in South Asia. He illustrates that in Pakistan the war is still primarily perceived as a Bengali betrayal against the idea of a united homeland for Muslims in South Asia. This persisting perspective, he argues, impedes political, economic, and socio-cultural relations between the two countries until today. In India the war of 1971 is commonly known as the third Indo-Pakistan war; this narrative, Raghavan contends, marginalizes East Pakistan/Bangladesh's struggle for independence and comprises it as a side note in the conflict between India and (West) Pakistan.[232] Both perspectives emulate the common academic circumscription of the South Asian region, with borders drawn along religious boundaries and India as the central court that sets the pace for cultural, political, and economic exchange.

In Bangladesh, the war is most commonly referred to as a war of national liberation, symbolizing the rise of nationalism. It is called *mukti-juddho*, "liberation war," and commemorates the bravery of freedom fighters, national heroes, and army men. The emphasis on heroism recorded in public accounts, text- and schoolbooks, memorials, and political speeches conceals other facets of the war.[233] Among these are the extremely high number of refugees, the targeted prosecution of Hindu, ethnic, and other minorities in Bangladesh, India's ambiguous role, and the systematic rape of women known as *birangana*.[234] The fact that the war has never been

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232 Raghavan, *1971*, 5–9.
233 Bangladesh's two main political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), have been sustaining individual versions of this narrative (based on different heroes) for the past 40 years. AL was founded in Dhaka in 1949. It is currently led by Sheikh Hasina, recurring Prime Minister of Bangladesh (1996–2001, 2009–2014, 2014–present) and the daughter of Mujibur Rahman, known as the *Father of Bangladesh*. The party bases its narrative on his leadership, and his role in bringing about the independence of Bangladesh. BNP was founded in Dhaka in 1978 by Ziaur Rahman, the late husband of the party's current leader and recurring Prime Minister of Bangladesh (1991–1996, 2001–2006) Khaleda Zia. Ziaur Rahman was an army general who assumed the presidency of Bangladesh (under martial law) in 1977 after the assassination of Mujibur Rahman. BNP bases its narrative on the heroic role of the army in winning the war.
234 Filmmaker and researcher Rubayat Hossain explains that the term *birangona* or *birangana*, literally "Heroic Woman," has subsequently been bestowed upon women who were raped during the 1971 war. The term, despite its wide use today, is problematic, she argues, as it seemingly "normalizes" the suffering of rape victims. It was coined in an attempt to "claim at least a minimum level of respectability for these women" by attributing them a "heroic" role in the fight for independence, yet it marks their loss of *izzat* (dignity, honor, chastity). Rather than offering practical solutions (for instance in relation to unwanted pregnancies) the term continues to reify their status of the "shamed one." Rubaiyat Hossain, "Trauma of the Women, Trauma of the Nation: A Feminist Discourse on Izzat," in *Bangladesh Genocide 1971 and the Quest for Justice: Papers Presented in the Second International Conference on Genocide Truth and Justice 30–31 July 2009*, ed. Mofidul Hoque (Dhaka: Liberation War Museum, 2009), 100–102; Arild Engelsen Ruud, "Narratives of Genocide: School Text Books and the War of Liberation in Bangladesh," in *Bangladesh Genocide and the Issue of Justice: Papers Presented in the International Conference Held at Heidelberg University, Germany, 4–5 July, 2013*, ed. Mofidul Hoque and Umme Wara (Dhaka:

judicially processed further affects the way that "victims" are perceived and portrayed. Although a Genocide Investigation Commission was put into place as early as 1972 and an International War Crimes Tribunal Act was drafted in 1973, the wish to process crimes and bring the perpetrators to justice was abandoned in the interest of composed relations with the South Asian neighbors, notably India and Pakistan. In 1973, the new government passed a general amnesty for lesser crimes, and prisoners were repatriated.[235] As a result, narratives beyond the "glorious victory" have been relegated to the scale of more private, personal accounts. The will to publicly address the post-war trauma and the damaging effect of thirty years of amnesty resurfaced during the 2008 general elections, when they became a decisive electoral topic.[236] It is in the midst of this emerging discourse that I situate Pulak's work at the 2011 *Venice Biennale*.

With *Echoed Moments in Time*, Pulak opens the discourse around 1971 to an international *Biennale* audience. Led by his own dealings with the war of national liberation, Pulak establishes himself as cultural broker and offers a new vantage point in the discourse. His digital manipulation of photographs taken by renowned war photographers such as Robin Sen Gupta, Abdul Hamid Rayhan, and Rashid Talukdar, marks his engagement with the war's continued effects on the individual psyche of Bangladeshis today. The fact that he chose to work with archival photographs highlights his willingness to engage especially with the visual discourse he emerged from—a discourse dominated by global media depictions of poverty and a nationally-promoted celebration of victory and war heroes. The visual testimonies taken during the war did not reach the Bangladeshi media or the greater public until much later. During the war, images taken by photographers in Bangladesh left the country with foreign journalists and negatives vanished or were hidden. Dhaka-based photographer Shahidul Alam was among the first to engage with the visual representation of 1971. During the first international photography festival *Chobi Mela* (*CM,* 2001), he organized an exhibition specifically on the topic. It contained photographs that had been published in foreign magazines and newspapers in 1971, but had never been shown in Bangladesh.[237] Today, many of the photographs can be seen at the Bangladesh Liberation War Museum, an

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Liberation War Museum, 2013), 65; Naeem Mohaiemen, "Flying Blind: Waiting for a Real Reckoning on 1971," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 36 (2011); Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami birangana balchhi* (Dhaka: Jagriti, 1994).

235 Raghavan, *1971*, 264–273.

236 Members of the BNP and the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami were accused of committing war crimes in 1971. Prominent war veterans discouraged the public to vote for said war criminals, and the opposing Awami League-led Grand Alliance promised to prosecute the culprits once elected. The Grand Alliance won the election and set up to finally bring the perpetrators to justice under the International Crime Tribunal Act 1973. M. Harun-Ar-Rashid, "Bangladesh Genocide and Trial of the Perpetrators," in Hoque, *Bangladesh Genocide 1971 and the Quest for Justice*, 79–81.

237 Shahidul Alam, "Our Visual History in the Making," in *Chobi Mela: Differences Unframed (Exhibition Catalogue),* ed. Chobi Mela (Dhaka: Drik, 2000), 4–5.

independent museum dedicated to the documentation and examination of the 1971 war.

Pulak was born in 1980, nine years after the war, into a Hindu family in the northeast of Bangladesh. In his artist statement he recollects how he learned about the war during his childhood: "The elders in my family narrated countless stories of that time while I was growing up. Later, I read numerous textbooks, viewed pictures spawned off media which have impacted and shaped my thoughts pertaining to the liberation war."[238] He elaborates that while hearing these different stories, the heroes, victims, the glory of the freedom fighters, the disgust and fear over the violence, and the happiness over the achieved freedom all blended together. In an attempt to comprehend these past events, Pulak would imagine himself as a protagonist in 1971, trying on the role of a hero and that of a victim.[239]

The digital manipulation Pulak uses on the photographs is an expansion of this childhood mind game. In *Echoed Moments in Time*, Pulak slips into different identities; in one photo he is a soldier holding a gun, in another, he is a mother holding her child, and in yet another, he is part of a pile of corpses. He photoshops his face onto the people in the photographs and creates a very personal, corporeal engagement with the diverse narratives of the war. Moreover, Pulak's work is based on his childhood memory, a mix between the personal experiences of his family members, his reading of textbooks, and hearing of political speeches. While the first constitute private accounts, the textbooks and speeches are part of a more public narrative. As I mentioned above, the latter often center on heroic personages and glorious moments of the war, on liberation and victory. The private accounts, in contrast, are more nuanced. They contain moments of suffering, loss, and death. The photographs Pulak uses are somewhat in-between; they capture heroic soldiers as well as grim moments. Appropriating these photographs, subjecting them to his manipulation, and exhibiting the result inside the Bangladesh pavilion allows for a connection between his personal reading of the war, the millions of individual stories, and the public narrative. Seen together, the many-layered, antagonistic, and fragmented feelings Pulak addresses by juxtaposing different roles and identities (from soldiers to *birangonas*) speaks to a more inclusive collective experience of 1971 and the constitution of the nation to which it led. The juxtaposition offers a counter to the publicly portrayed narrative of heroic nationalism (in political functions, textbooks, and referenced in political speeches) based on the glory of the freedom fighters. Pulak's call for a more nuanced and inclusive account connects him to artists who have raised similar claims, such as New York-based artist Naeem Mohaiemen:[240]

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238 Promotesh Das Pulak, "Echoed Moments in Time," in *Parables: Pavilion of Bangladesh: Biennale Arte 2011,* ed. Subir Choudhury (Dhaka: Bengal Foundation, 2011), 97.

239 Das Pulak, "Echoed Moments in Time," 97.

240 Artist and writer Naeem Mohaienem has done extensive research on the 1970s in Bangladesh. His video works on the topic have been shown at the *Venice*

> When I probe family history, nothing seems settled. There are no sim-
> ple heroes or villains, only people who made difficult choices. … Every
> Bangladeshi family carries many such contradictions within them-
> selves. Contradictions of impulse, afterthought, hesitation, and brav-
> ery. But how they choose to remember all this varies, ranging from
> exuberant mythmaking to quiet soul-searching. The realities of peo-
> ple's actions during war are always a combination of beautiful hero-
> ism and a liminal failure of nerve. It is a fundamental aspect of being
> human. Bangladesh is still waiting for that human history of 1971.[241]

Similar to Pulak, Mohaiemen contests the publicly propagated myth of
national heroism. The quote stems from a review of journalist Sarmila
Bose's *Dead Reckoning. Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War*, published in
2011. While the text is intended as an in-depth critique of Bose's partial and
biased research frame that lead her to question the genocidal character of
the 1971 war, Mohaiemen also engages in his own appraisal of the ambig-
uous public narrative of 1971. He argues that the unilateral narrative of
national heroism propagated by the ruling parties feeds into the persisting
"unstable dynamics" in contemporary Bangladesh.[242] The general elections
of 2008, the resulting institution of the International War Crime Tribunal,
and the emergence of a renewed public discourse on the circumstances
of Bangladesh's independence constitute only one part of these "unstable
dynamics." Underlying, I contend, is an ongoing power play between dif-
ferent claims to national identity in the context of which I see Pulak's work.

During the Pakistan era, the political and cultural elite in West Pakistan
engaged in the promotion of a superethnos in order to legitimize their
claim for political independence.[243] The related cultural work included the
emphasis of the lacking territorial and cultural cohesion between the two
parts of the nation. The West-Bengali region was linked to Pakistan based
on an assumed communality of religious beliefs. In order to undermine the
importance of this unity, the idea of peaceful coexistence between Hindus,
Buddhists, and Muslims in Bengal before colonization was strengthened.
Secularism, language, and discrete geographies thus became the cultural
elements to build the new state. The persistence of this cultural work sur-
faced during my research on several occasions. Often comments included
the mention of the *sari* or the *bindi*, traditionally worn by women in Bangla-
desh, as a sign of the influence of Hinduism on the current culture. One of
my interview partners for instance explained: "What was the clash between
Pakistan and Bangladesh? The clash is culture. Because they speak in Urdu,

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Biennale in 2015 and at the *documenta* in 2017. The latter earned him a nom-
ination for the prestigious Turner Prize in early 2018. See Natasha Ginwala,
"Naeem Mohaiemen," documenta 14, accessed February 8, 2021, https://www.
documenta14.de/en/artists/988/naeem-mohaiemen.

241 Mohaiemen, "Flying Blind," 52.
242 Mohaiemen, "Flying Blind," 50.
243 Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*, 31–32.

we speak in Bangla. They eat bread or roti, we eat rice. They wear *kurta*, we wear *sari*. So, all these differences, soon we realized that we are so much different from them."[244] The claim to a distinct Bengali or *Bangalee* identity conjured an ideological unified ethnicity with an assumed right to run its own state. This right was anchored in Article 9 of the Bangladesh Constitution: "The unity and solidarity of the Bangalee nation, which, deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bangalee nationalism."[245] The creation of this superethnic identity however also consciously excluded and consequently denied the right to full citizenship to other identities.[246] This exclusion corresponds to the general conception of the war as the glorious birth of a nation: the new-old Bengali identity does not represent losers, women, or indigenous people.[247]

Mohaiemen locates the reason for this exclusion within the Bengali Muslim middle class and elite.[248] He elaborates that it is especially these classes that have politically and economically benefited from 1971; after the war, they took over the businesses that had previously been in the hands of West Pakistanis, similar to what they had been doing to the Hindu population since the partition in 1947.[249] Moreover, invoking Mujibur Rahman and his role in the independence has allowed the Awami League and its Muslim middle class supporters to maintain its political and economic interests.[250] Lotte Hoek argues along very similar lines. She explains that the Awami League has repeatedly monopolized and propagated the Bengali nationalist ideology.

> The Awami League under Sheikh Hasina has actively sought to make this vision of "1971" the central signifier of Bangladeshiness. The cultural tropes of Bengaliness were thus democratized, spread far beyond the confines of bourgeois households traditionally associated with them, as being Bangladeshi became linked to Bengali culture and arts.[251]

The "Bengaliness" anchored in the Constitution and safeguarded by one of the nation's main ruling parties stands in contrast to other identities, especially the Islamic Nationalist identity. This idea goes back to the Partition of

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244 AR, A, 2015.
245 Bang. Const. Part II, Art. 9.
246 Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*, 30; Tripura, "Identity Grabbing," 30–31.
247 Khushi Kabir, "How our Generation Sees Shahbagh," *South Asia Citizens Wire*, March 7, 2013, accessed June 6, 2021, http://www.sacw.net/article3870.html.
248 Mohaiemen, "Flying Blind," 51.
249 Mohaiemen, "Flying Blind," 50.
250 Mohaiemen, "Flying Blind," 51.
251 Lotte E. Hoek, "Mofussil Metropolis: Civil Sites, Uncivil Cinema and Provinciality in Dhaka City," *Ethnography* 13, no. 1 (2012): 35.

1947 and builds on religion as a binding factor.[252] Supporters of this identity (especially the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party) are often accused of having fought on the "wrong side" in an attempt to preserve the unity of a South Asian Muslim nation.[253] They are repeatedly singled out as collaborationists of the Pakistani army that led the attack in 1971.[254] The Shahbag movement or *Gonojagaran Mancha* (National Awakening Stage), which took place two years after Pulak exhibited his work in Venice, and right at the beginning of my research into contemporary art, exposed the force of this narrative. At the base of the protests was the sentencing of Jamaat-e-Islami politician Abdul Quader Mollah by the newly established War Crimes Tribunal. The Awami League's role in establishing the Tribunal and its exclusive focus on members of the political opposition, Jamaat-e-Islami and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), caused widespread agitation especially among the young generation, and gave momentum to Jamaat-e-Islami supporters. Moreover, the movement triggered a more general critique against the political climate that had allowed for the long silence on 1971, putting both the Awami League and the BNP into the spotlight. All in all, the movement sparked fears against an impending radicalization of both the Bengali and the Islamic identity.[255]

Amid this power play, a third claim to a more inclusive Bangladeshi identity arises. Advocated by intellectuals, bloggers, activists, artists, and writers like Mohaiemen, this identity accounts for a more "human history of 1971."[256] It allows a more inclusive notion of national identity by accounting for women, atheists, and Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian communities, as well as Bangladesh's ethnic minorities. With *Echoed Moments in Time*, Pulak conceives a vantage point for such an identity to be realized. His work questions entrenched narratives of a glorious war at a crucial moment in time—right between the set-up of the War Crimes Tribunal (2009) and the Shahbagh movement (2013). It bears testimony to Pulak's sense of crucial contemporary negotiations about a nationally circumscribed locality. His work questions and relativizes hegemonic notions of national identity—as male, Muslim, middle class, glorious, fierce—and playfully suggests a more nuanced pluralistic approach to what it means to be Bangladeshi. The idea of the nation is repositioned as complex, dynamic matter of constant (re)negotiation.

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252 Rahman, "Shahbagh."
253 Salil Tripathi, "Bangladeshi Inquisitions: Freedom of Expression in Bangladesh is Caught Between the Machete and the Magistrate," *Himal Southasian: The Bangladesh Paradox* 28, no. 3 (2015): 21.
254 See for instance Syed Anwar Husain, "Genocide in Bangladesh, 1971: Fixing Responsibility," in Hoque, *Bangladesh Genocide 1971 and the Quest for Justice*; Ansar Ahmed Ullah, "Building an International Network. Campaign to Seek Justice & the Efforts in the UK," in Hoque, *Bangladesh Genocide 1971 and the Quest for Justice*.
255 Seema Amin, "Shahbagh Slides Into Old Identity Dichotomy," *Alal O Dulal*, March 6, 2013, accessed June 18, 2021, http://alalodulal.org/2013/03/06/shahbagh-seema-amin/; Kabir, "How our Generation Sees Shahbagh"; Rahman, "Shahbagh."
256 Mohaiemen, "Flying Blind," 52.

The ongoing socio-cultural and political frictions in Bangladesh, the majority of which are related to the struggles of 1947 and 1971, are manifest in all the works on display at the Bangladesh pavilion in Venice. Mahbubur Rahman engages with the religious taboos of domestic animals in Bangladesh. Through the example of pigs (referencing the restriction on consuming pork in Islam) and cows (alluding to the veneration for cows in Hinduism), he visualizes how deeply religious and ideological division have penetrated the daily lives of people, from livestock farming to eating habits.[257] His work mediates knowledge about prevailing religious traditions and social norms in Bangladesh. I also read his work as a critique of religious prescriptions, and the effect these have on every part of society. In this sense, the installation questions and contests the geopolitical, cultural, and social sectioning caused in the name of religion in the region, from the Partition of India (1947) to the prevailing marginalization of Hindus in Bangladesh. My reading is based on the fact that the issue of social divide frequently surfaces in Rahman's work, as I will expand upon in my case study of the public art project *1mile²*. Lipi investigates the socio-cultural asymmetries between men and women based on disparate gender roles at play in Bangladesh. While Piplu's work deals with states of war in general, Pulak specifically focuses on 1971 and the memories related to the year in which Bangladesh became an independent nation. The characteristic of Pulak's brokerage of a more dynamic understanding of national identity—beyond the prevailing exclusivist Bengali nationalism shaped by the narratives of 1971 and the raising Islamist fundamentalism—is closely tied to the medium of photography itself.

Christopher Pinney argues that "photography's indexicality, its chemical trace, its indiscriminating data ratio"—meaning its technical constraint to reproduce exactly what is in front of the lens—allows for the manifestation of "what has already been achieved socially." Simultaneously it provides a "space of experimentation where new identities can be conjured."[258] Pulak's work reflects exactly this duality of the medium. On the one hand, the photographs he uses capture heroes and victims, victory and suffering. This indiscrimination allows Pulak to revisit the events of 1971 and to demonstrate that the war did not only include brave freedom fighters, as the official narrative suggests. On the other hand, the option of digital manipulation allows him to transgress the fine line between fact and fiction and construct something new: a personalized, manipulated archive. This personalization does not entail a reduction in perspective, however. On the contrary, it establishes a connection with a generation of Bangladeshis torn between exclusivist narratives of the event and its ramifications.

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257 Manzoorul S. Islam, "Mahbubur Rahman," in Choudhury, *Parables*, 81.

258 Christopher Pinney, *The Coming of Photography in India* (London: The British Library Publishing Division, 2008), 145.

In *The Social Life of Things*, Kopytoff suggests that the focus on specific objects allows access to wider political, historical, and aesthetic norms and values related to these objects.[259] The artworks in the Bangladesh pavilion offer access to the artists' environment. This environment is not a fixed, bounded, and culturally cohesive locality. Pulak and the others reference hegemonic discourses about religion, political power, and visual representation, and through novel ideas and mediums, such as photography and digital manipulation, open it up for an ongoing negotiation and relativization. The visual norm promoted by the state is centered on glory, heroism, and victory in independence. The political ideal is a united Bengali nation rallied behind its heroes, and the values remain anchored in the Muslim middle class. The artists however visualize a more dynamic, inquisitive, and current interpretation of their locality. They prove to be skilled observers of the fabric of everyday life, able to create a space of encounter between hegemonic and alternative discourses. They broker this third space in which elements of the diverse discourses they encounter come together to a wider audience and thus create vantage points for a more dynamic conception of the locality of Bangladesh. The type of cultural brokerage from artists through their works does not happen in isolation. It is situated in a wider network of social connections built and sustained by the collective and other actors, such as SANA.

THE COLLECTIVE AS CULTURAL BROKER

At first glance, the realization of the first Bangladesh pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* seems the result of a series of coincidences—a perfect yet random interplay of encountering the right people at the right time. In fact, it involved a serious effort of brokerage by diverse actors who used their respective positions in the field of art production and beyond it to a collective end. The first contact between the artists and the curator Mary Angela Schroth, director of the non-profit cultural research center Sala 1, was established by the Bangladeshi ambassador to Italy. As diplomatic envoy, the ambassador actively mediates cultural messages on a bilateral scale from the nation-state that sends him (Bangladesh) to the nation-state in which he is now based (Italy) and *vice versa*. Through his profession, he is one of the most deliberate cultural brokers.[260] In contrast to the artists, he is bound to the national scale and the content of his brokerage is, to a certain extent, limited or even prescribed by this scale and the state in power. He provided Schroth with information, notably in the form

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259 Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011 [1986]), 67.

260 Sala 1 is a cultural non-profit experimental research center established in Rome in 1970. "Home," Sala 1, accessed February 05, 2023, https://www.salauno.com/.

of catalogs, about the contemporary art world in Bangladesh.[261] Britto's consistent work in the field of contemporary art has earned them large visibility in Bangladesh since its foundation in 2002, and thus Schroth came to know about them. Again, with the assistance of the ambassador, she began conceiving *Videozoom: Bangladesh*. This show focused on video art from Bangladesh as part of a series of exhibitions on the medium. Among others, it comprised works by Britto member Pulak and trustees Lipi, Piplu, and Rahman. The latter was also present in Rome in May 2010 when the exhibition opened. On that occasion, a collaboration formed between Schroth, Rahman, Fiona Biggiero, the artistic director of the alternative collaborative art platform Gervasuti Foundation, and artist Paolo W. Tamburella, who had been introduced to Bangladesh through his Bangladeshi studio assistants.[262] Together, the four conceived of the initial idea for the 2011 pavilion of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Fiona Biggiero and Lipi jointly commissioned *Parables / Parabole*, as the pavilion was entitled, and Tamburella and Schroth acted as curators. As a representative of the nation-state, the ambassador was tasked with introducing the formal request of participation to the Venice Biennale Foundation.[263]

Curators Tamburella and Schroth acted as mediators between Bangladesh and Italy, but on a different scale than the ambassador. They introduced Rahman to Biggiero and the Gervasuti Foundation. The Foundation, born from the Gervasuti family's tradition in wood artisanry, in turn controls the building in the Castello area that became the pavilion. Tamburella and Schroth's positions in the artistic field, as an artist and a director of an experimental research center respectively, provided each with the necessary cultural and social capital, as well as the flexibility to travel to Bangladesh on several occasions during the planning phase. Their creative vocation brought them closer to Britto, itself an artist-led, experimental platform, and the exchange between Britto founders Rahman and Lipi, and between Biggiero and the curators, was more reciprocal, driven by a mutual interest in furthering contemporary art practice.

The realization of the pavilion was based on hard work and the overcoming of several challenges. One such challenge involved the physical distance between Italy and Bangladesh and the resulting difficulties in communication. Despite Rahman's presence in Venice in 2010, and the curators' visits to Bangladesh, the planning involved extensive e-mail exchange, highlighted by the partial reprint of one conversation between Lipi and Biggiero in the *Parables* catalog.[264] In my interview in

261 Mary Angela Schroth, "Recounting 'Parables,'" in Choudhury, *Parables*, 102–121.
262 The Gervasuti Foundation is an alternative collaborative art platform operating from Venice. The foundation's goal is the revitalization of the area of the Castello, famous for woodcraft and shipbuilding, where the Gervasuti family artisan wood workshop is located. "Home," Gervasuti Foundation, accessed April 13, 2021, http://www.gervasutifoundation.org/.
263 Schroth, "Recounting 'Parables.'"
264 Tayeba Begum Lipi and Fiona Biggiero, "Long Distance Conversations," in Choudhury, *Parables*, 16–17.

February 2015, Rahman and Lipi explained that they did not have access to a reliable internet connection at the time, making the exchange tedious at times.

Another challenge was the selection of exhibiting artists. Initially, the Italian curators only considered Rahman and Lipi. As founders of an artist collective, however, they preferred a collective representation. They have in fact repeatedly pushed for collective representations in large-scale events, as Lipi mentions in our interview. They thus negotiated the participation of other Britto trustees and subsequently invited Piplu, who had already participated in the *Videozoom* exhibition, and Massum to join. Both artists have been involved with Britto since its establishment and have known Rahman and Lipi since their student years. Pulak held the position of a newcomer in the art field. He had also participated in *Videozoom*, but his lack of experience and familiarity with the other Britto members initially raised doubts about his ability to produce consistent quality work. Rahman explains that it was his work for Britto's fourth International Artist Workshop (November 24–December 3, 2010) that convinced curator Tamburella of his artistic talent:

> And then later Paolo [Tamburella] decided to take Pulak, because Pulak did a very nice work. At that time Pulak was a newcomer, he just started his career. So, I did not have the confidence about him. But his work in Panam City was very good and he received really good response. So Paolo suggested to include him.[265]

I expand on the importance of the workshop as a space for networking in the sixth chapter, as it constitutes one of the most important nodes in which to situate interpersonal, ideational, material, and discursive connections. In particular, the international workshops facilitated by SANA with the support of the Ford Foundation from 2000–2011 brought together actors that subsequently have become important figures in the South Asian art field, not least due to the relationships they built in these workshops.[266] The 2010 workshop brought together ten artists from around the world and ten artists from Bangladesh, among them Mithu Sen (India), Hu Xiao Xiao (China), and Ayesha Sultana (Bangladesh). It took place in the deserted *Panam Nagar* (or Painam village), part of Bengal's

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265 AR, MR, February 2015.
266 For six years, SANA was funded by the US-based Ford Foundation. Established in 1936, the foundation initially operated under the control of the Ford family by allocating grants to many kinds of organizations. Since the 1940s, it is governed by a board of trustees and, as one of the largest philanthropy foundations, it funds projects around the world. Its funding allowed the SANA collectives to organize regular programs, their activities in regular network meetings. "About Ford: Our Origins," Ford Foundation, accessed April 19, 2021, https://www.fordfoundation.org/about-us/our-origins/.

first capital Sonargaon.[267] During this workshop, Pulak collected archival imagery of erstwhile inhabitants and locals, as well as remnants of their visual culture, such as images of gods and goddesses. For the resulting project *Harano Sur* (The Lost Rhythm) he replaced all the faces in the collected images with his own in order to create a very personal, subjective re-imagination of the private lives of these inhabitants. Tamburella, who was also a participant in the international workshop, was impressed by his colleague's work and as a result suggested Pulak join the line-up for the pavilion.

Rahman and Lipi are important brokers of social capital to the young generation of artists in Bangladesh. They use the format of the collective to pass on the benefits of the positions they have achieved in the contemporary art field—their reputation that led the ambassador to pass on their catalogs to Schroth and the subsequent connection with the curators—to other artists. This sharing of capital does not happen through membership by default. It is subject to an evaluation of artistic value, of which, as mobile brokers, Rahman and Lipi have authority. While founding trustees Piplu and Massum have repeatedly proven their ability to produce high quality work, Pulak still needed to showcase his capability. The system of valorization and hierarchization at play here is not circumscribed by a nationally structured field of cultural production, it lies outside the limits of art education and mediation institutions in Bangladesh and beyond bilateral diplomatic relations. Artists are not limited to the legitimacy of their practice provided by the state nor are they limited by the exchange it offers. Legitimacy and value are defined by the collectives' position in a multi-scalar field of connections situated in international workshops, regional networks such as SANA, and experimental research-focused spaces like Sala 1. It was in the international workshop that Pulak developed his experimental approach to archival imagery and digital manipulation, which became constitutive elements of his work for *Parables*. Further, the realization of the pavilion almost entirely derived from interpersonal face-to-face or e-mail-based relations between art-related individuals. Nevertheless, the national frame has not become inconsequential: the ambassador's position allowed for the initial matchmaking and was crucial in facilitating the official application to the Venice Biennale Foundation. This frame remains meaningful, whether as an identifier for a specific field of cultural practice or in the form of state bureaucracy, but it marks just one scope of action next to an array of others. My research partners position themselves on multiple scales in order to broaden their reach. This is most obvious from the challenge to gather funding for the pavilion:

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267 Nazimuddin Ahmed, *Discover the Monuments of Bangladesh: A Guide to Their History, Location & Development*, trans. John Sanday (Dhaka: University Press, 1984), 152–154; see also "Panam Nagar: The Lost City," *Daily Sun*, November 7, 2017, http://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/266769/Panam-Nagar--the-lost-city.

> TBL*: Even for the Biennale, there was no money from the government, although it was a national pavil-ion. We had to raise every single penny.*
>
> MR*: But there were many people who helped us.*
>
> TBL*: That was the private sector. ...*
>
> MR*: Why are you expecting something from government?*
>
> TBL*: That happens from the government because it is a national pavilion.*[268]

In our 2015 interview, Rahman and Lipi repeatedly address the absence of government support in organizing their participation. While Rahman does not seem surprised by the lack of support (he does not explain why), Lipi sees it as the responsibility of the state's current government, given that the pavilion is a "national" pavilion. Despite the invocation of the national frame by the *Biennale* organizers, the state does not act as a giver; it does not offer economic support.[269] Britto thus mobilized a network of per-sonal connections and managed to raise support from the private sector. Among others, they secured funding from the Bangladesh-based Bengal Art Foundation, which I will discuss in more detail in chapter four,[270] the Amsterdam-based, globally operating Prince Claus Fund,[271] and the Arts Collaboratory network.[272] Throughout the interview, the founders convey a sense of pride to have achieved the first national representation based on self-sufficiency and personal effort; they managed to convince pri-vate actors as well as nationally and globally operating art foundations to believe in Britto's initiative and the value of the artists involved with the collective. This pride is paralleled by a sense of resignation in the face of the government's lack of support. It is Britto's ability to take on multiple positions in a multi-scalar network that allows them to act beyond their nationally circumscribed field, and to push forward the emergence of an alternative contemporaneity.

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268 AR, MR/TBL, February 2015.
269 Gupta and Sharma, "Globalization and Postcolonial States," 288.
270 The Bengal Foundation was founded by Bangladeshi industrialist and entre-preneur Abul Khair with the aim to grow, proliferate, and conserve the art and culture of Bangladesh. "About Us," Bengal Foundation, accessed April 14, 2021, https://bengalfoundation.org/about-us-2/.
271 The Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development was established in 1996 and is financially supported by individual donors, the Dutch Ministry of For-eign Affairs, and the Dutch Postcode Lottery. See "About," Prince Claus Fund, accessed April 24, 2021, https://princeclausfund.org/about.
272 Arts Collaboratory is a worldwide network of twenty-three art-related organ-izations. It was founded in 2007 by DOEN and Hivos, two Dutch foundations, with the aim to support the growing movement of artist initiatives. Within the network, Doen and Hivos have provided smaller grants to independent organ-izations—Britto has been one of the recipients of these grants. See "Home," Arts Collaboratory, accessed April 24, 2021, https://artscollaboratory.org/.

THE ART PAVILION AS (TRANS)LOCALITY

Within the global contemporary frame, large-scale events such as bien-
nales are often subject to contextualising practice; they are discussed as
local versions of a globally transportable format.[273] Consequently, their
localities are treated as mere context in which the global format of the
Biennale is temporarily fixed. This practice leads to an overemphasis of the
one-directional relation between a global form and its local implementa-
tion and masks the heterogeneous constitution and place-making prac-
tices that go into the curation and reception of each event. Translocality
remedies this unilateral perspective prone to a diffusionist rhetoric and
directs attention to the different rhythms and dynamic entanglements
between diverse scales and localities.

In the Interlude: *Echoed Moments in Time*, I compare the exhibition space
of the Bangladesh pavilion (next to the Rio di Sant'Anna) to one of the main
venues of the *Biennale*, the Arsenale. Since the 1980s, the Arsenale hosts
a more international exhibition designed by an overall *Biennale* curator as
well as the pavilions of newcomer nations that do not own buildings in the
Giardini or have not managed to secure access to other buildings around
the city of Venice.[274] Like the curated exhibition with its juxtaposition of dif-
ferent mediums, practices, and techniques, the experience of the national
pavilions located in the Arsenale resembles striding a long walk-through;
the transition from one pavilion to the next is more or less fluid. The build-
ing in which the Bangladesh pavilion is located induces the opposite effect.
It is clearly separated from the main venues. In order to enter the pavil-
ion, visitors have to physically pass through a narrow door—framed by
one of Bangladesh's most popular art products, a decorative element used
in rickshaw art.[275] Aside from this marker, the knowledge that the build-
ing constitutes the pavilion of Bangladesh creates a sense of coherence:
everything inside the pavilion seemingly belongs together. This coherence
is based on national affiliation. Moreover, the physical experience of the
pavilion differs from that of the Arsenale: there is a much calmer environ-
ment, with fewer people and fewer artworks.

The Arsenale's erstwhile function as shipyard, depot, and workshop is
still visible in its architecture: unrendered brick or concrete walls, ample
warehouse structures, and high ceilings. The vastness and isolation of the
area seemingly allows the building to fade into the background and thus
puts the artworks at center stage. Due to their overwhelming amount, one
cannot help but feel distant from the outside world. The perception of the
exhibition space within the pavilion of Bangladesh in contrast is imminent:
the house, the courtyard, the humidity of the walls, the chipped paint, the

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273 Valentine, "Art and Empire," 209.
274 "La Biennale di Venezia," La Biennale di Venezia.
275 Henry Glassie, *Art and Life in Bangladesh* (Bloomington: Indiana University
      Press, 1997), 26–38.

remains of the kitchen structure and the fireplace, serve as a constant reminder of a more "common" existence outside the realm of contemporary art. During my visit, I perceived the interaction between the house and the display as an interesting interplay between content and space. When I later addressed this interplay in the interview, the artists explained that to them, this interaction was cause for a considerable struggle:

> Once we went there, we were not in a happy mood, because, Venice—we always think: "Oh it's Europe. It should be white cube. Why is this a very old, abandoned building? Why should we take that?" There was no other choice, and if we wanted to convert that space, it would have cost us huge money. But at the end of the day, what happened, was that when we kept going to the venue, spent our days there, prepared food there, had our first lunch on the roof top—it was a sunny day, we had fun, installing the work by ourselves, we ultimately loved the venue. We only got the electrician from outside who installed the electrical cables and light system and the rest of the things we did ourselves, we painted, we cleaned the floor, and made the venue suitable for installing our work.[276]

The "abandoned" state of the house initially caused confusion among the artists, as it did not meet their expectations of an exhibition ground in Europe. Rather than an unrendered and untenanted residential building, my research partners had expected the "white cube" type of exhibition space. White cubes become synonymous with museum and gallery displays all over the world and symbolizes yet another globally propagated and locally implemented format. According to art critic Brian O'Doherty the white cube physically and mentally separates "art" from a broader "non-art" space,[277] similar, I imagine, to what I experienced in the Arsenale. However, I object to the idea that any exhibition space could be autonomous, locally and temporally neutral, and undefined—an argument that I elaborate upon in chapter five. Instead, I consider it a valuable part of analysis to observe in what ways the curators and artists deal with the structure of a space, its historical value, and the effect it will have on the display.

Over the course of their stay in Venice, Lipi, Rahman, and the other Britto artists slowly adapted to the situation by making the locality their own. They cleaned the floors, painted the walls, and looked for ways to consciously integrate architectural elements in the display of the works. Moreover, their approach meant dwelling in the space, filling its rooms with everyday experiences, such as hanging out and sharing food.[278] In

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276 AR, MR, February 2015.
277 Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica: Lapis Press, 1986), 13–15.
278 Martin Heidegger used the phrase "to dwell" to describe the way in which people are in and interact with their environment. I understand dwelling as defined by Fred R. Myers: the "everyday practices of living, residing, dying on

our interview, Rahman explains that it was Britto's experience with site-specific projects in Bangladesh, notably the aforementioned international workshop in Panam Nagar (2010), that taught him how to "deal with the heritage building or old place, keeping things as it is and making art inside there."[279] The Britto members' method of place-making—of inhabiting / spending time in a certain locality, infusing it with value,[280] and making it a center for encounters[281]—is related to their collective practices in Bangladesh. These in turn are influenced by the connections to the SANA collectives and the internationally active organizations such as the Triangle and the Ford Foundation involved in the network. Their place-making is also born out of a necessity caused by the situation on site in Venice.

The interplay between the way Britto handled its resources, both in terms of architecture and economic means at their disposal, and their personal physical effort, also became an object of comparison to other national pavilions in Venice:

> And we see all the other pavilions, they have a huge budget. They have people to install and work for them. They have so much logistical and technical support. But we don't. And we saw while installing, artists were having lunch and dinner in the restaurant. Since we did it with a very tight budget, we were always making our own food.[282]

In comparison to other pavilions, Britto realized the limitation of their economic resources; they could not afford to hire additional staff and had to install the exhibition by themselves. They did not receive any logistical or technical support. Moreover, they did not have the money to eat out. On the one hand, this realization highlights the values of support and shared responsibility that characterize the collaborative initiatives; everybody contributes, often based on the skill-set they have acquired from years of experience, be it by cooking, cleaning, or fixing the wiring. On the other hand, the artists' observation is a commentary on what it means to be an artist in Bangladesh. To explain, the pavilion is a platform and a cohesive frame to showcase artworks from one specific national locality—a place where the audience can discover contemporary art practices from "other" countries. It is also a device for comparison and hierarchization—a place for competition among pavilions that represent nations. This not only pertains to cultural production, "dramatizing every two years the latest

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the land" and the "activities through which places become a significant bearer of social identity." Martin Heidegger, "Bauen Wohnen Denken," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Stuttgart: Neske, 1954), 105, 139–156; Fred R. Myers, "Ways of Place-Making," *La Ricerca Folklorica* 45 (April 2002): 105.

279   AR, MR, February 2015.
280   Beatrix Busse and Ingo H. Warnke, "Ortsherstellung als sprachliche Praxis – sprachliche Praxis als Ortsherstellung," in *Place-Making in urbanen Diskursen*, ed. Ingo H. Warnke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 2.
281   Friedmann, "Place and Place-Making in Cities," 153–155.
282   AR, MR, February 2015.

top trends and artists,"[283] but also to economic resources. The exhibitions in the national pavilions are not contingent on an overall organizational, financial, or curatorial *Biennale* management. Rather, they are managed by a diverse range of actors. Some pavilions are state-controlled and funded, some like Britto are largely the result of private initiatives, and some are backed by powerful institutions in the art field, whether operating on a national or global scale. The available resources therefore differ from pavilion to pavilion, inevitably creating economic and logistic asymmetries between participants from countries in which there is little state support or infrastructure for the arts. The format of the national pavilion thus indirectly inherits existing economic and infrastructural asymmetries between nation-states and risks continuing a system of classification and hierarchization between creative and innovative countries and "elsewheres." At the same time, the pavilions are a platform for organizers to showcase their ability to rally support from within the art field, or from commercial investors, private donors, and institutional supporters. The Bangladesh pavilion highlights Britto's ability to rally and redistribute social and economic capital as much as it showcases the country's contemporary art production.

The institution of the national pavilions of the *Venice Biennale*, which goes back to 1907,[284] has repeatedly been criticized for being an anachronistic symbol, obsolete in times of globalization.[285] The curator of the 54th *Biennale*, Bice Curiger, consciously chose *ILLUMInations* as a leading theme to address this critique. In the official *Biennale* catalog, she explains that "the *Venice Biennale* continues to be buoyed by a spirit that transcends all national boundaries, especially in the age when artists too have become multifaceted, keenly perceptive migrants and cultural tourists."[286] Art, she elaborates, "far removed from culturally conservative constructs of 'nation' … offers the potential to explore new forms of 'community' and negotiate differences and affinities that might serve as models for the future."[287] In an argument similar to Juneja's—that the artist (and scholar) is capable of imagining the nation as both local and transgressive[288]—Curiger offers art as a transgressive and connective medium. In fact, several artists have used the *Venice Biennale* as a platform to realize artworks that question the

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283   Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 70.
284   In 1907, Belgium claimed its own pavilion over the jury-led-system of selection and the growing number of Italian and German artists taking more and more space in the common exhibition hall. Subsequently, Belgium received its own pavilion in the Giardini. Hungary (1909), Germany (1909), Great Britain (1909), France (1912), and Russia (1914) followed after realizing the advantages of the nationally organized pavilions, free from the judgement of the jury. Robert Fleck, *Die Biennale von Venedig: Eine Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2012), 42–63.
285   Juneja, "'A Very Civil Idea…'"
286   Bice Curiger, "ILLUMInations," in *ILLUMInations: 54th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia*, ed. La Biennale di Venezia (Venezia: Marsilio, 2011), 43.
287   Curiger, "ILLUMInations," 43.
288   Juneja, "'A Very Civil Idea…'" 294.

frame of the nation and the power of the state over its circumscription. Niru Ratnam and Néstor García Canclini both point to Santiago Sierra's *Palabra tapada* (covered or clogged word) as making this point.[289] Sierra's installation consisted in disallowing all non-Spanish-passport-holders to enter the Spanish national pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* in 2003.

Despite Curiger's curatorial appeal to creatively and productively transgress the idea of the nation, the labels of the national pavilions and their reproduction on the *Biennale* map, the homepage, and in the catalog effectively elicit a strong connection between the nation-state and what comes to act as its representation in Venice. Aside from the economic and infrastructural links I have traced, this connection also pertains to content and composition. Visitors, media, and scholars come to perceive the pavilion in reference to the conditions and events happening in the nation-state that lends its name to the pavilion. This is visible in a series of comments, from Curiger's own juxtaposition of the "*Venice Biennale* with its national pavilions" and "the real world" to art-journalist Susanne Boecker's reading of Pulak's work as a remembrance of the 1971 war, based on her observation that the 54th edition of the *Venice Biennale* coincides with the 40th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence.[290] The overall catalog description of *Parables* reads that the pavilion offers "an introduction to Bangladeshi contemporary art practice."[291] Consequently, as a viewer, one is prompted to expect a certain "Bangladeshi-ness" within the national pavilion of Bangladesh.

In the light of the assumed relation between the pavilion and a "real" geopolitical entity, it seems surprising that the Britto founders did not have a national frame in mind when they started to conceive the Venice exhibition. In fact, they were not even aware of the pavilion-format:

> In the beginning, we did not have any idea about national pavilions. We thought the *Venice Biennale* is a biennale like others. I don't think I ever checked the *Venice Biennale* website. We know about *Venice Biennale*, but we never went through the way they do it.[292]

In our interview, Lipi admits that she initially did not know about the nation-based structure of the *Biennale*. She and Rahman had participated in other biennial art events before, notably the *Asian Art Biennale* in Dhaka (9th edition 1999, 14th edition 2010), and they had imagined the system in Venice to be similar: artworks clustered by country of submission, but as part of one overall exhibition. Rather than representing a nationally circumscribed

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289   Ratnam, "Art and Globalisation," 290; Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 71.
290   Curiger, "ILLUMInations," 43; Susanne Boecker, "Bangladesch," *Kunstforum International* 211 (October–November 2011): 242.
291   La Biennale di Venezia, ed., *ILLUMInations: 54th International Art Exhibition la Biennale di Venezia* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2011), 414.
292   AR, TBL, February 2015.

art field as introduced in the *ILUMInations* catalog they aimed at showcasing high quality work, worthy of the occasion.[293]

Curinger frames her approach to the format of the national pavilion in a positive, proactive way: the pavilion becomes a site for artists to transgress national borders and to perform their role as migrants. What she fails to see is that format can also confirm economic asymmetries. While the nationally framed pavilion gives artists a platform to critically engage with and potentially transgress the concept of the nation, it also highlights the rigidness of economic or political boundaries. Britto is able to make up for the economic asymmetries that exist between them and participants from other countries by taking multiple positions in a multi-scalar network and thus expanding their scope beyond the national scale. They rely on their practiced collaborative value system and work ethic, gather social capital from international workshops, and access funding from national as well as supranationally operating art foundations. Furthermore, it is not the *Biennale*'s format of the national pavilion that pushed them to engage and question hegemonic strategies of nation-making in Bangladesh. This approach has been a part of their ongoing cultural brokerage. Through their art practice they engage with the way structures of religion and gender influence daily lives; they uncover how war in general or the 1971 war specifically continues to affect the public political and visual discourse in the country. They open the exhibition as a place of encounter between different discourses, offering the viewer a dynamic, multilayered perspective on the locality from which they emerge.

As described above, Pulak takes a corporeal approach to the visual legacy of 1971 by photoshopping his own face into the archival imagery. Nepal-based contemporary artist Sigdel similarly uses his body as a conveyor for his engagement with the nation-state. Like Pulak, Sigdel grew up in the SANA collectives. Through his performance at the *DAS* 2014, I continue my analysis of the collective as a cultural broker and examine the artistic negotiation of the locality of Nepal.

Interlude: *My Blood, Your Script & Bull Tongue*[294]

Sunil Sigdel is dressed in boots and camouflage pants. His chest is naked. He is kneeling in front of two pots. Like the other people in the audience, I am waiting, shuffling around, tense to see what is going to happen. It is the opening day of the second edition of the Dhaka Art Summit *and only VIP pass holders*

293 AR, MR / TBL, February 2015.
294 The latter component of this title, "bull tongue," was part of an initial concept that Sigdel submitted to the *DAS* organizers a few months before the event. The title was printed in the program and the catalog, but Sigdel later changed his concept. In a personal communication (January 2018), he explains that "bull tongue" no longer applied to his performance and the correct title therefore should be *My Blood, Your Script*.

are allowed in the Shilpakala building. The international crowd of artists, collectors, media, and other registered guests is eagerly waiting for the performance to start.

I met Sigdel the day before, at Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman's apartment, where he is staying for the duration of the Summit. *The artists have known each other for a long time, and Rahman, who is the curator of the performance program, invited Sigdel to participate.*

Suddenly, Sigdel drives a large safety pin through his bare chest, takes matches from one of the pots, lights them up, dips them in the second pot, and then uses them to create red marks on his skin. I am disconcerted by the briskness of his actions and it takes me a moment to realize what is happening. Each repetition of the quick-paced procedure—lighting, dipping, marking—attenuates the initially violent effect of the performance. The repetition causes a slowing down. After a while, the repetition itself starts to convey a feeling of disquietness and unease. Sigdel's face and body are covered in red strokes (see Fig. 2). *I initially mistake the liquid in the second pot for colored water, thinking of other performances I have seen in Nepal, but soon realize from the marks on his chest that this must be real blood. From some animal, I assume.*

In his performance, Sigdel addresses the localities of Nepal and the United Kingdom. Both nations are connected by the movement of people, in this case Nepali soldiers joining the British army. While the artist embodies Nepal through his nationality, the UK is represented by a salient national symbol: the UK flag. Sigdel emphasizes the importance that the Gorkha soldier holds for him by pinning this flag through his naked chest just above his heart. The use of blood emphasizes this gravity. In our first conversation (March 2014), Sigdel explains that he did not use animal blood, as I had first assumed. Prior to the performance, a doctor came to the premises of the Shilpakala Academy and drew Sigdel's own blood, which he then used in his performance. He reveals that this element was an important part of the process: only the blood of a Nepali spilled in a foreign country (Bangladesh) could serve as an accurate metaphor for the blood lost by Nepali soldiers. Sigdel's body takes on several different roles in his work: as the main medium in performance art, as a representation of the artist's birth country, and as a link to the wider community of Nepalis abroad. The artist elaborates that attaching the flag to his chest did not cause pain, but the action was intended to shock. Through the emulated pain, he wanted to grasp the soldiers' suffering and the pain he felt after learning of their fate.

In our second interview (December 2015), Sigdel explains that he became invested in the cause of the Gorkha soldiers during a visit to London in 2011. This visit was enabled by a scholarship from the Royal Over-Seas League (ROSL).[295] The mobility and shift in locality allowed him to come into contact

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295   ROSL was founded in 1910 as a self-funded organization to promote "international friendship and understanding" within the Commonwealth. They sponsor

Figure 2: Sunil Sigdel, *My Blood, Your Script & Bull Tongue*, 2014.
Performance, 20 mins, Dhaka Art Summit. Photo: author.

with new people, ideas, and materials which changed his view about the locality he had grown up and been educated in:

> [W]e don't know our surrounding until when we go outside and look back from outside. I got one travelling scholarship in London. And in London, there were a lot of Gurung people.[296]

During his stay in the UK, he came across an advertisement in the paper asking for donations to Gorkha families in Nepal. Bewildered to find this ad in a London newspaper, he felt the need to research the fate of these soldiers. He learned that many families in his Pokhara neighborhood actually have fathers, husbands, and sons serving in the British army. This made his need to work on the topic even more urgent. Gorkha soldiers have been part of the British Army since the beginning of the nineteenth century, but Sigdel was particularly affected by the high number of casualties during World War I and II. The marks that he created on his bare chest using matches and his own blood symbolize bullets piercing the soldiers. He

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scholarships for young musicians and visual artists to travel to London to develop their practice and build networks. "Who We Are," ROSL, accessed February 8, 2021, https://www.rosl.org.uk/about-rosl/about-rosl.

296 AR, SSi, December 2015.

likens these marks to a type of script left on the soldiers' bodies in service of the British. Hence the title of the performance: *My Blood, Your Script*…

Through his ongoing research and interactions with neighbors, Sigdel came to realize a large discrepancy between the celebration of the brave Gorkha soldiers as part of a long-standing orientalist myth and the state's actual treatment of these soldiers and their families. Gorkhas are believed to belong to a "martial race" that possesses the qualities of courage and loyalty, plus extraordinary physical and military strength.[297] Throughout the colonial era, they had been admired and feared for their bravery. Despite the unifying notion of the martial race, Gorkha regimes are usually comprised of various ethnicities or indigenous nationalities, including Gurung, Tamang, Sherpa, Limbu, Chhetri (Thakuri), Rai, Newar, and others.[298] Yet, the unifying myth led the British to favor the service of these ethnic groups.[299] Between the two World Wars, the Rana rulers facilitated the recruitment of Nepali men and received payments from the British government in return.[300] Toffin reads this cooperation between the Ranas and the British as an indicator of the "subservient status" of Nepal to the British Empire, likening it to a type of colonial rule.[301] After the end of the Empire, many Nepalis continue to seek employment in the British army in an attempt to improve their living conditions in Nepal. Although Sigdel concedes that many ethnicities have managed to raise their economic and political position through this employment—an observation he shares

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297 Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*, 29; Prashant Jha, *Battles of the New Republic: A Contemporary History of Nepal* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014), 9–10.

298 The terms "ethnicity" or "ethnic group" are used in the majority of the literature and demographic data to refer to the different population groups in Nepal, including high-caste Hindu groups. The term "indigenous nationalities" has been promoted by supranational organizations, such as the UN and the World Bank. In Nepal, the term goes back to the democratic movement in the early 1990s, when the non-high-caste Hindu groups formed new collective identities as *ādivāsi janajāti* (indigenous nationalities). See Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*.

299 Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*.

300 Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*, 29; Mary Des Chene, "Soldiers, Sovereignty and Silences: Gorkhas as Diplomatic Currency," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 13, no. 1 and 2 (1993): 68–73.

301 From 1814 to 1816, the Gorkha War raged between the Gorkha Kingdom in Nepal and the East India Company. After the war, the British, impressed by the abilities of Gorkhali soldiers, drew up a peace treaty, which agreed that Gorkhalis could be recruited to serve under contract in the army of the East India Company. The May 1815 treaty between Amar Singh Thapa and General David Ochterlony paved the way for a tradition that has continued for the last 200 years. Today Gorkha regiments are not limited to the Indian and the British army; they work as mercenaries all over the world. Toffin, *Imagination and Realities*, 3–4; see Des Chene, "Soldiers, Sovereignty and Silences"; Ram Ashish Giri, "The Power and Price of English: Educating Nepalese People for the Global Workforce," in *Educating the Global Workforce: Knowledge, Knowledge Work and Knowledge Workers*, ed. Lesley Farrell and Tara J. Fenwick (London: Routledge, 2007), 213; Bandana Rai, *Gorkhas: The Warrior Race* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2009), 1; Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*, 5–6.

with Hangen[302]—Sigdel's focus is on the conditions that have made foreign labor a valid alternative for many young men in the country. Sigdel's performance focuses directly on the Gorkha soldiers, but it serves as a starting point to discuss current power plays in Nepal, such as the continuous disregard of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, as well as the ongoing outmigration of Nepal's labor force. These issues are at the center of ongoing renegotiations over national identity.

Unlike its South Asian neighbor Bangladesh, the history of the Nepali nation usually starts with a unification, not a partition or an independence. Nevertheless, Nepal and Bangladesh are facing similar frictions over what and who the nation should include. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Prithvi Narayan Shah, the king of the principality of Gorkha, conquered and unified the kingdoms of the Himalayan region that today constitute the territory of Nepal. Kathmandu was established as the commercial and political center. "Since this 'unification' of the state, the Shahs, high-caste Hindus who claim to be descendants of royal clans from India, have reigned as Nepal's monarchy."[303] Although some members of the Newar population, believed to be the original inhabitants of Kathmandu valley,[304] have been closely associated with the ruling elite, high-caste Hindus (Bahun and Chhetri) have secured their position as a superethnos in charge of the state.[305] Throughout Nepal's history, indigenous nationalities, Dalits, and the rural population have repeatedly been politically and culturally marginalized in favor of Hindu nationalism centralized in the Kathmandu valley.[306]

Following the abolition of the Rana dynasty and a brief period of democratic freedom in the 1950s, King Mahendra established the so-called Panchayat System (literally "a council of five" derived from a village council system) in 1962. In his eyes, Nepal was not ready for a democratic multi-party system. Instead, the Panchayat Constitution outlawed all parties and consolidated absolute control in the hands of the king.[307] The Panchayat ideology officially promoted equality; caste was delegalized.[308] In the name of bringing the country together however, the ideology intensified the

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302 Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*, 29.
303 Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*, 28.
304 Niels Gutschow and Hermann Kreutzmann, *Mapping the Kathmandu Valley: With Aerial Photographs by Erwin Schneider* (Kathmandu: Himal Books, 2013), 14; David N. Gellner, "Language, Caste, Religion and Territory: Newar Identity Ancient and Modern," *European Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 1 (1986).
305 Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*, 28; Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*.
306 See Krishna Hachhethu, *Trajectory of Democracy in Nepal* (New Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 2015), 191–192; Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*, 28; David N. Gellner, John Whelpton, and Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, ed., *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publications, 1997).
307 Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*, 21–22; Jha, *Battles of the New Republic*, 10–11.
308 Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, "Introduction," in *Revolution in Nepal: An Anthropological and Historical Approach to the People's War*, ed. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4–5.

promotion of a Hindu-based superethnos. The cultural labor of the new Panchayat state consolidated a homogenous collective national identity, based on Hindu religion, Hindu monarchy, and the Nepali language under the motto *Ek bhasa, ek bhes, ek des* (One language, one form of dress, one country). Hindu symbols, such as the color red, the cow, and the flag, were actively promoted, while the cultural practices of other ethnic groups were relinquished.[309]

In 1991, the *Jana Andolan* (People's movement) ended the Panachayat rule and elections took place for the first time in over thirty years. As a result, the king's political role was curtailed. Jha Prashant describes the following three-year period of Nepal Congress government in a very positive, almost nostalgic way.[310] He alludes to values of freedom (of assembly, of organization, and of speech), democracy, and economic prosperity. Hangen offers a different reading. She argues that "compared to the Panchayat years, the political exclusion of marginalized groups actually increased during the post-1990 political system."[311] Her enumeration of examples, for instance the decreasing number of indigenous nationalities represented in parliament, points to the fact that the positive, even nostalgic view of the early 1990's—a view that I also encountered in several conversations during my research period—largely reflects the feeling of high caste, urban inhabitants.

On February 13, 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) launched an armed conflict against the government forces.[312] The span of their objectives reached from abolishing royal privileges and the semi-feudal economic system, to ending Hindu upper-caste domination and drafting a new democratic constitution.[313] The war ended with a second *Jana Andolan* and the abolition of the monarchy that had lasted for 240 years. A comprehensive peace accord was signed on November 21, 2006, and elections were held in 2008.

Jha Prashant, like many others, interprets this moment (continued in the writing of a new Constitution, presented in 2015) as a hopeful momentum for the Nepali nation:

> From war to peace, from monarchy to republicanism, from being a Hindu kingdom to secularism, from being unitary to potentially federal state, and from narrow hill-centric notion of nationalism to an inclusive sense of citizenship—Nepal's transformation was, and

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309 Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*, 4, 31–32.
310 Jha, *Battles of the New Republic*, 18.
311 Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*, 30.
312 Unfortunately, the scope of this book does not allow me to discuss the various publications that trace the political struggles of the war. For an in-depth analysis of various aspects of the war, see Deepak Thapa and Bandita Sijapati, *A Kingdom Under Siege: Nepal's Maoist Insurgency, 1996 to 2003* (London: Zed Books, 2007), Lecomte-Tilouine, "Introduction"; Hachhethu, *Trajectory of Democracy in Nepal*; Jha, *Battles of the New Republic*.
313 Jha, *Battles of the New Republic*, 19–23.

is, among the most ambitious political experiments in recent years in South Asia.[314]

In the eyes of many citizens, this promise of peace, economic and political participation, and socio-cultural inclusivity has not yet been realized. The Hindu monarchy has been abolished, but the mono-cultural national identity promoted by the Panchayat System remains a powerful trope, as for instance Harsha Man Maharjan has convincingly shown.[315] The government remains centralized on Kathmandu, and especially ethnic minorities, Dalits, and the rural population see the domination of urban high-caste Hindus continued. The most salient and violent expression of a countermovement is the ongoing Madhesi Movement. Incited by the draft of the new Constitution in September 2015, it paralyzed the country for six months.[316] Less violent claims for a renewed negotiation of national identity come from artists, activists, and other members of the civil society. They aim for a national identity that is able to include multiple religions, ethnic groups and castes, languages, and geographical zones, without homogenizing differences.

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314 Jha, *Battles of the New Republic*, xxv.

315 Harsha Man Maharjan, "Vote for Prashant Tamang: Representations of an Indian Idol in the Nepali Print Media and the Retreat of Multiculturalism," in *Political Change and Public Culture in Post-1990 Nepal*, ed. Michael Hutt and Pratyoush R. Onta (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

316 The Madhesi Movement arose in the 1950s during the brief democratic opening that followed the abolition of the Rana oligarchy in Nepal. It is based on the idea of a common ethnic and cultural identity of the inhabitants of the Madhes (the southern lowlands of Nepal, see fn. 145), and directed against the continued socio-cultural and political dominance of the high-caste Hindus primarily from the country's hill and mountain regions. The series of movements is led by various political parties, which claim that this identity should be recognized. Their demands comprise equal political representation, the creation of an autonomous region, and the recognition of other languages besides Nepali. The first movement took place in 2007, shortly after the presentation of the draft for the Interim Constitution (2006); contrary to the hopes of the Madhesi leaders, this draft did not include the word "federalism" and thus cemented a continued centralization of the state. The second movement took place in 2008 and resulted in the recognition of Nepal as a Federal Democratic Republic in the Interim Constitution, acknowledging a certain regional autonomy. The third movement (2015) followed the presentation of the new Constitution of Nepal. Protests against the newly proposed federal boundaries—which the protest leaders felt undercut previously recognized regional autonomy—resulted in a wave of protests and a six-month blockade on the border with India, causing a severe gas and petrol shortage in Nepal. During this blockade, political leaders in Nepal repeatedly blamed India for instigating, even controlling, the blockade as a means to assert its influence over the Nepali neighbor. These allegations fed into long-running suspicions about India's intentions in Nepal. Bilateral relations between Nepal and India, despite the "open border" (citizens do not require any kind of documentation to cross the border) are marked by a delicate balance between economic and political support, and hegemony and dependence. Jha, *Madhesi Upsurge*, 47–48; Hachhethu, *Trajectory of Democracy in Nepal*, 3; Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*, 10; Maharjan, "Vote for Prashant Tamang."

Sigdel's performance can be seen as part of these claims. Although focused on the issue of the Gorkhas, the artist raises important questions about the relations between the high-caste Hindu-dominated government and minority groups. By using his own body and blood as a medium, he moreover makes a strong claim for a unified yet culturally diverse national identity. In our interview, Sigdel explains that he holds the growing illiteracy and unemployment in Nepal responsible for the number of young men enlisting in Gorkha regiments. The lack of alternatives and the wish to lead a better life drive more and more people into labor migration.[317] Bandita Sijapati and Amrita Limbu explain that employment in the British army marked the starting point of labor migration in Nepal.[318] However, many other avenues have opened since the 1990s and labor migration is now considered an intrinsic part of everyday life for a majority of Nepalis: about 29 % of the households in Nepal have at least one member living abroad.[319] Many scholars call the government to account for not having been able to create employment and provide valid alternatives to earn a livelihood.[320] Especially the effect of the unilateral focus of infrastructure development (education, transport, telephone lines, and so on) within the urban centers of the Kathmandu valley affects labor migration:[321] 14.6 % of total migrants are from urban areas, whereas 85.4 % come from rural areas. Furthermore, the social group with the highest probability of migrating are minority groups, especially Dalits from the hill areas.[322]

Sigdel uses his body as a medium to voice his critique of the economic and political discrimination of ethnic minorities and indigenous nationalities that has caused many Nepali citizens to leave their country in search of employment, as he explains in our interview. Recruitment into the British army for him represents the first instance of a now widespread practice of labor migration, just one of the failures of the Nepali state. Sigdel is not alone in using his work to highlight the country's huge dependance on labor migration: artists like Hit Man Gurung or Bikas Shrestha, whose work was exhibited in the booth of the Nepal Picture Library (NPL) at *Unseen Amsterdam*, draw on their socio-cultural environment to foster a discussion on current national identity discourses. They join a wider base of intellectuals, activists, and writers who demand a renegotiation of state-sanctioned economic and political discrimination and hegemonial notions of nationality to allow for more inclusivity and political codetermination. Sigdel's

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317 AR, SSi, December 2015.
318 Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*.
319 Since 1993, two million labor permits have been issued by the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) to individuals who migrate to countries beyond India for employment. In the fiscal year 2010/11 alone, more than 300,000 permits were issued. Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*, 3; Giri, "The Power and Price of English," 213.
320 Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*.
321 Madhav Adhikari, Boris A, Portnov, and Moshe Schwartz, "Urban Growth in Nepal: Does Location Matter?" *Urban Studies* 44, no. 5–6 (May 2007).
322 Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*, 19.

use of his own body and blood are his way of expressing solidarity with his fellow citizens, especially those suffering from current economic and political marginalization. Like the artists in the Bangladesh pavilion, his performance is meant to create a space of encounter for diverse notions of locality and the claims that are being made to it by the state and other actors. Due to the use of his own blood, Sigdel's own understanding of nationhood can be seen as tracing back to primordial roots.[323] Yet, it can also invoke a more idealistic humanist notion of social cohesion that transgresses ethnic circumscriptions; through our blood, we are all connected as humans across ethnic and national boundaries. In this light, the transference from the body of the Gorkhas to his becomes an expression of the artist's claim for a more inclusive and equitable national politics.

THE PERFORMANCE HUB AS (TRANS)LOCALITY

Sigdel's performance takes place in the frame of a performance program curated by Britto co-founder Rahman for the *DAS* 2014. The *Summit* is organized biennially by the Samdani Art Foundation, which was established as a private trust in 2011 by the collector couple Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani. Moving from the *Venice Biennale* to the *DAS* entails an obvious shift in spatial and temporal reach. While the *DAS* is a newly established perennial large-scale art event, the *Venice Biennale* is more than 120 years old. The Venice exhibition lasts six months and its venues are spread across the city. The 2017 edition included eighty-six national participations from all over the world and counted more than 615,000 visitors.[324] Inaugurated in 2012, the *DAS* takes place entirely within the 11,148 m² of the Shilpakala Academy and for the 2014 edition, the organizers counted over 70,000 visitors.[325]

Using the format of the biennial to set both events against each other, comparing their histories and sizes, quickly exposes the risks of a top-down, linear, and potentially hierarchizing rhetoric. The *DAS* is easily seen as a novel edition to the global circuit of art events; successful, but not quite able to draw the same professionals and crowds as the European events. This in turn opens the door to geopolitical arguments, for instance in the form of Dhaka being able to surpass low expectations—becoming a "muscular art powerhouse" despite being a "sleepy backwater that's not

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323 Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.*, 39; Wimmer, "Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries," 971.
324 "Biennale Arte 2017, over 615,000 Visitors," La Biennale di Venezia, November 26, 2017, accessed January 17, 2018, http://www.labiennale.org/en/news/biennale-arte-2017-over-615000-visitors.
325 Samdani Art Foundation, "Dhaka Art Summit VIP Booklet," 2014 (Dhaka: Samdani Art Foundation, 2014); Gianne Brownell Mitic, "Putting Bangladeshi Art on the Map," *The New York Times*, October 22, 2015, accessed June 19, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/22/arts/international/putting-bangladeshi-art-on-the-map.html.

really on the global map."[326] Focusing solely on the implementation of a localized event (Venice, Dhaka) and a "global form" (large scale perennial art event) not only draws attention away from the contemporary art that is being produced and exhibited, but it also conceals motivations, means, and meanings outside the local-global connection. A transcultural approach to contemporaneity, in contrast, gives prominence to the connections created by events and their organizers and participants on multiple scales.

In our interview, *DAS* co-organizer Rajeeb Samdani explains that the foundation consciously chose the format of a summit to demarcate the event from both the nationally circumscribed *Asian Art Biennale* and commercial art fairs. The *Asian Art Biennale* has been the flagship project of the National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts, referred to as Shilpakala (*shilpa*: industry, art, handicraft, craft; *kala*: art) in Bangladesh, since 1981. In the past four decades, the biennial has brought together especially modern and contemporary art from all over Asia. It is one of the oldest perennial art events in the region and I will return to it to elaborate in chapter four. In contrast to the state-organized biennial, a summit allows for greater liberty in experimenting with different exhibition formats, Samdani contends. Accordingly, the 2014 edition included fourteen solo art projects, fifteen Bangladeshi and seventeen South Asia focused galleries, as well as five curated group exhibitions.[327] This flexibility permits new scopes of action and connection beyond the nationally circumscribed field shaped by popular commercial fairs and the established format of the biennial. In contrast to the *Asian Art Biennale*, for which different kinds of works, techniques, and mediums are juxtaposed, the *DAS* offers frequent pace-shifts with formats ranging from themed shows to more intimate solo exhibitions. However, the experience of both exhibitions is significantly determined by the fact that the whole event takes place in one single building. The mostly windowless and whitewashed, AC-cooled, four-story maze of the Shilpakala Academy makes it easy to forget the surrounding capital city. It shields visitors from the outside world, its noises and climate.

For the 2014 *Summit*, where Sigdel's performance took place, the Samdani Foundation invited foreign curator Diana Campbell Betancourt to coordinate the solo shows and speakers' panels. The latter included professionals from major European Institutions, such as the Centre Pompidou, the British Museum, and the Tate Modern, highlighting the professional connections the Samdani Foundation has managed to establish since its foundation.[328] In contrast to the first edition of the *Summit* in 2012, which was organized locally and only featured Bangladesh-based artists, the 2014 edition focused on participants from across South Asia. This was an important step for the art field in the region. Despite the claims that we

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326   Paran Balakrishnan, "The Dhaka Canvas," *The Telegraph India*, March 16, 2014, accessed January 27, 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20160404141226/https://www.telegraphindia.com/1140316/jsp/graphiti/18084429.jsp.

327   Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed.

328   Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed.

have entered into an age of "carefree nomadism" and increased mobility in globalization theories, motility for many people has not actually grown.[329] Visa regulations and high travel expenses prevent many artists, art professionals, and audiences from South Asia from attending art events abroad. An art event like the *DAS*, dedicated to contemporary art in the region, and with foreign curators and art professionals from renowned European institutions present, provides an unmatched platform for art professionals from South Asia. The *Summit* is significantly more accessible in terms of geographical proximity and cost (entrance is free) than other events on the biennial calendar. On this regional scale, collectives are crucial cultural brokers. The "performance hub" is an expression of their important role in mobilizing ideas and people.

In the curatorial note for the performance program, Rahman assesses the status of performance art in South Asia.[330] Performance art is most generally understood as a form of art in which the body is used as the main medium to convey an idea or concept. The practice emphasizes the ephemeral, emerging nature of the act, often contingent upon the direct presence of an "audience."[331] Due to its historiography, performance art is frequently addressed as yet another global form that originated in a Euro-American modern art context,[332] and from there travelled and was adopted locally in art fields around the world. Rahman assumes this diffusionist narrative by stating that performance art has "only" entered Bangladesh in the early 1990s. I return to the medium of performance art in a more analytical manner as part of my discussion on situating connections in the sixth chapter. Here, it is important that Rahman highlights the role of SANA in the medium's subsequent development and proliferation across South Asia. He presents the South Asian art infrastructure, the "galleries and mainstream organizations," as obstacles to the development of new mediums. Moreover, he deems the "political suppression" a barrier for creative exchange in general.[333] The younger generation of artists and its "alternative platforms" like SANA and Britto, in contrast, have tried to further creative development across geopolitical boundaries: they have fostered exchange with fellow artists from other countries and have engaged with mediums not included in the fine art curriculum and not exhibited in existing galleries. Rahman thus uses the medium of performance art to validate the art collectives' role as avant-garde in the region. In contrast to

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329 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 179.
330 Mahbubur Rahman, "Performance Programme," in Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed.,87.
331 Paula Serafini, "Subversion through Performance: Performance Activism in London," in *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, ed. Pnina Werbner, Martin Webb, and Kathryn Spellman-Poots (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 321. Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010).
332 RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988 [1979]); Serafini, "Subversion through Performance."
333 Rahman, "Performance Programme," 87.

the institutions that represent the national field (such as existing galleries or Shilpakala), the Samdani Foundation has become an ally: the *DAS* "has pledged its support to Performance Art," Rahman explains.[334] The Foundation supports the collectives' aim to foster spatial and institutional mobilities: "The *Dhaka Art Summit* ... gave me an opportunity to invite artists from Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma) to be a part of my exhibition."[335] The list of participating artists that he invited to perform represent Rahman's mobility and the cultural brokerage entailed. The list includes, among others, Bandu Manamperi, a core member of SANA collective Theerta (Sri Lanka), Nikhil Chopra, who has participated in numerous KHOJ (SANA, India) programs, and Sigdel, who has repeatedly worked with Sutra (SANA, Nepal). Rahman emphasizes the prominent role these artists play in their respective fields of art production, thereby highlighting, as in the example of Pulak, that support does not happen by default, but is contingent on artistic merit:

> Despite the fact that performance art is not very prevalent in her [*sic*] native Sri Lanka, Bandu Manamperi is one of the most important performance art practitioners who has been leading this art form since its early beginnings in the region.[336]

Rahman's assessment introduces the reader to the South Asian network of contemporary art in which he is situated. It suggests a rather brief history of performance art in the region and highlights the role of collective formats in its successful circulation. It also contains information about existing asymmetries within this network:

> India is the most privileged country in the region and therefore shares closer ties with the global art scene, and Nikhil Chopra is one of the most celebrated performance artists from this country.[337]

In this description, Rahman asserts that in contrast to the other countries in South Asia, India is "privileged." He does not explicitly state what this privilege pertains to, but it surely goes beyond the field of contemporary art production. His emphasis on global ties suggests that he is referring to India's access to worldwide economic and socio-political capital. India's position as a central court in the region, its political power, its participation in global market circuits, and the resulting infrastructure development have noticeable effects on the art field: they offer India's artists a broader scope of action than their South Asian colleagues. The economic and cultural marginalization of South Asia's periphery finds another expression

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334 Rahman, "Performance Programme," 87.
335 Rahman, "Performance Programme," 87.
336 Rahman, "Performance Programme," 87.
337 Rahman, "Performance Programme," 87.

in Rahman's curatorial note: while he characterizes India by its global connectedness, he praises Nepal for its spirituality and its beauty.

> Nepal is perhaps the most desirable country to practice in because of its energizing spirituality and natural beauty. The country has huge potential and the younger generation of artists have been challenging conventional notions of art over the last ten years. I am proud that Nepalese artist Sunil Sigdel will be performing at the *Summit*.[338]

The first part of Rahman's assessment of Nepal mirrors the country's portrayal in travel magazines and early ethnographies; it is reduced to a place of beauty and spirituality. The description bespeaks Rahman's nostalgia about working in Nepal. Throughout my research, his affective relation with the neighboring country resonated in many conversations. His appreciation reached from the quality of the food to the beauty of the nature. Aside from his emotional connection to Nepal, it exposes Rahman's conception of his own country: Bangladesh is neither as well connected as India, nor as inspiring as Nepal. Artists working in his home country are at a double disadvantage. Nepal, as the second part of the note read, has huge potential. That is notably the merit of the young generation of artists, who have been questioning and changing the status quo of the art field.

This section best illustrates the polymorphic composition of locality. My research partners use their work to question hegemonic notions of the nation. However, this does not mean they are not making use of reified, bounded, and totalizing notions themselves. More than with respect to the actual localities they pertain to, these notions become important indicators for the way that actors see their own locality. Rahman has participated in numerous workshops all over South Asia. Through this mobility, to a large part enabled by SANA, he has connected with fellow artists and gained new inputs. He has experienced other localities and these in turn have relativized and changed his relationship with his own locality. To overcome tropes like methodological nationalisms and unilateral center-periphery relations, it is important to recognize such dynamic interconnections and interdependences of different "versions" of locality. The *DAS* invokes a notion of South Asia based on regional strength, cultural affinities, and solidarity in the arts. In the curatorial note, Rahman exposes India's economic and cultural predominance in that region. A few lines below, he records his generalizing nostalgic and optimistic notion of Nepal. In his colleague Sigdel's performance, contrastingly, he dismantles this notion by performing a national identity characterized by colonial exploitation, state failure, and economic dependance.

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338   Rahman, "Performance Programme," 87.

THE COLLECTIVE AS A CULTURAL BROKER

Sigdel's presence at the *DAS* is twofold. His performance is part of the performance hub and two of his paintings are displayed at the Kathmandu-based Siddhartha Art Gallery booth.[339] Both presentations of his work are expressions of a professional and personal network of connections. In April 2006, Sigdel participated in the first international artist residency of *Sutra,* which took place at the newly founded Kuart Center in Bhaktapur and was followed by an exhibition at the Siddhartha Art Gallery.[340] Rahman took part in the same residency. The connection between the two was furthered when Sigdel travelled to Bangladesh to participate in Britto's international artist residency in July of the same year. Only one month later, they jointly organized a workshop on contemporary and *Mithila* art (see fn. 82) in Janakpur, in the southern Tarai region of Nepal. The workshop was a cooperation between Britto and Bindu. Since then, Bindu and Britto have collaborated on numerous occasions. Sigdel's Bindu co-founders Saurganga Darshandhari and Prithvi Shrestha mention that Rahman even played a key role in encouraging the formation of Bindu. This involvement reemphasizes Rahman's aforementioned nostalgia for working in Nepal as well as his belief in the country's young art generation, and the format of the collective.

The idea of collectivity that emerges from this chain of connections is based on a delicate balance between autonomy and mutual support in creative development. On the one hand, the collective (and in extension a network of collectives) facilitates contact to like-minded people, people who share similar creative values and therefore understand the needs and demands of contemporary artists. One example is the experimentation with new mediums, such as performance art, within the SANA network. Members of the collectives work towards similar aims: the transgression of spatial (geographical and state borders), institutional (limits of fine art education), and socio-cultural (socio-politically marginalized groups) boundaries. They collaborate in organizing programs that help achieve these aims and further the field of contemporary art as a whole. On the other hand, the formats realized by the collectives (from international workshops to national pavilions) allow for individual artistic development. Artists get a chance to showcase their mastery in certain mediums and their ability to

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339 The Siddhartha Art Gallery was co-founded by arts manager Sangeeta Thapa and artist Shashi Kala Tiwari in 1987. It has become one of the most persistent private art institutions in Nepal. See Interlude: *Graduation* and chapter four for a more elaborate discussion of the gallery and its situatedness in the art infrastructure of Kathmandu.

340 The Kuart Center was established by Sutra co-founder Sujan Chitrakar and UK-based educator Aidan Warlow in the early 2000s. During the first few years, the center offered a one-year diploma course with six students. In 2003, it became affiliated with Kathmandu University, and now constitutes the Center for Art and Design.

translate ideas. The quality of their work as well as the social capital they accumulate are key to gaining better positions for themselves.

Both Sigdel and Pulak have benefitted from the social and cultural capital dispersed by the network, and on a smaller scale, within the collectives themselves. Through the collectives, they accessed the decisive social relations that led them to take part in large-scale events. The participation in events like the *Venice Biennale* or the *DAS* in turn fostered other opportunities. Three years after the *Venice Biennale* in 2011, Pulak was short-listed for the Samdani Art Award at the *DAS* 2014 and secured gallery representation with Aicon Gallery in New York. Sigdel was able to showcase his work at the 2014 *Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale*. Moreover, his paintings of US-American president Donald Trump, Chairman Mao, and Russian President Vladimir Putin, exhibited at the 2017 India Art Fair, were widely cited in the media. These paintings represent another example of the artist's ability to put his finger on current political discourses regarding the contestation of hegemonic national identities.

Through their membership in SANA, collectives like Britto not only connect to fellow artists, they also gain legitimacy (for instance through the globally established Triangle) and funding (such as from the Ford Foundation). This formal and professional legitimacy allows them to access new positions in a global field of contemporary art. Through the format of the collective, they share resulting social and economic capital among members, subsequently expanding the mobilities of artists, artworks, practices, and expertise about materials and mediums. While they travel and participate in programs and workshops, they encounter elements of other visual discourses—hitherto unknown or unpopular mediums, such as performance art—and other visions of locality. These elements foster critical engagements, creative approaches, and eventually can lead to the relativization of the discourses from which they emerged.

The national boundaries set by the state through the bureaucratic system, manifested for instance in visa applications and export taxes, as well as the cultural labor serving the maintenance of national unity, whether based on primordial roots or cultural affinities, remain significant in our lives. On the one hand, the South Asian nation-states are comparatively young, and the effects of the state's cultural work are sometimes violently visible. The repeated reference to the glory of 1971 as the year in which Bangladesh was born, and its ongoing negotiation in many sections of society, bears witness to the prevalence and value attached to the idea of the nation. Similarly, the ongoing frictions over Nepal's new Constitution have foregrounded discussions on the importance of national inclusivity. On the other hand, the understanding and circumscription of nation is constantly transgressed, no matter how consolidated it seems at a particular moment. Through their mobility, my research partners engage in a type of cultural brokerage that is able to shake hegemonial discourses of nationality and locality. They create spaces of encounter in which a plurality of discourses meet. The format of the collective allows them to

transgress the national artistic fields. In the newly emerging multi-scalar field, they are able to take multiple positions depending on their aim and motivation. They no longer depend on receiving legitimacy for their practice inside the field they emerged from, and can access it through supranational organizations like the Triangle or global audiences at the *Venice Biennale*. They find allies in new actors like the Samdani Foundation, who also try to set themselves apart from the nationally circumscribed field and its institutions. Further, in the light of prevailing hegemonic notions of national identity—be it a middle-class-based, predominantly male, Muslim "Bengaliness" rooted in tropes of a glorified victory in 1971, or an urban, high-caste Hindu-dominated "Nepaliness"—the exchange fostered by the collectives under SANA is remarkable. The translocal approach I follow does not pronounce the national scale irrelevant, but accepts its validity next to that of a multitude of other scales. In order to demonstrate this, the next chapter centers on the city.

Chapter 2
(Trans)localities: Creative Place-Making in the City

> TW: *... that pressure, that "I have to produce," keeps it [the art scene] running and going. That is why I love Dhaka. Because—I told you right?—I love Dhaka and hate Dhaka. I hate Dhaka, but I love Dhaka because Dhaka gives me such a tough time. Always keeps me [thinking]: "I have to produce."*
>
> MH: *You constantly have to be there.*
>
> TW: *Yes.*
>
> ME: *You can't just shut off.*
>
> TW: *That intensity is nice. Not in the sense of the market, that I have to be there to serve my own financial need. But it is more like, I have to be there and look at others, look how they are participating in the movement, look at how encouraged and inspired [they are], and the sheer amount of energy they have. Even though they are in a fucked-up city. The harshest possible city.*[341]

Early in my research, the city emerged as an important node for negotiations of collectivity, locality, and creative place-making. Dhaka and Kathmandu are not only the localities in which the vast majority of my research partners reside, but due to the density of art infrastructure, including art schools, galleries, and art centers, they also constitute the main milieu from which creativity, imagination, and inspiration arise. Cities in general have been subjected to tropes of globalization, modernity, and development, making them a crucial case study for a transcultural rethinking of locality. In the past three decades, scholarship on urban spaces has produced distinct models of urbanity, such as the "global city"[342] and the

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341 AR, TW, November 2015.

342 Saskia Sassen, "The Global City: Strategic Site, New Frontier," in *Accumulation by Dispossession: Transformative Cities in the New Global Order*, ed. Swapna Banerjee-Guha (Los Angeles: Sage, 2006); Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (Los Angeles: Sage; Pine Forge Press, 2012).

"world city,"[343] but also the "Asian city," the "creative city" and numerous others. These categories have been prone to a hierarchizing practice: on the one hand, global cities marked by creativity, innovation, and economic success are recognized as sites of urban theory production. "Megacities," on the other hand, are characterized by "things they lack."[344] Especially cities in the global south, such as Kathmandu and Dhaka, are often reified as objects of developmental intervention, characterized by a lack of urban planning resulting in environmental pollution, densely crowded spaces, and clogged streets. This categorization stands in contrast to the ambiguous positions that these cities hold in my research partners' daily lives. As the quote above shows, Dhaka and Kathmandu's intensity is both invigorating and suffocating—it inspires creativity and distracts from it. How do artists approach the city in which they live and work? What does a creative practice in or with the city consist of? Which issues do artists address in city-centered initiatives and site-specific artworks? To what end? What kind of urban environment do they imagine?

A translocal perspective to the urban context does not dismiss existing economic and socio-cultural asymmetries. On the contrary, it increases our awareness for the specific situations in which related issues are raised by different actors. Moreover, translocality sees the city as integrated in a multi-scalar network of localities, not just other cities: Dhaka is connected to a hinterland, the nation of Bangladesh, the region of Bengal, the South Asian subcontinent, and the world.

The statement "I love Dhaka and hate Dhaka"[345] is representative of many similar utterances from artists working in and on the city that I heard over the period of my research—both in relation to Dhaka and to Kathmandu. In conversations, artists repeatedly emphasized that the infrastructure in the city, the art institutions, the hanging out places, and the contact to other artists are sources of creativity or innovation. At the same time, they often feel overwhelmed by the chaos (especially in terms of traffic and population density) that the urban landscape represents. These experiences are not antagonisms. In fact, both are considered intrinsic parts of city life in general. Anthropology is able to offer a more subtle approach to the city's multiple meanings and paces from the perspective of the actors that live in them. By following artists' spatial movements, their transgressions of cultural, social, and political boundaries, and by observing how they creatively make place in the city, I offer an actor-centered transcultural reading of the locality of the city. Further, I show that, as milieus of condensed interaction, creative exchange, and cultural brokerage, Dhaka and Kathmandu play an important role in the emergence of an alternative contemporaneity. They are not passive surfaces on which

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343 Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996).
344 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.
345 AR, TW, November 2015.

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either "global flows" or local human actions are inscribed.[346] Neither are they examples of a "noir futuristic urban genre of decline and despair."[347]

As a response to the hierarchizing practices that caused a divide between mostly Western cities, celebrated for their creativity and their success in accessing global flows of capital, and other cities, as lessons of failed urban planning, Robinson encourages researchers to approach all cities as "ordinary cities."[348] Instead of focusing on specific elements of cities that connect them to or disconnect them from flows of goods and capital, the city "as a whole" needs to be brought back in to view. Such a holistic approach recognizes the dynamic rhythms and complex socio-cultural mark-ups of each city. We need a postcolonial urban studies, Robinson argues, that "draws inspiration from all cities" and understands them as equally "autonomous and creative."[349] Yet, the concept of creativity shares a complicated history with that of the city. It is often conceived as a type of innovative thinking or practice that can be brought to use as a tool for economic development; it serves to brand the city to tourists and investors, like in the form of *European Capital of Culture* concept from which it originated.[350] Richard Florida has presented one of the most popular applications of this understanding of creativity in his "creative class" hypothesis.[351] The production of "meaningful new forms" (i.e., creativity), according to Florida, happens at the intersection of expanding neoliberal mechanisms, fast-paced global markets, and art.[352] While his "creative capital thesis" helps to identify specific creative occupations in urban settings, it does not actually offer an approach to how these creative types interact with the city and its infrastructure.[353] Furthermore, the idea of the "creative city" has served as a hierarchizing category, declaring certain cities, or particular areas in the city, more creative and thus more economically profitable than others.

I agree with Robinson that we need a more holistic approach to the locality of the city —not by trying to understand every aspect of urban life,

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346 Tsing, "Conclusion: The Global Situation," 471.
347 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 5.
348 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 2, 10; see also Ananya Roy, "Urbanisms, Worlding Practices and the Theory of Planning," *Planning Theory* 10, no. 1 (February 2011).
349 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 2.
350 Roberta Comunian argues that the idea of the "creative city" in the late 1990s was congruent with the *European Capital of Culture* vision, which focused on improving the city through creative and cultural activities and events. The initiative was developed in 1985. It is managed by the European Commission and applications are collected on the level of national ministries for culture. From 1998 onwards however, the word "creative" became popular in a variety of different contexts, especially for its promise of economic gain. Over time, the concept shifted towards a "creative economy," based on the production of culture and creative products by skilled labor. Comunian, "Rethinking the Creative City," 1158.
351 Florida, "Cities and the Creative Class"; Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*.
352 Florida, "Cities and the Creative Class," 293–294.
353 Comunian, "Rethinking the Creative City," 1174.

from economic to religious practices, but by adopting a perspective that recognizes the city's different fabrics and paces, while at the same time keeping in sight the people, things, and ideas that are connected through mobility. This dual constitution—the interconnectedness and autonomy of different parts of / in the city—plays a crucial role in how I and my research partners make place. "Place-making" is based on an interplay between inhabiting or spending time in a certain locality, infusing it with value,[354] and making it a center for encounters.[355] It thus involves dwelling in a space for a considerable amount of time. This does not necessarily mean creating a home, but engaging with the fabric of the space, learning one's way around, and becoming aware of its socio-cultural constitution. In line with the practice of place-making, I propose an extended, twofold understanding of creativity. The first is manifest in ordinary, daily practices, such as walking, talking, and meeting people while dwelling in the city. The second is expressed in specific, more reflected, and conscious collaborative actions, such as the organization of public arts festivals and the creation of site-specific artworks. The first connects artists to a larger community of city dwellers, long-term visitors, and researchers who have become familiar with the city or some of its areas. The second sets artists apart from the city's ordinary inhabitants because of their deliberate creative intervention. The collaborative practices that serve me as case studies for this chapter are conscious and calculated strategies to alter the status quo of the urban environment. The cultural brokerage involved is directed at collectively making visible, engaging with, and possibly countering hegemonic claims to the city. These claims can be made by politicians and urban developers, by religious authorities or supranational companies.

Esther Baumgärtner develops the term spatial broker to describe a specific form of space-related brokerage. In her studies on the Jungbusch (a neighborhood in Mannheim, Germany), Baumgärtner defines "spatial brokers" as all people actively involved in the processes of representing, re-thinking, and (re)claiming—and thereby constituting—diverse spaces as locality.[356] With the city-wide mural arts project *Kolor Kathmandu (KK)*, my first case study for this chapter, the Sattya Media Arts Collective (Sattya) establishes itself as a spatial broker of Nepal's rural areas in the capital city. Over a period of six months in 2012/2013 more than sixty-five artists from Nepal and abroad were invited to create seventy-five murals in the Kathmandu valley.[357] These seventy-five murals represent the seventy-five

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354 Busse and Warnke, "Ortsherstellung als sprachliche Praxis," 2.

355 Friedmann, "Place and Place-Making in Cities," 153–155.

356 Esther Baumgärtner, *Lokalität und kulturelle Heterogenität: Selbstverortung und Identität in der multi-ethnischen Stadt* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009), 146.

357 The execution phase of *KK* was almost over when I started my first fieldwork in Nepal. I was not able to speak to the international participants, as the majority had already left the country. My discussion of the case study is based on notes from this first fieldtrip and my personal experience of the murals. I recorded a two-part interview with the coordinator of Sattya at that time, and over the

districts that administratively divide the nation-state of Nepal.[358] Besides making the different parts of Nepal visible to city dwellers, Sattya also aimed to broker a more colorful, inclusive city-image to its inhabitants and visitors. The project borrows from neoliberal strategies of the creative city discourse and aims to use "street art" as a way to counteract the "visual pollution" of the political slogans and advertisements that encroach into urban spaces. Sattya, the collective behind the project, was established in Kathmandu in 2011 and was initially funded by Open Society Foundations.[359] At the time of my research in 2013, the collective was registered with the government as non-profit company and consisted of an all-Nepali sixteen-member team. They were based in a rented building in Patan, from where they organized workshops and facilitated exchange with international and national instructors, artists, and local communities. Initially, Sattya focused on promoting a "do it yourself" culture. Over the years, it has ventured in various other directions, such as *Sattya Inc.*—acting as a bridge between commercial demand and the artist's diverse skills—or *Hariyo Chowk* (green court), a project that aims at designing green garden spaces in the city.[360] Sattya's core member Yuki Poudyal describes the collective as a space "where artists can come and learn from each-other and share their skills." It builds on the idea that art is a means to "make people aware, local communities aware of different issues." In our interview, she explains that Sattya's idea of "collectivity" is rooted in an "equal pay equal say" as well as a "do it together" working atmosphere. The expansion of financial and human resources, as well as the registration with the government, have however time and again challenged this choice of organization.[361]

My second case study is a month-long public art project in Old Dhaka entitled *1mile²*. Organized by the Britto Arts Trust (Britto) in 2014/2015, *1mile²* brought together forty artists and two researchers. Over the course of several weeks, the participants, among them many Britto members,

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course of my subsequent research periods, managed to collect interviews with a handful of participants from Nepal. My main interest was to talk to artists who are still actively engaged in collective practices in the art field. The discussion thus centers on the strategies employed by the *KK* organizers and how the project affected the perception of the city, rather than the ongoing project.

358 Before the presentation of the new Constitution of Nepal in 2015, the country was divided into five development regions (Eastern Development Region, Central Development Region, Western Development Region, and Far-Western Development Region), fourteen administrative zones and seventy-five districts.

359 Open Societies Foundations began with the philanthropic work of George Soros in 1979. Today, it is the second largest private philanthropic organization based in the US. It works on creating "inclusive and vibrant democracies" by supporting initiatives related to education, public health, media, human rights, and diversity of opinions in over 100 countries. "Home," Open Society Foundations, accessed February 14, 2021, https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/.

360 AR, YP August 2013; Hariyo Chowk, Facebook Page, accessed August 12, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/HariyoChowk/.

361 AR, YP August 2013.

explored the natural and social ecology of the specific neighborhood of Old Dhaka. Old Dhaka, as the name suggests, is the capital city's oldest and most southern part. Due to its location on the Buriganga River, it was an important node in the regional trade network during colonialism. It quickly became a center of cultural production and circulation with education institutions, libraries, and publishing houses. After the Partition, economic and cultural capital has shifted to the newer urban neighborhoods in the north. In the site-specific artworks displayed during the final day of *1mile²*, many of the artists critically engaged with the effects of these developments and addressed notions of urbanization, neglect, and heritage.

There is no direct personal link between the two collectives, Sattya and Britto each take different approaches to collectivity. Sattya's understanding is rooted in a "do it together" spirit that goes beyond the artistic field. It is guided by values of participation and volunteerism that intersect with neoliberal mechanisms. In this sense, it is perhaps better described through Geza Ziemer's concept of "complicity" as a momentary, pragmatically and swiftly organized collaboration.[362] Britto's conception of collectivity is based on a long-term commitment with the aim to support and expand opportunities for the "local community of artists."[363] Despite their distinct missions, the collectives' respective projects *1mile²* and *KK* both represent "intense short-term interactions that physically transform the urban space," and which function as "strategies for social and spatial binding."[364] They are creative interventions that represent a collective aim; both projects are based on a shared belief in the benefits of artistic exchange across national and socio-cultural boundaries, in building alliances outside the art field, and in countering hegemonial claims to city space. Both act through the medium of ephemeral site-specific art but engage in cultural and spatial brokerage that engenders physical and socio-cultural transformations with long-term effects.

Interlude: *Kolor Kathmandu*

It feels like a treasure hunt, but rather than trying to find treasure, I am looking for Kolor Kathmandu *murals. It is my fifth day in Nepal and I don't yet have my bearings in the city. So, I decide, together with one of my new roommates, to combine my first experience of Kathmandu with the beginning of my research on the* Kolor Kathmandu *project. From the Sattya homepage and its inbuilt map,[365] I note down the locations of the murals that are situated in the vicinity of the main road from Patan—where our guesthouse is located— to central Kathmandu. To my astonishment, the locations are seldom street*

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362 Ziemer, *Komplizenschaft*, 9–11.
363 Begum Lipi, "Extending and Expanding the Idea and Space," 172.
364 Rahul Mehrotra, Felipe Vera, and José Mayoral, *Ephemeral Urbanism: Cities in Constant Flux* (Santiago: ARQ Ediciones, 2016), 38.
365 Unfortunately, the map and the homepage are no longer available.

names or addresses, rather references to nearby shops, temples, or other land-marks. I am not aware of it yet, but over time, these landmarks will become my main tool for orientation in the city. The first mural, by Priscilla, is right of Jawalakhel roundabout, on top of a clothing store. From the other side of the street, the painting of a group of "urban mountaineers"—five figures climb-ing a mountain of containers and packaging materials—reveals itself. They and the mountain are carried in a doko *(wicker basket) attached to a sling around one man's head. A black sea of small yellow squares, reminiscent of a cityscape at night, surrounds them. The mural is much more like a painting than the street art I was expecting, based on the graffiti and tagging I am used to seeing in European cities. On the way to the next KK mural we discover a large variety of types and styles of art in the public space. Especially the wall near another famous landmark, the Hotel Himalaya in Kupondole, on the main road to Kathmandu, seems to be a popular spot for artists. The wall presents a mix of diverse techniques from simple unicolor tags to paintings with large areas of unbroken color, one even includes photographs pasted on the wall. We reach Thapathali Bridge, the main connection between the two cities Kathmandu and Patan. Even from the Patan side, DAAS' tribute to the endangered red panda is clearly visible. The painted animal head, comprised of orange, red, black, and white geometrical shapes, spreads over the two upper floors of a seven-story building at the Bagmati riverfront. In contrast to the previous murals, the artist's name is clearly visible. We continue our walk towards the Maitighar roundabout and find another mural—or what is left of it. The work by Emily Sams initially showed a woman who—accord-ing to a Dolakha (northeast of Kathmandu) folktale—gradually dissolves into the landscape after drowning in the river. The lower part of the mural is now concealed by a newly built house; only the black branches of a tree rise up behind it, and even they are gradually vanishing behind things stored on the roof of the house in front. It is a far cry from the images I later discover on Sattya's Facebook page, and if I had not known to look for a mural, I probably would not have seen it. Yet, I suppose this is part of street art—first it stands out against its background and then it slowly fades into it. We walk past the collaborative mural of Michelle Lama and Roseanne Kalavathi in Dillibazar, and Dustin Spagnola's work on the "Democracy Wall" in Bagbazar before we reach Ratna Park, Kathmandu's central bus park and the city's biggest green area.*[366] *We cross the street on one of the numerous footbridges and spot the mural by Germany-based artist duo Herakut. The painting of three children, one wearing a monkey-shaped bonnet, is part of the artists' ongoing project "Giant Story Book." Right opposite of the mural, I discover the sign of Lalit Kala or Fine Art Campus associated with Tribhuvan University. We pass the mural and the school and lose ourselves in the busy streets between Ason Tol and Indra Chowk.*

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366 The wall has earned its name from the numerous political slogans that people started to paint and post there during the Panchayat regime.

THE CITY AS "MUSE AND MEDIUM"[367]

> Kathmandu has been bombarded by visual manifestations of polit-
> ical rivalries and the ubiquity of consumer culture. Huge billboards
> preaching the doctrine of consumerism engulf entire buildings, and
> loud political slogans leap out from the city's walls espousing hollow
> rhetoric. The footprints of urbanization spread throughout the city,
> distancing Kathmandu from the realities of the rest of Nepal.[368]

The opening lines of the catalog for *KK* reflect the starting point for Sattya's
creative urban intervention. Yuki Poudyal, one of the collective's core mem-
bers and the initiator of the project, describes how the city of Kathmandu,
specifically its physical infrastructure, its buildings and walls, have been
overrun by what she understands as the visual language of consumer-
ism and politics. For her, political slogans, advertisements, and billboards
in all sizes constitute the preeminent traces of urbanization. During my
research, I observed that buildings along the main roads especially are
used as a display for huge billboards. Almost every shop carries adver-
tisement boards for both nationally and internationally known companies,
such as Coca Cola, Castrol, Apple, Samsung, and so forth (see Fig. 3). Even
the poles meant to support the innumerable electricity wires lining the
streets are used as suspenders for Ncell advertisements—the country's
first private mobile operator. It is not only manufacturers and corporations
who take advantage of this space, however, politicians and their support-
ers have also realized the city's potential for publicity. Political slogans line
the "Democracy Wall" near Ratna Park and many other walls throughout
the city. Sattya's project, as described in the catalog, is directed against
both these visual "encroachments": The inflow of neoliberal consumer ide-
ologies represented through advertisements and billboards on the one
hand, and the political appropriation of the city as a means of spreading
what is conceived of as propaganda on the other.

In the statement above, Poudyal identifies urbanization as a negative
process. Its "footprints," as she calls the visible commercial and political
signs that mark the streets, are pervasive and overwhelming. Her refer-
ences to sound ("bombarding," "preaching," "loud") point to the fact that
these signs are not only visually irritating, but also encroaching on other
senses. Furthermore, she sees them as "hollow" and aloof from the daily
realities of the people living in the city.[369] Devoid of content and thus per-
ceived as of no value, they are reduced to mere nuisance; they represent

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367 This phrase was quoted by geographer David Pinder and stems from the (no
     longer active) homepage of one of his case studies, Brooklyn-based artist col-
     lective *Toyshop*. Pinder, "Arts of Urban Exploration," 385.
368 Yuki Poudyal, "Our Story," in *Kolor Kathmandu: 75 Districts, 75 Murals*, ed. Ashish
     Pradhan, Kate Walton, Priti Sherchan, and Yuki Poudyal (Kathmandu: Sattya
     Media Arts Collective, 2013), 1.
369 Poudyal, "Our Story," 1.

Figure 3: Dillibazar, Kathmandu, 2013. Photo: author.

what geographer Nazrul Islam calls "visual pollution."[370] In his text on the urban development of Dhaka, Islam identifies "writings on the walls," "unsightly banners" and "awkward billboards," along with "uncleared garbage spots" and "unpainted building facades" as visual pollution in the urban aesthetic of Dhaka. By associating billboards and wall writings with pollution (usually understood as environmental contamination) they are identified as harmful and detrimental to life in the city. At the same time, they are seen as unavoidable byproducts of the urbanization process which, by association, becomes detrimental too.

The literature on the "creative city" and "urban exploration" offers a broad overview of creative projects that challenge hegemonic norms about the city, in revealing processes of gentrification, addressing weakening community ties, and claiming a democratization of public space.[371]

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370 Islam, "Mahbubur Rahman," 47.
371 See for example Greg Richards and Julie Wilson, "The Impact of Cultural Events on City Image: Rotterdam, Cultural Capital of Europe 2001," *Urban Studies* 41,

In line with the hierarchizing practices apparent in contemporary urban studies,[372] and the pairing of creativity with neoliberal politics of innovation and economic revitalization,[373] this literature almost exclusively focuses on European or American cities. The absence of non-Western cities and "megacities" from this discourse suggests that the people living in these localities either do not share the creative capacities of their Western counterparts, or worse, have accepted their fate of living in urban despair.[374] In either case, their experience of urbanization appears unilaterally negative.

When we meet in August 2013, I ask Yuki Poudyal to elaborate on how *KK* came into being. She talks about her experiences with collaborative creative projects in the city, notably during her studies in the United States. When she comes to the situation of her hometown Kathmandu, she struggles: "there are so many things wrong with—there are so many things right with Kathmandu—but also things wrong with Kathmandu."[375] This assessment and the change in opinion Poudyal has in the middle of her sentence, in order to let the positive, the "right," take precedence over the negative, points to a complicated relation with the city. She is conscious about her criticism and tries to counterbalance her assessment of the negative aspects of urbanization. Although the negative aspects have sparked the *KK* initiative, her statement seems to indicate that these aspects do not define Kathmandu in its entirety. Her switching of words opens a new perspective on the city, as a locality marked by pollution, density, and its overpowering visuals—but also as a locality of many other things. Through the examples of the artists involved in the *KK* project, the city emerges as a home, a space of encounter for diverse claims to locality. The city is a muse and a medium that has the potential to inspire and motivate the development of critical approaches to its own constitution. In her explanations, Poudyal repeatedly emphasizes that the tools to execute these critical approaches, to convey "powerful messages" and to inspire social change, are "media" and "art."[376]

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no. 10 (2004); Sharon Zukin, "Whose Culture? Whose City?" in Lin and Mele, *The Urban Sociology Reader*; Christoph Lindner and Miriam Meissner, "Slow Art in the Creative City: Amsterdam, Street Photography, and Urban Renewal," *Space and Culture* 18, no. 1 (2015); Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*; Florida, "Cities and the Creative Class"; Pinder, "Arts of Urban Exploration"; as well as the other articles in the themed section "Arts of Urban Exploration," *Cultural Geographies* 12, no. 4 (2005).

372 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.
373 Comunian, "Rethinking the Creative City."
374 There are a few important exceptions: Brosius, "Emplacing and Excavating the City"; Minna Valjakka, "Negotiating Spatial Politics: Site-Responsive Urban Art Images in Mainland China," *China Information* 29, no. 2 (2015); Siegenthaler, "Towards an Ethnographic Turn."
375 AR, YP, August 2013.
376 AR, YP, August 2013.

MURAL ART AS A COLLECTIVE TOOL

Sattya conceptualized *KK* as a public street art project.[377] The project was based on the realization of seventy-five murals throughout the three cities in the valley: Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. The term mural that Sattya uses in the catalogs commonly refers to any kind of artwork realized directly on a wall or similar surface. In contrast to the term street art, typically associated with techniques like spray graffiti, stencils, and tagging, mural art is more inclusive of diverse art practices. Sattya's choice to talk about muralism rather than street art opened the project to artists who until then were working in a studio, classroom, or gallery. It also freed the project from the stigma of illegality, vandalism, and nocturnal delinquency that street art in Europe and America owes to its modern inception in the 1960s and 1970s.[378] The *KK* murals are created on private walls, often after lengthy negotiations with the respective owners. The act of seeking permission entails a very different *habitus* than for usual street art practice. Painting (as most murals are realized with the paintbrush, not the spray-can) happens during the day and thus proactively calls for an exchange between artists and passersby. The participants I talked to recount stories about curious neighbors repeatedly engaging artists in lively discussions about the purpose of the project, the contents of the work, and their personal backgrounds. This type of exchange with the people dwelling in the neighborhoods of the murals was one of Sattya's initial aims. It extends the notion of the collective claim to the city from the Media Arts Collective and participating artists to a wider set of people. But how is this set circumscribed?

> We felt like we could provide an alternative. And this community-driven alternative solution was so much more powerful than the money driven one. … We really wanted … to say that we have a voice too. Not just crafty politicians, not just the squabbles, "don't just put that in our streets." We have a voice too.[379]

In our interview, Poudyal establishes a collective entity, a "we," and repeatedly makes references to notions like "community-driven," "community values," or "community building." This community clearly differs from the

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377 I base my use of the term street art on the vocabulary used by my research partners to describe themselves and their work in my interviews. The term roughly refers to the production of artworks that either use the streets (and the walls along them) as a medium, or that include techniques generally used in street art related practices (spray painting, stencil art, graffiti, tagging, and so on). For a detailed discussion of the term street art, see Nicholas A. Riggle, "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 3 (2010); Valjakka, "Negotiating Spatial Politics."

378 Rafael Schacter, "An Ethnography of Iconoclash," *Journal of Material Culture* 13, no. 1 (2008).

379 AR, YP, August 2013.

politicians and corporates who, in her eyes, are responsible for the visual pollution. In contrast to their voice, which is ubiquitous, the voice of this "we" is not being heard. But this "we" also seems to include more than just her fellow project organizers. It vaguely bespeaks a wider community of "creative types" (as Sattya comprehends itself on social media) or a "young generation" (as Poudyal repeatedly states in the interview).[380]

Unlike many of my research partners in Nepal, Poudyal does not have a background in fine arts. When she joined Sattya, she had recently completed an undergraduate degree in sociology and psychology in the United States. Kathmandu-based collectives, Artudio—a platform for visual arts founded by artist Kailash K Shrestha in 2010—and Artlab—a street art-centered artist-led initiative founded in 2012—had been promoting street art in Kathmandu for several years, but the number of artists working with murals was still comparatively small when Poudyal returned to Nepal.[381] Of those who did, the majority were students or graduates of the fine art institutions in Kathmandu. Therefore, Sattya approached these institutions early on in the project and organized information sessions for interested participants. In addition to the outreach to existing art institutions, Sattya also launched an open call through its website and social media accounts, asking interested artists both nationally and internationally to apply. The multifaceted outreach methods Sattya employed brought in a heterogenous group of participants, comprising fine art students and graduates in Nepal as well as musicians, photographers, and graphic designers. As applied arts, the latter two are not commonly part of the fine art curriculum and have therefore been repeatedly excluded from the nationally circumscribed art field, expressed for instance in the national exhibitions organized by the National Academy of Fine Arts. Further, people from related fields such as education or sociology, like Poudyal herself, joined the project.

Poudyal does not offer an exact delimitation of what she means by community, but based on her comments, she seems to invoke a more general community of city dwellers that supersedes the young creative types involved in the project. She separates these city dwellers from the politicians and their supporters who benefit from the political propaganda on the walls. She also differentiates them from corporates who profit from the advertisement on billboards and signs. They are ordinary inhabitants

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380 AR, YP, August 2013
381 Artudio offers a wide range of activities from photography and children's art classes to community-based art programs. Its founder, Kailash K. Shrestha, very early on initiated street art projects to open the art practice and connect to a general public. According to Shrestha, the street art movement took off from the activities of the two Nepali street artists Mr. K and Yeti, from French artist Bruno Levy, and from an artist called Rainbow Warrior. AR, KKS, September 2013; "About," Artudio, accessed April 24, 2021, http://artudio.net/we/. Artlab was the first artist-led initiative in Kathmandu to focus solely on the development of art in public space. "About," Artlab, accessed February 14, 2021, https://artlablife.wordpress.com/about/.

of the city whose commonality seems solely defined by their shared suffering of the signs of urbanization. With *KK*, muralism becomes a tool for this vaguely circumscribed "we" to make its voice heard.

VISUALIZING THE NATION IN THE CITY

Since the unification of Nepal following Prithvi Narayan Shah's mid-eighteenth-century conquest, the Nepali state has put a lot of effort into promoting the nation as one single object that can circumscribe the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity of the people living in its borders. The state's monopoly to visualize the nation and the cultural work that goes into this visualization not only comprises bureaucracies, but also media representations and political mobilization.[382] During the Panchayat regime, the Nepali flag, the cow, and the color red were promoted as symbols of the Hindu kingdom.[383] After the Civil War (1996–2006) and the abolition of the monarchy, the new government had to boost the format of the Federal Democratic Republic. The first line of Nepal's newly adopted national anthem (2007)—"woven from hundreds of flowers, we are one garland that's Nepali, sovereignly spread across from Mechi to Mahakali"—for instance, represents an attempt to visualize socio-cultural unity (one garland) in plurality (hundred flowers) as well as territorial sovereignty (from Mechi in the far east to Mahakali in the far west) while maintaining the iconography of the garland and its important role in religious ceremonies. The political slogans in the city can be seen as an extension of the state's cultural work, a strategy to remind its citizens of the political leaders (or those who want to become leaders in the future) on a daily basis.

With *KK*, Sattya is claiming the tool of visualizing the nation in order to undercut the government's monopoly. First, Sattya uncovers the ongoing disconnect between the city's inhabitants and their leaders, as well as between the urban center of Kathmandu and the rest of the country. Then, they attempt to mend this divide through the medium of public art. Sattya's idea to create seventy-five murals is based on the ongoing socio-cultural and political centralization on Kathmandu, which isolates the locality of the city from the country's "realities."[384] In Poudyal's argument, the markers of the process of urbanization (the consumerist and political publicity) also become the visible signs of the distance between the urbanized capital and its hinterland. While consumer goods, especially the telecommunication supplies advertised in the billboards, cover the city and visually represent a connected country, the benefits of these capital and infrastructural flows are often contained within the Kathmandu valley. Neither the infrastructure nor the goods, nor the associated capital and job opportunities, reach

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382 Gupta and Sharma, "Globalization and Postcolonial States."
383 Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*, 4, 31–32.
384 Poudyal, "Our Story," 1.

the rural areas. Madhav Adhikari, Boris A. Portnov, and Moshe Schwartz show that the three major population centers of the "central development region"—Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Birgunj—head the country's commercial activities.[385] They argue that Birgunj, due to its location near the Indian border, is the country's "main trade gateway" whereas the cities in the Kathmandu valley attract tourists and pilgrims with their religious sites and political institutions.[386] Further, the availability of educational opportunities, health facilities, and other infrastructure causes more and more migrants to settle in the valley.[387] Especially during the civil war (1996–2006) and the associated growing insecurity and violence in the rural areas, many people fled to the valley.[388] Rather than encouraging the distribution of capital generated in the urban center, for instance by developing the infrastructure in the rest of the country, the government has continued to focus most of its efforts on Kathmandu.[389] These processes highlight the fact that while flows into the city—of capital, of consumer goods, of students, and of labor—are continuously rising, flows from the city to the rest of the country are often absent. Further, while national symbols like the anthem reference places like Mechi and Mahakali, these places and their socio-cultural, economic, and political realities often remain distant elsewheres in the minds of the urban population. This is where *KK* ties in with Sattya's claim that despite the daily arrival of migrants from the rural areas, not only the politicians but also the wider urban population largely remain ignorant to their living conditions.

> Kathmandu is so isolated and bubbled up in its own world. It is so distant from the realities of different parts of the country. So, by bringing seventy-five murals, inspired by seventy-five districts, we get Kathmandu's people connected to different parts of the country.[390]

In the interview, Poudyal explains that the motivation to include seventy-five murals to represent seventy-five districts was based on the collective's aim to counteract the persisting ignorance of the capital *vis-à-vis* the rest of the country. Sattya allocated each selected artist a specific district and negotiated a specific locality in the city in which the murals were to be realized (Jamsikhel roundabout, Maitighar, or Tapathali Bridge, for instance).

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385 From 1982 to 2015, Nepal was divided into five development regions (Eastern Development Region, Central Development Region, Western Development Region, Mid-Western Development Region, Far-Western Development Region). Adhikari, Portnov, and Schwartz, "Urban Growth in Nepal," 927.
386 Adhikari, Portnov, and Schwartz, "Urban Growth in Nepal," 927.
387 Bijaya K. Shrestha, "Housing Provision in the Kathmandu Valley: Public Agency and Private Sector Initiation," *Urbani izziv* 21, no. 2 (2010): 86.
388 Barry, N. Haack and Ann Rafter, "Urban Growth Analysis and Modeling in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal," *Habitat International* 30, no. 4 (2006): 1056–1057.
389 Shrestha, "Housing Provision in the Kathmandu Valley," 86.
390 AR, YP, August 2013.

They thus connected socio-culturally and economically diverse urban neighborhoods through the frame of one project. Murals could be found from Bouddha in the east, to Tahachal in the West, from Panipokhari in the north, to Nakhipot in the South. By bringing stories and visual representations from the districts to the city in the form of murals, they could raise awareness of the conditions in these localities. The overall intent was to create a more inclusive conception of national identity than the one promoted by the state. The outcome however does not quite match this aim. Especially in the way the project was carried out, the resulting murals instead often seemed like appropriations of cultural elements and stories from other localities, in an aesthetically pleasing form catered to an urban viewership.[391] The project did not manage to counter the unilateral social and economic inflow; on the contrary, it added cultural elements to it.

The geographical expansion of the mural project throughout the valley prevented me from visiting all seventy-five murals in person. Additionally, several murals were already painted over or partially disappearing behind new structures when I arrived in Nepal in the summer of 2013. However, the *KK* publication introduces each mural and thus provides an overview of the topics addressed. It allowed me to conclude that the notes from my first encounter with the murals (Interlude: *Kolor Kathmandu*) actually provide a good sample of the visual representations chosen by the artists. Animals, such as the red panda painted by DAAS, were among the most common motifs, either to highlight Nepal's waning biodiversity or to point to the importance of animals in the natural and cultural landscape of the country. Landscapes and general cultural practices were common topics. Further, many artists chose to represent myths, legends, or folktales, such as Emily Sam's depiction of a female figure gradually dissolving into the surrounding nature after drowning in the river (Fig. 4).

Participant Nhooja Tuladar, whom I interviewed in January 2016, explained that he initially did not know anything about Udayapur, the district Sattya selected him to represent. Through a former journalist colleague, who relocated from Udayapur to Kathmandu, he learned a story that inspired his mural:

> It is about this pond, which is very far away from the headquarters of Udayapur, where there are no leaves on the surface because there are very small brown birds who come and pick the leaves and clean the pond. I thought it was very poetic in a way and very interesting.[392]

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391 Canclini makes a similar argument for the art field on a different scale. He poses that regions like Africa, Asia, and Latin America have provided "a large portion of our landscapes and memory" to cultural production, whereas the Euro-American centers have produced "the aesthetic criteria and the cultural evaluation." Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 47.
392 AR, NT, January 2016.

Figure 4: Selection of Kolor Kathmandu murals: a) Kiran Maharjan, *Lalitpur*, New Baneshwor. b) Priscilla DeCarvalho, collateral mural, Jawalakhel. c) DAAS, *Rasuwa*, Thapathali. d) Nhooja Tuladar, *Udayapur*, Sanepa. Kolor Kathmandu 2013. Photos: a) courtesy of the Sattya Media Arts Collective; b) author.

Tuladar, who was a student at the Kathmandu University (KU) Center for Art and Design at the time of the project, decided to use his interest in comics and sequential storytelling to illustrate this story in a minimalistic way. The mural, located in Sanepa (Patan), is comprised of four separate panels, each telling one part of the story. In the first panel, a green leaf is floating on a blue, wavy surface. In the second, a brown bird is approaching the water from below the pond's surface. Then the brown bird picks up the leaf and flies away. In the last panel, a clear blue surface remains. In addition to talking about the motive and the story that led to it, Tuladar emphasizes the interactions he had with passersby and neighbors while

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working on the mural. A young man who worked at a nearby restaurant for instance ended up assisting him in painting the mural, as he recalls in our interview. He also mentions a curious passerby who was from Udayapur and recognized the story.

Although most murals addressed the issue of politics rather subtly, a handful of artists approached the topic head-on by referencing moments of historical importance. The mural of the Gorkha district by Bathroom Painter (artist Shunnal Ligade from India), for instance, became a visual testimony to Prithivi Narayan Shah's campaign to unite Nepal. The Dailekh mural by Paul Atchinson paid tribute to Radio Nepal correspondent Dekendra Thapa, who was allegedly killed by Maoist revolutionaries. Sujan Dangol, also a graduate of the Center for Art and Design (2012), engaged with the issue of politics in an almost poetic manner. When I talked to him in January 2016, he explained:

> You know the word *"saphal"*? *Saphal* is success. There are so many parties, so many politicians and so many [different] kinds of slogans. But every slogan, and everybody's motive is to make "success" for the country, or success for anything. … They are using the word very easily, because we have to make success of the country, or we have to make success of constitution … sometimes I think they are misusing this word. They use the word "success" that is why a lot of people are together with them. … I really don't want to see those slogans. I think that "success" is a very interesting word, so I erase all the words in the front and the back. I leave [the word success] and just frame it.[393]

Dangol's representation of Rolpa district consists of several murals. In these murals, he questions the motives of politicians and their often "empty" rhetoric of success. He relates the recovery of Rolpa after the Maoist insurgency to the situation of the country as a pawn in political squabbles. Thereby he plays on the ambiguous meaning of the word success, which, as he explains above, often comes to represent a hollow promise, and yet is used by all political parties to rally and draw in the masses. Rather than overpainting the political messages, he highlights the word *saphal* by framing it. His work becomes a critique of the political rhetoric and represents a creative incentive to reflect on what success means, for whom, and at what cost.

During his studies at the Center for Art and Design at KU, Kiran Maharjan (mostly known by his artist name H11235) became very interested in street art and joined Kathmandu's first street art centered collective Artlab. He answered Sattya's open call and was selected to represent Lalitpur (Patan), one of the three districts inside the Kathmandu valley. In contrast to many other participants, he was already familiar with his district. He quickly

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393   AR, SD, January 2016.

decided to work on the Kumari, a crucial religious figure in the local Newari community and the Nepali culture in general.[394]

> For the *Kolor Kathmandu* project, I did a mural representing Lalitpur. For that mural, I interviewed the ex-Kumari of Lalitpur because she was the main figure of my mural. ... When you are in her presence, you feel—I know, it doesn't sound right—I felt this godly presence when I was around her. I talked to her and it is interesting, she doesn't even know what is happening outside of the walls on the street. I wanted to know what she thought were the main elements of Lalitpur, because I wanted to use her ideas and put it in the mural, so that people could see it. But she didn't know what the main things in Lalitpur were. It was enlightening for me.[395]

The Kumari, a pre-pubescent girl who manifests the divine female energy, is physically removed from public life and only allowed to leave her abode on ceremonial occasions. Although she is an important symbol for the locality, her ritual concealment prevents her from physically experiencing and engaging with this locality. This insight became an important motif for Maharjan during the project.

Expressing any type of message (oral, written, or visual) in public space raises questions about reception. The *KK* murals were painted on privately owned walls. But they were visible from the streets shared equally by all inhabitants of the city. All the participants I talked to perceived the direct relationship with this "audience"—house owners, passersby, neighbors—as a positive element of working on the streets. Several also raised concerns about ethical implications, social responsibilities, and self-censorship. Maharjan for instance explained that as a member of the Newari community (from which the Kumari is chosen) he tried to be respectful and sensitive towards people's feelings in the conception of his mural. "Bringing positivity" is a big part of what motivates him to work on the streets.[396] He believes that thorough research about the topics one wants to depict, the locality, and the people one wants to work among safeguards against offending people. He concludes that artists always must balance out their freedom and "creative right" against people's values.[397]

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394 The Kumari or "Living Goddess" is a Nepali tradition according to which Buddhists and Hindus worship young, pre-pubescent girls as manifestations of the divine female energy—as the goddess Taleju, or Durgā (Hinduism), or the goddess Vajradevī (Buddhism). The Kumari of Patan (Lalitpur) is one of the three most important Kumaris in Nepal. See Durgā Śākya, ed., *The Goddess Tulaja and Kumari in Nepali Culture: A Collection of Research Articles About Istadevi Tulaja Bhawani and Aradhyadevi Kumari* (Kathmandu: Kumari Prakashan, 2013); Isabella Tree, "The Living Goddess," *History Today* 65, no. 4 (April 2015); Isabella Tree*, The Living Goddess: A Journey into the Heart of Kathmandu* (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2014).

395 AR, KM, March 2016.

396 AR, KM, March 2016.

397 AR, KM, March 2016.

SPATIAL BROKERAGE—WHOSE RIGHT?

The issues raised by Maharjan point to a tension underlying *KK*. With the project, Sattya claims a collective right to the city and challenges the claims of politicians and neoliberal actors. Sattya's understanding of collectivity invokes not only organizers and participant artists, but also a wider community of creative types as well as the city's ordinary inhabitants. Esther Baumgärtner demonstrates that the locality of the city is a highly contested space.[398] Many different agents and groups claim authority over meaning, values, and norms of city life. Therefore, spatial brokerage happens on many scales and often involves asymmetric relationships between different brokers. Is it possible to balance the creative right of the individual participating artist and the right of the wider community, as Maharjan suggests? Who is involved in spatial brokerage during *KK* and to what end?

The artists I talked to were all based in Kathmandu at the time of the project. While working on their respective murals, they all took a genuine interest in the districts they were allocated by Sattya and did their own research on noteworthy historical events and cultural and visual elements from that district. For instance, Maharjan interviewed the Kumari of Lalitpur, which he chose as his main subject matter, and Nhooja Tuladar sought contact with an acquaintance who hailed from his district to learn more about it. Because all artists chose their own approach, the level of engagement with and reflection on the locality varied with each mural. Dangol's mural(s) for Rolpo started from his research into the district, but ended up as a much broader commentary on the government's false claims of success and its failure to make good on its promises of development. Other artists focused on the aesthetic message rather than conveying specific content. In the case of the international participants, there seems to have been a similar range of approaches: some engaged more deeply with the socio-cultural or natural fabric of their districts, others opted for rather superficial, sometimes even stereotypical depictions of visual elements often associated with Nepal or South Asia in general (mountains, elephants, tigers, etc.). Altogether, the cultural brokerage was not as deliberate and pronounced as it was in my case studies in the first chapter. The artists did not interrogate the notion of locality as such, and their brokerage did not offer notable alterative visualities. To illustrate, the mural by Indian artist Bathroom Painter, which portrays the strength of Prithivi Narayan Shah in unifying Nepal, does not challenge the hegemony of the national hill-centric superethnos of high-caste Hindus. It is, on the contrary, a strong indication for the continued power of the state over this narrative.

The participating artists are not the only actors brokering space. In fact, Sattya conceived the form and the frame of their spatial brokerage; the collective acted as initiator, manager, and mediator of the project, allocating

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398 Baumgärtner, *Lokalität und kulturelle Heterogenität*, 145–148.

specific national districts to specific artists, and providing these artists with specific spaces in the city. Through the *KK* publication, promotional videos, the online map, and guided tours of the murals, Sattya claimed both the right to creatively intervene in the city as well as the monopoly over the reception of this intervention. The collective's brokerage was not uncontested. For instance, in relation to content, one artist described that his attempt to visualize his allocated district did not get approved by the collective. In the end, he had to concede to a motif he did not like. Pertaining to locality, several participants alleged that the best, most visible sites in the city had been reserved for foreign/prominent artists and that these artists in general had been favored during the project. More than a third of the participating artists came from abroad, and most of them only had a limited relation to Kathmandu and its art scene at the time of the project. They flew in to create the murals, and by the time I arrived, most of them had already left again. During my first contact with *KK*, I almost exclusively encountered the murals of the international artists: the works by DAAS, Herakut, and Spagnola figured on main traffic axes of the city, such as Tapathali Bridge and Ratna Park (see Interlude: *Kolor Kathmandu*). Was there pressure for increased visibility of international artists? Or, on the contrary, was there a motivation to leave the more intricate spaces for artists who were based in Kathmandu? In any case, the effect of these allegations was symptomatic of a more general power asymmetry between the local urban art field and other scales connected to the project. One participant noticed that the Nepali "art community" had not been properly involved: "… they asked artists to come to Kathmandu and paid for them. But why did they not approach other artists from Nepal? For murals or suggestions or anything."[399] Another explained that the communication between the Nepali and the foreign artists was lacking: "most of the street artists that had been working here, they had this complaint that they did not get as much time to interact with the international artists. And that is quite true."[400] The latter elaborated that Sattya did not properly communicate the presence of foreign artists in Nepal. As a result, many Kathmandu-based artists missed the opportunity to meet them or study their work process. "Why is this always working in a Western way?" another participant asked me in a conversation.[401] Like several other participating artists, they experienced Sattya's general way of operating and conceiving projects as something foreign.

Sattya was co-founded by three non-Nepalis, and its programs, such as film screenings, do it yourself (DIY) workshops, and recycling activities, attracted many expats that live and work in Kathmandu.[402] Poudyal

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399   AR, A, 2016.
400   AR, A, 2016.
401   AR, A, 2016.
402   "Expats" or "expatriates" refers to foreigners who live and work in Nepal on a long-term basis. Ulf Hannerz stresses the freedom of choice inherent in the status of the expatriate: "these are people who can afford to experiment, who

is well aware of this fact and explains that one reason for their involve-ment might be Sattya's concept of collectivity, equality, and DIY culture, which is more familiar to them than it is to Nepali society, where it has only recently emerged.[403] Although initially conceived as alternative strategies to political and socio-economic empowerment and self-actualization, DIY and other creative initiatives have come to be associated with neoliberal governmentality, especially in relation with the creative city discourse cen-tered on cities in Europe and America. Poudyal explains that the inspira-tion for the project came from her studies in sociology and psychology, which she completed in the US. In particular, she was impressed by the visual art projects in American cities, such as the Philadelphia Mural Arts project, and the sense of tolerance and community that these projects conveyed.[404] Back in Nepal, she and the Sattya team started to brainstorm about how media and art could be used as similar tools of communication in Nepal. Street art or muralism became their tool to "revamp" the city and to strengthen "community values."[405] In order to provide materials and compensate the artists (each received 7000 NPR per mural), Sattya also drew in funds from the Netherlands-based Prince Claus Fund.

Sattya, like many of the other initiatives I am looking at in this book, tried to position itself in a multi-scalar network of connections; the organ-izers aimed at reconnecting the urban population, many of which are migrants from rural areas, with their own city. They further intended to reconsider the connection between the capital city and its nation-state, establish a relationship with a worldwide street art community, and access funds from supranationally operating organizations. Yet, for many partic-ipants and observers I talked to, the connections to the persisting centers of the art world (Europe and America), be it in the form of inspiration from

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do not stand to lose a treasured but threatened, uprooted sense of the self." He elaborates that they are pictured as "independent" and open to new expe-riences, but have the freedom and means to "go home when it suits them." Ulf Hannerz, "Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture," in *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, ed. Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1990), 243. Due to this emphasis on higher social class and economic status, and its related association with a specific group of countries of ori-gin (mostly Europe and North America), the notion has come to contrast the "(im)migrant," who, in turn, is often synonymous with poverty, lower social class, and the Global South. See also Mawuna Remarque Koutonin, "Why Are White People Expats When the Rest of Us Are Immigrants?" *The Guardian*, March 13, 2015, accessed June 20, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/glob al-development-professionals-network/2015/mar/13/white-people-expats-immigrants-migration.

403 AR, YP, August 2013. It is important to emphasize that Sattya has undergone several changes since its foundation. Even at the time of *KK* (2013) its members were primarily from Nepal. Further, the environment has also changed, and many young urban people are now much more familiar with the DIY culture.

404 Mural Arts Philadelphia is the largest public art project in the US. It is con-cerned with the idea that "art ignites change" and has been ongoing for more than thirty years. "About," Mural Arts Philadelphia, accessed April 25, 2021, https://www.muralarts.org/about/.

405 AR, YP, August 2013.

American public art projects or the role of expats in the foundation of Sattya, were very prominent. By contrast, attempts to connect to the local urban or national art field were found lacking. This asymmetry is what might have led to a more general perception of *KK* as a project by foreigners for foreigners.

Nevertheless, the general outcome of the project was met with appreciation by its participants and within the wider art scene. The participating artists I talked to approved of Sattya's creative engagement with the city, especially the positive energy the project established for street art. They appreciated the fact that *KK* brought art to the streets, and they were now able to see it during day-to-day movements through the city, instead of having to visit a gallery. One artist, for instance, explained that the project was "making Kathmandu very beautiful,"[406] and another emphasized that "irrespective of whether the project carried on very well or not, … Kathmandu is this very colorful city, traditionally, and it's losing its splendor every passing year. And I think it needed that breathing space."[407] Many people I met beyond the art scene were aware of and felt positively about the project; whenever I mentioned my research on contemporary art, the murals came up. The project thus not only contributed to the popularity of street-based art, but also increased the visibility of contemporary art in general. The collective thus accomplished their aim to broker an alternative image of Kathmandu as a locality. The project brought together, under the frame of one project, highly diverse areas of the city, from residential areas to main traffic axes, and from commercial centers to important religious sites. From a bird's eye view, the project managed to engage the city's various paces and socio-economic environments. The murals were created in close collaboration with the walls' owners. The online map and guided tours organized by Sattya provided an incentive for city dwellers and tourists alike to venture into more secluded parts of the city. Further, the organizers' choice to use mural art as a medium made sure that the artists' creative interventions were ephemeral: they could evolve with the city and the needs of its inhabitants. Some murals vanished very quickly—under new constructions, growing greenery, advertisements, and political slogans—and some were still visible when I last visited Kathmandu in 2018. The project thus offered the idea of the city as a shared space, a space of encounter between multiple claims, values, and meanings.

Sattya derived its legitimacy to intervene in the urban space by invoking the community. This claim, in turn, was based on the idea that Sattya's members were part of a wider urban community that collectively shares its streets, as well as a creative community. This brings me back to my reflections on creativity: I proposed a double understanding of creativity, first as in the ordinary practices of dwelling in the city, and second as in the conscious production of site-specific artworks. The larger part of the

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406   AR, A, 2016.
407   AR, A, 2016.

KK audience (inhabitants, commuters, and passersby) is not involved in the production of contemporary art. Many of the project's participants, however, are part of a wider urban community that collectively shares its streets. This double position allows the artists to use the tool of art and media to raise their voice and counteract the effects of urbanization. These effects, mostly visible in political slogans and advertisements, are marked as detrimental, as visual pollution. As part of the creative community, the artists can engage with the fabric of the city and possibly change hegemonic neoliberal visualities. Sattya thereby acts as a spatial broker and a mediator between citizens and artists: they set the thematic frame, provide the funding, and select the artists. Poudyal describes Sattya's role as "the loudspeaker" or the "platform":

> Artists are the voice. In a way it could be like, [laughing] artists have the voice, are the means, express their views and thoughts, and we are more like the loudspeaker to reach to a mass. That is how it has been going and that is how it should be. We want to make sure that the artists don't lose their voice. And we are here as a platform to encourage that and get them to a community where we gather people with more voice and they exchange ideas and learn from each other.[408]

In relation to the artists' more critical comments, this quote indicates that while acting as brokers, Sattya also became a gatekeeper. The organizers are city dwellers and creative practitioners, but they are also in charge of the project. They are in control of the economic, social, and cultural capital. Among the participating artists, this power asymmetry was not always well-received. Sattya was criticized for blocking exchange between the artists, rather than allowing for open communication. By choosing the frame, the walls, the color, the participants, and sometimes even the motives, it effectively undercut the agency of the individual artists. Sattya approached the nationally circumscribed contemporary field by including the art education institutions such as the Center for Art and Design at KU. This way, they managed to involve especially younger art students, but failed to engage the larger field. Many of my research partners, especially those established in the art field felt either disconnected or left out. For them, the project was framed, to use Kravagna's terms, more as "impact" (drawing inspiration from Euro-American street art projects) than as "contact" (as enabling translocal alliances, fostering artistic exchange, and collaboration).[409]

The example of *KK* raises central issues in public art projects, such as the negotiation of diverse claims to locality and the circumscription of communities. The emic notion of community invokes an emotional value

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408 AR, A, 2013.
409 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, 50.

of togetherness and solidarity. Sattya makes use of this value to legitimize its creative intervention in the city and motivate artists to join it. Yet, the actors that *KK* is directed against are also able to invoke "community" to legitimize their claim: politicians rally donors, supporters, and voters, while companies want to promote their products to clients and consumers. Community cuts across many other communities (of consumers, of voters, of artists, and so on) ready to be called upon (and mobilized). Even the creative community Sattya invokes is crosscut by different claims and frictions, such as between Kathmandu-based and foreign artists, or between established artists in the national/urban artistic field and young creatives. A balance between these different claims becomes possible in the transience of the project: urban walls are a highly visible site to lay claim to the city, but any intervention is ultimately ephemeral. During *KK*, the walls are "occupied" by an artist. Nevertheless, their ownership remains in the hands of landlords, inhabitants, and neighbors. They can reclaim the walls any time by painting over them, by using the space in front of them as storage, or by adding a new structure to them. The temporal usage of walls thus allows for multiple claims to the city and appeals to community to co-exist. Like Britto and Bindu—A Space for Artists (Bindu), Sattya attempts to take on multiple positionings in a multi-scalar network of contemporary art; their scope of action reaches from the urban to the national and the global scale. Some of these connections however are perceived as more pronounced than others, making visible an underlying asymmetry. The critique against Western influences and the alleged favoritism toward foreign artists particularly highlights persisting power imbalances: Europe- and America-based projects and institutions continue to dominate the art field in terms of access to economic and cultural capital. Despite the recognition of their positive effects, projects like *KK* can be seen as further facilitating this dominance. A similar imbalance pertains to the urban–rural divide: *KK* aimed at reconnecting the city and its inhabitants with the rest of the nation by making seventy-five districts visible in the city. Factually, however, the project reproduces the centralization model it tries to counteract. Arguably, the individual murals encouraged urban dwellers to consider the socio-cultural and economic conditions in the rest of the country, yet the overall project reinforced the unilateral flows of migrants, goods, and cultural forms from the hinterland to the city.

KK and my next case study *1mile²* are connected by the underlying idea to create alternative, more inclusive, and for the lack of a better word, more "colorful" cities. Their organizers aim to incite a critical reflection on the different claims to their cities. Often, they consider those claims, be it those of neoliberal powers, politicians, or developers, as detrimental to the quality of urban life. Studying these projects allows us to gain a more dynamic insight into how actors creatively make space in the city; how they interact with its infrastructure; and how they culturally and spatially broker emerging visual discourses. This, in turn, allows us to map a more nuanced version of localities than those currently offered by urban studies,

as well as to expand our knowledge on when and where contemporary art happens. Due to my research, I have become a city-dweller in Dhaka and Kathmandu, and my own mental map of both cities plays an important role in how I approach my case studies. Similar to my introduction to *KK*, I start my discussion of *1mile²* from my discovery of Old Dhaka through the artists' site-specific works.

Interlude: *1mile²*

My perception of place—my mental map of Dhaka—has been shaped by both my own movements in the city and those of the people I engaged with; the experiences they have had and decided to share with me. These experiences often contained over-simplifications and clichés. North Dhaka, where I stayed on my first visit interning with an NGO (2009), is the most northern and most recently developed part of the city. It consists of the neighborhoods Baridhara, Gulshan, Banani, and even more recently also Basudhara and Uttara. Connections on a global scale are most obviously situated here; they take the shape of international and national aid and development agencies (whose logos are displayed in large, capital letters on the faces of their respective buildings), heavily guarded embassies, five-star hotels, exclusive international clubs, and well-known restaurant chains, such as Pizza Hut or Kentucky Fried Chicken. I was repeatedly urged not to leave this part of the city, its comforts and sense of security, by my colleagues and friends.

During my doctoral research, I moved to New Dhaka, which according to my acquaintances in the North was good for shopping but too far away (one to two hours with traffic—twenty minutes without) and too dangerous, too crowded. The mixed residential and commercial areas of New Dhaka, the area around Dhanmondi, is largely inhabited by the Bengali Muslim middle class. It comprises busy streets, markets, hospitals, and institutions of higher education. Together with the neighborhoods Ramna and Shahbagh, this area slowly developed as a new cultural and political center of the city under the Pakistan era, hence its name. New Dhaka houses the majority of cultural institutions, and many artists live in the area, making it a good locality for my research. It is from Dhanmondi, on an early morning in December 2014, that I begin my first journey to Old Dhaka, the southernmost part of the city. I am nervous, as I have also been warned about this part of the city, its chaos, possible robberies, and kidnappings.

Two weeks later during the open studio of 1mile² *I feel comfortable walking the streets of Old Dhaka. I have memorized the maze of small, crooked alleys during the visits and go-alongs I undertook with some of the participating artists over the past weeks. Ruplal Das Lane is one of the widest roads in this area, but the rickshaws and little trucks and also the pungent smells from the numerous spice-shops make it a challenge to walk here. Suddenly, I hear somebody calling me from one of the shops. "Come in," a man shouts, pointing at my camera, "you can take the best photo from here." I turn around and realize that*

in fact his spice shop offers the perfect view of Shimul Saha's art installation (Fig. 5a). *Saha created small, white, and open windows and fixed them on top of the actual windows of Puthi-ghar, the house of one of the region's first publishers. I continue my walk towards Ruplal House, which due to its enormous size dominates the whole street. The geometrical shapes of Ruplal House, the impressive courtyard and its rows of columns, motivated artist Shubho Saha to choose it as a venue for his project. The artwork is composed of an orange cloth, hanging from the center of the courtyard, and bricks at the base of the installation. Although the pile of bricks forms a foreign body within this confined space, the installation quickly blends into the architecture and the everyday life of the house—the playing children, the drying laundry* (Fig. 5b).

With Ruplal House, as with Boro Bari (big house) a little further up the street, I am glad that the artists exhibiting here have already taken me inside before today. I might otherwise not have dared to enter it on my own. Intruding into people's homes and their lives feels brazen, but it is exactly what artist Yasmin Jahan Nupur dares visitors to do. Her sound installation is hidden at the far side of Boro Bari, among large piles of paper from the nearby printing press. The sound pieces allow access to the inhabitants' histories and memories of the building, which Jahan has recorded over the past weeks. I leave the house again and continue to follow the green footsteps that mark the 1mile^2 *perimeter* (Fig. 5e). *Finally, I end up at Beauty Boarding, one of the erstwhile famous boarding houses frequented by writers and other intellectuals of the area. Over the last couple of weeks, it has become the main hub of* 1mile^2; *artists have been sharing lunches, tea breaks, and dinners in-between their explorations of the neighborhood. A number of artists have chosen the space for their projects. Munem Wasif displays his work on the box camera, one of the oldest methods of photographing, still practiced in the area in one of the simple, ground floor rooms.*

URBAN FABRICS AS INSPIRATION FOR CREATIVE PLACE-MAKING[410]

1mile^2 was initially launched by a London-based organization called Visiting Arts.[411] The 2009 pilot program took place in eight countries (Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan, England, Iran, Scotland, and South Africa) and has since included more than 13,500 artists, ecologists, and researchers from ten countries around the world. Britto's co-founder and the co-organizer of *1mile^2* in Bangladesh, Tayeba Begum Lipi, explains that the overall aim of the initial project was to explore the natural and social ecology of the specific square mile that participants are most familiar with; the

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410 Parts of this chapter have previously been published in the form of an article, see Marlène Harles, "Creative Place-Making: Contemporary Art Practice and Urbanization in Dhaka," *Visual Ethnography* 7, no. 2 (2018).
411 Visiting Arts is a platform for the promotion of intercultural understanding through the support and connection of artists around the world. The organization was registered as an independent charity in 2001. Visiting Arts, Facebook Page, accessed September 7, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/visitingarts.

Figure 5: a) Shimul Saha, *Whose Decision it Might Be*. b) Shubho Saha, *Brick 1*. c) Mahbubur Rahman, *Shower With Oil*. d) Ayesha Sultana, *Rupture*. e) 1mile² footprint. 1mile² 2015, Old Dhaka. Photos: author.

neighborhoods in which they live and work. When Dona Vose, Visiting Arts' program manager for *1mile²*, approached Britto, its founders were eager to participate in the project. Yet they did not like the idea of working in Dhanmondi, even though this area is home to most art institutions, artists, and art spaces, including Britto.

> At that time, we were in Hatirpool, so we found it is not—of course it is an interesting place, wherever you do it, really interesting—so we thought, why don't we do it in Old Dhaka.[412] This area [New Dhaka] has the look and attitude, it is very common. The people's lifestyle, the job facilities, the movements, are very similar. In Old Dhaka, every lane has differences, in architecture, in jobs, in professions. Massive shifts within short distance. So, we thought, why don't we do it there because the possibility is there only.[413]

Lipi characterizes New Dhaka's neighborhoods as marked by ordinariness. In contrast to Robinson, whose claim to the "ordinary city" is a means to overcome the biased categorizations of global / megacities,[414] ordinary for Lipi is synonymous with monotony. New Dhaka offers its inhabitants a limited range of daily habits, living facilities, and occupational fields. Many neighborhoods in this area are characterized by an overabundance of multi-storied buildings and concrete high-rises, an absence of green or open spaces, and a large density of private tenants—mainly Bengali middle class—businesses, and factories.[415] However, it is not only the visual and socio-cultural uniformity that keeps Britto from engaging with this area in the frame of the *1mile²* project. Their experience of having lived and worked in the area for a long time makes them very aware of its pace: during an afternoon of hanging out at Britto, some collective members tell me about an artist from Europe who had done a residence at Britto a few years back. This artist had planned to organize a public art event in Dhanmondi. Both Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman had tried to dissuade them from going through with this plan, arguing that "their" city was not like

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412   Hatirpool is an area lodged between Dhanmondi and Shabhag in New Dhaka. Britto used to have a small space in this area before it moved to Britto Space on Green Road in Dhanmondi.

413   AR, TBL, February 2015.

414   Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.

415   Naveed Islam, "Dhaka City: Design Actions for the Future," *Jamini: International Arts Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (November 2014); Saif Ul Haque and Salma P. Khan, "Dispersing Dhaka: Developing a Nexus of Towns," *Jamini: International Arts Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (November 2014). Nazrul Islam from the Center for Urban Studies in Dhaka describes Dhanmondi in the following way: "It is a typical Bengali neighborhood. Upper class, one hundred percent Bengali neighborhood. So that is very unique. And in a cosmopolitan capital city, you don't see this in other countries. They are mixed." He further explains that the middle class is attracted to the area mainly by the institutions that were established here: high quality schools and universities, sports and leisure centers for men and women, and cultural institutions like galleries and music schools. AR, NI, August 2015.

European cities; people did not hang out or walk on the street for leisure, and even if they did, they would not easily be convinced to break their everyday pattern of walking and being in the streets in order to engage with a public art project. There was too much chaos in New Dhaka and its inhabitants are used to their ways.[416]

While New Dhaka was and still is the place for middle class families, Old Dhaka's fabric is much more heterogeneous. Moreover, its small streets preclude the use of motorized vehicles, causing a very different pace. Under the Mughals and the British, the neighborhoods to the south near the Buriganga River had been the center of translocal distribution. Through the port, goods were distributed to or brought in from the larger region of Bengal. The caravansaries *Bara Katra* and *Chhota Katra* (mid-seventeenth century) are remnants of the vast trade routes that connected the former Mughal city to the region. Further, as the seat of the Nawabs, the Muslim rulers of South Asia, the area around *Ahsan Manzil* also became the center of cultural production and circulation.[417] The first educational institute in the present-day territory of Bangladesh, the Collegiate School, was founded here by the British in 1835. Additionally, the area around Bahadur Shah Park housed libraries.[418] The establishment of Dhaka University in 1921 entailed the first shift in attention towards the north of the city. In the course of the Partition (1947), substantial population displacements followed. Many Hindu merchants that had settled in Old Dhaka left for India. During the riots of the language movement in the 1950s and the war of independence from Pakistan in 1971, religious persecution and forceful evictions further dispersed the Hindu population.[419] Nevertheless, Old Dhaka remains comparatively heterogeneous, visually and socio-culturally. The diversity of communities in Old Dhaka is displayed in places like Hindu Street, lined with sites of worship, shops for Puja items, and the best vegetarian restaurants in town; in the Armenian Church, named after the Armenian Colony that settled here in the eighteenth century; and in the close proximity of temples, churches, and mosques. This is intensified by a steady influx of migrants from the countryside.

New and North Dhaka are marked by wide, often congested streets and monotone concrete buildings. Life in Old Dhaka follows a different pace.

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416 FDE, TBL/MR, February 2015.
417 For an overview of the most important monuments of Old Dhaka and Bangladesh, see Ahmed, *Discover the Monuments of Bangladesh*; Roxana Hafiz, "Conservation in Dhaka," in *400 Years of Capital Dhaka and Beyond: Rājadhānī Ḍhākāra 400 bachara o uttarakāla*, ed. Sharif Uddin Ahmed (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2011); Qazi A. Mowla, "Urban Aesthetics: A Study on Dhaka," in Ahmed, *400 Years of Capital Dhaka*.
418 Bahadur Shah Park (until 1947 "Victoria Park") is named after the last Mughal emperor. It is considered a monument for the 1857 failed Sepoy Revolt and the British rule in South Asia.
419 Emdad C. Haque, "The Dilemma of 'Nationhood' and Religion: A Survey and Critique of Studies on Population Displacement Resulting from the Partition of the Indian Subcontinent," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 8, no. 2 (January 1995); Ul Haque and Salma P. Khan, "Dispersing Dhaka," 150.

Many streets are too narrow for cars to pass, and some of the architectural remnants of the past have survived. The spice shops, wholesale markets, and workshops, still depending on the port, offer a visual contrast to the large shopping malls of the north. This perception of different paces is mirrored in Britto's decision to locate their square mile in Old Dhaka. Relating to Clark's elaborations on cultural brokerage,[420] one could also consider New Dhaka, the place where most of the participating artists live, a site of discursial stability: it houses most of the country's art institutions (the National Museum, the Shilpakala Academy, the Fine Art Faculty of Dhaka University, and several galleries) and is thus the main milieu for the production of the visual discourse from which my research partners emerged. They are interested in relativizing and developing this discourse in order to generate new impulses for the field as a whole. Old Dhaka, in the eyes of the *1mile²* organizers, offers novel visual elements and ideas that can relativize not only the established visual discourse, but also their and the participants' relationship with the city.

Britto considered the initial project in 2009 a success and wanted to continue working in the area. They applied for their own funding and organized a second edition, independent from Visiting Arts, in December 2014. The project continued to follow the initial idea and so forty-two artists, photographers, and researchers were asked to physically and creatively engage with the landscape of Old Dhaka over the course of one month. The long-term project included group site visits, regular meetings, and a talk program on "Heritage, Transformation and Recovery" organized by Britto to support the artists in their individual research and explorations.[421] On the last day, the artists presented the outcome of their engagement, in the form of video screenings, performances, and site-specific installations to a mixed audience of Old Dhaka inhabitants and art-related people from the northern parts of the city.

By locating *1mile²* in Old Dhaka, Britto changed the frame provided by Visiting Arts. Apart from Rahman, who grew up in Old Dhaka, the vast majority of the forty-two participants were not familiar with this area of the city. The project was thus not about exploring everyday localities, but about place-making in an unfamiliar part of the city. Artists first had to find their bearings by learning ordinary activities, such as where to get the best breakfast, where to stop for tea, and how to walk the streets without getting lost. Over the course of this type of creative place-making, a more artistic engagement with the locality developed. While getting to know the socio-cultural fabric and the pace of the area, artists started scouting potential venues, negotiated with tenants and owners, and conceived their

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420   Clark, "Asian Artists," 21–22.
421   The talk program included activist, social worker, and trustee of Britto, Khushi Kabir, the chairman of the Centre for Urban Studies, Prof. Nazrul Islam, and the architect-planner, Salma A. Shafi. It took place at Britto Space in Dhanmondi on December 20, 2014.

Figure 6: Britto Arts Trust, *1mile² Invitation Card,* 2014–2015.
Courtesy of Britto Arts Trust.

on-site projects. Despite the one square mile radius, most participants stayed close together, forming several meeting and exhibition hubs.[422]

One such hub was Ruplal House (see Fig. 6, n. 10). For the first edition of *1mile²* in 2009, the participants had not received permission to create work inside the large nineteenth century mansion, which lends its name to Ruplal Das Lane. In 2014, Shubho Saha spent most of his time in seemingly endless rounds of negotiation to allow himself and Kehkasha Sabah to install their work there, as he explains in a conversation.[423] "Brick on Brick 1" is in the central courtyard of the long waterfront building. The work's overall theme is the relationship between the human and the natural landscape as well as the connection between past and present (see Fig. 5b). The artist explains that the orange cloth, draped over a wire at the center of the courtyard, symbolizes the fluid relation between what was and what is. The bricks at the base represent the human civilization and its impact on the natural landscape.

The reluctance of Ruplal House's owners for the place to become a public venue is related to the building's contested history, which is explained to me by Shimul Saha on our go-along (December 2014). The go-along, as I elaborated in the introduction, became an important complementary method to participant observation and interviewing and allowed me to

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422 For a list of the participating artists and researchers who worked at the different venues, see "1mile² Dhaka 2014," Britto Arts Trust, accessed June 19, 2021, https://brittoartstrust.wordpress.com/.

423 FDE, SS, February 2015.

gain access to the artists' experiences of space.[424] Saha explains that Ruplal House initially belonged to two Hindu merchant brothers. After the Partition in 1947 they left Dhaka and exchanged their home with a Muslim family from India who in turn immigrated to East Pakistan. This was a strategy employed by many wealthy families in the aftermath of Partition. Since the Independence in 1971, the ownership of Ruplal House has been contested. Several sections have been taken over by squatters. Neither the government nor the military (who supposedly has taken over ownership after one of the brothers returned to Pakistan after 1971) care for the building's upkeep. Due to its history, the house constitutes an important architectural and socio-cultural heritage; it physically represents the history of the Bangladeshi people, marked by conflict, migration, and displacement. By using it as a venue for his project, Subho Saha draws attention to the political shifts that have and continue to endanger Old Dhaka's socio-cultural environment.

For her project, Nupur approached the inhabitants of Boro Bari (see Fig. 6, n. 13) and recorded their histories and memories of the building. While the building's facade bespeaks the wealth and prosperity of its original owners, the half-crumbled walls, the humid smell, and the stacks of freshly printed papers hint at another life. Nupur's place-making is conditioned by the way people transform place through their daily actions and lives. Rather than identifying the building's value for herself, the artist focuses on brokering its meaning and value for the people dwelling inside. During the open studio day, she displays recorders inside the vast rooms, urging visitors to listen to the city's stories; to engage with its inhabitants and otherwise hidden spaces, such as the decaying interior of Old Dhaka's architectural heritage. Her work highlights the socio-cultural endangerment of the place, the loss of individual stories and the crumbling of an erstwhile prosperous landscape.

Over the course of the month long initiative, Rahman's project underwent several alterations, but it always revolved around issues of neglect, abandonment, and, in opposition, revival and rediscovery. The final work, a six-channel video entitled "shower with oil" (see Fig. 5c), is a reference to an oil-spill catastrophe that happened in the Sundarbans during the research phase for *1mile²*.[425] It opens a space for encounter between the densely populated area of southern Dhaka and the low-density area of

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424 Kusenbach, "Street Phenomenology," 459.

425 The Sundarbans, one of the largest mangrove forests in the world, is situated in the delta of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers on the Bay of Bengal. It has been a World Heritage site since 1987 (India) and 1997 (Bangladesh) (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 1992–2016). On December 9, 2014 an oil-tanker carrying 350,000 liters of furnace oil sank in the Sundarbans after it was hit by a cargo vessel. The oil spill posed a substantial threat to the environment and inhabitants of the area. Alip Ghatak, "Oil Spill on a Sundarbans River Triggers Environment Concerns," *bdnews24.com*, December 10, 2014, accessed June 20, 2021, http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2014/12/10/oil-spill-on-a-sundarbans-river-triggers-environment-concerns.

the mangrove forest. In his artist statement, Rahman describes how he wanted to bear witness to the ongoing change—often caused by human domination over the natural landscape—that both the mangrove forest and Old Dhaka's ecosystems are susceptible to. Both landscapes lack the protection, support, and maintenance they would need in the face of the ongoing effects of human expansion, notably water and air pollution. Local communities, the artist recounts during our go-along, were too often left to fight for themselves, without much support or proper resources.[426]

The three works by artists Subho Saha, Nupur, and Rahman highlight several of the common topics referred to by the participating artists. The majority of the forty projects engaged with the culturally, politically, and naturally endangered, neglected, and contested urban landscape. The neglect thereby was perceived in relation to the emigration of the cultural elite (artists, writers, and other intellectuals) from Old Dhaka, the displacements of 1947 and 1971, but also to the focus on urban areas further north. During our go-along, Rahman elaborated on this issue: developers and government authorities (for instance RAJUK, the Capital Development Authority of the Government of Bangladesh) have concentrated their attention on more prosperous parts of the town and the middle and upper classes of New and North Dhaka.[427] Since 1971, not only Ruplal House but many of the buildings previously owned by Hindu families were grabbed by the government or the military, after the original owners became the victims of displacement.[428] The new owners have been disregarding the upkeep and the actual tenants or local communities do not have the means to do so, Rahman contends.[429] Although the government has recognized heritage as a value and some buildings, like Lalkuthi (see Fig. 6, n. 8), have been restored under the supervision of the Archeology Department, only a small number of buildings are actually registered as heritage and thus received the care that is usually accorded with such recognition of heritage value.[430] Rahman sees the developments as a conscious neglect of Bangladeshi heritage and relates it to the modernization of the rest of the city:

> After the Partition in 1947, the whole area became abandoned. All the buildings of Hindu owners became abandoned. And those are

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426 GA, MR, February 2015.
427 GA, MR, February 2015; Nazrul Islam, *Dhaka Now: Contemporary Urban Development* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Geographical Society, 2005), 67.
428 Mohaiemen, "Flying Blind," 50. In his review of Bose's *Dead Reckoning*, Mohaiemen points to the controversial "Vested Property Act," a remnant of the Pakistan era. It allowed successive Bangladesh governments to seize Hindu property, thereby disadvantaging the population economically.
429 AR, MR, February 2015.
430 Ahmed, *Discover the Monuments of Bangladesh*. Lalkuthi (red house), as the Northbrook Hall is locally referred to for its red brick facade, was built in honor of Lord Northbrook's visit to Dhaka. He was the viceroy of India between 1872 and 1876. The building was initially conceived as a town hall, but its auditorium is currently used as a theater. The public library was added on the southeast side a few years later.

very important, vital buildings. Overnight it is not working. So, the cultural shifting is quite big, it is quite upside down. We are still carrying that part of the culture. They say we are modern. In Old Dhaka, they use slang. … Those who tell you in Old Dhaka all the people talk slang, what about their roots? Where are they from? It hurts me when the people treat us in that way.[431]

In this quote, Rahman refers to the fact that many of the Bengali middle-class families that settled in New Dhaka, like his own, stem from Old Dhaka. He criticizes the attitude of the inhabitants of these newer city parts towards their own past, their roots, and the communities that today live in Old Dhaka. He observes a deep-rooted asymmetry within the population, mirrored in the landscape, and based on what Robinson has identified as tropes of innovation and modernity.[432] While the north believes itself to be modern, Rahman argues, the south (through the eyes of the north) continues to talk slang. The image of Old Dhaka is marked by chaos, lack, and backwardness. Thinking back to my stay in North Dhaka (see Interlude: *1mile²*) I realized that many Bangladeshis and foreigners I had met consciously or unconsciously reproduce this image. The way I was warned of the dangers that Old Dhaka would pose to me (robbing and kidnapping) not only reifies the area as elsewhere, it also turns its inhabitants into potential criminals. Rahman's own assessments are not free of such clichéd representations; he for instance comprises the north of the city as modern and therefore out of touch with the country's history and culture. Modern here becomes synonymous with illiterate and uncultured. Old Dhaka, in contrast, takes the shape of the exoticized object of Rahman's nostalgic longing for better times.

The artists' place-making and the resulting brokerage emerge from the intricate amalgam of these experiences, including stereotypes and nostalgia. Their place-making in Old Dhaka was imbibed with new input: conversations with new acquaintances, research on the history of specific buildings, smells and tastes, their experiences in their dwelled-in places, the political and visual discourses in which they grew up. All of this input prompts reflections on persisting asymmetries between different areas of the city. Similar to Promotesh Das Pulak's work, which I discussed in the first chapter, many of the artists engaged with the ongoing socio-economic and political processes in Bangladesh. They join a larger demand in the country to rethink the notion of national identity based on the ethnically and culturally homogenous superethnos of the Bengali. This claim was stimulated by the political unrest surrounding the 2008 elections, the institution of the War Crimes Tribunal, and the growing power of Muslim

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431 GA, MR, February 2015.
432 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*; Jennifer Robinson, "The Urban Now: Theorising Cities Beyond the New," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 6 (December 2013).

fundamentalist groups. Attacks on bloggers, intellectuals, and activists are becoming more frequent, threatening the values of free speech and freedom of opinion deemed crucial in the art field. The socio-cultural diversity of Old Dhaka lends itself to functioning as a physical representation of a different, more inclusive and tolerant Bangladeshiness. Through their projects, the *1mile²* participants raised awareness about Old Dhaka's neglected state and its resulting endangerment, but Old Dhaka also becomes a reminder of and a model for a socio-culturally inclusive city that was once, and might once again, be possible.

BROKERING OLD DHAKA AS PLACE OF CONTEMPORARY
CULTURAL PRODUCTION

1mile² opened the locality of the city as a space for the negotiation of national identity politics. It also contested hegemonic discourses and tropes of heritage and modernization. Ayesha Sultana's site-specific work *Rupture*, for instance, was inspired by the impressive brick pattern and the multiple layers of meaning that qualify her chosen site, Panch Bari (see Fig. 6, n. 12). The complex structure is named after the five *(panch)* brothers that share this maze of interwoven corridors, staircases, living rooms, and courtyards. Sultana's installation is located in an adjacent large, roofless space used for religious ceremonies by the local Hindu community. It also regularly turns into a cricket ground for the children of the neighborhood. The artist applied gold leaves to the fissures and cracks that run along the crumbling walls of the building (see Fig. 5d). In a conversation,[433] she explains that the idea was based on the Japanese *kintsugi,* a technique of repairing broken ceramics with lacquer dusted or mixed with gold or silver powder. The gold applications simultaneously conceal the slow decay of the architectural structure and highlight its devastating effects. By using the *kintsugi* technique, Sultana also refers to the technique's underlying philosophical appreciation of simplicity and of embracing the flawed or imperfect. Her project is not about preserving the traditional in the name of heritage, nor overcoming the traditional in the name of modernity. Rather, the site-specific work offers a vantage point from which to imagine a middle ground; Sultana highlights the neglected, flawed walls and offers a way of repairing their cracks without obscuring their provenance.

Wasif engages with the box camera in a similar manner. The simple photography mechanism consists of a box, containing a lens and film on opposite ends. It is, as the artist explains, one of the oldest methods of photographing and an important part of the history and development of photography in the region.[434] Today there are very few people left who know how to process and work with this technique, and Wasif located them in Old Dhaka. The installation "Paper Negative" reflects the artist's

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433 FDE, AS, February 2015.
434 FDE, MW, January 2015.

commitment to identify the skilled practitioners and to document the technique while it is still practiced. Rather than resurrect the craft, his motivation is to learn from it and to experiment with its different possibilities. He especially stresses the collaborative process of the box technique; the model must sit still for long periods of time and communication with the photographer needs to be on point.

In his installation at Puthi-ghar (see Fig. 6, n. 11), Shimul Saha also offers an alternative perception of neglect. Although the house of one of the region's first publishers still exudes a glimpse of its former grandeur, its untended state is clearly marked by the chipped paint and the slowly crumbling facade (see Fig. 5a). The ground floor has been taken over by a business and plastered with concrete. During one of our go-alongs, Saha explains that on a previous visit to Old Dhaka, he had noticed especially the imposing windows on the first floor of the building's front. They had been closed up with bricks and scrap. While exploring the area back then, he had observed a similar sealing of openings in other old buildings, which enhanced their already derelict appearance. In his artist statement, he compares the sealing of windows to the process of nation building, in which people repeatedly close doors on certain memories while consolidating others as part of a common history. In his installation of small white and open windows, Saha dares onlookers to open these doors and claim a more inclusive history. The foregrounding of the covered-up widows transforms the neglect of the beautiful architecture into an aspiration for renewal and recovery.

The individual artworks each highlight different aspects of the Old Dhaka area: its heterogeneous socio-cultural organization, the historical, cultural, and economic value of the area, and the continued political discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities. As a whole, *1mile²* claims a renegotiation of the neglected neighborhood, its architecture, its people, and their cultural practices. It dares people to remember the important role that the area once played, as a nodal point for economic and cultural distribution. Rather than preserving this role, Britto reestablishes Old Dhaka as a site of cultural production. It shows that Old Dhaka should not only be valued for the role it played in the past, but that it is also an important, inspiring locale for contemporary art production.

Similar to *KK*, the project claims an ephemeral occupation of space; Britto had to agree with the local authorities to take down all the works on the evening of the open studio. The exhibition spaces are thus immediately freed up for other engagements, like religious ceremonies, musical concerts, or ordinary dwelling. *KK* and *1mile²* constitute "temporary celebratory landscapes" that disrupt the daily pace and habitual practices of neighborhoods for a fixed period of time.[435] Despite the artists' short-term physical engagement, they celebrate the localities in all their complexity and transform thinking about the urban space in the long run.

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435   Mehrotra, Vera, and Mayoral, *Ephemeral Urbanism*, 38.

Locality, as Brickell and Datta have suggested, is situated across a variety of scales, and each locality is part of a network of spaces.[436] Through the lens of public art projects like *1mile²* and *KK* and the artists' place-making, the multiple scales of connections can be traced. Creative place-making does not preclude the consolidation of stereotypes and bounded notions of culture or territory, as my mental map and that of many Dhaka inhabitants shows. Old Dhaka is associated with derogatory urban identifiers (chaos, decline, and criminality). New and North Dhaka are marked as modernized and developed. *1mile²* further contributes to the exoticization of Old Dhaka as a place of harmonious socio-cultural diversity and at times promotes a sense of nostalgia for a distant past. Through cultural brokerage however, new impressions, visual elements, and connections are introduced into more stable hegemonic discourses and are able to challenge them; preservation of heritage, for instance, does not necessarily need to mean the preservation of a static image of the past. It can be a reactivation of past importance for contemporary meaning making. When artists leave their homes and engage with different neighborhoods, they gain new perspectives on these localities as well as their dwelled-in places. Through their site-specific artworks, they mediate these experiences to wider audiences. Translocality allows me to see the dynamic nature of experiences as an important part of ordinary cities. Cities are not either global, creative, or made up of chaos and decline. They are complex amalgams of diverse rhythms, meanings, life-models, and socio-cultural and political asymmetries. Sometimes they inspire creativity and at other times they cause frustration. The collectives' projects offer, as Christiane Brosius has shown for a similar urban intervention in Delhi, a vantage point to "bring forth an alternative vision of the city" as a site of all these experiences.[437]

The collectives are particularly apt at positioning themselves simultaneously on multiple scales, thus expanding their scope of action beyond the nationally circumscribed artistic fields. Sattya and Britto acquire funding from supranational organizations and take inspiration from art projects established in Europe and America. Both rally a number of artists and other creatives with the aim to collectively rethink the notion of locality, to imagine a capital city able to include multiple ethnicities, religions, and lifestyles present within the country. This multi-positionality does not always go unchallenged, as the example of *KK* has shown. Sattya's connections to the Euro-American art field were deemed unilateral and the initiative faced critique for being "too Western." This perception reemphasizes the power that "the West" still holds in the artistic field, despite the widespread celebration of a co-produced global contemporary.

The aim, reception, and impact of public arts projects are often measured by their impact on the community: Britto aims to expand opportunities

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436 Brickell and Datta, "Introduction," 5, 10.
437 Brosius, "Emplacing and Excavating the City," 75.

for the "local community of artists,"[438] and Sattya invokes a larger community of city-dwellers. This emic notion of community can have a very powerful and galvanizing value in bringing people together for a collective aim. Because it most often circumscribes an imaginary community of members, rather than a group of people that meet face-to-face on a daily basis, community can be made to operate on all scales, from neighborhoods to nations.[439] The dynamic nature of the notion community is also the reason why it is so easily contested by crosscutting claims. Paying close attention to when and by whom this notion is invoked gives insight into the distribution of capital and thus power.

Projects like *1mile²* and *KK* constitute claims to spaces for contemporary collective practice. However, outside the privacy of people's homes, the cities of Kathmandu and Dhaka only offer a limited infrastructure of supportive and creative facilities for artists. Therefore, the use of public spaces is not always a conscious decision. It often grows from a necessity for collective spaces—spaces for exchange and contact. In the next two chapters, I take a closer look at the art infrastructure and how the artists interact with it.

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438   Begum Lipi, "Extending and Expanding the Idea and Space," 172.
439   Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; John Postill, "Localizing the Internet beyond Communities and Networks," *New Media & Society* 10, no. 3 (2008).

Chapter 3

Contesting the Art Institution: Between "Fine Art" Education and Contemporary Practice

Each case study I have presented so far is set in a specific situation, influenced to no small extent by my own experiences of the respective localities. Together however, the four examples emphasize how artists collectively engage multiple scales of locality; they operate in specific neighborhoods *(1mile²)*, in urban settings *(Kolor Kathmandu* [*KK*]*)*, in cross-regional formats *(Dhaka Art Summit* [*DAS*]*)*, and globally referred programs *(Venice Biennale)*. Following the artists' movements through these scales allowed me to rethink locality as translocality—each locality as dynamically connected to other localities on multiple scales through the mobility of people and the cultural elements they broker. A thorough rethinking of the relationship between different scales of locality, especially the often unilaterally emphasized local-global connection, strengthens the field of transcultural studies. In the next two chapters, I turn my attention to the art infrastructure. Based on my earlier discussion of Bourdieu and Buchholz, I demonstrate the need to reconsider nationally circumscribed fields of art production and their institutions from a transcultural, multi-scalar perspective. The education system and national art institutions such as the national academies in Nepal and Bangladesh sustain a relatively autonomous logic of competition, with its own values and hierarchies. This horizontal autonomy distinguishes the field of art production from other fields (e.g., computer science or theater). There is however also a vertical autonomy at play that distinguishes the field of art production in Bangladesh or Nepal from a regionally or globally circumscribed field.[440] The artist collectives, through their multi-positionality in this multi-scalar field, have learned how to manipulate the national field to broaden their scope of action; with their activities they crosscut hegemonic hierarchies (e.g., between different mediums or between fine art and crafts) and stable discourses (e.g., art primarily treated as a manual skill). They offer new avenues for education by organizing workshops and bringing in educators from other fields

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440   Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field?" 43–44.

(on the same scale) and localities (on other scales). They build alliances with like-minded artists, with other artist-led initiatives, with private foundations, and with supranational funding agencies that offer their work legitimacy and value. Thus, they are no longer dependent on nationally operating institutions such as the Shilpakala Academy to gain access to economic and socio-cultural capital.

By organizing art exhibitions, talk programs, large-scale events and offering training opportunities, the Britto Arts Trust (Britto), photo.circle (PC), Sattya Media Arts Collective (Sattya), and other collectives have come to operate analogously to art institutions in many ways. Art institutions, like any type of social institution, play an active role in producing and constituting values.[441] They delimit rules and provide structure, security, and opportunity for practice. Yet the same rules also restrict individual scopes of action and often serve the interests of dominating social groups.[442] As cultural or art institutions, they play a crucial role in the establishment of their respective field (e.g., Archeology, Fine Arts). They have an official administrative status, whether they are considered private or public.[443] They might refer to specific buildings, as architectural and physical symbols of this field,[444] or operate as an "arts framing apparatus" from a more intangible position.[445]

In most self-descriptions, the collectives and art initiatives I worked with define themselves against established art institutions in terms of freedom, flexibility, and experimentation. The out-datedness of art institutions, their conservative and slow bureaucratic structure, as well as the seniority and intransigence of its personnel are often a topic of frustration in hanging-out situations. Yet, it is not about discarding the national frame for a global contemporary. On the contrary, despite their critique, my research partners regularly participate in the programs offered by national institutions. In fact, it is through their critique that they develop strategies that complement or counter the discourses emerging from the national field. These tensions are a central part of contemporary art practice: contemporaneity emerges from the connections and interdependencies between artists and institutions and from the friction between multiple scales of infrastructure.

Infrastructure refers to the "built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas."[446] It comprises physical structures that facilitate such mobilities (from exhibition spaces to airports), institutions of support and patronage (from travel grants to auction houses), as well as

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441 Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Chicago: MIT Press, 1996), 116.

442 Möntmann, *Kunst als sozialer Raum*, 35.

443 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*.

444 Jonathan Harris, ed., *Art, Money, Parties: New Institutions in the Political Economy of Contemporary Art* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004).

445 Deutsche, *Evictions*, 152.

446 Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (October 2013): 328.

lineages of knowledge transmission and discourse.[447] In short, it makes up for the structures and actors that circumscribe what is considered a valid art practice. Karin Zitzewitz argues for "an integration of the materiality of artistic networks into a discourse preoccupied with their aesthetic and, to a somewhat lesser extent, political significance."[448] An anthropological approach focused on transcultural transgressions and scales allows access not only to the political, aesthetic, and material meanings in which Zitzewitz is interested, but also the power relations, asymmetries, and collaborations of and with the enabling infrastructure. Flows of knowledge, artworks, and artists on a governmental scale have different aesthetic, political, and social qualities than on other scales. National policies pertaining to education, for instance, must be seen in relation to transnational ideologies and the agendas of transnational institutions.[449] In Nepal and Bangladesh, the development of the education infrastructure is closely tied to the nation-building process: the respective governments have played an important role in regulating access to education and controlling its structure. During the Rana oligarchy in Nepal, education in general—and art education in particular—was the privilege of the urban, upper-caste Hindu elite. Under the Panchayat regime, it became part of a larger development plan, formed in symbiosis with so-called Western experts working for the United Nations.[450] Since the 1990s, education has become the tool of the middle classes, cutting-across and replacing earlier forms of social organization such as caste and family connections.[451] Transculturality sees these local developments as more than a mere "reflection of global trends."[452] The unfolding of historical events that led to the current state of the (art) education system are connected to the region—notably to developments in India, dating back to the colonial period—but also to socio-cultural and political shifts in Nepal. To trace these connections, this chapter takes a translocal and a diachronic approach. The collectives' conscious multi-positioning in search of a multi-scalar scope of action can be read against these historical developments. A nuanced analysis of the negotiations over the values that are operative on each scale allows insight into how new mobilities have unsettled older hierarchies or formed new asymmetries between actors and how an alternative contemporaneity emerges from this tension. This offers a considerable advantage over Richard Florida's "creative capital thesis," as it allows us to discuss how different members of the art field and different fields (horizontally and vertically distinct) interact with one another. Rather than following the constitution of a fuzzy creative class, it enables the analysis of what constitutes contemporary art as a practice.

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447   Karin Zitzewitz, "Infrastructure as Form," *Third Text* 31, no. 2–3 (2017).
448   Zitzewitz, "Infrastructure as Form," 343.
449   Gupta and Sharma, "Globalization and Postcolonial States."
450   Bell, *Kathmandu*, 273–276
451   Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 58.
452   Gupta and Sharma, "Globalization and Postcolonial States," 292.

Education scholars Lesley Farrell and Tara J. Fenwick argue that education systems are the "key levers for knowledge production."[453] As such, the respective institutions hold crucial positions in the social and economic realities of any locality, and they continue to be the subject of important power negotiations and asymmetries in and between these localities. They influence policymaking, social structures, cultural norms, and regulations.[454] With the growing interconnectedness of economies and labor markets around the world, the demands on educational provisions have changed. The concept of education serves as a powerful transnational tool for economic and social development. Jeffery et al. posit that, more than a means to economic security, education "has become a type of discursive 'scaffold' upon which people display their ideas about morality, development, and respect."[455] Through the example of Dalits and Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, the authors show how education is commonly equated with respect for elders, proficiency in religious ceremonies, politeness, and good behavior in general.[456] For my research partners, the value of art education often builds on a tension between education as a tool to economic security, as a means of displaying social and intellectual superiority, and as part of a path to self-realization. They pursue a degree in art because it has become an important part of being recognized as a member of the art community. It is often also a way of self-actualization, of acquiring freedom (from socio-cultural expectations or norms), or a conscious denial of other life choices.

In Nepal, as I stated above, education developed from a privilege of the male, urban elite to a general public-school system with American advisory and financial aid.[457] In the past three decades, private schools have mushroomed all over the country, turning education into a tool of the upper and especially middle classes; according to the Ministry of Education there were 6015 private schools in 2016.[458] In Bangladesh, the general education system also remains divided along social boundaries: vernacular general or public education for lower- and middle-class families, religion-based *madrasas* for poorer families, and English-medium or private institutions for urban middle- or upper-class families.[459] Due to the multitude of public

453 Lesley Farrell and Tara J. Fenwick, "Introduction," in Farrell and Fenwick, *Educating the Global Workforce*, 2.
454 Farrell and Fenwick, "Introduction," 6.
455 Craig Jeffrey, Patricia Jeffery, and Roger Jeffery, "'A Useless Thing!' or 'Nectar of the Gods?' The Cultural Production of Education and Young Men's Struggles for Respect in Liberalizing North India," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94, no. 4 (2004): 961.
456 Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery, "'A Useless Thing!' or 'Nectar of the Gods?'," 969.
457 Pratyoush Onta, "Education: Finding a Ray of Hope," *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 47 (2000): 4094; Mojibur Rahman Doftori, *Education and Child Labour in Developing Countries: A Study on the Role of Non-Governmental Organisations in Bangladesh and Nepal* (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2004), 40–41.
458 Ministry of Education, "Nepal Education in Figures 2016: At a Glance," 2016.
459 Two different systems of *madrasa* education exist in Bangladesh. The government-assisted system provides a mix of religious and secular curriculum. The *quomi or qawmi* system on the other hand, is non-governmental. It exclusively provides religious education and often includes free food and accommodation

and private actors involved in this system, the government is struggling for control.[460] This also pertains to the art education system, where government institutions compete with private schools.

I start my analysis of the art education institutions with two Interludes. In the first, I focus on artist Sujan Dangol, whose murals of the Rolpo district were already part of my discussion of *KK*. His series of paintings entitled *Graduation* lead me to the development and meaning of art education, particularly in Nepal. While Dangol's mother is proud to display his graduation certificate by hanging it on the wall, the artist perceives the degree as a mere adornment. He questions its real value for his personal development and for status in society. The tension between studying art as a creative endeavor (aimed mostly at self-realization) and a market-oriented production (directed towards economic sustainability and / or critical acclaim) is an intrinsic part of art practice. However, young contemporary artists like Dangol are especially frustrated with outdated art curriculums that do not prepare them for a changing field. While education institutions are focused on medium-specific manual skills, contemporary art practice is increasingly oriented towards mixed and new media, conceptual strength, and discursive practices. The second Interlude continues this discussion for Bangladesh. The multi-media installation of artist Shimul Saha, who received his bachelor of fine arts (BFA) from the Faculty of Fine Arts at Dhaka University (Charukola) in Bangladesh and his master of fine arts (MFA) from Beaconhouse National University (BNU) in Pakistan before becoming a member of Britto, leads me to examine the role of new private institutions in the arts, as well as the involvement of the young generation of artists in teaching.

My research focuses on a young generation of professional artists, meaning artists who have finished their education and have successfully established themselves in the artistic field. Due to a lack of literature on fine art education and education in Nepal and Bangladesh in general, my main source of information is personal testimonies. I drew information from short essays by Nepali and Bangladeshi art writers, from grey literature such as exhibition catalogs and curricula, and from interviews with teachers from different institutions.[461] This means that my collected data does not allow me to talk about art students in general, nor their motivations to study, to discontinue their studies, or the potential alternative paths they have taken outside of the arts.

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for students. This makes it especially attractive to poor families, struggling to provide for their children. See Manzoor Ahmed, "The Education System," in Riaz and Rahman, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*, 345–346.

460 Ahmed, "The Education System."
461 These institutions include, in Bangladesh, the Faculty of Fine Arts at Dhaka University and the Institute of Fine Arts in Chittagong, and in Nepal, the Central Department of Fine Arts at Tribhuvan University, the Lalitkala Campus at Bhotahiti, the Sirjana College of Fine Arts, and the Center for Art and Design at Kathmandu University.

Interlude: *Graduation*

There is nothing on my schedule for the day, so I decide to walk to Babar Mahal Revisited, an upscale multi-use complex near the Maitighar Roundabout in Kathmandu. The Siddhartha Art Gallery (est. 1987), Kathmandu's most consistently operating gallery, is located at the end of the three-story former Rana palace complex. It is my first time back at the gallery since my initial fieldwork in the summer of 2013, and like the last time, I feel slightly out of place between the fancy shops and restaurants. I missed the opening of the exhibition the week before, but from word of mouth, I know that it shows two young, upcoming artists, Sujan Dangol and Anil Shahi.[462] *The artworks displayed are exclusively acryl paintings on canvas. They address a broad range of topics, from urbanization to current socio-political issues.* Graduation, *a series of three paintings by artist Sujan Dangol, figures prominently on the first floor, right at the top of the stairs* (Fig. 7).

The first painting in the series shows a naked male figure facing away from the beholder and looking up to a black graduation robe in the left-hand corner of the canvas. In the second painting, the figure faces the beholder and is revealed as the artist himself. He is now wearing the gown, as a sign of his success; a cocky smile on his face, a bright halo around his head, and the lotus sitting on his chest mark him as an enlightened, proud graduate. In the third painting, the sense of pride and enlightenment have vanished. Instead, the painting strikes a sarcastic tone. The lotus, generally a sign of wisdom, now garnishes a toilet lid. Whether the graduation gown, hanging hollow in the back, has become dispensable waste matter, to be flushed down the toilet, or whether it serves as nothing more than a bathroom decoration, it has lost the value previously bestowed on it.

In my interview with the artist in January 2016, Dangol tells me about his mother and her dream to hang his graduation certificate on the wall in their house. He presumes that it is not really him (his accomplishment) that she wants to exhibit, but her pride and satisfaction over this accomplishment: "You studied at least," he imagines hearing her say. Rather than celebrating his achievement and recognizing its meaning for his personal development, this imagined mother focuses on his changed status in society. The new status is contingent *solely on the degree, which separates him from the majority of other members of that society. Dangol questions its significance and immediately offers his answer: "They [the people who have a degree] have something to cover in the society. They have a good thing to cover them, to protect them, so that they*

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462 From February 14 to March 7, 2014, the Siddhartha Art Gallery showed *Through My Stories* by Dangol and *Smile With Me* by Shahi as part of the Australian Himalyan Foundation Art Award exhibition. Each year the Foundation awards financial support to two artists in Nepal, who in turn commit two works to the Foundation. The exhibition as a whole, as the wall panel stated, focused on the frictions in Nepali society and the artist's own feelings towards people's reaction to them. "Himalayan Art Award," Australian Himalayan Foundation, accessed April 29, 2021, https://www.australianhimalayanfoundation.org.au/himalayan-art-award/.

Figure 7: Sujan Dangol, *Graduation*, 2014. Siddhartha Art Gallery, Kathmandu. Photo: author.

have some good things." [463] *From the artist's perspective, the certificate, represented in the painting series through the graduation gown and hat becomes a cover, an otherwise hollow cloak that people wrap around themselves. Rather than protecting against unemployment and poverty, it shields one from the curious, judging eye of society. The nakedness, by contrast, becomes a metaphor for the absence of a degree, and maybe also for the shame of not being properly educated.*

> Maile graduation gareko bhaide bhae chai mero ekdam ramro huntyo. Aba ta mero chaina *(If I had graduated that would have been really good. But I haven't, so it is not good). It is like they [people without a degree] have no clothes or nothing. They are just naked. But when they graduate ...* [464]

A HISTORY OF FINE ART EDUCATION IN NEPAL

During the Rana period (1846–1951), Nepal's rulers focused exclusively on the education of their children and those of affiliated families. Since there were only two higher education institutions established in Nepal— the Durbar School (1892) and the Kolkata affiliated Tri-Chandra College (1918)—many Rana children were sent to India to study. [465] Besides Sanskrit *pathshalas* (a vernacular type of religious education based on the Sanskrit

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463 AR, SD, January 2016.
464 AR, SD, January 2016.
465 I refer to the city using its Bengali name Kolkata, which became the city's official name in 2001. Under British rule, the city was renamed Calcutta, and is often referred to as such in the literature. I use the old name Calcutta only in direct quotes and in the names of well-established institutions, such as the Calcutta Government School of Art.

language) and monastic schools catering to an exclusively male population, public educational institutions were nonexistent; education was a monopoly of the elite.[466] In the art field, training had long been regulated through caste-affiliation, a topic on which I will elaborate in the next section. After the peace treaty with British India in 1816, the establishment of the British residence in Kathmandu, and the coming into power of the Rana dynasty, access to formal art education became more and more contingent on the personal taste and patronage of the ruling elite: the Ranas developed an interest for European architecture, furniture, and fashion. They started sponsoring the production of European style technique paintings (naturalist scenes, landscapes, family portraits, and still lifes) to decorate their homes.[467] However, due to the Rana's policy of isolation and the restrictions on foreigners that persisted until the 1950s, exchange in the arts was limited to the elites and the individuals under their patronage. Bhaju Man Chitrakar, a Newari artist who accompanied Jang Bahadur Rana, Prime Minister of Nepal (1845–1877), on his visit to England in 1850–1851 is commonly mentioned as the earliest Nepali artist making use of European styles.[468] The correlation between the Rana elite and the introduction of "Western" techniques into the Nepali art practice is also retained by the National Museum in Chhauni (Kathmandu), as this extract from a wall panel within shows:[469]

> The Rana regime in Nepal brought some changes in the stylistic features of painting. With the growing influence and impact of western style, the Nepali artists could not retain the indigenous beauty and charm of Nepali paintings. The trend of portrait painting in western style canvas painting had started at the time of Rana regime. The technique of oil painting was initiated from the time of Junga Bahadur Rana returned from his visit to England. The portrait of rulers, beautiful women and majestic landscapes were the major

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466 Onta, "Education: Finding a Ray of Hope," 4094; Doftori, *Education and Child Labour in Developing Countries*, 40–41.

467 Susanne van der Heide, "Traditional Art in Upheaval: The Development of Modern Contemporary Art in Nepal," *Kailash: A Journal of Himalayan Studies* 14, no. 3–4 (January 1988): 233–234.

468 Van der Heide, "Traditional Art in Upheaval," 234. Madan Chitrakar has disputed Bhaju Man's role as the "sole founding father of modern forms" ("modern" is here synonymous with "Western" forms). He claims that Raj Man Singh Chitrakar already created "drawings and sketches with the definite notion of Western concepts including a sense of light and shade and the perspectives" in the 1820s–1840s in the service of Brian Hodgson, the British Resident in Kathmandu. Chitrakar, *Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany*, 85, 88–90.

469 This museum is the first public museum of Nepal. It initially constituted a repository of weapons and hosted the private collections of the royal family and the Rana Prime Ministers. It only became accessible to the public in 1938 and was formally established as a National Museum *(Rastriya Sangrahalaya)* in 1967. "About Us," National Museum, accessed April 24, 2021, https://national museum.gov.np/about-us.

themes of the Nepali painting, no issues of social reality were high-lighted under the strict regulation of the rulers.[470]

The influence of colonial British and European techniques (naturalism, light and shade, perspective) are clearly perceived as markers of change in the Nepali art field. While the majority of narratives I gathered on this topic describe this change as a departure into the modern phase, the above panel also bemoans the concurring loss of "indigenous beauty and charm."[471] I observed a similar rhetoric of modernity (as something foreign) and tradition (as something indigenous) in many institutions operating on the national scale, especially the National Art Academies.

The next important shift is set at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Chandra Shumsher Jang Bahadur Rana, Prime Minister of Nepal (1901–1929), sent two young artists, Tej Bahadur Chitrakar (b. 1898) and Chandra Man Singh Maskey (b. 1900) to the Calcutta Government School of Art in India to further their skills in painting. In India, the establishment of education institutions was largely influenced by the colonial need for skilled workers and administrative staff. A private School of Industrial Arts had been set up in Kolkata in 1854. Only ten years later it was taken over by the government and renamed the Government School of Art. Its art teaching focused on applied and industrial arts with the aim to provide vocational and technical training to future draftsmen, surveyors, engravers, and lithographers.[472] The curriculum had a strong bias: while fine art was seen as the monopoly of the colonizers, the colonized were supposed to acquire technical skills. This bias was first challenged by Ernest Binfield Havell, who became a fierce advocate of India's art traditions and attempted to Indianize the curriculum in the late 1890s, and later by Abanindranath Tagore (nephew of eminent poet and Nobel-laureate Rabindranath Tagore). Tagore was appointed vice-principal of the renamed Government School of Art in 1905. He continued to rethink the school's role in art education and rejected the Western academic training. With these reflections, he led a movement that argued for the importance of *Swadeshi* (*swa*, own; *desh*, country) values in Indian art. The movement eventually resulted in the

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470 "Portrait Painting," The National Museum of Nepal, wall panel, recorded April 2014; author unknown.

471 This includes conversations in the field as well as vernacular and academic texts such as: van der Heide, "Traditional Art in Upheaval"; Chitrakar, *Nepali Art*: *Issues Miscellany*; Madan Chitrakar, "Nepali Art Has Ugly Faces – Too," *Spaces Nepal*, November–December 2011; Abhi Subedi, "Nepali Art: Nepali Utopia," *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 22, no. 2 (1995); Yam Prasad Sharma, *Nepali Painting: A Critical Analysis* (Kathmandu: Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, 2014). It also includes historical overviews such as Sangeeta Thapa, "A Brief Review of the Contemporary Art in Nepal (1920–2014)," NepalNow.blog, August 2014, accessed August 17, 2022, https://www.nepalnow.blog/important-re-post-kathmandu-triennale-art-nepal-1920-2014/; Dina Bangdel, "Modern and Contemporary Arts of Nepal: Brief Overview," Nepal Art Council, accessed April 24, 2022, https://www.nepalartcouncil.org.np/modern-and-contemporary-arts-of-nepal-brief-overview/.

472 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 143.

establishment of the Bengal School of Art.[473] At the time of Tej Bahadur Chitrakar and Chandra Man Singh Maskey's studies, Abanindranath Tagore had already left his post as a vice-principal and fine art had been reintroduced to the curriculum to be taught alongside "Indian Painting."[474] While Chitrakar and Maskey had been sent to Kolkata in service of the Rana elite, they were exposed to Western-style fine art teaching, as well as the ideas of the Bengal School and its nationalist *Swadeshi* ideas.

Chitrakar and Maskey returned to Kathmandu at the end of the 1920s but struggled to align their acquired artistic and political knowledge with the prevalent socio-political conditions. Chitrakar, who did not belong to one of the higher Newar castes, faced exceptional difficulties finding a job and a place in society.[475] Maskey, despite his more fortunate social background, also struggled with the repressive political climate. A few years after his return, he was arrested for allegedly drawing Rana-critical cartoons, and ironically, Chitrakar was tasked to take over his position as an art teacher at the Durbar High School.[476] From there, Chitrakar moved on to become the headmaster of Juddhakala Pathshala, the first art school in Nepal. Following the Indian colonial model, the school had been founded by Prime Minister Juddha Shumsher at the beginning of the 1940s as a part of the "technical school."[477] Ram Ashish Giri comprehends this technical training school as a "modest effort" by the Rana regime to keep up with the pressure of "modernization" elsewhere, notably colonial India, and the need for low-level workforce in the development sectors.[478]

The roots of fine art education in Nepal thus grew from a threefold nexus of transcultural connections: first, from the painting techniques and values mediated by European art through the British colonial power (and the Calcutta Government College of Art); second, from the nationalist and anti-colonial ideologies propagated by the Bengal School in India and brokered by mobile artists like Chitrakar and Maskey; and third, by the taste and demands of the Rana elites. Access to these connections was the privilege of a very small group of artists, dependent on favors from the Ranas.

With the political shifts in the 1950s and the abolition of the Rana oligarchy, new actors, most notably recent graduates from India and beyond, entered the stage. Upon their return to Nepal, these artists laid the groundwork for the infrastructure in place today. They not only founded the central institutions of the art field, but also brokered the visual discourses

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473 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 155–165.

474 Lala Rukh Selim, "50 Years of the Art Institute: (Part 2)," *Art: A Quarterly Journal* 4, no. 3 (1999): 4.

475 Van der Heide, "Traditional Art in Upheaval," 235–236; Madan Chitrakar, *Tej Bahadur Chitrakar: Icon of Transition* (Kathmandu: Teba-Chi [TBC] Studies Centre, 2004), 34–39.

476 Chitrakar, *Tej Bahadur Chitrakar*, 40.

477 Chitrakar, *Tej Bahadur Chitrakar*, 40; Banshi Shrestha, *RN Joshi: Widening the Horizon of Nepalese Art* (Kathmandu: Park Gallery, 2006).

478 Giri, "The Power and Price of English," 214.

and aesthetic values these institutions came to stand for. Artist Lain Singh Bangdel graduated from Kolkata and continued his studies in Paris in the 1950s.[479] He came to Nepal on the invitation of the newly crowned King Mahendra and was appointed first as a member, then as vice-chancellor, and finally, in 1979, as chancellor of the Royal Nepal Academy. He also co-founded the Nepal Art Council in 1962–1963 and became the first treasurer of the Nepal Association of Fine Arts (1965), the precursor of the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). Shashi Bikram Shah, Krishna Manandhar, Indra Pradhan, and Basta Gopal Vaidya, all graduates from Sir J.J. School of Art in Bombay, returned to Nepal at the beginning of the 1970s, and, inspired by the Progressive Art Group in India, formed one of the first artist collectives in Nepal: SKIB-71.[480] They also set the path for the establishment of the Sirjana Contemporary Art Gallery, and in 2001, the Sirjana College of Art. Another important actor was Rama Nanda Joshi, the founder of Park Gallery (1970). Joshi returned to Nepal after graduating from J.J. School of Art in the mid-1960s. He was quickly dissatisfied with the conservative methods of art education at Juddhakala Pathshala, as well as with the modern abstract painting practiced by many of his contemporaries. As a result, he developed his own curriculum and started teaching students in private classes, emphasizing outdoor, real-life, and watercolor painting. From here the idea for the Park Gallery developed.[481] Likewise, two other returnees, Sangeeta Thapa from Great Britain and Shashi Kala Tiwari from the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, founded the earlier mentioned Siddhartha Art Gallery (1987).

I will return in more detail to these mediating art institutions and their founders in the next chapter. Here, I want to focus on the more general shifts that allowed these returning graduates' initiatives to take root and for the "fine art" education to take the shape it largely still has today. In 1951, the Rana oligarchy and its policy of isolation were both abolished. After a brief period of democratic opening, King Mahendra took over rule and envisioned a "new nationalism" under the frame of the Panchayat system (1962–1990).[482] The second half of the twentieth century was marked by the king's attempt to strengthen the national infrastructure, often in concurrence with the foreign actors (notably the development industry) who

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479 For a detailed account of Lain Singh Bangdel's life, see Narendra Raj Prasai, *The Glory of Nepal: A Biography of Lain Singh Bangdel*, trans. Sangpo Lama (Kathmandu: Ekta Prakashan, 2003); Donald Alan Messerschmidt and Dina Bangdel, *Against the Current: The Life of Lain Singh Bangdel; Writer, Painter and Art Historian of Nepal* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2004).

480 Rather than a common style, the collectivity resulted from a common wish to promote modern art in Nepal through the organization of group exhibitions and other activities. The name SKIB-71 is a combination of the members' initials and the year of their foundation. Chitrakar, *Nepali Art*: *Issues Miscellany*, 96–98.

481 AR, NJP / NJ, May 2014.

482 Sangeeta Thapa, "Introduction: The Hermit of the Hermitage and his Drawings," in *In the Eye of the Storm*, ed. Manuj Babu Mishra and Siddhartha Art Gallery (Kathmandu: Nepal Investment Bank, 2009), 9.

had entered the country in the 1950s. These actors advised and funded the formation of a national education planning commission (NEPC) which conducted research on the country's educational needs. Additionally, a general school system was started.[483] In 1959, all colleges formerly accredited by Indian universities were brought together under the Tribhuvan University (TU), the country's first higher education institution located a few kilometers south-west of Kathmandu.[484] The Panchayat system strengthened general education as a means to unify the nation. Its conscious disregard of diversity and its centralization on Kathmandu however increased the exclusion of non-Nepali-speaking and rural populations from the education system. The subordination of education to a nationalizing mission was furthered by the National Education System Plan (1971), according to which all newly created private, communitarian, and government colleges in the country were put under the patronage of TU.[485] Although several regional universities have opened since then (for instance the Mid-Western University in 2010, or the Pokhara University in 1997), TU still receives more than 85 percent of enrollments in higher education in the country.[486] Inequity has not only persisted along the rural–urban divide; the national literacy rate of 52.4 % is still much lower for women, ethnic minorities, and indigenous caste groups.[487] Kathmandu University (KU), founded in 1991 through a private initiative, is part of the growing sector of private schools and universities spreading in Nepal. They have increased access to good quality education, but at the same time have deepened that rift between lower-class, rural and middle- or upper-class urban families; often, only the latter have the necessary economic resources to pay for the high fees in private institutions.[488]

These general developments also affected the art education. After the reforms of the NESP in 1971, Juddhakala Pathshala was renamed Lalitkala Campus of Fine Arts. Like many other institutions of higher education, it was and remains affiliated with TU and thus under government control. Until the foundation of Sirjana College of Fine Arts in 2001, Lalitkala remained the only art education institution in the country. It offered an intermediate (IFA) and three-year bachelor (BFA) degree in Fine Art. Students who wanted to pursue a master's had to study abroad, and the majority opted for India. The MFA was only introduced at TU in 2009 after a student protest and protracted negotiations between faculty members of the Lalitkala Campus and TU authorities. Hit Man Gurung, one of the initiators of "Walking on the Street" (2007), explains that the students'

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483 Onta, "Education: Finding a Ray of Hope," 4094.
484 Pramod Bhatta, "Privatization through Affiliation: Trajectories of Higher Education Expansion in Post-1990 Nepal," *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 20, no. 2 (2015): 303.
485 Onta, "Education: Finding a Ray of Hope," 4095.
486 Ministry of Education, "Nepal Education in Figures 2016."
487 Ministry of Education, "Nepal Education in Figures 2016."
488 Onta, "Education: Finding a Ray of Hope," 4095.

main motivation to join the protest was the need for security in the field. He argues that not all BFA graduates have the economic resources to continue their studies abroad. Their education, he contends, should be made available by the Nepali government.[489] Although, like Sunil Sigdel, Gurung grew in and through Sutra workshops and carries on the values of collaborative art practice with contemporary artist collective ArTree Nepal (est. 2013), he identifies the state as the responsible authority in providing education.[490] Through their multi-scalar cultural brokerage, the young generation of artists is not attempting to dismiss the national institutions. On the contrary, the novel ideas, aesthetic values, and meanings they have been exposed to animate them to push for a revitalization. Already in the 1960s, especially fine art graduates returning from abroad felt dissatisfied by the limited, elite-focused, and Europe-oriented training institution in Nepal. This dissatisfaction fostered new impulses and led to the creation of alternative education institutions, both formal, such as the Sirjana College, and less formal, such as Rama Nanda Joshi's outdoor watercolor classes. Next to the integration of new ideas and new mediums, this revitalization also includes a demand for the national institutions to keep up with contemporary developments in the art field as well as in other fields worldwide. Many of my research partners share Gurung's opinion that education should inspire a feeling of security. This includes equal and affordable access to higher art education as well as a promise of security beyond education—a promise of a sustainable life as a full-time artist. Even with the MFA in place, this security is not (and may never be) given. The question arises whether the newly established private art education institutions can offer this sense of security, either by better preparing students or by raising the competition and thus pushing the national institutions to change. Today, a handful of institutions in the Kathmandu valley offer a degree in art, and of those, only two are government institutions. Bijeswori Higher Secondary School offers a +2 in Management and Fine Arts (in Nepal, many high schools use a 10+2 system, which is gradually replacing the intermediate level system in secondary education), Sirjana College of Fine Arts (+2 & BFA) and the Center for Art and Design of KU (BFA) are private institutions, while Lalitkala Campus of Fine Arts (BFA) and the Department of Fine Arts at Thribhuvan University (MFA) are public institutions.

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489 AR, HG, September 2013.
490 See Marlène Harles and Sheelasha Rajbhandari, "Contemporary Artists' Response to Heritage in Times of Crisis: 12 Baishakh and Photo Kathmandu," *Material Religion* 13, no. 3 (2017); ArTree's initiatives are socio-political in nature. They deal with issues such as gender discrimination, migration, and political injustice. Further, they foster critical dialogue and a dynamic understanding of identity and culture through an interdisciplinary art practice. "About Us," Artree Nepal, March 1, 2017, accessed February 14, 2021, http://artreenepal. blogspot.com/.

CASTE-BASED TRADITION AND CLASS-BASED EDUCATION

With his *Graduation* series, Dangol raises issues that lie at the intersection of middle-class imaginaries of modern futures and the education system's orientation towards a dominantly middle-class market. Scholars and observers of education in Nepal such as Pratyoush Onta and Ram Ashish Giri deplore the inefficiency and ineptitude of the education system, especially with regard to rising underemployment, the resulting labor migration, and continued centralization on male, high-caste, urban elites.[491] In contrast to the rest of the country, the number of education institutions in the Kathmandu valley is steadily growing and crosscutting old social hierarchies. Liechty shows that Kathmandu has seen an "education explosion," from less than six schools in 1951 to 1727 schools in 1993.[492] He argues that education is no longer a privilege of the socio-political elite, as it was during the Rana period; it has increasingly become a tool of the urban middle classes. Access to education is contingent on economic capital, rather than on caste or social status. This means that children of different castes and ethnicities "are brought together according to what kind of education their parents can afford"[493] instead of what their social status allows them access to. Bhatta further argues that especially higher education has been increasingly commercialized over the past decades and that most university programs focus on those matters that are easily sellable to the middle-class market, such as medicine, engineering, and management.[494] Liechty relates the shift towards commercialization to a middle-class striving for modernity: "Education is the mantra that middle-class parents repeat in hopes of propitiating the vagaries of an unknowable 'modern' future."[495]

Dangol stems from a middle-class, urban family. He attended a private school and, in agreement with what the majority of his peers did, joined a management course.[496] Liechty explains that the motivation of many youths to study at least up to a bachelor's degree is often stirred by the hope to join the civil service, or to gain "employment in business, management,

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491 Onta, "Education: Finding a Ray of Hope," 4093; Giri, "The Power and Price of English"; Sijapati and Limbu demonstrate that labor migration to India, Malaysia, and the Gulf countries has been a strategy for many Nepali families to counteract the effects of unemployment and poverty. As evidence, they cite the significant contribution of remittances to individual households and the national economy, which amounted to 23% of the GDP in 2009 and 20% in 2010 and 2011. Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*, 3.

492 Liechty, *Out Here in Kathmandu*, 8. Figures from 2016 show 35,222 schools and nine universities in Nepal. Ministry of Education, "Nepal Education in Figures 2016."

493 Liechty, *Out Here in Kathmandu*, 8.

494 Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 216; Pramod Bhatta, "Privatization through Affiliation," 324, 326.

495 Liechty, *Suitably Modern,* 216.

496 AR, SD, January 2016.

or nongovernmental 'development' work."[497] At the same time, the anthro-pologist asserts that the tertiary economy nowadays is so inflated that finding a job has become very difficult.[498] This is the reason that pushed Dangol to create the *Graduation* series: the discrepancy between people's perception of a degree and its actual value on the employment market:

> It is only a cover. Inside you are you and I am I. Maybe it will help a little. … In Nepal lots of people say: "I studied this much, and the government has no job." "Did you ask the government for a job? Did you make a contract with the government that if you graduate, they will give a job?" That is the story.[499]

On the one hand, Dangol debunks the belief that education is a means to economic and social betterment. He affirms that there is no correla-tion between graduating and finding a job in the government. In fact, he emphasizes it would be foolish to rely on this idea. Yet, at the same time, his artwork confirms the hopes that many people hold: to reach economic safety through education. Moreover, his work challenges the discrepancy between the meaning of the certificate for a person's individual develop-ment and its influence on their social status. The degree is a way to display individual accomplishment to the wider society. It for instance improves people's marriage prospects, he explains. Yet this is only an outward mean-ing. His *Graduation* series seams to ask if the access to social status repre-sented by the certificate is more important than the actual knowledge to be gained.

When I inquire about his motivation to work on this topic, he explains that it is closely linked to his personal struggle to receive a degree and develop an individual creative practice. He admits that he dropped out of school for a few years after his private secondary education and before joining a management college. "I didn't know Lalitkala College," he explains, "that is why I went to the management college. But I threw everything. And then somebody suggested me to go to Lalitkala College and I went there."[500] The art education woke his interest, but still he "did not study very well."[501] He continued his art studies at the Center for Art and Design at KU, from which he graduated in 2012. At the time of our interview, he is enrolled in the MFA program at TU.

Dangol's description of his education contains repeated allusions to "timepass,"[502] to hanging out at teach-shops, passing time between classes

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497 Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 211.
498 Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 211.
499 AR, SD, January 2016.
500 AR, SD, January 2016.
501 AR, SD, January 2016.
502 Craig Jeffrey, "Timepass: Youth, Class, and Time among Unemployed Young Men in India," *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 3 (2010): 471.

with friends and "painting with the sky."[503] His education resembles a drifting more than a series of deliberate choices. Throughout my research, I met many artists whose artistic development was not straightforward, and instead filled with periods of timepass, doubt, and deviation. Many also struggled against their parents' wishes to learn something more tangible, such as medicine, management, or computer science. Especially this last point is a symptom of the ambiguous status of art education that Dangol addresses with his work. On the one hand, fine art education represents a higher education, which supposedly offers access to cultural and social capital. As such, it appears to fulfill middle-class dreams of modern futures,[504] access to sustainable jobs, economic capital, and thus a better, more secure position in society. On the other hand, art education does not seem to satisfy these hopes because art is not recognized as a cultural and economic value among the wider population outside the artistic field.

In an assessment of the state of art education in Nepal, Madan Chitrakar offers an explanation for this ambiguous status and considers it the art education institutions' responsibility to change the situation.[505] His main argument is based on the fact that art is not part of the general school curriculum in Nepal. Although private schools have started art classes, the absence of art from basic government education, he believes, is a major reason for the poor reception of secular art in the country. In his recent publication on the history of the Chitrakars, Madan Chitrakar also suggests that the low esteem of art in Nepal can be traced back to the low social status of traditional artists. *Chitrakar* in Nepali literally means image or picture maker. The name originated in the fourteenth century when King Jayasthiti Malla decreed a hierarchical ordering of the Newar population according to Hindu policy.[506] In his social reforms, specific vocations were exclusively allocated to specific groups (castes) in society. The Chitrakars became the exclusive producers of art; nobody "was supposed to paint an image of a deity or any other tasks related to the Art of Painting other than the Chitrakars."[507] Along with the techniques to make and mix the natural paints, and the utensils, so-called *thyaa safoos* (sketch books or manuals) were passed along from one *Thakali* (most senior member of a Chitrakar

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503 AR, SD, January 2016.
504 Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 216.
505 Madan Chitrakar, "Art Education in Nepal: Time for a New Dynamics," in *The Creation: A Souvenir Published on the Occasion of the Fifth Anniversary of Sirjana College of Fine Arts*, ed. Sirjana College of Fine Arts (Kathmandu: Sirjana College of Fine Arts, 2006), 7–12. Madan Chitrakar is an artist, art-writer, and the former chairman of the Artists Society of Nepal (1992–1998).
506 David N. Gellner, "Introduction," in *Contested Hierarchies: A Collaborative Ethnography of Caste among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal*, ed. David N. Gellner and Declan Quigley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 1–37, 8; Madan Chitrakar traces the history of painting in Nepal further back to a community of monk-cum-painters that settled in the Kathmandu valley after the Muslim invasion of India, starting in the twelfth century. Chitrakar, *Nepali Art*: *Issues Miscellany*, 48–49.
507 Chitrakar, *Nepali Art*: *Issues Miscellany*, 48–49.

family) to the next.[508] This system ensured that the tradition of creating illuminations of sacred texts or *Paubhas*, as they are called, was kept alive and almost unchanged over the centuries.[509] For a long time, the art was exclusively religious, but with the changing taste of the ruling families for European style paintings, some Chitrakars began branching out. They started to incorporate hitherto uncommon styles and poses, from Mogul paintings and especially from European naturalist portraits.[510]

Chitrakars, along with other artisans and craftsmen, were ordered in the lower ranks of the caste system. Madan Chitrakar argues that although the caste system was lawfully abolished, this has had a lasting effect on the current position of artists. "Up to the present moment some orthodox segments of Newar society like to follow this antiquated notion obediently and think it proper to treat the 'Art of Painting' as of inferior profession," he writes.[511]

Chitrakar's account of the roots of art practice in Nepal highlights several major shifts. Over the past one hundred years, the social context of art education in Nepal has changed from a caste-specific vocation to a freely chosen profession, open to everybody with the necessary economic capital. This has had a fundamental effect on the role of the artist in society. The Chitrakars' economic and social position in the art field, despite their low caste status, was secured through their exclusive right to produce religious art needed for specific rituals. This raised their position within other fields and gave them access to economic capital; it ensured regular commissions by private persons and religious institutions and thus safeguarded their profession. Thereafter, their position was secured by the taste of the ruling elites, acting as patrons of the arts, and providing access to education in India. The opening of art education institutions in Kathmandu allowed a wider social group to aspire to become artists, thus crosscutting older social hierarchies. Moreover, with the abolition of the Rana rule and the shifting elites, social ties to patrons and clients changed. The vacuum caused by the political shift seems to have temporarily been filled by the monarchy. Regardless of their own political standing, artists active in the 1970s and 1980s for instance often reminisce about King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya's interest in and support for the arts. However, with the waning power of the monarchy in the 1990s, and its official abolition in 2008, the vacuum in patronage fully emerged. Although many art functions I attended were presided by social or political figures, such as ambassadors and development activists, the indifference of local politicians towards the arts was a repeated cause for critique. The middle

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508 For detailed information on the techniques and utensils used in Paubha Paintings, see Renuka Gurung (Pradhan), *Paubha Painting: The Traditional Art of Nepal* (Lalitpur: Simrik Atelier, 2010).
509 Madan Chitrakar, *Nepali Painting: Through the Ages* (Lalitpur: Patan Museum, 2017), 31–51.
510 Chitrakar, *Nepali Painting*, 52.
511 Chitrakar, *Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany*, 48–49.

classes, to which most of the artists I worked with belong, have become the main consumers of education, but they do not invest in the artistic field.

NEW CHALLENGES IN THE FIELD OF CONTEMPORARY ART PRODUCTION

The local Nepali urban and national art market is modest and largely limited to the Kathmandu valley. The fine art educated and established artists I spoke to have a small collectors' base from the upper-middle or upper class, among them foreign ambassadors and long-term expats. Some work as illustrators for schoolbooks and newspapers, others receive portrait commissions, and again others sell landscapes through commercial galleries in the tourist areas of Thamel (Kathmandu) or Lakeside (Pokhara). Especially photographers can earn assignments from one of the tens of thousands of NGOs and INGOs operating in Nepal.[512] The vast majority of the urban middle classes however, I am told, do not spent money on art. "People in general, in Nepal, think that art is only beautification," one artist offered as an explanation.[513] According to them, people are unwilling to spend money on art or on the services of artists (as designers for instance) because they do not recognize the surplus value. Whether Chritrakar is right to argue that this is due to the low caste vocation, or whether it is a persisting mindset that relates art purely to religious worship, or to the ruling elite, is unclear. Any meaningful discussion on the value of art in the broader population would require a more systematic quantitative study which I cannot offer in the frame of this book. What I want to emphasize is the disparity between the cultural capital promised by a degree and the access graduates have to that cultural capital. Beyond this practical contestation, there are more ideological questions: What is art supposed to do? What does it do in and for society? What strategies can be employed to instigate an understanding for the value of contemporary art in the wider society? The young generation of artists is asking these questions and the art education institutions are not able to provide satisfying answers.

Another source of contestation is the matter that is taught, and the way knowledge is transmitted. Here the emphasis of contemporary art on new media and discursive practices are important topics that art students feel are being ignored by the existing curriculum. Further, the growing amount of exchange and art events, from South Asian Network for the Arts (SANA)-facilitated residencies to large-scale exhibitions in the region, as well as the newly established translocal connections, open markets. Artists living and working in Nepal are no longer limited to the art market in Kathmandu. Supranationally active galleries and foundations, events such

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512 "List of NGOs affiliated with SWC," Social Welfare Council, accessed August 17, 2022, http://swc.org.np/pages/391; "List of SWC INGOs," Social Welfare Council, accessed August 17, 2022, http://swc.org.np/pages/389.
513 AR, A, December 2015.

as the *DAS*, platforms like the Triangle Network, and most importantly the internet and social media have opened new possibilities for them. Yet the access to these avenues requires the artists to have specific know-how that the art education institutions are not able to offer.

The two challenges that emerged in the past two decades—the vacuum in art patronage and the disconnect between the national art education and the new demands of the contemporary field—mark a common ground for contestation, shared by the contemporary generation. Sujan Chitrakar, a founding member of Sutra and, since 2005, the Academic Program Coordinator of the Center for Art and Design at KU, touches upon the roots of this contestation:

> When I studied in India, in Benares, I really felt that I also needed to learn sculpture. In my second year, I went to my friends' studio during their sculpture class. One Saturday morning, we collected money and hired a rickshaw puller to pose for us. And I also did a bust. … we had this very well-known sculptor from India as a Dean, Prof Dr. Balbir Singh Katt. He visited while we were working because he was very friendly with his students and reviewed all the works. I asked him: "sir, this is the work I have done." He even did not look at my work. "You are from painting, na? No no no, you go to painting." And he left, I was so furious and heart-broken, and I cried. I always felt that those are the things—we never thought like this. I really don't want to behave like this with my students.[514]

After his intermediate level at Lalitkala in Kathmandu, Chitrakar went to India for his BFA at the Benares Hindu University and his MFA at the College of Art, Delhi University. In this interview excerpt, the artist explains that at the time of his studies in Varanasi art was understood as a skill. This skill could be acquired in one medium only; a painter paints and a sculptor sculpts. He elaborates that this medium-oriented education did not allow for the freedom of expression or experimentation that he wished for. The fact that I experienced the same frustration about medium-specific and skill-oriented education among students today as Chitrakar did twenty years ago shows that the organization of the discipline and the respective curricula have largely remained unchanged.

From the available curriculums and through my conversations with teachers and students, I learned that when applying to Lalitkala Campus of Fine Arts, the Central Department of Fine Arts at TU, and Sirjana College of Fine Arts, students are asked to choose between different sections such as painting or sculpture. The main curriculum in these institutions involves a combination of drawing, life study, perspective, composition, and art theory with special topics like printmaking, design, or modeling, depending on their chosen specialization. Moreover, I am told, these subjects are

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514 AR, SC, December 2015.

largely introduced through Western masters. Although "Nepali traditional painting" and "Indian art" form part of the curriculum, from my observations, the extent of their treatment in class depends entirely upon the individual teacher's will and expertise. Because most teachers graduated from India, their knowledge about Nepali art is contingent on their own position in the art field and their willingness to do research. Further, when I asked a former Lalitkala teacher about the emphasis on European masters, he explained that subjects such as composition and color study can only be taught through these masters; the techniques of "Eastern Art" are much too different, he assured me.[515] This causes a disconnect between the students and what they consider to be their own art ancestry. Throughout my research, many young artists complained that it was easier for them to find information on Western masters than on the previous generation of artists in Nepal.

Since the establishment of the institutions, the teaching of fine art has been tied to the canon of European art history. This education inherently reproduces the tropes of modernity and development that it inherited from colonial India. When it was established as a discipline, fine art exclusively pertained to Western artists, whereas applied arts was for the colonized.[516] This dichotomy is reminiscent of Hans Belting's description of the "double exclusion" of modern art: Belting argues that first, art was only considered "art" if it adhered to a modernist philosophy and second, modern art was only considered "art" if it was produced in the West.[517] A similar constriction applies to the notion of fine art: art was only considered "fine" if it was not applied or traditional, and only Western artists created non-applied art. Moreover, from the late nineteenth century onwards, non-Western art production was framed by an evolutionist argument: the special characteristics of race were believed to be imbibed within art products. The more aesthetically "pure" works were considered to be, the more successful they were on the international market. It was thus in the interest of this market to keep the education and production of local crafts for the colonized separate from the fine arts of the colonizer.[518]

Furthermore, the marginal position of Nepali art in the curriculum results from limited research and writing on the topic. Over the past fifteen years, Madan Chitrakar, Mukesh Malla, and Saroj Bajracharya have compiled important findings about traditional art, postmodern art, and sculpture in Nepal.[519] These publications originate from the authors' personal

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515 AR, A, January 2016.
516 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 143; Svašek, *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production*, 154.
517 Belting and Buddensieg, *Global Art World*, 12–13.
518 Svašek, *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production*, 16–18; Phoebe Scott, "Imagining 'Asian' Aesthetics in Colonial Hanoi: The École des Beaux-Arts de L'indochine (1925–1945)," in Nakamura, Perkins, and Kirscher, *Asia through Art and Anthropology*, 49, 51.
519 Malla, *Uttaradhunik Nepali kala ko abhilekh*; Chitrakar, *Tej Bahadur Chitrakar*; Chitrakar, *Nepali Art*: *Issues Miscellany*; Chitrakar, *Nepali Painting*; Saroj Bajracharya

interests. To my knowledge, there has not been any education institution-based effort to engage in art-historical research. Guha-Thakurta traces back a more wide-reaching dichotomy between practice and art history on the subcontinent to the *Swadeshi* movement of the Bengal school.[520] She explains that Government School of Art vice-principal Abanindranath Tagore, as well as Ernest Binfield Havell and Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy before him, promoted an Indian *(Swadeshi)* art that "was instinctive, natural, and deep-rooted."[521] In contrast to Western art, which "had to be acquired and cultivated," the knowledge about Indian art, Tagore believed, did not have to be mediated.[522] This division between instinctively comprehensible *Swadeshi* and laboriously acquired Western art values, she argues, led to a separation of institutions; the art school became a place of skill and manual practice, whereas the "Western disciplines" of art history and archeology became anchored within the museums. Indian institutions started to reduce this gap in the 1950s with the establishment of a handful of art history departments. Nevertheless, scholars Deeptha Achar and Shivaji K. Panikkar speak of a "logic that saw theory and practice ... as sharply divided and hierarchically ordered," which has prevailed in the Indian art field until recently.[523] In Nepal and in Bangladesh the focus on practice and skill (on the execution and repetition of predefined exercises) continues. In fact, any type of discursive approach to art, be it theory, history, philosophy, oral presentations, or written research papers, even concept notes, plays a minimal role in the curriculum. The emphasis is on training the hand.

Above, I traced the socio-political transitions that influenced the current make-up of the art field in Nepal. Art making has shifted from an almost exclusively caste-based structure to a small, urban, and elite-controlled field. It now comprises a wider—but still vastly urban—middle-class driven, higher-educated group of people. Although the middle class has become the main consumer of (art) education, this power-shift seems not to be reflected in the consumption of art. The dissolution of older patronage and clientele relationships has created a vacuum in the local market. Within the past twenty years, new translocal relations within the region and beyond have allowed for new positions. Many of the alternative avenues for artists have thereby been established by artists themselves. The residencies and workshops spearheaded by SANA under the framework of the Triangle Arts Trust and large-scale perennial events, such as the *DAS* or the *Photo Kathmandu (PKTM)* festival, constitute such avenues.

and Mukesh Malla, *A Concise Introduction to Nepali Modern Sculpture* (Kathmandu: Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, 2014).
520 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*.
521 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 161.
522 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 161.
523 Deeptha Achar and Shivaji K. Panikkar, "Introduction," in *Articulating Resistance: Art and Activism*, ed. Deeptha Achar and Shivaji K. Panikkar (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012), xiv.

Discourse-based mediation of art has become an important part of these new avenues. This is manifest in the growing role of curators, as creative mediators who conceptualize exhibitions and situate individual artworks within larger discourses,[524] and the emphasis on discursive events (panel discussions, lectures, and conferences). Talking and writing about art often requires artists and art professionals to demonstrate proficiency in, or at least an awareness of, contemporary issues and theories. Further, they need to present themselves and their work through artist statements, catalog texts, proposals, application forms, panels, and meetings with curators, critics, and collectors. New media such as the internet and social media platforms facilitate access to the discursive field, both as sources and conveyors of information, but their use requires a specific know-how. Throughout my research, I have observed that artists of all generations struggle with these new opportunities, but also expectations. I have been asked to proofread artists' statements and proposals and I sat across from interview partners who struggled to find the words to describe their artworks.

Another significant disparity between the shifted social setting, the emerging avenues, and the art education is how the art institutions on the one side and the young generation of artists on the other engage with new mediums (including a variety of practices from mixed media, installation, performance, and new media art).[525] During my interview with a teacher at TU's Central Department of Fine Arts, I learned that new mediums have recently been introduced in the curriculum of both the MFA level at TU and the BFA level at Lalitkala. When I ask why these have been introduced, they reply that performance, installation, or digital art are everywhere nowadays.[526] I do not receive an explanation beyond the fact that new mediums have become a salient part of the artistic field. The struggle to explain the department's reasoning is indicative of the difficulties involved in integrating new mediums into the existing curriculum delimited along classic mediums like painting, sculpture, and printmaking. Through students and other teachers, I learn that the newly introduced course is entitled "New

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524 Hans Belting, "Was bitte heißt 'contemporary'?" *Zeit Online*, May 20, 2010, accessed August 25, 2018, http://www.zeit.de/2010/21/Global-Art; O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 241; Michael Brenson, "The Curator's Moment," *Art Journal* 57, no. 4 (1998).

525 I use the plural form mediums to refer exclusively to artistic materials. In contrast, I use the plural form "media" to describe means of communication such as television, radio, or newspapers. "New mediums" are artistic practices that crosscut the boundaries of the classic fine art mediums such as painting, sculpture, and printmaking. The notion is an umbrella term for a variety of practices such as mixed media, installation, performance, and new media art. It can also refer to projects or works that transcend the discipline of visual arts in a broader sense such as those engaging music, theater, or dance. In contrast, the term new media refers to a variety of media that can be created and displayed through digital electronic devices (digital images, digital video, e-books, and so on).

526 AR, A, 2015.

Media" and allows students to choose between different mediums, such as film, video, installation, or performance.[527] Apart from the introduction of this course however, the existing curriculum remains unchanged.

I am curious as to how the new subject is introduced and ask one of the teachers for permission to join a session of his class. When I enter the classroom a few weeks later, I first notice two computers in the back. Due to the load shedding, which regularly happens when the classes take place, they remain unused.[528] The class consists of oral interactions between the teacher and his students: the latter take turns in presenting the artwork they are currently conceptualizing—ranging from mixed-media installations to video works—while the teacher offers his feedback. After the class, I inquire about how, with which tools, and where the students will work on their projects, and the teacher explains that the university generally only offers basic supplies such as clay, color, and canvases. Other materials, equipment, and workspaces need to be organized by the students themselves. This fact confirms my suspicion that the subject of new media has been introduced without much consideration to necessary preconditions and possible ramifications for the students.

The most evident consequence is the reemphasis of the education system's focus on economic capital. Students from more affluent backgrounds can afford qualitatively better and more diverse materials. With the introduction of new mediums, this gap has widened. In order to work with digital media, access to a reliable supply of electricity (through generators for instance) and technical equipment, such as laptops, digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras, processing software, and storing hardware is indispensable. Students who do not have access to the necessary economic resources and cannot rely on the university to facilitate access to materials are not only at a disadvantage, they simply cannot fulfill their assignments. Moreover, manual and technical skills are highly emphasized in the learning of classical mediums, but, as I have explained before, the same does not apply to new media. Working with new mediums requires learning how to use them. Like repeatedly exercising the hand with composition, perspective, and life drawing, the use of new mediums—be they computers in new media, or one's own body in performance art—needs to be trained. This comment by an MFA student highlights the knowledge gap between students, as well as the correlation between socio-economic background and working knowledge of the internet and different software programs:

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527 Note that New Media—the name given to the course—here conforms to my use of the term new mediums.
528 During my research, all areas in Kathmandu, including the campus of TU, were subject to a daily power cut of up to fourteen hours per day, especially during dry season. A load shedding schedule informed people about when the power would be off in their area. The load shedding has substantially decreased since the Tihar festival in 2017.

> [There are] lots of students from Lalitkala, who are really good in painting. But from Lalitkala, they don't know the multi-media. They don't know e-mail properly, or internet, or Photoshop, or photography. Adobe Premiere is very big software. How will they do, I don't know.[529]

The student's assessment also contains a critique of the asymmetry between the existing fine arts schools. Lalikala and TU are government institutions. Their low tuition fees and limited, government-controlled budget stand in contrast especially to the Center of Arts and Design at KU, which is a private institution.[530] This center, on which I will elaborate in the next section, is one of the most visible signs of the contestation of the education through an emerging generation of artists.

So far, I have addressed two major issues of contestation: the meaning of the fine art degree (and, by extension, the cultural and economic value of art in society) and the shifting notions of what constitutes art including new mediums and discursive practices. In the negotiation of both issues, artists working with collectives have come to play an important role.

ARTISTS AS CULTURAL BROKERS OF CHANGE

In our interview, Chitrakar explains that when he returned to Nepal from India in 2002, he soon became frustrated with the situation of the artistic field.[531] This was mostly because the lack of exchange between different mediums (such as between painting and sculpture) that he had struggled with during his studies in India also prevailed in Kathmandu. He therefore joined hands with recent returnees Ashmina Ranjit (University of Tasmania, Australia) and Manish Lal Shrestha (Sir J.J. School of Art, India), and other like-minded young artists such as Sarita Dangol, Salil Subedi, Dandapani Upadhyay, and Gopal Kalapremi. Allies in their shared dissatisfaction with the field, they founded the artist collective Sutra. The form of the collective allowed them to take on the boundaries set by the education institutions. During a weeklong workshop at the Osho Tapoban retreat center outside Kathmandu (2001), Sutra's members encouraged the fifteen participants to work with found objects and materials, as one of the participants recalls in a conversation.[532] Many created works in new mediums such as installation and performance.

The format of the collective offered the Sutra's members a platform to share their artistic needs and aspirations with other artists, and to experiment

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529 AR, A, December 2016.
530 AR, A, December 2016. Tuition fees for the BFA at Lalitkala amount to 13,000 NPR (approximately 110 euros in 2015) per semester. At MFA level, the fee varies with the semester and divides into 20,000 and three times 14,000 NPR (approximately 520 euros in total). There are no scholarships available.
531 AR, SC, December 2015.
532 FDE, A, 2016.

with hitherto unknown techniques and mediums. In an attempt to overcome the boundaries set by established art institutions, the collective enabled a broad reach of activities from workshops to residencies and public art events. The participating artists shared their economic and social resources and divided the organizational responsibilities and duties, rather than trying to change persisting constrictions individually. Further, Sutra actively aimed at expanding the understanding of art beyond the conventional limits of fine / traditional art, Western / non-Western, and practice / concept that were reproduced by the curricula, not only within the artist community, but also beyond. Especially the public interventions such as the "exhibition of performance art" in Patan, which Thomas Bell recalls in his compilation on Kathmandu, earned the collective and its members attention.[533]

Chitrakar was interested in breaking open the status quo of art practice as only including fine art. He also actively started to engage with art education. Together with Aidan Warlow, an educator and schoolbook editor from the UK who had been active in Nepal since the late 1990s, he laid the foundation stone for the Kuart Center in Bhaktapur. In the first few years, this center offered a low-key, one-year diploma course with six students. From there the initiative grew into the Center for Art and Design, which was affiliated with the private KU in 2003. In order to circumvent the problems resulting from outdated curriculums, which Chitrakar experienced firsthand during his studies in India, he aimed at keeping the curriculum as flexible and adaptable as possible. The reason why this is still possible lies mainly in the fact that the KU is a not-for-profit institution registered with, but not under the direct control of, the government. Chitrakar elaborates that the tuition fees, which the center controls, fund the running cost. A committee comprised of both students and members of the art world, such as Sangeeta Thapa (Siddartha Art Gallery), NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati (founding director of PC), and art writer Madan Chitrakar, set the curriculum. Since its initiation, the center has been experimenting with different specializations, gradually moving away from the classic divisions of sculpture, painting, and graphic design, Chitrakar explains. This is also made possible through the connection with former Sutra colleagues, who over time have acted as teachers and mentors to the students. At the time of my research in 2015, the studies at the KU Center for Art and Design included photography, filmmaking, illustration, art management, and others. Rather than selecting a main medium, the students register for a BFA in "studio art" and subsequently choose between a variety of mediums.

The higher tuition fees allow the center to provide students with access to resources and tools such as a comparably well-equipped library and a generator to circumvent load shedding. This allows teachers to prepare PowerPoint presentations or access the internet during classes in order to demonstrate the use of specific techniques and mediums. Yet, Chitrakar is aware that the higher fees also reaffirm social asymmetries between

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533   Bell, *Kathmandu*, 26.

students; he explains that he has been trying to minimalize these asymmetries, for instance by offering scholarships.[534]

As a teacher, Chitrakar encourages his students to transgress the boundaries that Sutra aimed to overcome. To this end, he offers the students as much input as possible by inviting guest lecturers, by communicating his own experiences, and by fostering exchange between the students and the wider art field. In the class I attended, Chitrakar encouraged the students to discuss and present their ideas for projects. He also encouraged them to experiment with different mediums to find the way that could best express their idea. As homework, he assigns each student a senior artist from the Nepali art field. Students then arrange an interview, and give a presentation in class. Moreover, he motivates his students to volunteer for large-scale events such as the *PKTM* festival or the *Kathmandu International Art Festival*.[535]

Chitrakar's efforts as a founding member of Sutra and as an educator are expressions of his personal investment in the arts. Yet, they are also symptomatic of an emerging comprehension of art that is pioneered by a young generation of practitioners and returnees like him. New developments in other art fields such as the transgression of classic mediums and the growing importance of discursive practices are brokered by mobile artists. They question and increasingly delegitimize their "home" discourses and thus also the education institutions that transfer and shape the relating knowledge. The disciplinary and social boundaries of these institutions do not only pertain to the disjuncture between different artistic mediums, but also to the dissociation between (manual) practice and discourse, and the gap between former and current members of the Nepali art field. The latter friction in particular is caused by a focus on European masters, the marginalization of traditional artists, and the localization of research almost exclusively within private endeavors. The existing education institutions face the challenge to react to these shifts. Disciplinary boundaries cannot be overcome by merely introducing unfamiliar topics into the already existing curriculum, as my observations from TU show. A focus on new mediums requires access to resources, such as books, technical equipment, and skilled teachers. More importantly, it requires a rethinking beyond the medium-specific practice promoted by fine art.

Rama Nanda Joshi's focus on outdoor painting, as well as the collective initiative of SKIB-71 represent early signs of this rethinking. Sutra, which started operating at the end of the 1990s, marks the beginning of a collaborative and more systematic reflection on the history and present constitution of the art field in Nepal. Especially Chitrakar's initiative and the establishment of the Center for Art and Design at KU with its flexible

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534 AR, SC, December 2015.
535 The festival has had two editions and was then "reborn" as the *Kathmandu Triennale* in 2017. The 2012 edition was organized by the newly founded Siddhartha Art Foundation, and the 2017 edition in partnership with the Museum of Modern Art in Ghent.

curriculum design will have lasting effects on the understanding of art for the next generation. By becoming an educator, Chitrakar relocates his brokerage from a modest circle of like-minded artists to a broader and more formal scale. Art education institutions transmit knowledge to students, and the way that educators design this transmission shapes the practice and understanding of art for future generations. The institutions thus actively produce the values and rules that determine the practices of their graduates. My next case study, a multi-media art installation by Saha, leads me to a discussion of similar developments in Bangladesh, notably the relation between the young generation of artists engaged with collectives and their involvement as teachers in art education in Bangladesh.

Interlude: *E=mc²*

From afar, the box looks both inconspicuous and intriguing. There is no indication, no sign nor sound, pointing to its contents. During an evening get-together Britto founder Mahbubur Rahman foretold that Shimul Saha's work would be fantastic, but he refused to give away any details. I had to see for myself, he insisted. Now, I am standing at the National Art Gallery of the Shilpakala Academy, where the eighth edition of the photography festival Chobi Mela *is currently taking place. As part of the festival program, Rahman led a three-month interdisciplinary workshop with 12 Bangladesh-based participants. The works realized in its course, among them* E=mc² *by Britto member Shimul Saha, are exhibited at the vast, white-walled Academy* (Fig. 8)*.*
I know this must be Saha's work. I consciously keep myself from reading the small concept note next to the entrance for fear of spoiling the surprise Rahman has promised. I slowly pass the threshold, bracing myself. As soon as

Figure 8: Shimul Saha, *E=mc²,* 2015. Chobi Mela, Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka. Photo: courtesy of the artist.
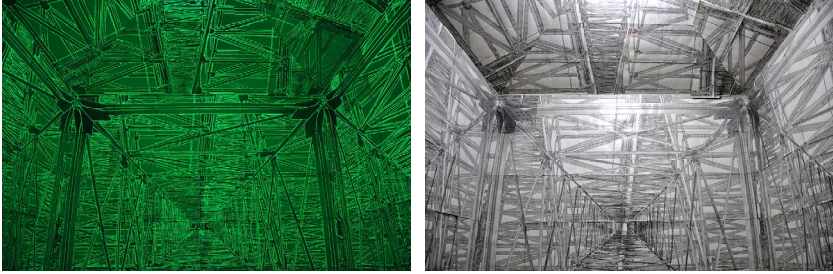
Figure 9: Shimul Saha, *E=mc²* (inside), 2015. Chobi Mela, Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka. Photos: courtesy of the artist.

I enter the box, some sort of mechanism is triggered, and the room turns pitch black. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust, but then the walls around me start to reveal a maze of neon green lines. Slowly patterns emerge and my mind pieces together a construction site—or is it a steel bridge? Only moments after my eyes become accustomed to the darkness, the light turns back on, the color vanishes, and the meticulous pencil work necessary to create all these lines jumps into view. Rahman did not exaggerate; the work is both whimsical and painstakingly executed (Fig. 9).

A HISTORY OF FINE ART EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

Saha's development as an artist, very similar to that of Dangol, started with a detour: after a secondary education in a private college, he enrolled in a bachelor of business administration (BBA) program at the request of his parents. Two of his closest friends then pushed him to take the admission test for the Faculty of Fine Arts at Dhaka University, commonly referred to as Charukola (*charu*: charming, beautiful fine; *kola*: art). As the oldest and most popular (in terms of applications) art school in the country, Charukola has educated generations of artists and nurtured the way they produce, perceive, and understand art. The majority of artists I interviewed have graduated from this institution. Its modernist architecture, especially the characteristic use of red brick and the incorporation of natural elements, such as ponds and vegetation, further serves as an architectural symbol of the newly established and thriving art field in East Pakistan.[536]

Saha explains that it was very difficult to communicate his choice to take the entry test to his family. He had never spoken against his parents' wishes before, but this matter was different, he admits. Initially, they were upset, especially because they had paid for his private education, and because they were unsure about the prospects of a fine art degree. His father eventually agreed and allowed him to continue his studies. Saha's story mirrors others, which served as an entry to the discussion in this chapter. One

536   Hoek, "Mofussil Metropolis," 34–35.

artist explains that they kept their studies at Charukola a secret during the first months and their parents were not happy when they finally found out.[537] Another research partner attributes the conflict with their parents to the family's middle-class status: "I told you we are a lower-middle-class family—so my father's dream was [for me] to be a doctor."[538] This last comment bespeaks Liechty's observations on the middle-class focus on management, medicine, and business as a way to nourish their dream of modern futures in Nepal.[539]

Saha enrolled in the department of painting. Soon, however, he started to struggle with the classwork. He explains that his choice to study painting did not reflect his actual inclination. He had based his decision on the prevalent understanding that painting is the most prestigious medium in art. Sculpture, which had a much lower standing, actually appealed more to him because of the haptic element involved. He applied to shift from the department of painting to that of sculpture after six months and was thankfully able to make his case to the faculty. Students, especially those with no prior experiences in the art field, often find it difficult to commit to one medium. In addition, institutes do not make it easy for students to gain information about the curricula they offer. At the time of my visit, neither Charukola nor the fine arts institutes of Chittagong and Rajshahi University made their course descriptions and curriculums available online. I was only able to obtain them from helpful teachers. Personal, face-to-face contact with teachers or students appears to be a prerequisite for an informed application. This might also explain why both Saha and Dangol learned about fine art education through friends and acquaintances who had already established this contact. Shifts between departments, such as the one Saha made, have been made more difficult since Charukola became a separate Faculty of the University of Dhaka in 2008. From the current dean, Nisar Hossain, I learn that students currently apply to and receive admission directly from the various medium-based departments. Each of the departments has its own administration, office, and curriculum, and there are no interactions or combined subjects, except for history of art and aesthetics. The organization of these departments can be traced back to their "colonial inheritance," the dean proceeds to explain, calling Charukola an "offshoot of the Government Art College in India."[540]

Prior to colonial rule, general education in the Bengal region, similarly to Nepal, was organized in Hindu *pathshalas* (Sanskrit, sometimes Bengali) and *madrasas* (Arabic).[541] The focus of the colonial power was on Kolkata, which served as the capital of British-India until 1911, when it was moved to Delhi. As I mentioned in the first chapter, the Bengal region received

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537 AR, A, 2017.
538 AR, A, 2015.
539 Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 216.
540 AR, NH, September 2015.
541 Mohammad Ehsan, *Higher Education Governance in Bangladesh: The Public Private Dilemma* (Dhaka: A H Development Publishing House, 2008), 50–51.

little support in developing its infrastructure after India's independence. At the time of Partition in 1947, there was only one university in the territory of East Pakistan—the 1921 established Dhaka University.[542] Like in Nepal, the production of art in Bangladesh has largely been organized in traditions—transmitted to following generations either through family lineage, or in workshops or ateliers from master to apprentice. In his extensive research in *Art and Life in Bangladesh* and *Living Traditions*, Henry Glassie traces many of these traditions, such as clay sculpting, woodwork, and metalwork, to the organization of Hindu castes.[543]

While West Pakistan possessed a well-developed infrastructure, including two schools for art instruction, the Mayo School of Art (now the National College of Art) and the Department of Fine Arts at Punjab University in Lahore, East Pakistan did not have a formal art school. The few artists that resided or moved to the eastern part in the wake of Pakistan's creation had been trained in Kolkata.[544] Zainul Abedin, Bangladesh's most celebrated master artist, enrolled at the Government School of Art in Kolkata four years after the aforementioned artists Chandra Man Singh Maskey and Tej Bahadur Chitrakar had returned to Nepal. He studied and then remained in Kolkata as a teacher until 1947. When he returned to Dhaka after Partition, he wanted to establish an art school. Initially, he struggled to explain this need to the Muslim elite of the country.[545] But only one year later the College of Arts and Crafts was established. The "Kolkata group"—Abedin's fellow graduates from the Government School of Art (and until today Bangladesh's most renowned modern artists) Anwarul Huq, Quamrul Hasan, Khawaja Shafique Ahmed, Safiuddin Ahmed, and Habibur Rahman—became its first teachers. The initial curriculum included pencil drawing, perspective, outdoor sketching, copy drawing, lettering, woodcut, and watercolors. Lala Rukh Selim maintains that although directly derived from Kolkata, the teaching had a different "flavor" in Dhaka.[546] She cites Zainul Abedin's focus on life drawings, on local folk art, on observing and capturing the people and landscape of Bengal, and the resulting figurative

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542 Ehsan, *Higher Education Governance in Bangladesh*, 56–57.
543 Glassie, *Art and Life in Bangladesh*; Henry Glassie and Firoz Mahmud, ed., *Living Traditions* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2007). Henry Glassie's compilation warrants two cautions. First, the author's research emphasizes lineages of Hindu artists, thus leaving the impression that the Muslim population—perhaps for religious reasons—does not engage in the production of art as extensively. Second, his account contains a strong, overgeneralized local–international dichotomy, especially in relation to his discussion of the art education institutions. He for instance claims that the stylistic precedents in traditional workshops are local. Whereas "in the college, they are international" with a "pretense to universal validity." He thus reproduces the fine art–applied arts dichotomy established with the first art institutions. Glassie, *Art and Life in Bangladesh*, 269.
544 Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 93–94.
545 Lala Rukh Selim, "50 Years of the Fine Art Institute," *Art: A Quarterly Journal* 4, no. 2 (1998).
546 Selim, "50 Years of the Fine Art Institute."

style (in direct contrast with the majorly Muslim society) as examples of this flavor.[547]

Under the Kolkata trained teachers, Charukola became a locus of progressive politics—as many students and teachers were involved in the language movement—and of romanticized notions of the Bengali lifestyle.[548] Cultural and artistic characteristics believed to be at the core of the Bengali identity were brought to use for a new nationalist politics against West Pakistan. The school also inherited the division between fine art (Western style painting) and the applied, technical, or commercial arts. Next to fine art and applied arts, a third department, Oriental art, was introduced in 1955, following the example of Kolkata. Although this subject was limited to Persian and Indian traditions, the ramifications of Partition and the political break with India precluded the department from being called Indian art.

In the 1960s, Charukola faced several changes. It moved into its current building, specifically created by renowned architect Muzharul Islam. Three further departments, ceramics (1961), sculpture (1963), and crafts (1967) were introduced. The organization as a degree college under Dhaka University in 1963 required the introduction of theoretical papers. For this purpose, classes on the history of civilization, the history of art, and sociology were implemented, but it proved difficult to find suitable teachers.[549] Art history, as a proper department, was only introduced in the 1990s.[550] Moreover, the artistic field as a whole, which for the first fifteen years was dominated by the art school, was exposed to fresh impulses and ideas. Similar to the situation in Nepal, these were brokered by the artists returning from their studies abroad. While hitherto unfamiliar techniques and styles, especially abstract art, became part of the practice of this emerging generation, the school's curriculum remained almost unchanged.[551] The MFA was introduced in 1978, and five years later the Institute merged with Dhaka University.[552] Its subdivision into the gradually established departments continues at the time of my research. In 2015, students were able

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547 Throughout his life, Zainul Abedin continued his efforts to develop the art field. His commitment to local traditions and folk art is for instance visible in the Sonargaon Folk Art Museum, which he established in 1975. In the same year, he also founded the Zainul Museum in Mymensingh, which holds his own collection. See Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 101.

548 The language movement comprises a series of protests in the late 1940s and early 1950s which erupted in East Pakistan after the West Pakistan-based government had established Urdu as the sole national language. The movement led to the establishment of Urdu and Bengali as recognized languages. With independence in 1971, Bengali became the state language of Bangladesh. Selim, "50 Years of the Fine Art Institute," 8; Raghavan, *1971*, 7–8; Khademul Islam, "Life and Times of Literary Magazines: Bangladesh's English-Language Literature Over the Years," *Himal Southasian: The Bangladesh Paradox* 28, no. 3 (2015): 79.

549 Selim, "50 Years of the Fine Art Institute," 8.

550 AR, NH, September 2015.

551 Selim, "50 Years of the Art Institute: (Part 2)," 5.

552 Selim, "50 Years of the Art Institute: (Part 2)," 5.

to choose between painting, printmaking, graphic design, oriental art, ceramics, sculpture, crafts, and art history.

Iftikhar Dadi highlights the crucial influence of Zainul Abedin on the art field in East Pakistan as an "adviser and bureaucrat" frequently called upon by the Pakistani government.[553] While Charukola and the national art field prospered under his guidance, the development of an overall education infrastructure in the eastern wing of the country was neglected. When Bangladesh became independent in 1971, there were only six public universities throughout the entire country. After independence, the new government took over and became the exclusive administrator of education policy. Its monopoly to provide higher education only changed with the Private University Act.[554] Since then, ninety-five private universities have been established.[555]

Like in Nepal, the private universities that have mushroomed in Bangladesh cater to a market of economically affluent, urban clientele seeking jobs in the government or the vast INGO/NGO sector.[556] The majority offer courses in business studies, computer engineering, English, and environment studies.[557] Two private institutions, the University of Development Alternative (UODA), established in 2002, and the Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology, established in 2003, offer fine art (BFA and MFA) programs. Public fine arts departments have been established at Rajshahi, Chittagong, Khulna, and since 2012 also at Jahangirnagar University. Of the practicing artists I met, Chittagong and Dhaka were and still are the most prominent. Charukola Dean Nisar Hosain explains that the Dhaka University remains the most privileged university of the country; most prospective students try to get admission in his faculty first. For 135 seats, Charukola receives more than 13,000 applications per admission session, he explains.[558]

In relation to the leading position of the Dhaka institute, Lala Rukh Selim argues that the school has "overshadowed" the country's art field, a fact notably due to the many artists who have held teaching positions at the faculty.[559] The prominent role of Zainul Abedin, commonly referred to as *Shilpacharya* (art teacher/leader of a college or university), Charukola's

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553 Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 108–109.

554 Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, "The Private University Act XXXIV," trans. The Heidelberg Bangladesh Law Translation Project, accessed June 20, 2021, https://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/workgroups/bdlaw/1992-a34.

555 Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), *Bangladesh Education Statistics 2016* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, 2017).

556 The NGO Affairs Bureau of Bangladesh counts a total of 2629 registered foreign and local NGOs up to July 2018. "List of all NGO," NGO Affairs Bureau of Bangladesh, updated February 6, 2023, http://www.ngoab.gov.bd/site/page/3de95510-5309-4400-97f5-0a362fd0f4e6/List-of-All-NGO.

557 Ehsan, *Higher Education Governance in Bangladesh*, 62.

558 AR, NH, September 2015.

559 Selim, "50 Years of the Art Institute: (Part 2)," 11–12.

central location in the capital city, as well as its closeness to other important art institutions, such as the Shilpakala Academy, are other reasons.

COMMONALITY OF STRUGGLE

> All the fine arts students in the first year, everybody dreams; "I will be Zainul Abedin, I will be Quamrul Hasan, SM Sultan." Everybody thinks like that. But in the second year, third year, the percentage is getting less and most of the students get a job. When they are doing their job, they are getting away from the artist life.[560]

The first part of Saha's statement highlights the key role of the national masters in the imagination of the Charukola students. Even though the curriculum focuses on European masters in Bangladesh too, the students refer to artists like Zainul Abedin and SM Sultan as their role models. Every year, Abedin's birthday is commemorated in Bangladesh, with special celebrations at the institutions he founded. When I introduced myself and my research in Bangladesh, people immediately brought up his name; especially artists praised his dedication and commitment to the art movement in Bangladesh. The emphasis on his persona is also due to his political activism. The famine sketches—which he drew during the Bengal Famine (1943–1944) that killed over three million people—have become the visual representation of the region's oppression under British colonial rule.[561] Further, his claim for the vital relation between art practice and the social and natural landscape of the region I discussed above,[562] and his use of art to support the Language Movement (1950s)[563] and the Liberation Movement (1971) that led to the country's independence in 1971, serve the idea of Bengali nationalism widely adhered to by the middle class.

The second part of Saha's comment bespeaks a common struggle among students, similar to the one I discussed for Nepal. Saha claims that the students enrolled in fine arts dream of becoming professional artists. Like himself, however, they are often sidetracked by disagreeing parents, heavy course loads, shortage of money, family responsibilities, and the need to get a job. Saha is originally from Tangail, about one hundred kilometers north of Dhaka. To support himself during his studies in the capital, he took on an extra job. This job, he explains, became a diversion that disconnected him from his coursework, his practice, and his dream of making a living as an artist. It was the collaboration and exchange with already established artists that brought him back to art. He met Britto

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560 AR, SSa, September 2015.
561 Two works from the *Famine Sketches* series were on display at the Neue Galerie in Kassel during *documenta 14*. They were part of an entire exhibition section dedicated to the Bengal Famine. "Zainul Abedin," documenta 14, accessed February 15, 2021, https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/21944/zainul-abedin.
562 Selim, "50 Years of the Art Institute: (Part 2)," 6.
563 See fn. 548.

co-founder Mahbubur Rahman at a time when he was struggling for orientation. Rahman "was fighting with life through art," he explains, referring to the paramount role of art in Rahman's life. The artist became Saha's inspiration, and Britto acted as a support for his further development as an artist.[564] Through the collective and its interconnectedness, Saha received the opportunity to participate in a Vasl (one of the five SANA member collectives) program in Pakistan. During the residency, he met renowned Pakistani artist Zarina Hashmi, who urged him to apply for one of the scholarships offered specifically to Bangladeshi artists at the BNU in Lahore. On the homepage, BNU is introduced as a "non-profit, apolitical, non-sectarian, and equal-opportunity institution."[565] It was established in 2003 and provides education through seven different schools, ranging from psychology, journalism, and education to business administration. Saha graduated from the master's program in art and design studies, which offers a large field of courses on visual arts (painting, sculpture, photography, video, installation), design, curatorial studies, and art education. Saha emphasizes the focus on new mediums, and identifies the wider scope for experimentation that this diverse curriculum allowed:

> What I learned here, from [the] sculpture department [during his BFA in Bangladesh], it made my hand flexible to work with any material. Over here, my skill was developed, my hand. And over there [during his MFA in Pakistan], they showed me something else: "In this way you can also think." I made the object, that was the skill from here, when I made the photograph, that was a skill from there.[566]

Saha notes the strict focus on manual practice of many fine art institutions. While the emphasis on repetitive drawing exercises at Charukola made his hands flexible, the BNU classes introduced new mediums in which to test this acquired flexibility. Rather than juxtaposing these different approaches to art, Saha emphasizes their complementary nature. He directly refers to $E=mc^2$, the artwork I described in the Interlude to this section. On the one hand, his drawing skills were crucial in the conception and realization of the inside walls of the room. On the other hand, the idea to use photographs of steel bridges and extract the lines from these images to depict the "millions of connections being made around us" represents a skill learned from BNU.[567] During our interview, Saha also mentions that working with light, which in the case of $E=mc^2$ is caused by phosphorescent pigment, is another element he picked up in Pakistan. The workshop entitled "Sculpting with Light," facilitated by Rahman during the seventh edition of

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564 AR, SSa, September 2015.
565 "BNU at a Glance," Beaconhouse National University, accessed June 19, 2021, http://www.bnu.edu.pk/bnu/About/BNUataGlance.aspx.
566 AR, SSa, September 2015.
567 Shimul Saha, $E=mc^2$, 2015, art installation, Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka.

the *Chobi Mela (CM)* festival, offered Saha an opportunity to combine these different techniques in one work. The format of the three-month workshop was specifically aimed at fostering transdisciplinary approaches by removing photography from its more common contexts, such as documentary or storytelling, and mixing it with other artistic mediums. Like Sutra in Nepal, Britto has been working at overcoming boundaries between mediums and opening new room for experimentation. *CM*'s organizers Drik and the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute have recently been engaged in a similar endeavor, hence the collaboration, which will be part of my case study in chapter five.

TEACHING EMERGING CONTEMPORANEITY

During my interview with Britto co-founder Tayeba Begum Lipi, I ask why she and her husband Rahman are not teaching at Charukola.[568] I am curious to know if they ever tried to change the education system from within, rather than fostering initiatives for contemporary art practice outside of it. She explains that she wanted to be free in her art practice, and for that reason did not want to be tied down by a teaching job. Her husband, on the other hand, had always wanted to be a teacher. When positions became available at Charukola in 2009 Rahman convinced her to apply for the openings in the drawing and painting department. They both applied, but as Lipi explains, "they refused to take either of us."[569] She elaborates that the committee initially had reservations because the couple was travelling a lot and was "too international." In the end, they were told they were "overqualified." Lipi suggests that the real reason might have been the institution leaders' fear of change.[570] Her suspicion is an indication of the difference between Britto's understanding of art and the values and rules mediated by Charukola.

The discrepancy between current contemporary practice and institutionally mediated knowledge is not a new condition but part of the cultural brokerage that results (manifest or latent) from the artists' mobility. I repeatedly emphasized this for the case of Nepal and briefly hinted at a similar situation in Bangladesh. The modernist artists who returned to Bangladesh in the 1960s after their studies abroad brought new ideas and visualities, yet these had little effect on the curriculum of the national institutions. Artist and art writer Mustafa Zaman refers to the Shomoy group to emphasize this point. Shomoy was one of the first artist collectives in Bangladesh. The collaboration which brought together Shishir Bhattacharjee, Habibur Rahman, Selim Ahmed, Saidul Haque Juice, Dilara Begum Jolly, Ali Morshed Noton, Dhali-Al-Mamoon, and Aziz Sharafi started after an initial banner exhibition in 1980. The group remained active

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568 AR, TBL, March 2017.
569 AR, TBL, March 2017.
570 AR, TBL, March 2017.

throughout the 1980s and promoted mixed-media, figurative, and political art that deviated from the styles taught at Charukola. Zaman himself experimented with collages and color graphs: "But you could never submit those works as part of your master['s] degree submission. You could never do that back then," he explains to me in our interview.[571] Teaching was marked by naturalistic painting and nudes and artists were "copying one-another and trying to give their own kind of twist."[572]

Like Lipi, Zaman attributes this stagnation to a fear of change: "Actually the senior artists of the country ... they have this fear that everything could be lost." In his opinion, this fear lies in the belief that modern techniques (such as abstract or conceptual art) and new mediums (like collages, installations, or photographs) entail a loss of skill. Since their establishment, the art institutions have promoted a notion of "skill" that is reduced to the manual command of color, composition, perspective, shade, and so on. New mediums are considered not to require, and most importantly, not to value this kind of manual expertise and skill. Zaman contends that this fear is unnecessary because the artists that push forward artistic border transgressions "are wonderful draftsmen."[573] $E=mc^2$, which served as my entry to this section, exemplifies Zaman's point. The installation highlights Saha's creative engagement with new mediums, as well as his meticulous drawing skills. It represents a strong argument for the importance of both. Moreover, this example points to the fact that contemporary artists also increasingly contest the notion of skill as understood by the education institutions; skill involves more than draftsmanship and composition. It includes the command of diverse mediums, techniques, technologies, ideas, and concepts.

After his participation in the "Sculpting with Light" workshop, taught by Mahbubur Rahman as part of the *CM* 2015 program, Saha was offered a teaching position at the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute, a private institution for the study of photography. In line with his own practice, Saha tries to incorporate manual skill and conceptual experimentation in his teaching. He explains that he teaches perspective and composition through the medium of drawing. He feels that these manual skills are very important in composing not only paintings but also photographs. He thus demonstrates that the adoption of unfamiliar techniques and styles and the transgression of boundaries between mediums and between what is perceived as fine and applied arts is not, as feared by the older generation, a renouncement of artistic values, draftsmanship, and other skills. In contrast, both complement each other in a contemporary practice promoted by the young generation.

Charukola's organization is contingent upon a multi-level bureaucratic apparatus, comprising the separate departments at the bottom, then the faculty committee, the dean's committee, and on top the academic council

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571   AR, MZ, September 2015.
572   AR, MZ, September 2015.
573   AR, MZ, September 2015.

of the university and the syndicate. This multilayered organization limits the flexibility of the institution.[574] Changes to the curriculum are much more difficult to implement. Several efforts to establish photography as a new medium at Charukola—including the dean's himself—have for instance failed due to other faculty members' opposition.[575] Private institutions, such as Pathshala or the Center for Art and Design in Kathmandu, are not subject to the same bureaucratic rigidness as government institutions. They can put changes into effect much faster. Further, they have at their disposal a higher budget, notably through higher tuition fees, as I showed for Nepal. This last point also places them closer to the market— they answer to the middle and upper classes that consume the education they provide. They cater to a smaller and more targeted audience, allowing them to incorporate its shifting needs.[576]

Moreover, these private institutions were founded by passionate individual actors with the aim to offer valid alternatives to the already existing arts infrastructure. While the foundation of Charukola also goes back to the initiative of artist Zainul Abedin, the institution quickly became consolidated in the colonial legacy it took over from the Government College of Arts in Kolkata as well as the new nationalist "Bengali" agenda. Both Shahidul Alam and Chitrakar however actively promote multi-scalar positionings that actively lead to the transgressions of older hierarchies and disciplinary boundaries. Pathshala founder Alam developed the school as a means to complement the multimedia organization Drik, established in 1989. Drik consists of several gradually developed building blocks (a dark room, a studio, a gallery, and so on) and acts as a junction space for photography in Bangladesh.[577] The Pathshala South Asian Media Institute,

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574 AR, NH, September 2015.
575 AR, NH, September 2015.
576 This however also makes them vulnerable to attacks and allegations of malpractice: On August 6, 2016 *bdnews24* published an article that denounced, among other things, Pathshala's lack of affiliation with an established university and its "illegal" issuing of certificates. It accuses founder Shahidul Alam of not searching for any accreditation out of fear of losing his political freedom and flexibility, and it alleges illegal money transfer from European countries. While the Academic Council of Pathshala issued an answer to the paper (Pathshala South Asian Media Institute 2016, widely shared through Facebook) and clarified the points raised by the article (notably that it is in the process of getting recognized by the government but has not been granted permission yet), it also confirms the latent influence and control the government has over affiliated institutions. In February 2018, Pathshala held a press conference announcing its affiliation with Dhaka University and the start of a bachelor program. Faisal Atik, "Shahidul Alam's Pathshala Operates Without Affiliation," *bdnews24.com*, August 6, 2016, accessed June 19, 2021. https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2016/08/06/shahidul-alam-s-pathshala-operates-without-affiliation; *The Daily Star*, "Pathshala Starts Bachelor, Post Graduation With Affiliation of DU," *The Daily Star*, February 15, 2018, accessed June 21, 2021, http://www.thedailystar.net/city/pathshala-south-asian-media-institute-starts-bachelor-and-post-gradation-diploma-programmes-photography-film-television-affiliation-dhaka-university-1535254.
577 AR, SA, September 2015.

which became operational in 1998, was the first education institution for photography in the country. It aimed at offering a more focused and durable training platform than the temporary workshops offered by Drik. Alam explains that he contacted other institutions around the world, seeking to borrow from their curriculums. Finally, he decided to base it on his own documentary practice and the specific needs of working in Bangladesh. Gradually, the education moved from a primary focus on documentary photography to a more critical and open approach to the medium. This was realized among other respects by consciously bringing in people with different, sometimes "diametrically opposite" ideas and practices to challenge the perspectives of the students:

> We very deliberately brought in people with very diverse approaches to the medium. So the students recognized that there was no one way of looking at photography. And there were people who very sometimes diametrically opposite, who questioned one another. So, there were value systems of established people being challenged internally. And I think it was that questioning environment which really was the main stay of the school we founded. It's a base that allows a lot more freedom than other places traditionally do.[578]

The incentive to question medium limitations, to transgress aesthetic and formal boundaries, to engage with different perspectives and discourses from around the world was, as this quote shows, built into Pathshala from the start. Over the course of its twenty years of teaching, Pathshala connected with the fine art field from which it had remained separated through the exclusion of photography from the fine art education. Thereby it overcame its own initial focus on documentary photography.[579] Saha's appointment as a teacher is an expression of this connective and transgressive agenda and the alliance between Britto and Drik, on which I will elaborate in chapter five.

The contestation of the status quo, of hegemonic visual discourses and of disciplinary boundaries is not solely the characteristic of an emerging contemporaneity. The historic approach of this chapter reveals that artists have repeatedly transgressed hegemonic circumscriptions of art: from Abanindranath Tagore, who challenged fine art as a colonialist category of exclusion, to Saha and Dangol, who question the validity of institutional knowledge transmission, including curriculums, canons, and the

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578 AR, SA, September 2015.
579 AR, SA, September 2015. Alam uses the term fine artists to circumscribe the practicing artists who graduated from fine arts institutes and faculties in Bangladesh. The differentiation between photography and fine art continuing in Bangladesh (and in Nepal) is based on the dual bias that photography commonly equals documentary photography (as it was long practiced at Pathshala), and that this type of photography is perceived as an applied art (in contrast to painting, sculpture, and so on).

art education's emphasis on manual skill. This contestation is part of the cultural brokerage that results from the artists' mobility—the engagement with new people, ideas, and discourses. What then is "emerging" about it? Artists make use of collaborative action in a systematic way; there were collective attempts in the 1980s, such as SKIB-71 in Nepal and Shomoy in Bangladesh. However, the collectives established since the 1990s that I am focusing on deliberately form multi-scalar connections and thus are no longer dependent on the national fields for their mobility and motility. They access supranational funding and collaborate with internationally established galleries, curators, and organizations. By establishing spaces for experimental practice, Britto, Bindu—A Space for Artists (Bindu), Sattya, PC, and Drik create a milieu for the (re)negotiation of what a valid art practice and education consist of. Prior to their initiatives, there were mobile artists like Chandra Man Singh Maskey and Tej Bahadur Chitrakar who also brokered new ideas into the established fields. However, these were mostly individual endeavors under the patronage of the urban or national elites. The graduates who returned to Nepal and Bangladesh in the 1960s and 1970s also carried fresh ideas and techniques. They fostered the development of an alternative art infrastructure (academies, galleries, and artist collectives), but had little effect on the curriculum of the national institutions. The artists that became active in the 1990s benefitted from the growing power of the middle classes and the resulting rise of private education. This establishment of alternative, private education facilities crosscuts older socio-cultural hierarchies, but in the process creates new economic asymmetries. My research partners deliberately position themselves on multiple scales of the art field to broaden their scope of action. Thereby they not only contest the status quo of art production in relation to artistic fields on other scales, but also in relation to other fields on the national scale (politics, religion, or economics, for instance). In other words, they question the position of art within a wider set of fields: What does art do? Who should it reach? Should it have socio-political effects? I will take a closer look at these negotiations in the next two chapters.

Chapter 4

The Field of Contemporary Art Production: National Academies, Art Foundations, Collectives

The understanding of contemporary art that emerges from my research partners' practice and their contestation of the existing education institutions is no longer confined to a specific medium, it cannot be reduced to manual skill, and discursive practices are considered an integral part of it. The medium is not a given but subordinated to an artistic (and a socio-political, in the case of *Kolor Kathmandu* [*KK*]) concept; it is chosen according to how the concept could best be mediated. Moreover, contemporary artists are interested in vernacular visual histories and historically meaningful places, especially in making them relevant for a contemporary practice. For this reason, artists actively engage with archeological heritage and seek contact with senior artists in their countries. At the same time, they use platforms like the *Venice Biennale* or the *Dhaka Art Summit (DAS)* to showcase their artwork to affluent curators, collectors, art writers, and wider audiences. They participate in transregional workshop networks to experiment with new techniques and meet fellow practitioners from diverse localities. They are influenced by formats related to street art or site-specific art established in Europe and America. This vertical multi-positionality serves the purpose to broaden the artists' agency beyond the nationally available art infrastructure. Britto Arts Trust (Britto), Sattya Media Arts Collective (Sattya), and photo.circle (PC), however, do not only operate on different scales of art fields, but also in different types of infrastructure in the same field and in other fields on the same scale. This includes less formal art training opportunities (e.g., outdoor-drawing or photography classes), galleries, and foundations, but also collaborations with musicians, researchers, activists, or specific NGOs/INGOs. One of the reasons to connect to these institutions is to broaden the contact with audiences, to access potential buyers, or to broaden the reach of a specific socio-political message. In the last chapter, I stated that with the vanishing of former socio-cultural elites there has emerged a vacuum in art patronage. The middle classes are not (yet) the audiences that artists hope for. Artists have tried to connect to them by taking art to public spaces, but also

by connecting with mediating institutions. I introduced art institutions as a "framing apparatus"[580] that both enables and restricts the socio-cultural and political scopes of the action of individuals.[581] While education institutions shape the field by transmitting art-related knowledge (art history, aesthetic and formal values, visual norms, etc.) through their canons and curricula, the institutions in focus in this subchapter frame art by mediating art and its related knowledge to a range of consumers (visitors, readers, followers, supporters, buyers). Thereby they contribute to a consolidation of values, norms, and canons.

The search for audiences is related to a set of ideological questions that I have mentioned earlier: my research partners are concerned with the position of art in a larger set of fields. They ask questions about the purpose of art in and for society and devise strategies to test this purpose through their programs: Sattya, for instance, sees art as a medium to envision alternative urbanizations. PC, my case study in the next chapter, uses contemporary and archival photography to stimulate a re-fabrication of urban social life after the 2015 earthquake. Mediating institutions can be crucial allies in realizing such programs. They can offer support through funding and provide knowledge resources or platforms to connect to audiences. Within the field of art production in Nepal and Bangladesh these institutions are far from abundant and researching them proved to be rather challenging: there is little to no available academic or vernacular literature on mediating institutions in these countries. I was able to draw information from interviews and participant observation within the respective institutions (National Academies, galleries, foundations, and art writers), yet the information I received was often antagonistic; artists used my interviews to voice their critique and frustration over the institutions' mismanagement and lacking support. The representatives of these institutions in contrast presented their activities and achievements in a very positive light. Further, despite the rather small number of institutions, the entanglements especially in terms of personnel are complex, as many actors hold multiple positions over the course of their careers. To acknowledge this complexity, I open this chapter with four personal assessments of the situation of mediating institutions in the fields of art. The quotes are taken from interviews with actors who have had practical training in different artistic mediums and who are working with private mediating institutions. They illustrate the relation between nationally organized public institutions and private initiatives from within the field.

Sharon Zukin writes about the idea of public spaces as democratic spaces, as spaces that are "regulated and controlled," but that are commonly identified as open, as not "defined by a single use or specific or

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580 Deutsche, *Evictions*, 152.
581 Möntmann, *Kunst als sozialer Raum*, 35.

preferred set of users."[582] Although public art institutions, such as galleries, academies, or museums serve a specific use and attract audiences interested in consuming art, they are conceived as more accessible than the private realm. Nonetheless, there is a discrepancy between how this access is perceived and how it is actually shaped. Kirsten Hackenbroch identifies religious, gender, and class discrimination as issues that influence access to and movement in public space in Dhaka.[583] Similar rules pertain to many public institutions in Dhaka and in Kathmandu. The frequency of guards and security checks for instance is if not physically at least visually deterring. Further, access to art spaces often presupposes knowledge—about what a specific institution does, how it operates and what it offers. Not knowing—or, in Bourdieu's terms, not having the right cultural capital at your disposal, can be an icommensurable barrier.[584]— But the discrepancy between private and public art infrastructure is not only about accessibility. For my discussion, I grouped the institutions according to the way they were founded, which allows me to analyze the scale on which they operate: Were they initiated by the state or from within the art field? Are they running on public or private funding? Are they part of a government structure or are they privately organized? Depending on their affiliation and targeted scale of operation, they cater to different audiences, have access to different networks, pursue different missions, and represent different values. Their relationship with the artist collectives is contingent on these positionings.

Within the nationally circumscribed field, the most notable public institutions are the national academies. The Bangladesh National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts (commonly known as Shilpakala) or the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) act as intermediators between the government and the countries' art scene. They represent government policy in the nationally framed art field and foster bilateral international exchange. In Dhaka and Kathmandu they are mostly known for their ample exhibition and function spaces. In 1965, crown prince Birendra founded the Nepal Association of Fine Arts, which was later replaced by NAFA and divided into six departments: painting, traditional arts, sculpture, folk art, handicrafts, and architecture and other creative arts. It operates through several chapters throughout the country and its most salient activity is the annual *National Exhibition*. Shilpakala in Bangladesh was established by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1974. Like NAFA, it has several chapters throughout the country and is administratively divided into six departments: drama and film; fine arts and photography; training; research and publication; production;

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582 Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 282.

583 Kirsten Hackenbroch, *The Spatiality of Livelihoods: Negotiations of Access to Public Space in Dhaka, Bangladesh* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2013).

584 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, xxiv–xxvi.

and music, dance, and recitation. It also organizes a yearly *National Exhibition*.[585] Since 1981, its flagship project is the *Asian Art Biennale*.[586]

The private initiatives often follow one *modus operandi*: they are characterized by their multi-functionality, offering exhibition spaces, training opportunities, and discursive programs, such as artist talks. This diversification is a direct result of the way they came into being. They are almost exclusively initiatives of one (socio-politically or economically affluent) individual based on a need identified from within the field (e.g., a lack of exhibition spaces). By working in the field, these individuals gradually identify more needs and based on available funding add building blocks to their initiatives. Today, institutions like the Siddhartha Art Foundation (and gallery) and the Bengal Art Foundation (and galleries) foster the development of the arts by organizing or supporting festivals, offering exhibition space, facilitating workshops, and establishing contact to collectors and buyers worldwide. Especially the translocal mobility and networking of their personnel keeps them updated on developments, trends, and needs on the local and global scales of the art field, and allows them to tailor their activities in response to these needs. While the foundations react in a top-down approach, the artist collectives proactively instigate experimental formats and debates. Therefore, they often act as a kind of spurring factor for the more established infrastructure.

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585 In the amendment to the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy Act (1989), "photography" is named as a separate department within the Academy. In the catalog of the 2014 *Asian Art Biennale*, Shilpakala Director Liaquat Ali Lucky mentions the addition of a "photography" section to the "fine art" department. Nevertheless, photography is not mentioned as a medium in the artworks for the *Biennale*. Based on my observations, photography has (if at all) only received marginal attention within the overall activities of the academy. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, "The Private University Act XXXIV," trans. The Heidelberg Bangladesh Law Translation Project, accessed June 20, 2021, https://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/workgroups/bdlaw/1992-a34.htm; Liaquat Lucky Ali, "Message," in *Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh 2014*, ed. National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts (Dhaka: National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts 2014).

586 Interestingly the organization of the first Biennale also goes back to the private initiative of an artist, Syed Jahangir. In her essay for *post*, an online resource of The Museum of Modern Art, *DAS* curator Diana Campbell Betancourt retraces how Jahangir made use of his worldwide network of artists (including Lain Sigh Bangdel from Nepal) to establish Asia's first biennale in Dhaka. Diana Campbell Betancourt, "Entry Points: Reconsidering the Asian Art Biennale with Syed Jahangir," *post*, May 25, 2017, accessed June 19, 2021, http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/992-entry-points-reconsidering-the-asian-art-biennale-with-syed-jahangir.

Interlude:
"We have artists, but we don't have the other factors"

INTERLOCUTOR I[587]

We have artists, but we don't have the other factors that play a role. ... We try to do a lot of programs here with our own resources. It is time to be more engaged in that kind of activities. ... A supporting system for that kind of engagement. If you look at what is happening around, it is not just artists, there are curators, as a profession. There are other [roles], managers, art managers, art writers ... many different components have evolved: exhibitors, galleries, curators, managers, promoters, dealers, collectors, art historians, art educators. ... this is the Western system .... Does Nepal need that kind of a system? I don't know. If it were not necessary, then why did the galleries come into existence? Why is the art education there? So, with the art education there, the art student comes in, when the art student come in, they need to place an exhibit, and when you exhibit you need an audience, and when the audience is there. Maybe that is an organic kind of a—nobody is making the system, it just evolves, probably in the West also. Artists are there, then artists need to—it is probably a system that comes in a very organic way.[588]

INTERLOCUTOR II

They try to change the scenario of the Nepali art. And now they are driving Nepali art into another world. These are the artists, they are talented. They are not only good painters, they are talented. They can organize a program. They write. They have formed very good groups. They go frequently outside of Kathmandu also. Academy has to think seriously and realize that fact. ... they are doing nothing for this generation. The Academy ... should give good opportunity to these artists.[589]

INTERLOCUTOR III

Art has always been isolated. Only artists talk about art and those who are talking are also very few in number. I think, more than about performance, contemporary or modern, it is more about how art in Nepal should be exposed to the public. It is more about that. ... When I say public, I don't mean to pull a pedestrian out there and explain to him what I am doing. I am not saying

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587 The quotes stem from interviews with four different actors working in or with mediating institutions in Kathmandu and Dhaka. I do not specify their position in these institutions because, firstly, it would compromise their anonymity, and secondly, like most actors I worked with, they have occupied more than one position. They are (or were at one point or another) artists, gallery managers, art writers, promoters, and educators.
588 AR, A, 2014.
589 AR, A, 2014.

that. What I am saying is, art is isolated and that is the only reason why we are having this kind of argument we are having.[590]

INTERLOCUTOR IV

[W]e thought we wanted to step in to create a certain kind of conventional gallery scenario, where there is a right environment for showing. ... That's how the gallery was set up. The focus was on the space and lighting, which until then no one had given much importance. ... And then how to document the work that we were doing. Because there wasn't the tradition of art writing or documenting exhibitions very well. ... And also gradually, something we felt in the early days, was that it was really underpriced in Bangladesh. Compared to what was happening in India and in the region, whereas the artists may have had started off from the same education institution, from the same studios, training under the same teachers, but their careers had very different trajectories because of forty-seven and then seventy-one and all of that.[591]

CONCEPTUALIZING THE FIELD OF CONTEMPORARY ART PRODUCTION

The quotes from this Interlude serve as the main frame of reference for my discussion of the mediating institutions. Although they contain information about whether they pertain to the specific context of Bangladesh or Nepal, I discuss them as a set. This emphasizes the interconnectedness and commonalities of the key issues these quotes raise.

First, all the quotes contain a conscious idea of a field of art that encompasses elements considered supportive to the artistic practice, such as related professions, spaces, and institutions.

Second, there is at the same time a conception of this field as "isolated"—as autonomously centered on artists. Interlocutor III sees the reason for this in the fact that the majority of people involved in the artistic field are themselves practicing artists. Because there is little exchange with the public, the ongoing discourses in relation to the features, aims, and boundaries of contemporary art risk being repetitive and redundant.

Third, this sense of isolation also pertains to the institutional landscape: the most supportive activities in the art field, as Interlocutor I comments, are based on the resources and efforts of individual artists or groups. On the one hand, this indicates an absence of patrons, mediators, and supporters, and thus inherently also finds fault with the infrastructure that does exist—particularly the national academies; they do not do what my research partners expect them to do. On the other hand, it points to the fact that the talent of contemporary artists is no longer believed to solely reside in the skilled mastery of a specific medium (i.e., being a painter). It is also located in the artists' mobility, their skill to organize programs, and

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590   AR, A, 2014.
591   AR, A, 2015.

to write —that is, to connect to audiences beyond the field. This is specifically tied to the contemporary situation ("it is time," "change," "now").

Fourth, one artistic field is often seen in relation to other artistic fields. The interlocutors compare Kathmandu and Dhaka to the West and to India. In comparison, their fields are conceived as falling short; Nepal and Bangladesh do not have a differentiated system comprising mediators, promoters, managers, dealers, writers, and educators to support the artists. The establishment of education institutions entailed, however, as Interlocutor I believes, a chain of such infrastructural needs. Education generates artists. These artists need a place to exhibit, and exhibitions need to be organized and mediated to audiences, buyers, dealers, and collectors. The system described by my interview partners is both labored and organic; it is determined by fields on other scales. Thereby especially India (on a regional scale) and the West (on a global scale) are perceived as dominating. Yet, at the same time the field is imagined as natural (and thus inevitable) as the result of growing interconnections. My interlocutors' comparative approach further indicates that the national governments continue to be seen as bearing the responsibility for infrastructural development. Education and mediation institutions are in turn subject to political and economic developments. Interlocutor IV uses the specific example of Zainul Abedin's Kolkata group to argue that artists' paths largely depend on reliable infrastructure. At the same time, the artists are recognized as important actors in providing infrastructural services. Next to individual endeavors, the format of the collective is directly mentioned in the second quote. It is positively connoted as a sign of the artists' growing agency and outreach. In the following, I unfold the collectives' multi-positionality in this field. I argue that they take on the role of connecting agents, as platforms for like-minded artists. Moreover, their activities provoke reflections about disciplinary and social boundaries that cause energizing frictions in the artistic field. This is the reason I comprehend them as a spurring factor.

In his writings on the "field of cultural production," Bourdieu elaborates that the production of artworks includes both a material and a symbolic production, and that the reality of the artwork is contingent upon the beholder or consumer's knowledge to recognize its value as such.[592] The production of "consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the works of art" is realized by a set of agents involved in the symbolic production of artworks, and here Bourdieu explicitly mentions critics and gallery directors.[593] He then differentiates three types of consumers: fellow art producers, the elite or dominant class, and the "popular" or ordinary consumers.[594] I began my analysis of the nationally circumscribed fields of art in South Asia at the center of a gradual shift that started during the

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592 Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 35.
593 Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 37.
594 Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 50–51.

British colonial rule and continues until today. This shift pertains to the circumscription of art practice from an enclosed, private field, preserved through family legacy and elite patronage to a more broadly accessible field, located almost exclusively within public institutions until the 1990s. The early art field was firmly controlled by the existing socio-cultural structures and the financial flows ran along the power hierarchies, through the patronage of religious and political elites (often in close relation to the British) to the artists in their service. The elites were the main consumers of art, and they became the main providers of access to education. The public education institutions that existed, such as Juddhakala Pathshala in Kathmandu or the Government School of Art in Kolkata, reflected this investment.[595] With the abolition of the Ranas in Nepal and the Partition of India in 1947, the control of the infrastructure was taken over by the new national governments. In terms of art consumption, however, a vacuum arose. The popular masses have not been recognized as consumers of art by many of its contemporary producers. The absence of art in public education in Nepal, the century-old almost exclusive relation between art and religion, as well as the association of art production with lower castes are possible reasons for the ordinary consumers' reluctance to recognize the value of (secular) art. In Bangladesh, my interlocutors suggested the emphasis of non-figurative art within the majorly Muslim population, as well as the outmigration of the educated and affluent strata (to India or Pakistan in 1947 and 1971, and after that, to the US, the UK, Singapore, or Bangkok) as possible explanations. The only type of consumer that remains, as the third quote from the Interlude suggests, are the producers of art themselves: "We have artists, but we don't have the other factors." The economic boom in Bangladesh and rising spending power of the urban middle classes in Nepal (notably driven by the large share of remittances in Nepal's GDP),[596] have brought new consumers to the forefront.[597] Many artists hope that the increased spending power of the middle classes will go hand in hand with a growing interest in secular art. These shifts could have a great impact on the artistic field. So far, there is little to no qualitative research on the economic power of the middle classes in Nepal and Bangladesh that would allow me to form a stronger argument here. Instead, I focus on the artists' proactive attempts to connect to potential consumers of their artworks by working with the existing

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595 Both schools were established by the socio-political elites and literally bore the name of their patrons. Juddhakala Pathshala was established by Prime Minister Juddha Shumsher at the beginning of the 1940s. The Government School of Art was renamed after the government took over control of the hitherto private industrial school in 1864. Chitrakar, *Tej Bahadur Chitrakar*, 40; Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 143.

596 Sailesh Tiwari, *Moving Up the Ladder: Poverty Reduction and Social Mobility in Nepal: Overview* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, 2016), 14, accessed September 17, 2018, http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/171641467117954924/.

597 Liechty, *Out Here in Kathmandu*.

mediating infrastructure and, increasingly, by themselves initiating formats that allow for this connection.

While the education institutions, similar to the family legacies and elites in earlier times, provide artists with the necessary knowledge to recognize the value of art, artists largely perceive the agents that could generate a symbolic production of art within the wider public today (galleries, curators, art writers) to be lacking or absent. This is evident from the quotes in the Interlude: "We have artists, but we don't have the other factors"; while my interlocutors affirm the ongoing material production of art by the artists, they refer to the agents or infrastructure involved in the symbolic production of art in India and in the "West" as absent or inadequate in their own field. The last quote mentions the absence of the market and a proper gallery system explicitly. The first quote emphasizes that there are practicing artists, but the "other factors that play a role" are missing. The second interviewee focuses on the insufficiency of the existing institutions, and the third deplores the lack of mediation to bring art to the wider public.

Early signs of contemporary artists venturing into mediation are visible in the initiatives of the artists who returned from studies abroad in the 1960s and 1970s. The artists' engagement with mediation became more prominent in the twenty years that followed, with the establishment of the national academies and the first galleries. While artists played a big role in establishing and shaping the national academies, the initiative and the conditions often came from the state. The galleries on the other hand were mostly initiatives by individual artists from within the field attempting to connect it to the outside, either by growing audiences or by establishing connections to buyers and collectors abroad. The artist collectives that formed in the 1990s are the driving force behind the current infrastructural renegotiations in the field. Sutra, Britto, Drik, and PC emphasize the symbolic production of art and actively focus on overcoming the boundaries that have dominated the field. They draw socio-cultural and political issues into the field by making them the topic of their work. Moreover, they proactively seek to change these fields through their activities. In Bourdieu's terms, they actively challenge what they perceive as the autonomous position of the field of art.[598]

Mediation and thus also the circumscription of what contemporary art is grows from a tension between these different actors active in the field: public, private, collective, and artist-led. This is a tension more than a clear-cut distinctness, as the field is modest and thus dependent on dynamic

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598 This is based on Bourdieu's argument of the field of cultural production as the site of a double hierarchy. In this argument, the field's existence hinges on the balance between a heteronomous (as completely subject to external laws of economic and political profit) and an autonomous (as completely autonomous from these laws) principle of hierarchization. In my case, the quotes from the Interlude, in particular "We have artists, but we don't have the other factors," suggest that the field of art in Nepal and Bangladesh is considered disproportionately autonomous, i.e., disconnected from other fields. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 38.

positionings. The majority of actors are involved with multiple institutions over the course of their career, often simultaneously. Further, as I stated above, the difference between public and private is often not clear-cut. In relation to access, public institutions suggest an openness to diverse users.[599] But access to public space, especially in Dhaka, is shaped by religious, gender, and class belonging as well as being contingent on cultural and social capital.[600] Ownership, control, funding, and censorship are other important factors in the private–public dichotomy. However, neither the financial substructure, nor the rules of access, allow me to fully circumscribe the institutions I encountered. Consider for instance the Siddhartha Art Gallery, which is located at Babar Mahal Revisited in Kathmandu. The former private Rana residence was converted into a high-end shopping complex. Technically, the locality corresponds to a public space, accessible to all those interested in spending money. Yet the security guards at the entrance, as well as the expensive-looking stores and restaurants, emit a rather distinct message about the type of consumers that are (un)welcome. Furthermore, the Siddhartha Art Gallery itself was established from a private initiative. It is run by its founder Sangeeta Thapa, but is located in a rented space. Because the private–public distinction does not offer additional analytical value, I propose to look at the institutions through their (intended) scope of action. Which connections do they establish for themselves and for other actors in the field? Are they reacting to needs from within or outside the artistic field?

INDIVIDUAL EFFORTS FROM WITHIN THE FIELD OF ART

J. J. School of Art graduate Rama Nanda Joshi established Park Gallery in the 1970s as a way to break with both the then current abstract painting and the static understanding of art promoted at Juddhakala Pathshala. Rather than the practice of still lifes and the copying of old masters common in the classrooms, Joshi advocated for watercolor painting *en plein air*. His son Navin Joshi explains that Joshi started to develop his own curriculum, "but that did not get implemented from the art institutions and the government."[601] As a result, Joshi began by teaching art students from his private room at New Road in central Kathmandu. From there, his initiative slowly expanded; "finally he ended up initiating the Park Gallery. He probably realized it is not just the education, there is a need for an exhibition space as well."[602] Joshi's strategy is reminiscent of many origin stories I listened to during my research. In the majority of these stories, two elements recur: first, the initiators are driven by a specific need that they discovered through their own presence in the field. Often, this need arises because

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599 Zukin, *Naked City*, 282.
600 Hackenbroch, *Spatiality of Livelihoods*.
601 AR, NJP / NJ, May 2014.
602 AR, NJP / NJ, May 2014.

the institutions that the initiators believe are necessary for the development of the art field are either absent or lacking. Second, the establishment follows a slow-paced process, based on the subsequent addition of separate building blocks. My research partners often mention these blocks in direct relation to the availability of economic resources, knowledge, and manpower.

Shahidul Alam started Drik by setting up a darkroom and a studio. To this, he gradually added other elements: first a gallery and a library, then the Pathshala South Asia Media Institute, the Majority World agency, and *Chobi Mela (CM)*. Every single component grew from a need within the field and was based on the availability of the necessary capital. The Drik gallery grew from the fact that both private and state-owned art galleries in Dhaka did not provide exhibition space for photography. When denying photographers their space, they argued that "photography is not art" (i.e., photography is not part of the Charukala's curriculum) or that the political nature of documentary photography often causes censorship issues that they do not want to trouble themselves with.[603] Both Park Gallery and Drik Gallery grew from their private initiator's objective to transgress existing boundaries of technique (such as Joshi's focus on still-life painting) or of medium (such as Alam's wish to create a space for photography) and directly targeted the artists practicing in the field.

In our interview, Sangeeta Thapa, the founder of Siddhartha Art Gallery, explains that she discontinued her studies in art, mass communication, and anthropology to return to Nepal to follow her family responsibilities. After getting married and settling in Kathmandu, she wanted to be involved in the art field. Together with artist Shashikala Tiwari, she opened a small gallery in Kantipath (1987). Her main incentive stemmed from the observation of what she calls an "*afno manche* culture" in Nepal. "That means 'my person,' 'my group,' 'my coach.'"[604] She elaborates that this culture causes artists to be selected for exhibitions as a result of favoritism and sycophancy, rather than because of the quality of their works. In contrast to this culture, Thapa wanted to open a gallery that shows "the best," a gallery that could give opportunities to artists based on their creative, not their social, merit, she explains.[605] Like the previous examples, her initiative did not conclude with the establishment of the gallery. Over the past two decades, Thapa's initiative has grown into the Siddhartha Art Foundation which operates on many scales, from organizing the *Kathmandu Trienniale* (formerly *Kathmandu International Art Festival*) to managing an education initiative for young artists.

Private initiatives like Sangeeta Thapa's from within the art field are not limited to spaces for exhibition and advanced training. They also include art writing. In the broadest sense, art writing includes any kind of writing

603 AR, SA, September 2015.
604 AR, ST, August 2013.
605 AR, ST, August 2013.

about art, most notably art or exhibition critiques, but also catalog texts, artist statements, curatorial notes, biographical accounts, and research into the local and regional art history. Together, these written formats contribute to the discursive or symbolic production of art. I briefly mentioned the personal endeavors of artists Madan Chitrakar, Mukesh Malla, and Saroj Bajracharya in compiling information about the art field in Nepal. In his book on *Nepali Art*, Chitrakar explains that in his opinion, only people possessing the knowledge of the "workings" and "basic fundamentals" of art (i.e., the necessary cultural capital) are able to "interpret" and "demystify" it; as an artist, he feels he possesses this knowledge.[606] From personal conversations with Chitrakar, I know that this assertion contains a critique of the current writing on art. His point is that the short articles and exhibition reviews in the daily newspapers often exhibit a rather superficial knowledge of cultural production. They describe works by quoting artist statements, but do not offer commentary, critique, or interpretation. Despite their wide readership, they do not make the values and norms of art accessible to outsiders of the field. In our interview Chitrakar concludes that "in Nepal, forget about writing in English. There is even a lack of good writers in Nepali."[607] When he travelled to Bangladesh for the *Asian Art Biennale*, he was fascinated by the amount of art writing in Bangladesh: "When I saw that—as a writer I was shocked to see that so many books, publications about art. ... You can see writers over writers over there."[608]

The Bangladeshi art field has been comparatively well researched and documented. However, to a large extent, the available Bengali and English publications pertain to the modern masters, who like Zainul Abedin or Quamrul Hassan were born in the first half of the twentieth century.[609] The only available written sources about artists working after the 1990s are exhibition catalogs. Two important exceptions are *Jamini*, the first international arts quarterly in Bangladesh, in print since 2003–2004 (less regularly

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606 Chitrakar, *Nepali Art*: *Issues Miscellany*, vii.
607 AR, MC, September 2013.
608 After his studies at the Sir J.J. Institute of Applied Art (Mumbai), Madan Chitrakar pursued a masters of ancient history and culture at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu. He then worked for several ministries, including the Ministry of Tourism in Nepal (1974–1999). This capacity, as well as his post as chairman of the Artists Society of Nepal (1992–1998), allowed him to travel internationally. He elaborated for instance that during his visit to the *Asian Art Biennale* in Bangladesh in 1995, he met Lipi and Rahman and invited them to Nepal to take part in an exhibition at the Ministry of Tourism. AR, MC, September 2013.
609 Shilpakala Academy has published sixty-seven books (listed up to 2009) on the topic of art, including an "Art of Bangladesh Series" on the Bengali masters, a "Contemporary Art Series" on artists born in the first half of the twentieth century, and the catalogs of the *Asian Art Biennale*. Shilpakala's publications can be found in the comprehensive inventory list of its libary: "List of Books Collected at Library," Shilpakala Academy, updated March 3, 2020, accessed June 26, 2022, http://shilpakala.gov.bd/site/publications/8ae56f24-018b-44ec-a9a6-bd2530b6fa42/-. The Bengal Foundation also produced several books on the "Great Masters of Bangladesh," however their overall publishing focus is on poetry and history. "Home," Bengal Publications, accessed February 15, 2021, http://www.bengalpublications.com/.

after 2009) by the Bengal Foundation, and *Depart*, a biannual magazine on contemporary art, in print since 2009.[610] When I meet Mustafa Zaman, a graduate of Charukola and the editor of *Depart*, his assessment emulates and at the same time contradicts Chitrakar's perspective:

> The reason I turned to art writing was because of the dearth of art writers in Dhaka. So I started out as a Bangla writer at first and then I realized that no, we need to broaden the horizon. Because people from outside need to acknowledge what is going on in Dhaka art scene.[611]

Both writers share a critical view of their fields and of written engagement with art. While Chitrakar admires the amount of publications in Bangladesh, Zaman perceives a "dearth" of writers in his country. The perception of this "lack" of art writing pushed both artists to venture from the production of art, the "artmaking" as David Carrier calls it,[612] to contribute to the symbolic production through writing.

These initiatives are primarily driven by the pressing lacks that individuals have identified while working in the field: Rama Nanda Joshi called for a dynamic and immediate engagement with nature through watercolor and outdoor painting; Alam intended to create a space for contemporary photography in the field of art production in Bangladesh; and Sangeeta Thapa aimed to raise the value of cultural capital above that of social capital. Underlying these strategies is the will to connect to audiences, to open the artistic field to outsiders, and thus broaden the reach of the artists and their work. The initial focus is often rather small (art students, photographers), but gradually grows from there. Both Alam and Thapa started from a small studio / exhibition space and now host international art festivals: *CM* and the *Kathmandu Triennale*. This tendency to expand, to change their positions within the field, and to create platforms for others to change also pertains to the art writers. As Zaman explains, while writing in Bengali allowed him to critically mediate between contemporary art and the public in Bangladesh, writing in English allowed him to reach a broader readership, outside the regional frame. This scope of action is furthered by the online publication of the articles in the magazine. Media or vehicles of information transmission, such as the English language and digital media, play an important role in mediating art to larger publics. I will discuss these in detail in the last chapter.

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610 Both English-speaking magazines have ceased regular publication at the time of the publication of this book. *Jamini* used to be accessible online, but the site is no longer active. The Bengal Foundation still lists it among its publications: "Jamini," Bengal Foundation, accessed June 26, 2022, https://bengalfoundation.org/jamini/. Although *Depart* is no longer published, old issues can be accessed through the homepage: "Home," *Depart*, accessed April 25, 2022, http://www.departmag.com/index.php/en.

611 AR, MZ, September 2015.

612 Carrier, *Artwriting*, 79.

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS AND THE (INTER)NATIONAL SCALE

On the surface, the public art infrastructure in Nepal and Bangladesh is not very sizeable. Moreover, it is not able to fulfill my research partners' expectations of economic and cultural support: it does not establish access to the art market or provide research on local art history, for instance. In fact, there are quite a few public institutions: During my research in Nepal, I visited the National Museum in Chhauni,[613] the Patan Museum, the National Art Gallery in Bhaktapur, and the Hanuman Dhoka Palace Museum. In Bangladesh, I visited the National Museum in Dhaka and the Varendra Research Museum in Rajshahi. While these institutions attract a large number of visitors, they play only a marginal role in the contemporary artists' creative practices. There is a general acknowledgement of their existence, but to my observation, artists do not further engage with them, presumably because they are perceived as passive repositories of culture rather than as potential actors in the field. A recent exception is the Patan Museum, which became a partner for PC during the 2015 *Photo Kathmandu (PKTM)* festival. This collaboration will be subject to a closer analysis in chapter five.

The public institutions that the contemporary artists engage with on a regular basis are the national academies. The national academies serve as an interesting case study, as their operating structure is unique to South Asia. In the European context, academies have been associated with the purpose of teaching since the sixteenth century.[614] Neither NAFA nor Shilpakala ever included a teaching component. Instead, the academy's role in South Asia is honorific, administrative, and mediative, as the chancellor of NAFA explains.[615] In 2013, the main body of NAFA was located in Naxal (Kathmandu). It was housed at Sita Mahal, one of the few remaining Rana palaces in the Kathmandu valley, and built under Bhim Shumshere Jung Bahadur Rana, Prime Minister of Nepal from 1929–1932. In 1965, then Crown Prince Birendra, himself an artist, donated one part of the former palace to the artists of Nepal and set the foundation stone of the Nepal Association of Fine Arts with artist Lain Singh Bangdel as its first treasurer. The association's main agenda was to organize a yearly, national art exhibition. When Birendra became king in 1972 "problems started," as one of my interviewees noted.[616] They allude to the fact that the art association was subordinated to the literature wing of the Royal Nepal Academy

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613 On the National Museum in Chhauni, see fn. 469.

614 The first *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* was founded in Paris in 1648 and the format has subsequently spread through many countries around the globe. The institution lost its importance over time, especially since the establishment of alternative art education institutions in the mid-twentieth century. Nevertheless, its teaching methods, canons, and curricula often remain valid until today. Humphrey Wine, "Academy," in *The Dictionary of Art*, vol. 1, ed. Jane Turner (New York: Grove, 1996).

615 AR, RU, December 2015.

616 AR, A, 2016.

resulting in economic disadvantages and land ownership disputes. Only in 2010 did the government grant a long-running demand by the Nepali artists for an independent Academy; the Nepal Association of Fine Arts was replaced by NAFA, housed on the disputed land of Sita Bhawan.[617] As mentioned in the introduction, its most popular activity is the *National Exhibition*, which accepts entries from all over the country along the categories represented by the different departments: Folk Art, Handicraft, Painting (which includes the categories contemporary and traditional painting), Sculpture (which includes the categories contemporary and traditional sculpture), and finally, Architecture, and Other Creative Arts (which includes the categories installation, performance art, and photography).[618] Unfortunately, the building was severely damaged in the earthquake in April 2015 and deemed unsafe to enter. The administrative body of NAFA continues to exist without a permanent building, but the government organization did not restart its cultural programming in Kathmandu until the end of my fieldwork period. My observations thus largely refer to the time prior to the earthquake. The Shilpakala Academy is NAFA's counterpart and, by a Memorandum of Understanding signed on June 21, 2016, also its government-level partner-institution in Bangladesh.[619] Shilpakala is Bangladesh's official, state-sponsored cultural center, established by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and run under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. It is currently located in a vast multi-building complex (including a theater hall, art gallery, conference rooms, and auditoriums) at Segunbagicha in central Dhaka. Like NAFA, it organizes a yearly *National Exhibition*, and since 1981 it also organizes the *Asian Art Biennale*.[620]

In my interviews, assessments of the academies, such as that of Interlocutor II, most often point to a disconnect between the needs and values of the emerging contemporary artists and the programs organized by the academies: "they are doing nothing for this generation."[621] On a general level, the academies' activities and outcome are perceived as too limited, inflexible, and static. This is primarily a reflection of their physical constancy, i.e., the monumental buildings they have occupied consistently, and their bureaucratic and administrative political structure, which often

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617 AR, A, 2015.
618 Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, ed., *4th National Exhibition of Fine Arts 2014* (Kathmandu: Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, 2014).
619 "Nepal, Bangladesh Sign MoU on Cooperation in Fields of Arts and Culture," *The Kathmandu Post*, June 21, 2016, accessed June 21, 2021, http://kathmandu post.ekantipur.com/news/2016-06-21/nepal-bangladesh-sign-mou-on-coop eration-in-fields-of-arts-and-culture.html.
620 Interestingly the organization of the first Biennale also goes back to the private initiative of an artist, Syed Jahangir. In her essay for *post*, an online resource of The Museum of Modern Art, *Dhaka Art Summit* curator Diana Campbell Betancourt retraces how Syed Jahangir made use of his worldwide network of artists (including Lain Sigh Bangdel from Nepal) to establish Asia's first Biennale in Dhaka. Betancourt, "Entry Points."
621 AR, A, 2014.

causes protracted negotiations running through several hierarchically organized levels.

> It is like this, the people who are actually in the government sector, representing from the art, they are not updated. They don't know how art is functioning. And how art should function.[622]

> Within Bangladesh, opportunities for experimentation and innovation are rather limited. We do not have enough information about international contemporary art practices. While our Government Academy is doing its best to provide a forum for the artists, it is limited in its resources and ideas and is unable to cater to the more experimental demands of younger generation artists.[623]

These statements—the latter taken from a catalog of the first Britto International Artists' Workshop in 2003—emulate the general critique of the academies as being too limited and too static. But they also introduce more concrete issues. First, they ascertain the academies' lack of knowledge about, or their failure to accurately deal with, changes in the art field on scales other than the national; that is, they are not updated. My research partners often use the example of new mediums to make this point. Within the organizational structure of NAFA and during the national exhibitions for instance, new mediums are shuffled together and subsumed under the header "Architecture and Other Creative Arts."[624] Similar to the situation in the fine arts institutes, this inclusion shows that new mediums have been recognized as part of the contemporary art practice, but in comparison to painting and sculpture—which warrant their own contemporary and traditional departments—they are marginalized within the overall program. Another issue is insecurity over the circumscriptions of new mediums. One artist for instance recounts a comment by one of the judges at the national competition: This judge did not consider their submitted installation a "proper" installation, because it incorporated readymade parts. In the end, the work was exhibited, but its status as an installation remained in question.[625] Another artist explains that when submitting photography-based works to the *Asian Art Biennale*, one needs to "bypass the

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622 AR, A, 2014.
623 Tayeba Begum Lipi, "Preface," in *Britto International Artist's Workshop 2003*, ed. Britto Arts Trust (Dhaka: Britto Arts Trust, 2004), 3.
624 During the 2014 national exhibition at NAFA, the display was composed of folk art, traditional art, and handicrafts (together 133 works, 206 in 2015) on the second floor, contemporary painting (216 works), contemporary sculpture (twenty-five works, forty-two in 2015), traditional sculpture (eleven works, thirty in 2015), architecture (eight works, two in 2015), and other creative art, including installations, photography, short videos, and performance art (thirty-nine works, thirty-eight in 2015) on the third floor. Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, *4th National Exhibition of Fine Arts 2014*.
625 AR, A, 2016.

system." Despite Shilpakala's claim to have a photography department, "photography" is not among the mediums available for selection on the submission form; artists working in the medium need to get creative and "check other boxes."[626]

Another issue that often warrants criticism is the low quality of Shilpakala's display designs, especially during the national exhibitions and the *Asian Art Biennale*. Artists comment on the lack of proper curation—often as a result of alleged sycophancy—reflected both in a poor selection of artworks and in the absence of a coherent presentation concept. This also sets the Academy's exhibitions apart from privately initiated events, such as the *DAS* and the *CM*, which happen in the same premises. The political affiliation of the institutions and their personnel are considered another reason for the current situation: several of my research partners made allegations of favoritism, sycophancy, and the misappropriation of public funds.

Underlying many of these points is an asymmetry between cultural and social capital: My research partners have gained cultural and social capital by engaging in the art field—studying, graduating, continuously working on their art, and going to art events. Many of them observe that the positions within government institutions, however, are filled based on social capital alone; not only do the representatives of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and the Shilpakala Academy lack the cultural capital, knowledge, and values that the artists consider central to the field of contemporary art production, but they also were appointed based on their economic or political affiliations, rather than their connections to the artistic field. According to the artists, this explains why many of the state-based policies and programs do not reflect the actual needs in the field of art. Intertwined with this is the question of authority: Who gets to define (by setting the curriculums, by determining canons through control of research and publications), judge (in national exhibitions), and propagate (through programming) what contemporary art is? And which scale is targeted by these strategies?

The national academies, by name, consider and thus operate on a specifically national scale. The foundation of the art academies is rooted in the consolidation of the national governments of Nepal and Bangladesh; it represents their attempt to structure and leave their mark on the field of art. In Nepal, NAFA's predecessor, the Association of Fine Arts, was founded in 1965, only three years after the establishment of the Panachayat system, which affirmed the monarchy's absolute control. The idea of an association that circumscribes all practicing artists in Nepal matches the nationalist ideology of "one country—one culture" promoted by the Panchayat.[627]

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626 AR, A, 2015.
627 The Panchayat promoted a homogenous collective national identity, based on the Hindu religion, the Hindu monarchy, and the Nepali language under the moto *Ek bhāsā, ek bhes, ek des* (one language, one form of dress, one country).

Further, it indicates the benevolent but regulating power of the monarchy: Crown Prince Birendra was the chairman of the organization and an avid supporter of the arts. In 1977, the association was brought under the direct administration of the Royal Nepal Academy. NAFA is present in various districts of Nepal and the *National Exhibition* includes artists from all over the country. At the same time, the academy's controlling organs (the council and assembly) reflect the prevailing socio-cultural and political dominance of urban high-caste and Newar actors.

The Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy was established three years after the country's independence by Mujibhur Rahman. Rahman is often referred to as "father of the nation"—a narrative popularly promoted by the Awami League party, the current leader of which is none other than his daughter, Sheikh Hasina—thus marking his role in bringing about the independence from Pakistan. Shilpakala's primary aim remains "effectuating the uplift, growth and circulation of national culture and practice in accordance with national aspirations, and creating favorable conditions for their uplift."[628] The Shilpakala Academy Act exposes how the national aspirations take precedence over cultural production. Although it maintains that Shilpakala's scope of action should go beyond the national—the institution is supposed to "present the country's art to the people" as well as to send "cultural/artistic groups to foreign countries"—it reemphasizes the controlling power of the state: artists may represent the country outside its national borders "with the prior approval of the Government."[629] Lotte Hoek situates the governments' exercise of control through the institution of the Shilpakala in a "modernist enterprise" that promotes fast-growing development through innovation and novelty.[630] Shilpakala, as part of a larger set of institutions, is "a site set apart for the expression of, and indulgence in, progressive and modernist aesthetics" promoted shortly after Bangladesh's independence.[631]

The National Academy in Nepal promotes a similar rhetoric of modernization:

> We are all Nepalese, and we are the artists searching the Nepali identity in our artworks working in the Nepali soil. We had a group to create authentic arts and culture of this country. We are attached to this country, this soil and Nepali art. Thus, let's rise from our own area and let's be united to colour our motherland with arts. Let's

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628   Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, "Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy Act XXII," trans. The Heidelberg Bangladesh Law Translation Project, accessed June 20, 2021, https://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/workgroups/bdlaw/1989-a22.htm.
629   Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, "Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy Act XXII."
630   Hoek, "Mofussil Metropolis," 28–30.
631   Hoek, "Mofussil Metropolis," 28–30.

begin from today to make our nation cultured through the light of Nepali art.[632]

In this quote from the 2014 *National Exhibition* catalog, the head of the contemporary painting department Shanta Kumar Rai naturalizes the common ancestry and identity of the diverse Nepali people through a set of values expressed in the terms "soil," "authentic," and "motherland." These are combined with words such as "cultured" and "light" emulating ideas of enlightenment and modernity. In addition, he focuses on the artists' shared mission to "color" the nation through art fostered and supported by NAFA. Color is used as a metaphor for recovery and revitalization, and stands in for the rich, diverse, and beautiful culture of Nepal. On the one hand, the intent "to make our nation cultured" bespeaks Nepal's image as "elsewhere."[633] NAFA is aware of this image bolstered by the development industry, scientific lineages, and international media and turns to the national art and culture as a tool to produce a counter-narrative to this image. In order to do so, NAFA reverts to a primordial definition of identity: a nation built by a united superethnos that shares one common and authentic culture. This position becomes even more prominent in the painting department's mission statement, which reflects the Academy's acclaimed scope of action "from Mechi in the east to Mahakali in the West."[634] This phrase, as I mentioned before, is the first line from Nepal's new national anthem (2007). It comprises the national territory in a poignant but easily imaginable way. The complexity of the lingual, ethnic, religious, or cultural background of the Nepali population is transferred onto a geographical unity. Under the header of one authentic culture contained within a territorial unity, the idea of artistic diversity becomes a positive, valued characteristic.

Even when the National Academies of Nepal and Bangladesh engage in international exchange, for instance through the organization of SAARC Artist Camps or by handling the selection and transference of works to government-organized events, their operating frame is international, not translocal.[635] The operating mode of the *Asian Art Biennale* in Bangladesh offers an example for this:

When other biennales evolved, we failed, our *Asian Art Biennale* failed to evolve in the direction of curation and the other entanglement that come with staging, planning this kind of international

632 Shanta Kumar Rai, "Creation of Historical Artworks in the Nation," in *4th National Exhibition of Fine Arts 2014*, ed. Nepal Academy of Fine Arts (Kathmandu: Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, 2014), 1.
633 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.
634 Kumar Rai, "Creation of Historical Artworks in the Nation," 1.
635 SAARC Artist Camp is an annually held program for artists from the SAARC member countries that has been organized in alternating member countries since 2011 by the SAARC Cultural Center in Colombo, Sri Lanka. "Home," SAARC Cultural Center Sri Lanka, accessed May 5, 2021, http://saarcculture.org/.

biennale. We are sort of lagging behind. Now you have biennales in, I mean even in India, you have curators curating those shows. At least a big chunk of it is curated. So here … it is yet to be introduced. Curation and all the other entanglements that comes along with curation. You need to have gallerist with proper training in displaying the art.[636]

This quote focuses specifically on Shilpakala's flagship event, the *Asian Art Biennale*. When it was established in 1981, the interviewee elaborates, it offered a unique opportunity for young artists from Bangladesh to exhibit and experience experimental artworks from the region. Rather than building on this momentum however, the *Biennale* slowly began to lag behind subsequently established perennial events. Especially the biennales established in Gwangju (1995), Sharjah (1993), Shanghai (1996), Queensland (*Asia Pacific Triennial*, 1993), and most recently Kochi and Muziris (2012) were and remain important for the South Asian region. In Bangladesh, both the *DAS* and the *CM* have increasingly challenged the relevance of the *Asian Art Biennale*. The development of a system of professional mediators, proper planning, the focus on curation and display are seen as the main reasons for the discrepancy in the events' contemporary relevance by my interlocutors. Their assessment thus mirrors the quotes from the Interlude: "We have artists, but we don't have the other factors," where Interlocutors I and IV observe the development of diversified art worlds in other fields of art, and Interlocutor I uses the Western system as a reference. Interlocutor IV notably compares Bangladesh to its neighbor India, where artists can rely on a well-developed infrastructure. The asymmetry between the two countries goes back to the interconnected history of the art institutions and the political border demarcations in South Asia: Most modern masters in Bangladesh and India trained at the Government School of Art in Kolkata. Therefore, Interlocutor IV contends, they started from the same base. However, their careers took different paths when they decided or were forced to leave India during the Partition in 1947. Pakistan, and especially its eastern wing, as I have shown in the historical overview, did not inherit an art infrastructure that could support its artists. Zainul Abedin and his contemporaries successfully established Charukola, but the institute remained isolated, within and outside the art field.

This issue of isolation resonates with the contemporary generation's assessment of the existing infrastructure: in comparison to other fields of art, Nepal and Bangladesh are not connected, or better yet, not connecting. The symbolic production in which their main public art institutions engage is bound by the national border. At the same time, it very broadly encompasses categories of contemporary, fine, modern, traditional, and folk art, within a primordial narrative pertaining to a monolithic territory-culture entity. Inwardly, the national exhibitions lump together diverse

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636   AR, A, 2015.

practices, which, on an administrative level, are kept apart by different departments. Outwardly, exchange happens exclusively on a bilateral level and takes a top-down approach: the national frame is transferred onto the artwork and the artist. Artists are exposed to wider audiences while being clearly marked as Nepali or Bangladeshi. The academies reach a vast public outside the field of art. Additionally, they generate ample media coverage in the country's main newspapers, thus having a powerful impact on the symbolic production of contemporary art. Yet, this mediation is subject to the terms of the cultural work of the state. That includes the risks of tokenization, practices of censorship and exclusion, as well as political endorsement and sycophancy. Exchange only happens within state-sanctioned programs, where the political agenda risks taking precedence over cultural matters. The reason why contemporary artists envision a more professionalized and diversified field is because they believe it would support their activities in breaking with this static, monolithic, and introspective (national) system of symbolic construction. A professionalized system would support their efforts to build translocal relations with other art fields. It would strengthen their agency rather than reducing it to representing a nation's "authentic" culture.

ART FOUNDATIONS AS EMERGING TRANSLOCAL ACTORS

Two types of actors have been trying to offer infrastructural support and opportunities beyond the government scale. The first are the art foundations, which developed from individual energy in the broader field of cultural production, often paired with personal wealth and the will to support artists by catering to their needs. I already introduced the Siddhartha Art Foundation, which grew from Sangeeta Thapa's initiative. In the following, I will focus on the Siddhartha Art Foundation and the Bengal Foundation as two important players in the field. The Samdani Foundation constitutes a separate case study in the next chapter. Therefore, I only mention it briefly before moving on to the second type of actor increasingly engaged in mediation: the artist collective.

In the Bangladeshi art field, the Bengal Foundation has emerged as a powerful player in the past two decades. Initiated by Bangladeshi industrialist and entrepreneur Abul Khair in 1986, it aims to grow, proliferate, and conserve the art and culture of Bangladesh. Since then, the foundation has become an important actor boosting culture through diverse programs, such as the *Bengal Classic Music Festival* (since 2012), the Bengal Cinema Development Forum, or the Aranya Crafts unit, which promotes a revival of natural dyes. Due to Khair's own art collection, the foundation's visual art program, as well as its first gallery (est. 2000, Dhanmondi) centered on modern art from the region. In comparison to the nationally circumscribed state-sponsored institutions, the Bengal Foundation refers to the scale of the region by name. This name is no less deliberate; it evokes notions of the new-old Bengalee identity that pertains both to

a thousand-year-old ethnic identity, unifying people across the region of Bengal, as well as to the tool of middle-class nationalist aspirations under Pakistani rule.[637] Over the last fifteen years, the foundation has recognized a need to widen its focus beyond modern art and engage with the emerging contemporary practices. Bengal Foundation's acting director Luva Nahid Choudhury explains that she repeatedly visited the *Venice Biennale* and other art events and realized that "a little bit of guidance was necessary." In her opinion, there was not "enough knowledge about things" due to the lack of critical thought and writing in the field of contemporary art in Bangladesh.[638] One attempt to change this situation came through Bengal Foundation's own publication department, which launched the aforementioned *Jamini* magazine. It also supported Britto in producing the catalog for the Bangladesh pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* (2011). Further, there was a realization that "just running a commercial art gallery wasn't going to get you there at all."[639] Even the form of the gallery was questioned and a new type of space, "able to cope with the needs [of] contemporary practitioners as opposed to just paintings hanging on the walls," was established in the form of the Bengal Art Lounge in Gulshan, North Dhaka (2011).[640] From here, other needs arose: "we needed to go out and look for young artists, teach them how to do exhibitions, how to talk about their work, how to articulate their artistic concerns."[641]

This history emulates the building-block style of development of private initiatives like Drik or the Park Gallery. Yet, in contrast to these initiatives, the Bengal Foundation reacts to developments and needs in the field of art. It does not proactively initiate new perspectives in the way that artist collectives do. In comparison to the national institutions, however, the foundation has at its disposal private funding, which gives it enough flexibility to react to changes in the field of art more rapidly, be it through the creation of issue or genre related events, or by funding artists' endeavors. Moreover, acting director Luva Nahid Chowdhury and Bengal Art Lounge manager Hadrian Diez proactively gather knowledge, travelling to art events around the world and establishing connections with institutions inside and outside Bangladesh.[642]

It is especially this network encompassing locally, regionally, and internationally active artists, collectors, buyers, and other influential people that artists value in the Siddhartha Art Gallery's founder Sangeeta Thapa. Like the Bengal Foundation, over time Thapa realized that to be engaged in contemporary art requires more extensive infrastructure than a gallery

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637 Rahman, "Shahbagh"; Tripura, "Identity Grabbing."
638 AR, LC, September 2015.
639 AR, LC, September 2015.
640 AR, LC, September 2015. Bengal Foundation opened a third exhibition space, the Daily Star–Bengal Arts Precinct in May 2014. It is located in central Dhaka, at the Daily Star Centre, the seat of the largest English-speaking newspaper in Bangladesh (see chapter five).
641 AR, LC, September 2015.
642 AR, HD, August 2015; AR, LC, September 2015.

alone can offer. She has expanded her activities in order to support the work started through the gallery: In 2007, she and artist Celia Washington co-founded the Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Centre (KCAC), which offers bursaries, residency space, and a reference library to emerging Nepali and foreign artists. In 2009, she organized the first *Kathmandu International Art Festival* and, in order to safeguard its triennial reoccurrence, established the Siddhartha Arts Foundation (SAF) in 2011. Like Bengal Foundation director Choudhury, Thapa saw that contemporary artists needed support beyond the mere availability of exhibition space, and that to expand her support, she needed motivated and skilled people to assist her. In partnership with the Danish Center for Culture and Development (CKU), she started the SAF Education Initiative (SAFEI). This program brings in art professionals from around the world to train future curators and art managers in Kathmandu. Through this type of building-block expansion, both the Bengal Foundation and Siddhartha Foundation have established themselves as crucial actors, not only within, but also in-between the field of arts of Nepal and Bangladesh. While Sangeeta Thapa for instance facilitated the presence of Sunil Sigdel, Hit Man Gurung, and Nhooja Tuladhar at the *DAS* in 2014, the Bengal Foundation organized the exhibition *Upheavals* featuring seven artists from Bangladesh during the *Kathmandu Triennale* 2017 in Nepal.

Although the foundations have established themselves as close allies to the contemporary artists, able to cater to their needs much more effectively than the inert national academies, they are not devoid of contestation from the artists. Especially the centralization of very diverse types and roles of infrastructure under the head of one organization (or even a single person) warrants caution against the risk of monopolization: economically, socially, and in terms of symbolic production. One of my interview partners for instance suggested that due to Bengal's monopoly, other galleries could be discouraged from becoming or staying involved in Dhaka's art field.[643] Several interviewees explained that running a commercial gallery and simultaneously doing not-for-profit activities does not mix well; it not only confuses consumers as to the motives of the organization, but also hinders the establishment of sustainable artist-gallery-client relations. Further, economic profitability and support are often mutually exclusive. How the foundations deal with new mediums is a good example for this. One artist explains that they did not organize an exhibition for a long time because they "did not find any gallery supporting" their work.[644] Contemporary mixed-media pieces require substantial funds to produce. At the same time, they are difficult, sometimes impossible, to sell. Therefore, many galleries continue to focus on the classical and commercially viable mediums of painting and, occasionally, sculpture. These mediums are easy to install and do not require any special technical resources (such as projectors, storage space, and running electricity) or maintenance. While the

643   AR, A, 2015.
644   AR, A, 2017.

Bengal and Siddhartha foundations see themselves as close supporters of the contemporary art field, they also need to consider their own economic survival. Of the eleven exhibitions I visited at the Siddhartha Art Gallery during my research, eight were drawing- or painting-based, one focused on sculpture, and only two included installations.[645] Bengal Art Lounge was established to specifically cater to new artistic formats, like installations, video works or even performances, but Bengal Foundation closed the gallery in 2016, allegedly to concentrate on its non-profit wing. One possible alternative for both foundations and artists is to focus on art events. The artists' reaction to the galleries' limitations vary; some concede to the laws of the market and produce two-dimensional works to earn a living and others focus entirely on project- or event-based work. This also creates new asymmetries between artists who can and those who cannot afford to work only on projects and events. While both Siddhartha Art Foundation and the Bengal Gallery continue to explore diverse formats, even newer actors have entered the contemporary art field. The Samdani Foundation has successfully directed most of its attention to the *DAS*.

COLLECTIVE TRANSCULTURAL BROKERAGE AS A SPURRING FACTOR

The mobility in the art field of the 1960s and 1970s was contingent upon a rather small number of individual artists who possessed the necessary social, cultural, and economic capital to study, exhibit, or participate in programs abroad. The second interlocutor from the Interlude: "We have artists, but we don't have the other factors" explains that the young generation of artists active today go "frequently outside of Kathmandu" and "have formed very good groups."[646] While the interlocutor does not directly link these two characteristics, I see a correlation between an increasing mobility in the art field and the format of the collective. This mobility does not only pertain to movement in physical space, but also to the transgression of social and cultural boundaries, as well as to the transference of knowledge and expertise. The format of the collective allows artists to build alliances with like-minded artists. These alliances strengthen the agency of the individual artists: together, they can apply for travel or project grants, share economic resources to rent spaces or equipment, mediate access to scholarships, and share knowledge about developments in other art fields. At the same time, the collectives offer space to focus on individual development and practice.

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645 The exhibitions that included installations were outside the regular calendar of the gallery. The first was entitled *The Solace of Art* and resulted from a relief donation collected by a group of Bangladeshi artists (including Britto members) after the earthquake in April 2015. This donation allowed young Nepali artists affected by the earthquake to produce artworks, mentored by the Kathmandu Center for Contemporary Art (KCAC) and Bindu—A Space for Artists. The second exhibition was part of 2017 *Kathmandu Triennale*.

646 AR, A, 2014.

The collective is a platform to gather and share knowledge on art historical developments, as well as current trends. Many of the initiatives I have worked with, such as Britto, Sattya, Bindu—A Space for Artists (Bindu), PC, or Drik possess a reference library available to associated artists. Members feed into this repository by donating books they gathered during their travels. In the same line of thought, most collectives regularly organize presentations and talks by visiting artists or by members who participated in programs abroad, to share their experiences with the wider circle. During my summer 2015 fieldwork in Dhaka, Britto organized *Pixelation 4*, the fourth edition of a workshop series on new media art that started in 2012. The main aim of this workshop was to not only inform the local artists about new mediums, but also to share a specific know-how. During the workshop, Shariar Shaon shared his long-time expertise of working as a camera operator, editor, and projectionist. He assisted the participants in handling the multimedia equipment as well as the necessary editing software. I was asked to give a presentation on new media art and share my experiences from different art events in Nepal and Europe. Workshops like this bring together individually acquired knowledge from different perspectives and scales. They connect self-trained experts with amateurs and professionals. They focus on sharing, rather than on providing top-down training, as is generally done in art education institutions. Further, a large part of the workshops is dedicated to material practice and discussions of ideas, and experimentation with different concepts and materials. This dynamic design allows artists to remain informed about what is happening in other fields. In other words, it allows artists to develop their motility in the absence (or the company) of opportunities for physical mobility. Further, it allows them to experiment and thus find innovative, avant-garde ways beyond local medium restrictions.

Moreover, collectives actively draw on issues relevant to the political and socio-cultural field. They often situate their activities and practices within larger social movements, thereby engaging in a dynamic transgression of the artistic field's relatively autonomous structure. The participants of *1mile²* research the socio-economic conditions of inhabitants, the architectural neglect, and the environmental pollution in Old Dhaka. They not only reflect on these issues through their artworks, but proactively offer counter narratives to hegemonic discourses on heritage and preservation. As a whole, *1mile²* responds to the rising fundamentalism in Bangladesh and the monolithic compositions of Bengali identity. Projects such as *KK, 1mile²,* or *PKTM* engage with socio-political issues relevant to a wider public beyond the art field. They broker these issues back into the art field by making topics like the preservation of heritage, religious persecution, property seizures, or the effects of rapid urbanization relevant for contemporary art production. At the same time, they hope that their artistic engagement will foster a rethinking of the way related policies are being made. They aim for a cross-pollination between different fields.

Inwardly, collectives foster a sense of artistic commonality that is at the same time smaller and bigger than the national frame. On the one hand,

they connect to a specific type of artist: the contemporary artist. This artist engages with new mediums and uncommon techniques. They are curious to learn from and collaborate with traditional and folk artists, but as a way of pushing forward contemporary art rather than as a means of preservation. They push into spaces not commonly perceived as spaces of artistic production, like the city's streets, public squares, or the tight-knit neighborhood, but also question and reflect on the symbolic production and hegemonic portrayal of these different localities. On the other hand, the collective builds on the idea that this type of contemporary artist exists anywhere in the world and that there is knowledge to be gained from fostering exchange. Especially the international workshops started within the framework of the Triangle Arts Trust (Triangle) and subsequently the South Asian Network for the Arts (SANA) actively connected like-minded artists from different socio-cultural and national backgrounds. They promoted the idea of art as a connective force, not on national, primordial grounds, but on shared creative needs, energies, and visions. Britto co-founder Tayeba Begum Lipi accurately sums up this sense of commonality when she describes SANA as a formation that allowed the collective "to do things independently without being alone."[647] It allows enough freedom for the collectives to be autonomous, but enough connection to feel supported.

The spatial, socio-cultural, and disciplinary mobilities and the resulting transcultural brokerage fostered by artist collectives generate a symbolic production of art that breaks open the still Western-centric fine arts framework of the public education institutions, as well as the national framework promoted by the academies. In its place emerges an alternative reference frame of a multi-scalar contemporaneity. This frame increasingly delegitimizes the mono-scalar positionings of the national academies by opening spaces of encounter for experimentation, transgression, and transcultural, multilateral, and de-centered "contact."[648]

The state continues to use its administrative apparatus and its institutions to promote "national" values and its claim of sovereignty over a delimited territory. It also persists as an important regulator of movement, especially through visa and import/export regulations. The cultural work the state engages in to uphold the nation as a single object also extends to the national art institutions.[649] The exchange facilitated by the academies exclusively happens on a government-to-government scale in state prescribed and nationally circumscribed formats. As a result their programs often reproduce tropes of modernity and development. Art is used as a metaphor for national recovery, revitalization, and the richness of culture. It becomes a tool for a counter-position to the perception of the countries as "elsewheres" and "objects of developmentalist intervention."[650] Yet at the

647   Begum Lipi, "Extending and Expanding the Idea and Space," 172.
648   Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, 50.
649   Gupta and Sharma, "Globalization and Postcolonial States," 279.
650   Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 2.

same time, the conscription reifies the essentialist modalities upon which these perceptions rely. In a similar way, especially through the format of the national exhibitions, the academies portray themselves as a "contact zone" between diverse art practices, reaching from diverse mediums, such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance, to different genres, like folk crafts and so on.[651] However, they effectively keep these practices separate through their administrative compartmentalization. The artists' practice has to conform to one of these categories. Further, the national circum-scription prevents academies from being vertically connected; they remain unperturbed by trends and developments (new mediums or curation for instance) in the global art field. Likely their inflexible administrative frame and their often senior personnel are among the main reasons for their inertness, which contributes to their image as outdated and unsupportive of the contemporary artist generation. Nevertheless, the vast majority of my research partners interact with the national academies on a regular basis and many continue to believe it to be the government's responsibility to provide infrastructure. This position on the surface might seem incon-sistent, but it is part of the artists' strategy to expand their agency. There is no inherent contradiction between using the platform of the national academies to participate in exchange programs or national exhibitions that reach thousands of people each year and at the same time contesting the bounded notion of the nation they promote. This multi-positionality is one of the defining characteristics of the emerging contemporaneity. Another quality is the increased interest in arranging programs, such as work-shops, artist talks, art events, or exhibitions. Artists do not merely create paintings (or any other medium), they create contemporary art to further their position in the field, and they collectively organize activities to further the position of the art field within a wider set of fields. Moreover, the collec-tives try to foster equitable and mutual exchange between different scales. The contact they establish particularly with other artists corresponds to the type of "de-centered," "multilateral," and "intentional" artistic contact that Christian Kravagna describes.[652] Especially through the Triangle and SANA formats, the collectives have allowed artists and art professionals to be spatially mobile. Britto's participation in the *Venice Biennale* or Sigdel's presence at the *DAS* are direct outcomes of the growing interconnected-ness among artist collectives in South Asia. In the course of these activities, my research partners become incredibly skilled translocal brokers able to jump scale. Collectively, they give impulses to other actors, such as the art foundations, who have become valuable allies. The Siddhartha Founda-tion and the Bengal Foundation are important institutions which gradually adapt their supportive activities to the arising needs of the field. Especially the mobility and networking of their personnel allows them to remain on top of current developments. Nevertheless, the foundations also face

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651   Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 5–6.
652   Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, 50.

challenges, notably the pressure to counterbalance economic profitability and support. The economic resources necessary to support creative freedom, the transgression of mediums, the contestation of circumscriptions of locality and identity, and global mobility are often difficult to manage. The large-scale event has become one crucial avenue to deal with these challenges. Temporary but recurring formats allow organizers to punctually focus their energy and resources to generate momentum. If successful, these events are able to draw in large sums of money, generate large audiences for their localities and art fields, and give artists a platform to create more experimental works than those intended for the market.

Chapter 5

Connecting Art Events: Large-Scale Perennial Events as Platforms for Translocal Contact

> The community survived and flourished not because it was an autonomous "space" outside of the state, but more because its multiple scales cut across and interacted with the multifaceted bureaucracy.[653]

In his multi-scalar approach to migration in and from China, Biao Xiang highlights the conscious recourse to multiple scales of reach and activity as a critical strategy for survival and success.[654] Large-scale perennial art events are unique avenues for artists to demonstrate, strengthen, and expand their transcultural multi-scalar connections. These art events aim at bringing together people under the central motive of contemporary art or photography, they sustain group identity as contemporary practitioners, and strengthen this practice by generating audiences and consumers. Large-scale events are also settings for education about art; organizers offer accompanying workshops, guided tours for school-classes, and so on. Events like *Chobi Mela (CM)* or *Photo Kathmandu (PKTM)* help fulfil socio-cultural or political agendas, reaching from overcoming human or economic crises to branding localities for tourism. Moreover, art festivals are spaces for experimental practices aside from the art market; economic revenue is part of the agenda, yet social and cultural reasons (creative expression, entertainment, socializing, or generating a buzz) often take precedence. Art events are complex situations that involve long-term planning, an elaborate logistical management, and the coordination of diverse actors.

Anthropology's actor-centered approach and its methodology based on long-term engagement allow access to this complexity. Through my repeated fieldwork in Dhaka and Kathmandu, I was able to observe the localities before, during, and after the large-scale perennial events. This

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653 Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography," 288–289.
654 Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography."

span allowed me to examine how events are planned, executed, and how they influence organizers and localities over time. I participated in festivals initiated by artist collectives *(CM* and *PKTM)* and by art foundations *(Dhaka Art Summit* [*DAS*] and *Kathmandu Triennale)*. In the artistic field, both types of actors often complement each other, but events can also make potential power struggles visible. Which strategies do the different actors employ to reach wider (local and international) publics and consumers? How do they broker their localities, and in what ways do they transgress normative socio-cultural or disciplinary boundaries? Further, which new practices and actors are emerging alongside and through the events? The transcultural perspective allows me to look at the different qualities and scales of connections in-between the local and the global, and the center and the periphery. It directs my interest to the way events, motifs, aims, forms, and meanings are interconnected. Practically, it permits me to follow artists, ideas, and objects from Dhaka to Kathmandu and vice versa, and to discuss how they are experienced and reflected in the different localities.

This type of transcultural ethnography offers a compelling alternative to the totalizing framework of the "global contemporary," in which the large-scale exhibition is considered a flagship event.[655] Academic texts on large-scale perennial events written within this frame almost exclusively take a birds-eye perspective: the idea of a globally shared contemporary "without borders and without history" is made tangible and durable by the proliferation of large-scale art events as "global forms."[656] Newly emerging events are classified within the global "canon of exhibitions,"[657] wherein certain events are perceived as more important, more avant-garde, or more contemporary, while recently established or upcoming exhibitions need to first prove their ability to tie in with the global contemporary discourse.[658] Individual events in distinct places are often perceived as connected on a "global map"[659] or within a "global art calendar."[660] The "map" or "calendar" imagery highlights the dominance of the top-down perspective. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey argues that the perspective map,

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655 Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation," 70–73; Bydler, *Global Art World*, 244–245; O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 242–243; Belting, "Was bitte heißt ,contemporary'?"

656 See Ratnam, "Art and Globalisation"; Bydler, *Global Art World*, especially chapter two "International Exhibitions: The Art of Global Competition"; Thomas Fillitz, "Worldmaking: The Cosmopolitanization of Dak'Art, the Biennial of Dakar," in Belting and Binter, *Global Studies*; Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016); and all the articles compiled in Elena Filipovic, Solveig Øvstebø, and Marieke van Hal, ed., *The Biennial Reader* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010).

657 Biggs, "'Art, Money, Parties' and Liverpool Biennial," 42.

658 Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions," 438; O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 258; Thomas Fillitz, "Spatialising the Field: Conceptualising Fields and Interconnections in the Context of Contemporary Art of Africa," *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo* 15, no. 2 (2013): 22.

659 Bydler, *Global Art World*, 244–245.

660 Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed.

which was developed during the Renaissance period, represents the standpoint of a "seeing eye" of the individual.[661] Because this seeing eye looks at spatial representation from the outside / the top, the map brought a new quality of "objectivity";[662] it allowed the world population to be "located within a single spatial frame."[663] This "totalizing vision of the globe"—much like the frame of the "global contemporary"—admitted, appreciated, and analyzed "otherness" by inscribing it into its proper "place."[664] The global art map celebrates the diversity of the artistic field while also prescribing order to it. The map orders art events in space and ties them into a territorial network. The metaphor of the "global art calendar" creates a structure for time: existing local rhythms and practices are substituted for a "linear, homogeneous, continuous time."[665] Socio-cultural and economic asymmetries between center and periphery are flattened. At the same time, the center-periphery model is inscribed onto territory: in the center of the map are Europe and America represented by Venice and Kassel as the vantage point for "biennialisation," and the periphery covers the rest.[666]

The asymmetry between center and periphery is in fact less to do with space than with motility. Looking at art events from the perspective of the organizers, the center is not a biennial in Italy, it is a mobile swarm of "stars and starlets from the regional and global art scene,"[667] an "art jet set,"[668] a "cosmopolitan travelling audience"[669] that flocks to the events inscribed on the calendar / map. Many researchers and curators I quote above belong to this center of "usual suspects."[670] Due to their mobility, the "VIPs of the international pack of art tourists, critics, curators, artists, and media" become the "seeing eye" able to behold in its totality the map of the global contemporary.[671] And since they are the ones controlling most of the art discourse, their perspective dominates the field. Canclini distinguishes not only between a mobile center and immobile periphery, but adds a middle ground: "the proletariat jet set."[672] In contrast to the private jet set, who

661 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2004 [1989]), 246.
662 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 246.
663 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 253.
664 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 253.
665 Harvey, *The Condition of* Postmodernity, 253; Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1977]), 97; van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing," 651.
666 Oliver Marchart, "Hegemonic Shifts and the Politics of Biennialization: The Case of documenta," in Filipovic, Øvstebø, and van Hal, *The Biennial Reader*.
667 Christiane Brosius, "'Catching up' to the World: Positioning the India Art Fair," *Critical Collective* (2015), accessed August 19, 2022, https://criticalcollective.in/CuratorInner2.aspx?Aid=246.
668 Robert E. D'Souza, "The Indian Biennale Effect: The Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2012," *Cultural Politics* 9, no. 3 (2013): 308.
669 Belting, "Was bitte heißt 'contemporary'?"
670 D'Souza, "The Indian Biennale Effect," 308.
671 D'Souza, "The Indian Biennale Effect," 308; Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 246.
672 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*; based on Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Inundaciones, Las Artes Como Parte De La Cultra Visual Globalizada," Paper presented at the

cater to upper classes, leading institutions, and sustain the market, the proletariat jet set, to which I and most of my research partners belong, travel tourist-class, often depending on travel grants. The periphery that forms the counterpart of this mobile center, then, is not a geographical periphery. Rather, it is qualified by its fixedness in space and time. From the perspective of this mobile center, it is possible to conceive of the global art world as a "transcending of place":[673] the same formula, from the white cube to the festival map, in fact, the entire biennial structure, is seen replicated globally. The localities in which this formula is consumed, negotiated, and incorporated are perceived exclusively through its connections with the center—thus positioned at the receiving end. Moreover, their existence is intrinsically tied to the perennial rhythm of the festival. Dhaka is on the calendar of the global art world for a few days every two years when the *DAS* takes place. Events, whether the *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* or the *Yinchuan Biennale* in China, are encased as "temporary" and "locally organized" events that connect to global "networks."[674]

To the less motile audiences, who dwell in or near the exhibition localities, and whose only experience with large-scale art events is the one taking place in their locality, the diffusionist argument of the globally replicated format does not make sense. They are not able to compare the exhibition design in Kassel to that in Adelaide, as they have not seen either one. Similarly, for the organizers, their event forms part of a continuous daily, monthly, and annual program, even though they are usually part of the art jet set. Events are formed on the basis of and generate connections to multiple scales beyond the mobile center. These connections do not form ad-hoc when the mobile center arrives for the opening, and they do not vanish suddenly when it leaves even before the closing ceremony. The transcultural and actor-centered approach I take to my case studies shows that the social and cultural capital that makes such events possible needs to be nurtured over time; connections to local authorities, donors, and communities are rekindled or broken, discussions among artists, organizers, and supporters go on, are re-thought, or endlessly repeated. Further, the physical and socio-cultural transformations triggered by events are not limited to the duration of the event; they have short-term as well as long-term effects on the locality and its inhabitants.[675] In order to fully grasp the alternative contemporaneity emerging in(between) Nepal and Bangladesh, it is imperative to analyze these different qualities.

The anthropological literature on festivals complements my transcultural perspective on art events. It offers a nuanced approach to large-scale events, able to capture the diverse rhythms and asymmetries in their respective localities. Ute Hüsken and Axel Michaels argue that festivals can

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workshop Conflictos Interculturales, Centro Cultural des España, Mexico City, 2007.

673   Tsing, "Conclusion: The Global Situation," 464.
674   O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 244.
675   Mehrotra, Vera, and Mayoral, *Ephemeral Urbanism*, 38.

have diverse aims such as to "display and celebrate culturally valued goods and performances," to implement political agendas, or to bring people together under a central motive.[676] They also have diverse outcomes and produce (not necessarily intended) meanings. Festivals create and sustain group identity, but also visualize socio-cultural and political frictions; they are "instances of communication and community-building" and thus constitute part of the cultural public sphere.[677] They are spaces for "communal learning," while often also entailing the extraordinary consumption of food or alcohol.[678] Financial and material transactions are only one of many possible meanings that festivals engage.[679] The research on urban festivals, rooted in the framework of the "culture" or "creative industry" often reduces cultural events to their economic rationality or utility, and unilaterally focuses on their "branding strategies."[680] This focus is certainly related to the fact that many of the Euro-American festivals in focus in that literature are acting as part of a city council or government.[681] The organizers behind my first case study are not; they are themselves artists. Access to economic capital and locality branding are a part of the two events they initiated, but they are not the organizers' main objectives.

The first two Interludes introduce two large-scale perennial events: *CM* in Bangladesh and *PKTM* in Nepal. The two events are connected through a set of photographs from the Nepal Picture Library (NPL, est. 2011) which travelled from the 2015 edition of *CM* to the first edition of *PKTM* 2015 in Nepal (and in 2017 to *Unseen Amsterdam*). *CM* (*chobi*: the picture or painting; *mela*: crowd or assemblage) is a regular biennale for photography in Dhaka. It was initiated, as I have mentioned before, by photographer Shahidul Alam as part of a multi-layered project, today comprising the Pathshala South Asia Media Institute and Majority World. Since its inaugural

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676 Ute Hüsken and Axel Michaels, "Introduction: The Dynamics and Transculturality of South Asian Festivals," in *South Asian Festivals on the Move*, ed. Ute Hüsken and Axel Michaels (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013), 13.

677 Liana Giorgi and Monica Sassatelli, "Introduction," in Giorgi, Sassatelli, and Delanty, *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, 1.

678 Giorgi and Sassatelli, "Introduction," 9–10, 15.

679 Hüsken and Michaels, "Introduction," 13.

680 See Papastergiadis and Martin, "Art Biennales and Cities," 45; Comunian, "Rethinking the Creative City," 1158; Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*; Florida, "Cities and the Creative Class"; Bernadette Quinn, "Arts Festivals and the City," *Urban Studies* 42, no. 5 (May 2005); Richards and Wilson, "Impact of Cultural Events on City Image."

681 The "propagation narrative" that traces large-scale art events back to the *Venice Biennale*, the *documenta*, or the *European Capital of Culture* event assumes a mobility of formats and, in many cases, a similarity of underlying structures. The initiative for the creation of the *Venice Biennale* in 1893, for instance, came from the then mayor, Riccardo Selvatico, and was supported by the Venetian City Council. The *Biennale* has run through several forms of management since, the last being the restructuring of the *Biennale* as a Foundation in 2004. Nevertheless, Paolo Baratta, the current president of the *Biennale*, is a former minister. The *documenta* was initiated by artist Arnold Bode and is run by a non-profit corporation, but the city officials of Kassel and the government of Germany are firmly integrated in the structure.

edition in 2000, the festival has run regularly every two years, with its latest edition in February and March 2019.[682] Photographer NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati and graphic designer Bhushan Shilpakar have been frequent guests of *CM*. Through their platform photo.circle (PC, est. 2007) they have collaborated with the festival on several occasions and the idea of starting their own festival as a means of bringing together photography-related people in Nepal grew with those experiences. Following the 7.8 magnitude earthquake, which hit Nepal on April 25, 2015, they felt the need to finally realize their plan; the inaugural edition of *PKTM* took place that same year.

Using the NPL and the photographs that travelled from Dhaka to Kathmandu, I am able to discuss the multi-scalar, translocal connections that artist collectives form through the medium of photography between Nepal and Bangladesh. Both *PKTM* and *CM* are extraordinary platforms to build and sustain alliances with like-minded actors, as well as to promote the valorization of vernacular (hi)stories through the medium of photography. They are however also grounded in more ordinary day-to-day activities in the city and complement the work of established local institutions. In a sense, neither Drik nor PC are "collectives" in their current form: since its establishment in 1989, Drik has grown into a multi-layered organization. PC maintains a permanent office, paid staff, and takes on remunerative assignments—structures that resemble an institution more than a collective. Yet, both initiatives started from a need for collaborative action, and their role as cultural brokers, especially in dealing with their localities, is very distinct. This brokerage becomes visible in the way that the perennial art events are grounded in the localities in which they emerged; the choice of exhibition sites and the engagement of neighborhood communities for instance are intrinsic parts of the curation. Like many of the other case studies I have discussed, the festivals are part of a broader collective agenda to create alternative visualities to hegemonic urban and national visual discourses. This engagement of the local scale (notably the locality of the city) also separates the festivals from my third example.

The *DAS* was initiated in 2012 by the Samdani Art Foundation. Both co-founders, Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani are part of the upper-class jet set and have managed to establish themselves as socially and economically powerful actors in the art field in Bangladesh. Their position influences the way they conceptualize the *DAS*; it affects their branding and localizing strategies. Here, the anthropological literature on festivals comes to its limits. I return to Thomas Fillitz's explorations on the global art market to discuss how the organizers establish the *DAS* as a "luxury commodity" and a "privileged zone of communication" for the influential art jet set.[683] Although the *Summit*'s organizers clearly distance themselves from the

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682   The Drik team attempted to set up a festival in 1995, but due to a *hartal* (general strike) called by the then oppositional Awami League, they had to cancel the first edition.

683   Thomas Fillitz, "Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art," *Focaal* 69 (2014).

format of the "fair," as rooted in purely commercial "trade fairs,"[684] they operate under a "logic of glamour"; they cater to an upper class clientele by establishing contemporary art from Bangladesh and the region as a "luxury good."[685] This strategy allows them to broker cultural and social capital to Bangladeshi artists, as well as to foster disciplinary and spatial mobilities. The third *Interlude* focuses on Tayeba Begum Lipi's solo exhibition at *DAS* 2014. By zooming in on her work, and by extension the collaboration between Britto Arts Trust (Britto) and the *DAS*, I develop a more nuanced approach to the alliances between collectives and other actors. While these alliances can be mutually beneficial, they also bear a potential for friction, notably in relation to distinct claims to locality, power, and legitimacy in the field of art production.

Interlude: *Retelling Histories*

Early in the morning, we meet in front of the Drik offices in Dhanmondi. Another hartal has been announced for the day and the minivans will not be allowed on the streets of Dhaka, so the organizers of Chobi Mela *VIII have arranged for an alternative. At the meeting point, a parade of cycle-rickshaws awaits us. After friendly greetings, several cups of tea, cigarettes, and last-minute toilet runs, people break up into pairs and take their seats on one of the rickshaws. The mood among the guests and participants of the festival is light. The fresh air and the empty streets quickly turn this makeshift solution into a fun adventure. People start taking photographs and filming with their phone cameras. People on the street in turn wave at us, wondering what we are up to. The joyous mood carries on into the first exhibition venue, Beauty Boarding, where many more guests have accumulated.*

From here, we move on the Northbrook Hall Library in Old Dhaka (Fig. 10).[686] I know the building's outside from the 1mile² *festival that Britto organized in this area less than a month ago, but I have never been inside. It is the third day of the* Chobi Mela *"gallery visits"—a term that seems unapt to describe a large amount of people trying to squeeze into a tiny space filled with bookcases, chairs, and a large wooden table. Northbrook Hall Library, unlike the other* Chobi Mela *venues that we visited in the past two days—Shilpakala Academy or the Alliance Française—does not have bare, white walls. In fact, because of the heavy wooden bookcases that line the room, there are no walls to speak off. We are told the public library, which forms part of the Northbrook Hall*

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684 Bydler, *Global Art World*, 84.
685 Bydler, *Global Art World*, 86.
686 Ahmed, *Discover the Monuments of Bangladesh*. Northbrook Hall, locally known as Lalkuti (red house) for its red brick facade, was built in honor of Lord Northbrook's visit to Dhaka. He was the viceroy of India between 1872 and 1876. The building was initially conceived as a town hall, but its auditorium is used as a theater. The public library was added on the southeast side a few years later. Its impressive and rare book collection dates back to its foundation in 1882.

Figure 10: NPL and photo.circle, *Retelling Histories*, 2015. Chobi Mela, Noorthbrook Hall Library, Old Dhaka. Photo: author.

Figure 11: NPL and photo.circle, *Retelling Histories*, 2015. Chobi Mela, Northbrook Hall Library, Old Dhaka. Photo: author.

complex, is still used daily by the local communities who come here to read the newspaper. Today however the space is crowded with us strangers; most of the people to join the gallery visits organized by the Chobi Mela *team are either international festival guests or locals from other parts of town. They keep streaming in, trying to get a look at the photographs which are displayed on the wooden table in the middle of the room. From the photos, faces are returning their gaze* (Fig. 11).

    Retelling Histories *comprises photographs from private family albums as well as from formal studio portraiture, as I learn from the little blue pamphlet that is handed out to the visitors. The photos evoke the history of Nepal, its people, and their daily lives. They also reveal information about the development of photography. Many of the early photos show stiff poses that remind me of the close relationship between photography and portraiture painting in service of Nepal's Rana elite. Perhaps to establish if not social then visual equation? Or was it not simply a requirement of the technique? In its early stages, photography, like painting, did demand sitting still for a long time. Across the table and through time the poses become more dynamic as props such as guitars, flowers, and bikes enter the frame. Nepal's rising urban middle classes seem to have had fun experimenting with double exposures and poses taken from Bollywood movies.*

CONVEYING A "VISUAL HISTORY IN THE MAKING"[687]

Neither *CM* nor *PKTM* refer to any of the prevalent formats (biennale, fair, festival, blockbuster, or mega exhibition) by name. *CM* introduces the notion of the *mela*, which in Bengali refers to a "crowd" or "assemblage." It can be translated as "fair" or "exhibition," but is done so more commonly as "celebration" or "festival."[688] *Mela* is combined with *chobi*, the "picture" or "painting." *CM* thus refers to the medium of photography and the locality of the event through the conscious use of the vernacular. The name that the organizers chose for the festival is a direct extension of its central goal—to strengthen the material and symbolic production of photography. Rather than forming an autonomous event, both the festival's *raison d'être* and its meaning are firmly rooted in a set of local institutions. Each of these institutions, starting with Drik (vision) founded in 1989 by Alam, plays a specific role within the field. At the same time, they are bound by a broader objective: to inspire social change within Bangladesh and to overcome Bangladesh's position as "the other"—as an "elsewhere" to a modernized, developed "West."[689]

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687 Alam, "Our Visual History in the Making," 4–5.
688 See for instance Silke Bechler, "Kumbha Mela: Millions of Pilgrims on the Move for Immortality and Identity," in Hüsken and Michaels, *South Asian Festivals on the Move*.
689 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.

> Drik was set up as a movement. It still is. The idea of photography just happened to be the tool that we decided to use. Because it was such a powerful tool. Because it is such a powerful tool. But I knew that one person alone couldn't do it, you need warriors.[690]

The term "warrior" embodies the weight and significance of Alam's objective to inspire social change, as well as his commitment to fulfill it. While Drik serves as a platform to rally such warriors, and the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute as a way to nurture more, *CM* is the instrument to reach wider audiences, to educate, and to establish contact with like-minded people across geographical, cultural, and social boundaries. Although Alam introduces photography as an arbitrary tool, the medium's own entangled history makes it an intrinsic part of the movement in which the warriors are engaged.

While pursuing his education in Biochemistry and Genetics at the Universities of Liverpool and London, Alam became interested in photography. Over the years he built up a large network in the field, allowing him among other things to travel to and work in more than fifty-five different countries.[691] In our interview he explains that during these travels he realized that as a Bangladeshi he was being perceived as an "icon of poverty."[692] He traces this ascription back to the visual portrayal of Bangladesh in general. Dominated by white Western photographers, the image of Bangladesh was and remains rooted in a development discourse propagated by INGOs, NGOs, and Euro-American media alike. The desire to counteract this hegemonic gaze denotes the root from which Drik, and subsequently *CM*, were born. In the catalog for the first edition of the festival Alam situates the asymmetrical representation of Bangladesh in a wider postcolonial discourse and denounces the entanglement between the history of photography and the history of colonization.[693] He equates photography to "colonial propaganda" and points out that most early photographs of and in the region remain within colonial archives, i.e., under the control of the former colonizer. This assessment emulates other writings on the "voyeuristic colonial gaze."[694] In the introduction to *Photography's Other Histories*, Christopher Pinney alerts his readers to the "extraordinary circumstances of inequality (encompassing the range from cultural, political, and economic hierarchy to systematic genocide) that gave rise to the vast majority of the images inhabiting the

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690 AR, SA, September 2015.
691 For more biographical information on Alam, refer to his homepage: Shahidul Alam, "About Me," Shahidul News, accessed May 13, 2021, https://shahidulnews.com/who-am-i/./
692 AR, SA, September 2015.
693 Alam, "Our Visual History in the Making," 4–5.
694 Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*; Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

colonial archive."[695] Pinney describes the world in which Euro-American photography operated as "available to a detached gaze" and "amenable to mathematical regulation."[696] Emulating the role of the map and the calendar that I discussed above, the camera allowed the colonial power to organize, plan, and mold the environment and its subjects.

This totalizing, othering, or exoticizing gaze, which fixes the periphery in its place, has many parallels in the global media's manipulation of the "non-Euro-American world," as for instance Cathrine Lutz and Jane Collins show.[697] Starting from the example of *National Geographic*, they analyze the mechanism through which the "people of the third and fourth worlds" have been represented as exotic, idealized, naturalized, and sexualized.[698] The people of Bangladesh were seen through the lens of poverty and national catastrophes by white Western photographers who, due to their own mobility, established themselves as "primary spokespeople" of the immutable periphery.[699] For Alam, the only way to counter this top-down ascription is for Bangladeshis to become their own storytellers. The need for such storytelling warriors to fight against the hegemonic gaze led to the establishment of the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute in 1998.[700]

Photography remains excluded from the national field of contemporary art in Bangladesh; the medium is neither taught in fine arts departments nor represented by the Shilpakala Academy, despite it being named as a separate department in the 1989 amendment to the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy Act.[701] This exclusion represents another bias against which Alam's activism is directed. In our interview, he explains that the need to establish Drik gallery as an autonomous space for the display of photography was caused by the existing private or state-owned art galleries' refusal to exhibit the medium. Their reasoning was based either on the assumption that "photography is not art" or a fear of censorship issues.[702] This comment bespeaks the political values of democracy and of freedom of speech that drive Alam's activism. On his homepage, he traces back his self-understanding as a documentary photographer to his political engagement in the 1980s, and in several talks during *CM* VIII he alludes to his experience of numerous censorship attempts by government authorities over the years.[703] In every one of these talks he emphasizes

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695 Christopher Pinney, "Introduction: 'How the other half...'" in *Photography's Other Histories*, ed. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 8.

696 Pinney, "Introduction: 'How the other half...'" 12.

697 Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

698 Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, 89.

699 AR, SA, September 2015.

700 AR, SA, September 2015.

701 Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, "Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy Act XXII."

702 AR, SA, September 2015.

703 In the 2014 *DAS* panel on "Firsthand Perspectives on Developing Infrastructure for Contemporary Art in South Asia and its Challenges and Breakthroughs,"

that partners and sponsors of *CM*, including Brac Bank, Beximco, or Berger Paints are strictly forbidden to interfere with the selection of content and the organization of the event.[704] Alam's motivation to unveil socio-cultural and political inequalities and to inspire change have continued to guide his practice. His statement about the need for warriors also addresses the specific nature of photography that Alam circumscribes. He elaborates on this point in an article about the beginnings of his practice and initiatives in World Literature Today:

> The resistance came from many fronts. Painters felt we were an uncultured lot trespassing into their territory. Press photographers felt we were fuddy-duddy academics mired in theory. Salon photographers dismissed our work as our horizons weren't horizontal and our composition wasn't "perfect." But that never dented our enthusiasm.[705]

Alam's assessment of the situation of documentary photography addresses the boundaries between his own photojournalistic and documentary practice and other uses of the medium of photography. Initially, his practice was neither accepted as a part of the field of art production, because it was not subject to established aesthetic standards (as the fine artists and the salon photographers), nor was it taken seriously as a conveyor of news stories (as journalists or press-photographers), because it was too concerned with the politics of representation. Drik and Pathshala were set up as platforms to strengthen and promote a type of documentary photography situated between such aesthetic and theoretical concerns.

The establishment of *CM* was a way to further transgress the circumscription of both the field of art and the field of media production. Alam explains that he wanted to convey what was happening in photography around the world to the growing number of Pathshala students: "I knew I couldn't take the whole load of them in my suitcase to Europe. The way to be able to do it was to bring the festival to them."[706] Since its first edition

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Alam explained that during the first edition of *CM* the organizers were forced by the government to take down an exhibition in the National Museum. The exhibition entitled *The War We Forgot* about the 1971 war in Bangladesh had to be relocated to the premises of Drik.

704 Berger is a paint company based in India, with a wide presence also in Nepal and Bangladesh. BEXIMCO Group is the largest private sector group in Bangladesh; its ventures include pharmaceuticals, textiles, and energy. Brac Bank describes itself as a "profitable and socially responsible financial institution." It assists Brac, Bangladesh's largest non-governmental development organization, with projects all over Bangladesh and other countries in Asia and Africa. "Company Profile," Berger Paints, accessed May 13, 2021, https://www.bergerpaints.com/about-us/company-profile.html; "About Us," BEXIMCO, accessed May 13, 2021, https://www.beximco.com/#about; "About Us," Brac Bank, accessed April 25, 2022, https://www.bracbank.com/en/about-us/.

705 Shahidul Alam, "With Photography as My Guide," *World Literature Today* 87, no. 2 (March/April 2013): 136.

706 AR, SA, September 2015.

in 2000, the festival has been organized biennially. Every edition is framed by an overreaching theme, which guides the selection of works. The topics are instrumental to Drik's wider political and cultural activism; they are always narrow enough to speak to current socio-political issues and broad enough to relate to many different socio-cultural and political contexts. The first edition for instance was entitled "Differences Unframed" and put a large emphasis on the visual coverage of the war of liberation in 1971. This was particularly important because the majority of existing photographs on the war were published in foreign media, but were never shown in Bangladesh.[707] "Fragility" (2009) was dedicated to the frailty of things—the in-between spaces and the fleeting moments often unseen by the camera. The 2015 edition, which I discuss in more detail below, deals with the topic of intimacy. Through these themes, *CM* offers a platform for the connection of diverse localities and practices while staying relevant to the Bangladeshi context. According to its organizers, *CM* is a space where a wedding photographer from India, a war photographer from Australia working in Nepal, and a fine art student from Dhaka can come together, because their photographic works speak—in very different ways—about intimacy.

> *Chobi Mela* is an attempt not only to create an understanding of the present state of photography in the region, but also to deconstruct current photographic practices on the basis of wider influences, particularly that of globalization.[708]

This quote captures the diverse scales on which the festival operates. *CM* is set in the urban context of Dhaka, yet it implicates the photographic practice in Bangladesh, in the South Asian region, and engages with visual and socio-political discourses worldwide. The quote also alludes to the fact that, although initially focused on documentary and photojournalistic practices, the festival's potential to transgress medium boundaries has been inscribed in its objective from the beginning: on its homepage, *CM* is presented as the "biggest" and "first" "regular biennale" for photography in Asia. By using this vocabulary, Alam and his team situate the festival and its specific focus on photography in the sub-continent and the wider Asian context in Dhaka.[709] They challenge the hegemony of the "Western construct of the history of photography" in the field, by demonstrating that the "majority world" is not merely a subject in the work of Western photographers, but actively engaged in photography's symbolic and material

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707 Shahidul Alam, "The War We Forgot," in *Chobi Mela: Differences Unframed (Exhibition Catalogue)*, ed. Chobi Mela (Dhaka: Drik, 2000).

708 Alam, "Our Visual History in the Making," 4–5.

709 The first edition of *CM* in 2000 included bodies of work from Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and France.

production.[710] "Majority world" is a term coined by Alam in opposition to the notion "third world." It highlights the fact that, although perceived as "in third place," this world comprises the majority of the world's population.[711] It is an attempt to define this world through its cultural, intellectual, and social wealth, rather than through what it is lacking.[712]

The organizers repeatedly stress the importance of socio-cultural diversity, not only by being geographically inclusive, but also by showing works from "absolutely the biggest names in the world as well as upcoming students."[713] This policy offers a counter-position to the belief that quality hinges on seniority and international recognition, as is often the case in the art field. It allows *CM* to foster young talent and pay tribute to established artists. Moreover, and this is an issue that I will come back to more extensively in the section on forays, *CM* has fostered an opening up of creative rooms to wider audiences, thus overcoming possible socio-economic boundaries. Artists and consumers of art in Dhaka are primarily from educated, middle-class backgrounds. Most art institutions (galleries, education institutions, art centers) are located in the middle-class neighborhoods of New Dhaka. Although technically open to the public, deterring mechanisms (such as guards and security checks) limit access for the lower classes. In an attempt to break with this status quo, a mobile exhibition format has become the trademark of *CM*: in addition to the main venues, the works are displayed on the sides of rickshaw vans, accompanied by short explanations in Bengali script, that travel all over the city (see Fig. 12). First realized during the third edition, these vans aim to democratize access by engaging more people, especially those excluded by the often exclusive gallery system.[714] Another mechanism to facilitate access across both social and geographical boundaries is the free live broadcast of all lectures and artist talks through the *CM* homepage and its subsequent upload to social media platforms, such as YouTube.[715]

Moreover, due to their active engagement with the boundaries of the photography field over the past fifteen years, the *CM* organizers have managed to minimize the gap between photography and the mediums recognized as part of the fine art canon. The most visible effect of this development is that all major art spaces around New Dhaka have made their spaces available for *CM* exhibitions, from the Bengal Gallery and the

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710 Alam, "Our Visual History in the Making," 4–5.

711 Shahidul Alam, "Majority World: Challenging the West's Rhetoric of Democracy," *Amerasia Journal* 34, no. 1 (January 2008): 88–98.

712 "Majority world" is also the name of a photography agency co-founded by Alam in 2004 that works with photographers from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. "Home," Majority World, accessed May 13, 2021, https://majorityworld.com/index.php.

713 AR, SA, September 2015.

714 Shahidul Alam, "The Gallery Versus the Street," *South Asian Popular Culture* 5, no. 1 (2007).

715 *CM* has its own YouTube channel: Chobi Mela, YouTube Channel, accessed May 13, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCq1U9B3TxOYvFYik_L3sXwQ.

Figure 12: Janatul Mawa, *Close Distance*, 2015. Mobile exhibition
on rickshaw vans, Chobi Mela, Dhaka. Photo: author.

National Museum, to the Dhaka Art Center and the Institute of Fine Arts at Dhaka University. On a more subtle level, the practice of photography in focus at Drik and Pathshala has changed. Alam explains that there is a complementary relationship between *CM* and the institute since the festival's initiation; on the one hand, the students and graduates of Pathshala are the skilled people needed to organize the festival. On the other hand, the diverse genres, techniques, aesthetics, and styles of photography exhibited during *CM* inform the curriculum and the practice of the students. This interdependency has pushed photography beyond the borders of the initially prevalent documentary practice. The young generation of photographers experiments with more conceptual and abstract approaches to storytelling; students employ new aesthetics, such as overexposure or blurriness, or incorporate other materials and surfaces in their work. Moreover, the topics are changing. The display during *CM* 2015 shows that visual storytelling is no longer limited to political issues, in the strict sense of the word. Contemporary works engage with a broad spectrum of motives, from mental health and suicide ("Fatalistic Tendency" by Tushikur Rahman) to the connection between humans and animals ("A Pause to Breathe..." by Tapash Paul) and middle class women and their housemaids ("Close Distance" by Jannatul Mawa). The invitation to Britto member Shimul Saha to teach methods from the fine arts education at Pathshala that I discussed in chapter three is a further expression of this rapprochement.

On its homepage, *CM* claims to have "become one of the highlights of the Asian calendar." On the surface, this self-portrayal conforms with

Enwezor and Bydler's argument about large-scale group-exhibitions from the periphery wanting or needing to connect to a global network:[716] *CM* establishes its value within the canon of international festivals and marks its presence on the calendar. However, this branding is more than a claim for legitimacy or a will to globality. The event marks itself as a platform to create and sustain a shared identity as photographers from the majority world. From this platform, photographers can build a counter-narrative to the twofold bias against photography: its marginalization by the white Western gaze and by the local fine art institutions. Through *CM*, and in extension all of its related institutions, photographers are able to broker their stories and their ideas and perspectives on socio-cultural and political issues to diverse audiences, from visitors of the arts centers in New Dhaka to the inhabitants of the mobile vans' destinations. *CM* thus represents a space for communication and the building of a community around the medium of photography.[717] The festival carries the political message that Drik embodies; it counters hegemonic practices of representation by giving photographers from the majority world the opportunity to create and share their own stories. The festival is a platform for contact between like-minded contemporary practitioners and consumers interested in vernacular visualities across socio-cultural and geographical boundaries. *CM* conveys "a visual history in the making" while also shaping a community of photographers.[718]

FORAYS INTO THE CITY

In the frame of *CM* VIII, the works of forty-one artists from Bangladesh and abroad are exhibited in eleven venues in New and Old Dhaka. The venues in New Dhaka include more classical, white-walled gallery spaces (such as the Daily Star–Bengal Arts Precinct, the Drik Gallery, and Britto Space) as well as outdoor spaces (such as Bokultala, a section of the Charukola campus). It also includes the nationally framed spaces of the National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts (Shilpakala), the Bangladesh National Museum, and the Gallery of the Alliance Française (the French cultural center). The Shilpakala Academy, which hosts most of Dhaka's larger-scale art programs (such as the *Dhaka Arts Summit* and the *Asian Art Biennale*), is the biggest venue with the works of twenty-eight artists on display. Most of these New Dhaka venues have been used in earlier *CM* editions, with two exceptions: the Daily Star–Bengal Arts Precinct (Bengal Foundation's third gallery space in the city), which was only established a year prior to the 2015 edition, and Britto Space. The decision to include the latter was a direct result of Britto co-founder Mahbubur Rahman's appointment as a guest curator for the eighth edition of the festival. Rahman's first curatorial collaboration with

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716 Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions"; Bydler, *Global Art World*.
717 Giorgi and Sassatelli, "Introduction," 1.
718 Alam, "Our Visual History in the Making," 4–5

Drik and Pathshala goes back to an exhibition organized on the occasion of the one year anniversary of the Rana Plaza factory collapse (April 22–26, 2014).[719] Pathshala graduate and faculty member Munem Wasif explains that Rahman demonstrated his organizational and curatorial skills during this collaboration, prompting the Drik team to invite him as a guest curator for *CM* 2015.[720] Next to long-term Drik employee ASM Rezaur Rahman and Pathshala graduates Tanzim Wahab and Wasif, the 2015 curatorial team thus included guest curators from other mediums for the first time: architect Salahuddin Ahmed and mixed-media artist Mahbubur Rahman. The decision to include curators working outside the medium of photography is part of Britto and Drik's strategies to transgress the circumscribed fields of art and photography. The collaboration significantly affected the outline of the festival, notably the interplay between the exhibition venues and the curation.

The academic discourse on exhibition spaces is shaped by two concepts that are often used in a mutually exclusive way: On the one hand, there is the "white cube," defined by art critic Brian O'Doherty as an autonomous, locally and temporally neutral and undefined space, which physically and mentally separates art from a broader non-art space.[721] Like the format of the biennale, the white cube is often accompanied by a diffusionist argument. Elena Filipovic for instance contends that the "timeless, hermetic, and always the same" white cube is "globally replicated" in the world of contemporary art biennials.[722] This is exemplified by the fact that "the main exhibition format" in the Dakar Biennial, she claims, is the same as the one used in Taipei and Venice. On the other hand, there is public space as non-art space per se. In opposition to the white cube, Filipovic refers to the artistic expansions into this space (in the frame of biennials) as "forays beyond the box."[723] These "forays" are part of biennials' localization strategies, she argues, and in contrast to the "white cube" (which isolates art-as-art), they aim to inscribe artistic practice into a wider socio-cultural locality.[724] The exhibition space is thus treated as yet another mechanism

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719 The collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory happened on April 24, 2013, and caused the death of more than 1100 people. At the time of the collapse I had just started my doctoral research and was contacting artists from Bangladesh through Facebook. While sitting in the library in Heidelberg, my Facebook wall was suddenly flooded with calls by the same artists to join the relief work, to donate blood, and to collect blankets and other first aid utensils. It was the first time that I realized just how socially engaged the group of artists that I was about to meet in my subsequent fieldwork were. The way the catastrophe affected not only the artists, but many parts of the Bangladeshi society, was illustrated in the exhibition entitled *1134 Lives Not Numbers* at the Pathshala Media Institute. Shahidul Alam, "1134 – Lives Not Numbers," *Shahidul News*, April 23, 2014, https://shahidulnews.com/1134-lives-not-numbers/.
720 AR, MW, September 2015.
721 O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 13–15.
722 Elena Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," in Filipovic, Øvstebø, and van Hal, *The Biennial Reader*, 328.
723 Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," 328.
724 Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," 328.

to localize (and fix in place) "the local," while the global contemporary and its formats (unilaterally originating from the center and its established institutions) are "transcending place."[725]

Comprehending these two spaces as antagonistic is neither compatible with a transcultural nor an actor-centered approach. Moreover, the hypothesis fails when looking at festivals like *CM* (or *PKTM*), because the delimitation between private and public, between interior and exterior, art and non-art, is never as clear-cut as analytical models make it out to be. There are no autonomous or locally and temporally neutral spaces. The Shilpakala Academy, for instance, despite its huge white-walled and maze-like structure, promotes a national frame that casts meaning onto the exhibited artworks. As a public (i.e., state-funded and state-organized) institution, it needs to comply with specific rules and norms, such as respecting public decency. These rules take effect on the exhibition, even if the space is rented out as a venue to private actors; exhibited works are subject to censorship. Further, the Academy's status as a national institution—in terms of control and reach—likely raises particular expectations among visitors from within and outside the art field.

The way the artists make use of their venues illustrates the need to look at every venue as a space of engagement between art and space, rather than discussing the different venues according to whether their conditions meet the concept of public space (as some place) or the white cube (as non-place). This approach has been suggested by Nina Möntmann, who advocates for looking at how specific *Teilöffentlichkeiten* (sectorial publics) are addressed by different exhibition spaces.[726] This approach allows me to understand *CM*'s use of multiple venues as "forays ... into the city."[727] Put differently, it is not the fact that *CM* makes use of these diverse spaces, but the fact that that it makes use of all these spaces at the same time that allows for the inscription of artistic practices into a wider socio-cultural locality.[728]

According to co-curator Wasif, the main advantage of utilizing diverse venues is the range of audiences that can be addressed.[729] Promoting the medium of photography as a tool for social change across socio-cultural boundaries has been an important part of the agenda since the festival's initiation. The National Museum and the Shilpakala Academy are important institutions for a nationally framed symbolic production of art. They attract a large and heterogeneous sectorial public beyond the art field, and thus allow the festival a wide reach of audiences from city dwellers to domestic tourists, and foreign visitors. At the same time, they are often susceptible to political agendas and censorship. The organizers were for instance forced to take down *The War We Forgot*, an exhibition about the 1971 war in Bangladesh in the National Museum, and relocate it to the

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725 Tsing, "Conclusion: The Global Situation," 464.
726 Möntmann, *Kunst als sozialer Raum*.
727 Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," 328.
728 Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," 328.
729 AR, MW, September 2015.

Drik premises (see fn. 703). Drik Gallery and Britto Space attract a more limited sectorial public, mostly members of the art field. Due to its concealed location on the second floor of a mixed commercial and residential building, especially Britto Space presupposes an informed viewership. Drik and Britto are also alternative spaces allowing for more experimental and cutting-edge works to be exhibited. For example, during one of the gallery visits (January 25, 2015), Alam explained that the decision to exhibit photographer Cristina Nuñez's work at the Drik Gallery was based on the fact that the exhibition included nude images and could have caused problems in other venues. The combination of both types of spaces (state-funded and alternative artist–led), and thus the inclusion of different sectorial publics, is critical for the festival's socially inclusive objective and its local reach. The organizers are able to bring into play a variety of differently framed space in order to generate a more nuanced and inclusive representation of the urban locality in which the festival takes place.

Until the 2015 edition of *CM*, this reach was limited to the predominantly Muslim, middle-class neighborhoods of New Dhaka and the cultural spaces located there. The only exception were the mobile rickshaw vans. Through the inclusion of three main venues in Old Dhaka—the Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA), Beauty Boarding, and the Northbrook Auditorium and Library—the organizers of *CM* VIII overcame this limitation. The expansion was driven notably by two members of the curatorial team, Rahman and Wasif. One month prior to *CM* VIII, both artists were part of *1mile²*. From December 2014 until January 2015, they engaged intensely with the spaces in the area with the purpose of creating site-specific artworks. But even before *1mile²*, both artists had a long-term relation with Old Dhaka. Rahman grew up in the area and started his career as an artist from BAFA and Wasif spent more than a decade working on the technique of the box camera. Their familiarity with the place is a great incentive and asset for *CM*.

In general, the festival's expansion into Old Dhaka is a continuation of the organizers' objective to reach heterogeneous audiences, beyond the art field and the upper / middle-class cultural elite, centered predominantly on New Dhaka. It invites New Dhaka dwellers (and international guests) to explore spaces hitherto unknown to them. As I mentioned in the second chapter, many inhabitants of New and North Dhaka refrain from going to Old Dhaka, often as a result of persisting stereotypes against its inhabitants. Moreover, the inhabitants of Old Dhaka, who are geographically and socio-culturally excluded from the field of contemporary art, are invited to discover the medium of photography in their dwelled-in spaces. Lastly, and especially in relation to the example of *1mile²*, the engagement with Old Dhaka is part of the creative field's larger claim to actively participate in the shaping of localities (neighborhoods, cities, nations), i.e., to act as spatial brokers.[730]

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730 Baumgärtner, *Lokalität und kulturelle Heterogenität*.

All three venues in Old Dhaka are important spaces of cultural production and heritage. The first venue, Beauty Boarding, played a significant role as a cultural hub for writers and other intellectuals in the first half of the century. The second, Lalkuti library, is still in use by the local inhabitants. Despite being one of the few registered heritage sites in Old Dhaka listed by the Department of Archaeology of Bangladesh,[731] the library's important book collection and the Lalkuthi auditorium are in a bad state. The third venue, the BAFA, was founded in 1955 by the widow of dancer Bulbul Chowdhury who promoted dance and music throughout his life. The Academy is an important space for the celebration of *Pahela Baishakh* and the anniversaries of cultural personas such as renowned poet Rabindranath Tagore and master painter Zainul Abedin.[732] The cultural importance of these institutions is recognized and remembered by the inhabitants of Old Dhaka, who continue to use these spaces. In my observations, the institutions are largely unknown to the wider urban population, especially in the North of Dhaka. The city authorities focus on more economically affluent parts of the city. My research partners consider their lack of interest in preserving Old Dhaka's architectural heritage and the rise of fundamentalist forces which I discussed as part of *1mile²* as threats to the continuation of these cultural institutions. Consequently, their collective engagement in reevaluating Old Dhaka as a place of contemporary cultural production can be read as a recognition of Bangladesh's cultural and religious plurality against hegemonic discourses of Bengali homogeneity propagated by national historiography, or by a growing fundamentalism. This claim resonates with Alam and Drik's overall objective to use visual history as a tool to inspire social change in the future. The festival draws attention to the venues' cultural value and urges urban and national audiences to remember and support its heritage.[733]

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731 "Archaeology, Bangladesh," Department of Archaeology, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, accessed September 15, 2016, http://www.archaeology.gov.bd/.

732 *Pahela Baishakh* (the first of *Baishakh*) refers to the first day of the month of *Baishakh* (mid-April to mid-May) in the Bengali lunar calendar. It marks the Bengali New Year and is celebrated with dance, processions, and fairs. Bipul K. Debnath, "Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts," *The Independent*, November 17, 2017, accessed June 19, 2021, http://www.theindependentbd.com/magazine/details/123957/Bulbul-Academy-of-Fine-Arts.

733 This engagement with history and heritage in the field of art is part of a wider movement within the public sphere. Another example is the event Illuminating Puran Dhaka—Heritage in Limelight organized in October 2015 by the Alliance Française, the Goethe-Institute Bangladesh, and the Urban Study Group. The latter is a voluntary organization that has been actively promoting the conservation of heritage in urban Bangladesh. One of their most prominent projects is the organization of heritage tours through Old Dhaka. For more information on the work of the Urban Study Group, see Urban Study Group, Facebook Page, accessed August 29, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/TaimurIslamUSG/. For a description of the event, refer to the event description at the homepage of the Goethe Institute Bangladesh or the YouTube video posted by the Alliance Française in Dhaka: "Illuminated Puran Dhaka—Heritage in Limelight," Goethe-Institut Bangladesh, accessed February 21, 2021, https://www.goethe.de/ins/bd/en/ver.cfm?fuseaction=events.detail&event_id=20611850; "Illuminated Puran Dhaka—Heritage in

On a more practical level, Drik's engagement with Old Dhaka is also the expression of a novel interest in site-specific curation, i.e., conscious engagement with the exhibition space as more than just a space to exhibit art. Co-curator Wasif explains that one of the reasons for expanding *CM* to Old Dhaka was his interest in the different qualities of the locality; it "gives a different feeling of the city, it works differently, it has more alternative venues."[734] This assessment alludes to the socio-cultural make-up of the area's population and the physical shape of its narrow streets and old houses, which stand in contrast to the Muslim middle-class areas of Dhanmondi populated by concrete high-rise buildings. Wasif also refers to the "alternative" exhibition spaces available here but does not further elaborate on what this alternative quality is. Rahman's comments allow a possible interpretation. In a conversation he explains that unlike the New Dhaka spaces such as the Daily Star–Bengal Arts Precinct or the Gallery of the Alliance Française, the spaces in Old Dhaka are not typically used as exhibition spaces.[735] They fulfill other cultural functions: they serve as a library, theater, boarding house, and a school. Therefore, the artworks first need to be merged with the space. Rahman describes trying to put himself in the skin of the audience—to see it how they would—while also maintaining respect for the architecture of the spaces and considering the content of the work to be installed. I elaborate on this relation between exhibition space, curation, and content through specific examples in the next section. Before I do, I briefly want to mention another, often forgotten and yet significant aspect of the use of space during perennial events: the effect of the unplanned. No matter how well-structured perennial art events are, and how deliberately chosen their spaces, unexpected happenstances can have a crucial effect on their perception and the meaning they gain within the overall festival. This is a point that the academic literature especially from the field of art history does not account for, because it often unilaterally focuses on the effect of events rather than on their coming into being. Here again, the singularity of the anthropological approach becomes clear. *CM* VIII takes place in the first half of a continuous six-month *hartal* (general strike) called for by the oppositional Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).[736] As a result, the mobility of motorized vehicles is severely limited and the use of mini-vans to transport guests unfamiliar with Dhaka to distant venues becomes

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Limelight," Alliance Française de Dhaka, uploaded October 27, 2015, YouTube video, 3:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVnt3fqUzAs.

734 AR, MW, September 2015.
735 FDE, MR, January 2015.
736 In January 2014, the BNP boycotted the parliamentary elections, resulting in the Awami League declaring an electoral victory. The situation remained calm until January 2015, when the BNP did not receive permission from the government to hold a protest on the one-year anniversary of the election. Several months of continuous general strikes called by the BNP followed. The use of petrol bombs against motorized vehicles operating despite the blockade caused the traffic in the city to halt. Sarah Tasnim Shehabuddin, "Bangladesh Politics Since Independence," in Riaz and Rahman, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*, 24.

impossible. While many of the gallery visits around the area of New Dhaka are manageable on foot, the distance to Old Dhaka is too long. On the day of the scheduled gallery visit, the Drik team therefore organized forty–fifty cycle rickshaws. In contrast to the vans whose air-conditioned interior creates a physical barrier to the urban environment, from blocking sensory inputs (such as heat, smell, and sound) to speeding up its perception, the walking and cycling allows for a more intense and slow engagement with the city. Because many guests, locals and foreigners, rarely travel to Old Dhaka, even less so on a rickshaw, the day is marked by an enthusiastic and adventurous mood that transmits into the perception of the exhibitions.

CURATING INTIMACY

In Bangladesh and Nepal, "curation" has become an important tool for conveying contemporary visualities. My research partners consider a well-chosen venue and a clever interaction between content and space to add value to the exhibited works. A good design is acknowledged as a marker for the quality of an exhibition. In a *Depart* article, writer Seema Nusrat Amin for instance compares the *Asian Art Biennale* to *CM*, which she describes as "one of the most sought after photography biennales in Asia," distinguished especially because of its consistency in hosting curated shows.[737] The growing importance of curation is an expression of my research partners' interest in connecting with wider audiences. It also points to an increased diversification of roles within the art field, from artists to different types of mediators. Authors like Hans Belting, Paul O'Neill, and especially Thomas Brenson view the rise of the curator as yet another effect of the proliferation of the large-scale exhibition.[738] This highly motile and mobile curator conceptualizes exhibitions and contextualizes individual artworks within larger discourses. The authors agree that the "curatorial turn," i.e., the development of the curator as a creative profession, has fundamentally changed the relationships between the organizer / curator, the artist, the audience, and the art institution.[739] While this literature understands curation mostly as mental work, my research partners' working context often demands them to be more hands-on.

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737 Seema Nusrat Amin, "The Polemic of Postmodernism in Search for Language and Continuity: 15th Asian Art Biennale, Dhaka," *Depart* 4, no. 12–13 (2013): 40–49, 41.

738 Belting, "Was bitte heißt 'contemporary'?"; O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 241; Brenson, "The Curator's Moment."

739 See also Andrew Hunt, "Curator, Curation, Curationism: Andrew Hunt on the A to Z of Curating," *Art Monthly* 390 (2015): 13–16; David Balzer, *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else* (London: Pluto Press, 2015); Iftikhar Dadi, "Curating South Asia," Guggenheim, October 1, 2012, accessed April 4, 2013, https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/map/curating-south-asia/; Mosquera, "Some Problems in Transcultural Curating"; Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Curating but Were Afraid to Ask* (New York: Sternberg, 2011); Judith Rugg and Michele Sedgwick, ed., *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007).

In the "Curators Talk," organized as part of *CM* VIII (January 30, 2015, Goethe-Institute Dhaka), Rahman explains that he is an artist rather than a curator. He thereby alludes to the fact that there are no trained curators in Bangladesh and everybody on the team, including *CM*'s curatorial director ASM Rezaur Rahman, is self-taught. Rahman elaborates that in other fields of art, the curator's task is to select artists, to coordinate work and money, and to create a flow. In Bangladesh, curators need to be organizers and (manual) workers at the same time. Wasif adds that the curatorial process includes the physical installation of the shows; his tasks during the set-up ranged from painting the wall to putting the nail in and cleaning the floor. In our interview, festival director Alam stresses an overall change of the curation process:

> In the beginning, it was simply hanging pictures. And then we started to think about how to hang pictures, how to create that interaction. Then in was a question of trying to incorporate what the artists wanted. How that work could ideally be rendered. Later the interaction with the audience. All of those things were bits that grew. So the last *Chobi Mela*, in my assessment, was easily the best we've had.[740]

This quote shows that in the early *CM* editions, the role of the curator was not distinguishable from that of the festival organizer. Now curation means going beyond the general programming of the festival, beyond coordinating the participants, and beyond simply hanging pictures. It is about creating an ideal rendering of the work. This ideal brings together concerns for the artists' interpretation as well as the audience's potential perspective and reception. It also includes an engagement with the space in which the work is to be displayed. In Rahman and Wasif's comments, Old Dhaka and its spaces are marked by difference; the area gives a different feeling of the city, it comprises alternative venues, which, in contrast to the art spaces and galleries in New Dhaka, serve various socio-cultural purposes on a daily basis. For the curators, this alterity is positively connoted; it poses a welcome challenge that forces them to shift their own approach to space in general. As with cultural brokerage, the influence of unfamiliar visual elements can challenge stagnant opinions and practices and inspire new creative approaches. Curating in these spaces is neither just about hanging images, nor about dealing with them technically (putting in the nails, painting the walls). It is about how the work could relate to the meaning of the space, especially for the local audiences who are aware of this meaning more than outsiders. This meaning includes a respect for the architecture of the spaces, but also for the cultural practices and beliefs of people who dwell in them.

In the 2015 festival description, Alam introduces that year's theme, intimacy, through adjectives such as tender, quiet, wistful, and personal,

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740   AR, SA, September 2015.

and through concepts like belonging, ownership, bonding, and togetherness.[741] While these terms are related to more abstract emotional states and responses, the introductory text also raises questions about the commercialization of emotions, exemplified in the branding of Valentine's Day merchandise. Further, Alam discusses the question of intimacy as a global feeling. This broad spectrum of possible readings and applications is deliberate, as co-curator Wahab explains to me: Intimacy was not a guiding theme for the curation. Rather, it was an open-ended point for consideration in each individual work.[742] Throughout my participant observation of the festival, I discern three different ways in which intimacy finds expression. First, in the selection of bodies of work that contain very strong connotations to physicality, love, sex, or romance. This applies for instance to the work of Max Pinkers (venue: Drik Gallery), a Brussels-based photographer who follows the paradoxes and frictions in love and romance between "tradition and contemporary mores" in the city of Mumbai.[743] His photograph of two lovers kissing on a beach, their heads wrapped in a scarf—a shield between the public eye and the intimate gesture—prominently figures as the cover photo of *CM* VIII. The second expression is in the artists' approach to their subject matter. In my interview with Wasif, he uses the word "intimacy" to describe a working pattern in documentary photography, which consists in establishing an intimate relation with the subject one tries to capture.[744] This approach is probably most tangible in Philip Blenkinsop's work (venue: Pathshala South Asian Media Institute). The Bangkok-based co-founder of Noor photo agency has been documenting armed conflicts such as Nepal's Civil War (1996–2006) since he arrived in Asia at the end of the 1980s. He spends weeks and months in war zones living together with the people whose stories he aims to tell. This approach allows him to capture intimate portraits of their daily routines, their fears and hopes, the violence and comradery they experience.[745] The third and most abstract expression of intimacy is the curatorial approach to the venues and the arrangement of the display. This is particularly visible in the exhibition design of documentary photographer Paolo Patrizi's work on Nigerian sex workers in Italy. The provisional and illegal character of the sex camps he enters as a photographer, and the precarious life-situations in which their occupants remain, are mirrored in the segmented exhibition set, subdivided with white, sheer, full-length curtains. This set-up allows the visitors of the Shilpakala—usually marked by ample rooms—to intimately engage with the work.

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741 Shahidul Alam, "Intimacy," in *Chobi Mela VIII: International Festival of Photography Bangladesh 2015*, ed. Drik (Dhaka: Drik, 2015), 1–2.
742 AR, TW, November 2015.
743 Drik, ed., *Chobi Mela VIII: International Festival of Photography Bangladesh 2015* (Dhaka: Drik Picture Library, 2015).
744 AR, MW, September 2015.
745 AR, MW, September 2015.

RETELLING HISTORIES AND INTIMACY

The three different curatorial approaches to the festival theme intimacy, via content, photographic work process, and exhibition design, converge in *Retelling Histories*, the exhibition of the NPL, which concluded the Interlude to this section.

  With regards to content, the exhibition does not explicitly connote love, sex, or romance (as Max Pinkers' work on couples in Mumbai does), yet it reveals intimate knowledge about the people of Nepal. The popular representation of the South Asian country is still dominated by unilateral imageries as a "development laboratory" promoted by INGOs, NGOs, and global media on the one side,[746] and as a place of pristine beauty, spirituality, and humble hill people, pushed by the tourist industry on the other.[747] *Retelling Histories* offers a counter-visuality; it allows a qualitative insight into vernacular histories in and of Nepal. It brings together photographs, taken from private family albums and closed-down photo studios, allowing audiences in Dhaka access to ideologies of family in Nepal,[748] to codes of gender, class, and power,[749] consumer culture, leisure, identity, and everyday life. The personal images permit questions about what was, at a certain period, considered photo-worthy.[750] They give insight into inter-human (family demographics, friendships, social conventions) and human-object (consumerism, personal effects of neoliberalism) relationships. The photographs from the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa collection, for instance, contain visual records of private and public ceremonies, such as *jatras* (religious festivals or processions, specifically in the Newar community), weddings, funerals, family outings, and political rallies.[751] Their "narrative power"[752] harks the Dhakhwa family's rising economic status as much as Kathmandu's changing socio-political public sphere under the Panchayat system. Moreover, the photographs evoke a less tangible

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746 Bell, *Kathmandu*, 332–333.
747 Pratyoush Onta, "A Suggestive History of the First Century of Photographic Consumption in Kathmandu," *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 3, no. 1 (1998): 181.
748 Sonja Vivienne and Jean Burgess, "The Remediation of the Personal Photograph and the Politics of Self-Representation in Digital Storytelling," *Journal of Material Culture* 18, no. 3 (2013): 279–298, 279–281.
749 Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).
750 Nancy A. van House, "Personal Photography, Digital Technologies and the Uses of the Visual," *Visual Studies* 26, no. 2 (2011): 125–134, 125–127, 130–131.
751 photo.circle and Nepal Picture Library, *Juju Bhai Dhakhwa: Keeper of Memories* (Kathmandu: Nepal Picture Library, 2016). Juju Bhai Dhakhwa (b. 1940) hailed from a Newar family in Naghbahal, one of the largest open spaces in Patan. During the 1960s–1980s he documented the life of his family and the close-knit Newar neighborhood. After his death his son Prakash Dhakwa, who still lives in the ancestral home in Naghbahal, donated the collection to the Nepal Picture Library. The next Interlude (*Retelling Histories*) centers on *PKTM*, where Juju Bhai Dhakhwa's ancestral home was one of the main venues. I will elaborate on his photography in that context.
752 Vivienne and Burgess, "The Remediation of the Personal Photograph," 279–281.

world of imagination. Reminiscent of Appadurai's argument on "mass media" as a facilitator of endless "possible lives,"[753] the camera offers "a space of exploration,"[754] a space for people to present a self that they cannot as easily present elsewhere.[755] Props (such as bikes and radios) and backgrounds (of pristine villages or urban scapes) used in the 1970s and 1980s by personal and studio photographers allowed people to embody their aspirations. By adopting gestures and fashion items made known by Bollywood movies, they brought forth their ideal vision of themselves.[756] The intimacy of *Retelling Stories* emerges from this unique, almost voyeuristic gaze into the private lives of strangers.

In relation to the work-process, the broad sample of images exhibited at *CM*, reaching from the early twentieth century to the 1980s, and from formal studio photography to spontaneous snapshots, sheds light on the history of photographic techniques in Nepal. While the stiff poses of the earliest images indicate a common ancestry of photography and portraiture painting,[757] this mannerism also alludes to the technical requirements of early photographic technology.[758] It presumed a prolonged relation between photographer and photographed, which became obsolete after the availability of small hand cameras, and even more recently, digital cameras and camera-phones. The technique allows for the interaction between photographer and photographed to be reduced to a split-second. Yet, the nature of the scenes on display at Old Dhaka's Northbrook hall—a crying bride, a spontaneous pose, a puff on a cigarette—indicates the gradual advance of the medium into intimate situations of daily lives. In other words, the technical advancement shortens the photographic moment (and thus makes it less intimate), while it also allows the camera to capture more intimate subjects.

Lastly, for the exhibition design of *Retelling Histories*, the *CM* team took into account the photographer's—or in this case the custodian, PC's—interpretation, the space, and the audiences that would interact with the exhibits. PC's motivation "to create a broad and inclusive visual archive of Nepali social and cultural history,"[759] to which I will return in more detail in the next section, overlaps in many ways with Alam's motivation to establish Drik and *CM*. Drik continuously challenges the Euro-American hegemony by visually documenting and thus inscribing localities / people in a fixed

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753 Arjun Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991), 191–210, 197.

754 Christopher Pinney, "Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Post-colonialism, and Vernacular Modernism," in Pinney and Peterson, *Photography's Other Histories*, 211–214.

755 Pinney, *Coming of Photography in India*, 142.

756 Pinney, "Notes from the Surface of the Image," 211–214.

757 Pinney, *Coming of Photography in India*, 134.

758 Arjun Appadurai, "The Colonial Backdrop," *Afterimage* 24, no. 5 (1997).

759 "About," Nepal Picture Library, photo.circle, accessed June 26, 2022, https://www.nepalpicturelibrary.org/about/.

periphery. The organization uses the festival to strengthen the position of the majority world and to foster exchange between its visual storytellers. The NPL was born out of the idea to create an alternative, inclusive visual repository for young contemporary photographers that allowed them to connect with the visual history of Nepal beyond the hegemonic visualities of the state and the tourism and development industry. Due to their similar missions, the *CM* curators were well-aware of PC's motivation and took that into account. The decision to arrange the exhibits on the large wooden table was a direct consequence of the absence of bare walls. Instead of making use of the shelves or building panels, however, they engaged with the space's day-to-day function as a library; people come in, sit down at the table, read one of the available newspapers, or take a book from the shelf. The photographs on the table, like the books and newspapers, tell stories about distant places and its people. Moreover, audiences—whether from Old Dhaka or international guests of the festival—have their own experiences with photographs as memorabilia. They likely have their own collection of family albums or photographs of ancestors displayed on their walls. Even though the medium of photography as a form of contemporary art production might be new to them, they can make their own connections to these images, and create a visuality of Nepal.

On a more general note, the exhibition illustrates Drik and PC's strategy to use photography as a tool and driving force to transgress the boundaries of the fields of art and photography. The two organizations aim at democratizing access to cultural production and at transgressing institutionally prescribed boundaries between mediums, especially between photography and what is still considered fine art in the nationally circumscribed field. By choosing important architectural and cultural landmarks in Old Dhaka as venues, the organizers of *CM* draw a connection between the visual heritage in family photographs and the architectural heritage of the region. For Drik as well as PC this is not about preserving things in a suspended state, but about making visual history a value for contemporary practices and contestations. Similar to Drik, NPL promotes a ground-up perspective to history, locality, and identity. In their individuality, the collections in the archive feature private, ordinary lives, memories, and aspirations. In their entirety, they allow the conception of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual, and multi-political nation. This complex socio-cultural composition has been flattened by historical narratives, spun to serve national claims, such as the Panchayat's (1962–1990) use of the "one language, one style of dress, one country" slogan. Hegemonic notions of national identity like these made PC's founding director Kakshapati realize that *Retelling Histories* needed to be shown in Nepal. Within eight months, the photographs travelled from Old Dhaka in Bangladesh to Patan in Nepal, where they were displayed in a new constellation during the first edition of the *Photo Kathmandu* festival.

Interlude: *Facing the Camera*

It is the first quiet morning since Photo Kathmandu *(November 3–9, 2015) started; there are no talks, meetings, or interviews on my schedule, so I decide to finally have a look at the exhibitions. Although I no longer need the tear-shaped, bright pink* Photo Kathmandu *signs to guide me through the* gallis *(alleyways) of Patan, they flash up everywhere. One marks the entrance to the home of the Dhakhwa family, where the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa collection is exhibited. I have seen parts of the collection eight months ago at the* Chobi Mela *in Dhaka, yet I am excited to discover them newly assembled, and what is more, in the place where many of them were taken. Through intricate corridors, small rooms, and tiny courtyards, I follow the Dhakhwa family through gatherings, wedding ceremonies, and a trip to Fewa Lake in Pokhara, until I suddenly find myself in Naghbahal, Patan's biggest open courtyard. Here the private opens into the semi-public, also with regards to the content of the exhibition. While the photos inside the house focus on Juju Bhai and his relatives, the photos exhibited around Naghbahal center on the neighborhood, religious festivals, friends, and political rallies. Most of the images are fixed on large panels; some however sneak up on me from the most unexpected places: dangling from the branches of a tree, or randomly fixed on the facade of a house* (see Fig. 13).

Only a few steps away from Naghbahal, I find Frederic Lecloux's contemporary work. The photographs are so perfectly integrated into its surroundings that the exhibition almost seems to vanish between the parked bikes, sleeping

Figure 13: NPL and photo.
circle, *Juju Bhai Dhakhwa:
A Keeper of Memories*, 2015.
Photo Kathmandu,
Naghbahal, Lalitpur.
Photo: author.

Figure 14: NPL and photo. circle, *Facing the Camera: A history of Nepali Studio Photography*, 2015. Photo Kathmandu, Patan Museum, Lalitpur. Photos: author.

dogs, and small teashops that create an important community space for the people of the neighborhood. But then, I guess, that is exactly what Everyday Epiphanies *is; Lecloux's work deals with the banal and the exceptional, the random and the particular. Life has also grown around Kishor Sharma's* Living in the Mist: The Last Nomads of Nepal *at Twilaka Tol. Men sell oranges and other fruits in preparation of Tihar, Nepal's second biggest Hindu festival. Bikes, boxes, and empty baskets are stacked in front of the wall, sometimes even partially covering Sharma's photos.*

On my way back to Patan Durbar Square, the former palace of the Malla kings of Patan, I run into fellow festival visitors; like me, they wear the festival design tote bags, and carry the iconic pink maps that have developed a life of their own in the neighborhood. Yesterday, I saw a woman using one to funnel hot tea into a mug. I walk by several empty spaces, which like tooth gaps now mark the neighborhood. These spaces and piles of carefully stacked bricks are all that is left of the houses destroyed by the April 25 earthquake.

I enter the main gate of the Patan Museum, where the exhibition entitled Facing the Camera: A History of Nepali Studio Photography *is located. I recognize some of the NPL photos from the Northbrook Hall Library in Old Dhaka. The organizers have used different exhibition surfaces, from constructed grey panels to metal boxes* (see Fig. 14). *Especially these boxes, used throughout South-Asia to keep valuables and memorabilia safe and dry, create*

an interesting connection between the intimate content of the photos and the valorization of memorabilia in general. Some of the photos simply lie on the elevation surrounding the courtyard, others are fixed on the red brick walls of the museum.

Were it not for the fact that these photos show ordinary people, one could think they were part of the museum collection.

EXPLORING MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND HISTORY THROUGH IMAGES[760]

In her study on the effects of the digital revolution on personal photography in America, Nancy van House argues that images of deceased family members, past events, and places of significance are used to teach children about "history" and "membership in family."[761] I observed a similar practice in PC's use of the archival photographs from the Juju Bhai Dhakwa collection, as well as in its initiative at the NPL and the photography festival as a whole. *PKTM* is a place for "community-building" and "communal learning":[762] The exhibitions resulting from the archival material of the NPL transmit knowledge about the history of photography and the visual history of people in Nepal. In contrast to the history taught by public institutions (the National Museum in Chhauni, the Patan Museum, or schoolbooks) which focus on extraordinary events, objects, and personages, the history transmitted through the NPL is the history of ordinary people. The photographs contain the personal histories of friends, colleagues, and neighbors. Together, they teach audiences and aspiring and established photographers about a pluralistic, everyday Nepali society.[763] With a specific focus on the earthquake, these images and their display around the neighborhoods of Patan aimed at rebuilding social life in a community disrupted by crisis. They became a reminder of the rituals and everyday practices that structure life. In order to highlight important connections between the initiatives of Drik and PC, while also emphasizing the individual qualities of *PKTM*, my focus remains on aims, spaces, and curation. In my discussion of these issues, I pay specific attention to the creation of community around photography and the way space is structured through instruments such as maps, signs, and info panels.

PC is an association of photographers, designers, and people interested in social change and exploring "issues of memory, identity, and history through images."[764] Since its foundation in 2007, PC has regularly organized photography-related workshops, lectures, and exhibitions. It is supported by private and public donations, but manages to be at least

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760 "Memory, identity, and history through images" is part of PC's mission statement for the Nepal Picture Library, see "About," photo.circle, accessed February 21, 2021, https://www.photocircle.com.np/about/.
761 Van House, "Personal Photography," 125–127, 130–131.
762 Giorgi and Sassatelli, "Introduction."
763 Van House, "Personal Photography," 131.
764 "About," photo.circle.

partially self-sufficient by taking on photo-related assignments.[765] Its individual members, especially co-founders Kakshapati and Shilpakar, strongly engage with social change in Nepal, which manifests in PC's collective activities and events. PC's overall mission was and remains the connection of people through the medium of photography, and collectively working at enhancing the quality of photojournalism and storytelling in Nepal. Its flagship project, the NPL, grew from the observation that the visual references available to young practitioners in the country are very limited; there are no visual archives and the existing culture of representation is dominated by the country's main income sources: the development and tourism industries. In order to generate a more multifaceted and inclusive visual repository for photographers to use, PC called out for people to donate their family albums and private collections. In this way, the team has digitized more than 60,000 photographs. After digitization, the physical photographs or negatives are returned to the individual contributors and only the digitized files and according metadata are stored in the archive. The metadata largely stems from oral history interviews with the contributors (where this is still possible), time-consuming work which so far only covers a small amount of the photographs in the archive (as of 2016). In addition to contributor interviews, PC generates information about the archival material by organizing exhibitions using the NPL collections. These exhibitions are always grouped under a broader research term that serves as a way to approach the photographs: *Photographs of Friendship* (2012, 2013) for instance allowed PC to research friendships between women outside marriage. The chosen theme contributes to a larger discourse on the socio-cultural ramifications of patrilocal residence practiced in Nepal. In this social system, women become part of the husband's household after marriage, often leading to them being cut off from their families, friends, and familiar surroundings. Further, their new responsibilities often confine them to the private realm of the household, leaving them no time and opportunity for friendships outside the family. Yet, the photographs PC curated showed women that defied social conventions and maintained relationships beyond the boundaries of gender and family.[766] Another example for the generation of research through the organization of exhibitions is *Postcards and Beyond* (2012). In this case, PC collaborated with Alban von Stockhausen (University of Vienna) to engage with Mukunda

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765 PC has been successful in securing funding from globally operating institutions, such as the Prince Claus Fund and the Danish Centre for Culture and Development. The collective organizes fundraisers, sells prints from the NPL and various merchandise (such as tote bags, mugs, etc.) through its homepage. Further, it offers its services in digitalization, design, creative consultancy, and organization of events and workshops. For a full list of activities and events see "Home," photo.circle, accessed February 21, 2021, https://www.photocircle.com.np/.

766 "Retelling Histories: Photographs of Friendships," photo.circle, accessed September 6, 2022, https://www.photocircle.com.np/exhibitions/retelling-histories-photographs-of-friendship/.

Bahadur Shrestha's work. With the expected boom in the tourism industry after the country's opening in the 1950s, Shrestha, who worked for the Department of Information and later at the Tourism Department of Nepal, was commissioned by the government to travel around and document the country. His photographs were actively sent out as posters and postcards to promote tourism to and within Nepal. To this day they largely shape the way Nepal is perceived from the outside. Nevertheless, Shreshta's personal collection also includes images that go beyond this conventional representation. One photograph, for instance, depicts his sister-in-law and her friends posing in a Willys Jeep during a picnic near Bhaktapur (one of the three cities in the Kathmandu valley). Like the photos about women's friendships, this shot defies social norms; women rarely went on outings with their friends, especially in the 1960s when it was taken.

Photographs of Friendships and *Postcards and Beyond* entailed a regrouping of NPL photographs under a specific heading and provided an opportunity for PC to research traditions of visual representation, socio-cultural norms and values, and the influence of political developments. Both examples foretell the strategy that *PKTM* implements on a larger scale; the photos that travelled to *CM* in February 2015, with the main aim of introducing NPL (as a whole) to international audiences, are regrouped under new headings for the festival in Kathmandu, thus inspiring more extensive and detailed research into the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa family and the history of studio photography. This research in turn allows the photographs to be imbibed with additional and new meaning and contribute to the reshaping of representational visual politics. PC's wider engagement with social change through history is exemplified in their use of the photographs as a way to raise issues of gender politics, social institutions (family, marriage, residency rules), and cultural norms. The exhibitions are instantiations of a ground-up, inclusive national history that comprises the life of diverse ordinary people.

Promotesh Das Pulak, in his use of archival photography, also questions the status quo of existing visualities. In his case, the digital manipulation of the images is the source of this contestation; his own face inserted into the images comes to represent the ordinary citizen—the hero, the victim, the child, the mother, the collaborator, and the bystander, all at once. Similarly, PC makes use of archival photography to educate local and international festival visitors about Nepal's multiple, ordinary histories. But the artist-led initiative's method is different. Appadurai and Kopytoff suggest that objects accumulate versatile biographies during their lives.[767] Examining these biographies allows access to wider political, historical, and aesthetic norms and values. PC puts this theory into effect by repeatedly and purposefully introducing photographs into new life situations. The

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767 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*; Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things," 67.

rearrangement into novel constellations allows the photographs in the archive to interact with each other, to enter different spaces, to address different audiences, and thereby be imbibed with new meaning. It is not only the content or the materiality of the photograph, but its inscription into different localities that creates dynamic values able to delegitimize history as written by the socio-political elites. Like Drik, PC aims to transgress the field of art and photography: the team consciously pulls archival material into the field of contemporary art production by exhibiting it alongside contemporary works under the header of one festival. At the same time, its use of the archival material transgresses the fields of art and photography, and reaches into the fields of media, sociology, politics, and history.

Due to the close parallels between Drik and PC, it is not surprising that the two actors have been in close contact from the beginning. Over the years, both organizations have shared skillsets by organizing joint workshops, presentations, and lectures. In 2008–2009 for instance, six travel grants were given to emerging Nepali photographers to travel to *CM* V. In return, twelve exhibitions from the same *CM* edition travelled to Kathmandu. Fittingly, this exchange was named "Project Freedom" and designed to promote "freedom through photographic and cultural exchange."[768] In conversations, especially the young generation of photographers in Nepal repeatedly note the benefits of the exchange with Drik and Pathshala; several of them have been awarded scholarships to join Pathshala's six-month "International Course," while others have attended workshops. The list of collaboration suggests an asymmetry between the artist initiative in Bangladesh, which has grown into a set of well-established institutions, and the one in Nepal, which in most cases is at the receiving end. None of my research partners understand this situation as a form of dependency, however. Rather, they see it as an incentive, a motivation, and a source of confidence. In our interview, PC co-founder Kakshapati explains:

> We have been thinking about the idea of a festival for a while. Primarily because we have been going to *Chobi Mela* and to *Delhi Photo Festival*, and to *Angkor* [*Photo Festival*]. And realizing that a festival can create a lot of opportunities when it comes to networking, when it comes to bolstering the ongoing activities of an organization and creating this slightly higher international profile.[769]

Kakshapati's explanation highlights how important the contact with other festivals in the region, such as the *Delhi Photo Festival*, the *Angkor Photo Festival & Workshops*, and the *CM* is for initiatives like PC.[770] She emphasizes

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768 For a description of the project, see "Traveling Chobi Mela V," photo.circle, accessed May 16, 2021, www.photocircle.com.np/exhibitions/traveling-chobi-mela-v/.

769 AR, NGK, December 2015.

770 The *Delhi Photo Festival* was established in 2011 through an initiative of the Nazar Foundation. The *Angkor Photo Festival & Workshops* have been running

that PC's network is primarily based on such regional ties. Especially after the NPL showcase at the 2015 edition of *CM* (and the attendance of three other editions before), PC finally had the courage to say: "Ok, we sort of know enough about how something like this would work."[771] Yet, once the decision was taken, the main challenge was to find enough qualified people to help organize and to exhibit in the festival. Unlike Drik, PC cannot draw warriors from education institutions such as the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute. There is no school dedicated to the study of photography in Nepal and out of the private and public higher education institutions only Kathmandu University (KU) has recently started to offer photography classes as part of its BFA curriculum. PC has been organizing regular introductory and advanced story-telling workshops for over a decade. Additionally, Artudio, a collective led by Kathmandu-based artist Kailash K Shrestha,[772] held its 65th Photography Workshop in May 2017. Yet people producing qualitative documentary stories are still scarce. Kakshapati explains that it is challenging to find enough photographers in Nepal to apply for the festival slide shows. In this regard, the relationship with Drik, and the connections made from attending other festivals, prove valuable. Especially for the *PKTM* 2015 print exhibitions, PC taps into *CM*'s existing network. They invite senior photographers Philip Blenkinsop, focusing exclusively on his work on the Maoist Guerilla in Nepal, and Kevin Bubrisky, who has been documenting Nepal since his first arrival as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1975. Both exhibited at *CM* in the same year. Moreover, PC is supported by a group of regional photographers, who come in to assist with the set up and documentation of the festival.

For the members of this network—organizers, curators, visiting photographers, collectors, and other members of the field of photography—the repetitive character of the exhibitions, the formats and the familiar faces, is cause for the occasional weariness. As part of the mobile jet set—though mostly travelling tourist class[773]—they are familiar with the festival pace of lectures and workshops in the mornings, exhibition visits during the day, slideshows and social gatherings in the evening. The *CM* VIII team, most of which travelled to Kathmandu for the inaugural festival, have already seen Philip Blenkinsop and Kevin Bubrisky's works. Most probably,

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since 2006. For more information on the respective festivals, see "Home," Nazar Foundation, accessed May 16, 2021, https://www.nazarfoundation.org/; "About," Angkor Photo, accessed May 16, 2021, https://angkor-photo.com/about/.

771 AR, NGK, December 2015. PC has collaborated with *CM* once in 2009 through a presentation at *CM* V on "Building Community and Tracking Change in Nepal" and in the same year through a project called "Project Freedom in Nepal." Further, in 2011 *CM* exhibitions toured in Nepal through PC. Finally, in 2013 PC co-founder Kakshapati was a participant of the *CM* VII discussion session.

772 Artudio offers a wide range of activities from photography and children's art classes to community-based art programs. Its founder, Kailash K Shrestha, very early on initiated street art projects to open the art practice and connect to a general public. See "About," Artudio.

773 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*; based on Medina, "Inundaciones."

they have also come across most of the other exhibited contemporary bodies of work in workshops or residencies. To them, the festival does not offer much visual input in terms of photography. Several of my interview partners mention that they consider taking a break from the festival calendar, yet they also greatly enjoy the company of friends and colleagues, the food, and the opportunity to travel.

For the general festival visitor however, especially those from Kathmandu and its surroundings, *PKTM* is an opportunity to experience archival and contemporary photography in their locality, to meet eminent photographers, listen to artist talks and lectures, and see works from and about their country that they have never seen before. Despite their long-term engagement with the country, neither Kevin Bubriski's photographs nor Philip Blenkinsop's work on the Civil War have ever been shown in Nepal.[774] In our interview, Kakshapati explains that the upkeep of the network and the contact with established colleagues in the field by means of the festival is crucial. Nevertheless, the ordinary inhabitants and potential future storytellers are its intended audience. The tension in the festival's situatedness, i.e., the organizers' ambition to rally the local community and their urgency to connect with a larger network of like-minded creators, marks its position within the emerging multi-scalar field of contemporaneity. Moreover, *PKTM* is but one of the collective's mediums to reach this audience: "for us, the in-between is actually the most important stuff. And the festival is just something that creates momentum, that creates this platform and opportunity."[775] The PC director explains that the objective to motivate people—other photographers, but especially local communities, businesses, audiences, clubs, and so on—to engage with the medium of photography on a long-term basis is deeply engrained into the PC day-to-day work ethic. Through programs organized by its team, PC aims to "bring together photographers and other visual storytellers to nurture unique voices that document and engage with social change in Nepal."[776] One part of this mission is to find people who, due to their particular skills, can inspire and guide a new generation of photographers in Nepal. The other part is to use the medium of photography to inspire people to engage in current socio-cultural and political processes. The festival is a momentous way to bring both these aims together. In contrast to monographic exhibitions, whether thematic *(Photographs of Friendship)* or artist-centered *(Postcards and Beyond)*, the format of the festival allows the exposition of different styles, techniques, and applications of photography next to each

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774 Philip Blenkinsop's work remains unique in its perspective and depth. In my observation, the civil war period has largely been absent in visual representations by the artists in Nepal, although *Nepali Times* editor Kunda Dixit has published two major photography collections on the topic: Kunda Dixit, *A People War: Images of the Nepal Conflict, 1996–2006* (Kathmandu: Publication Nepa-Laya, 2006) and Dixit, *People After War: Nepalis Live with the Legacy of Conflict* (Kathmandu: Publication Nepa-Laya, 2009).
775 AR, NGK, December 2015.
776 "About," photo.circle.

other.[777] Similar to Drik, PC therefore consciously decides to invite a team of curators hailing from different backgrounds to strengthen its medium and field-transgressing approach. The choice to include Sujan Chitrakar, the co-founder and academic program coordinator of KU's Center for Art and Design, for instance, is part of the goal "to actively try to reach out to the existing art community."[778] The versatility of perspectives on photography not only enlarges the local practitioners' frame of reference, but also grants audiences access to a broader spectrum of the medium's possibilities. Therefore archival, contemporary, and "whatever in-between" styles of photography are exhibited next to each other, as Kakshapati explains.[779]

As I mentioned above, the organization of a festival as a means to concentrate outreach both locally and internationally had been part of PC's deliberations for a while. The participation in *CM* VIII provided the necessary incentive by boosting the team's confidence in organizing an event on their own, as well as by making them realize how important it was to show the NPL collections in Nepal. However, another event became the galvanizing factor: Two and a half months after *CM*, on April 25, 2015, Nepal was hit by a 7.8 magnitude earthquake that killed nearly 9000 people. Next to Sindhupalchowk and Nuwakot, Kathmandu was among the most affected districts.[780] In Patan, where PC has its office, the area in and around the Durbar Square (since 2006 part of the UNESCO World Heritage) was most affected. Both the Charnarayana temple and the Harishankara temple, dating back to the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries respectively, completely collapsed.[781] In the narrow *gallis* around the square, private homes were severely damaged. Especially the absence of open spaces for people to take refuge caused fear and panic. After the earthquake, wooden stilts were quickly installed to prevent affected buildings from giving in during the aftershocks. Warning signs were put up to divert people and traffic.

By the time the festival started, most of the rubble was cleared away, but house-sized empty spaces, carefully stacked piles of bricks, makeshift shelters, warning signs, and wooden beams remained as daily reminders of the catastrophe. Psychological effects seemed to be lingering—my research partners and acquaintances described being terrified of the constant aftershocks, scared to move through their neighborhoods, and even more afraid to enter their own houses. One photographer explains that, in the weeks after the earthquake, many people hurried through the *gallis* in

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777 O'Neill uses the term monographic presentation in opposition to the format of the group exhibition, which brings together multiple artists in one single event. O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 242–243.

778 AR, NGK, December 2015.

779 AR, NGK, December 2015.

780 Ministry of Home Affairs Nepal, "Nepal Earthquake 2072: Situation Update as of 11th May," *Ministry of Home Affairs Nepal*, May 11, 2015, accessed June 20, 2021, http://drrportal.gov.np/document/documentdetail/14.

781 Katharina Weiler, "Authenticity and the Re-evaluation of Cultural Heritage: The Revival of Patan Darbar Square's Sacred Sites," *Material Religion* 13, no. 3 (2017): 382.

fear of being crushed by the remaining buildings.[782] Similar observations led Christiane Brosius to conclude that in the aftermath of an earthquake, such as the one in Nepal, "the city, one's home, and safe harbor, can turn into a 'minefield.'"[783]

PC was quick to respond to the earthquake, not least because its members themselves were in the center of Patan, participating in a workshop on oral history when the earthquake hit. They rallied together a large network of friends and colleagues, coordinated basic relief, and set up a fundraiser for earthquake-affected areas and people.[784] More than that, PC wanted to change people's feelings toward their city, to allow them to feel safe and enjoy their homes again. This became an important goal of the festival and a big part of the reason why the festival was located in Patan.

ENGAGING THE FABRICS OF LOCALITY

PKTM 2015 comprises seven contemporary visual stories (including Kishor Sharma's work on the Raute, and Frederic Lecloux's *Everyday Epiphanies*) and five archival exhibitions from the NPL. Moreover, *PKTM* includes eight interdisciplinary projects, such as the "Photobook Library" by the Mumbai-based Bind Collective (est. 2015), and a project on *patis* (arcaded public platforms) which comprises photographs, oral histories, and a curated walk around Patan. More than half of the eighteen *PKTM* venues are located in the streets and squares around Patan. Alongside these open-air displays, eight exhibitions take place in private homes (such as the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa exhibition), existing galleries (New Chen Gallery, Image Ark), public buildings (the Old Court House), and the Patan Museum. As there are only a limited number of places in Patan and Kathmandu big enough to meet, hang out, and provide space for talks and seminars, the Yala Maya Kendra, a socio-cultural center and high-end restaurant near Patan Dhoka (Patan Gate) was chosen as the main festival hub. A second info-point with a small office-cum-storage surrounded by *bhattis* (small local eateries) and *pasals* (shops) is installed at Swotha, one hundred meters away from the main Patan Durbar Square (see Fig. 15).

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782 FDE, A, 2015.
783 Christiane Brosius, "Art in the Aftermath of a Catastrophe: Gazing, Walking, Participating in the City," in *Breaking Views: Engaging Art in Post-Earthquake Nepal*, ed. Christiane Brosius and Sanjeev Maharjan (Kathmandu: Himal Books, 2017), 120–121.
784 The relief activities were mostly organized out of the Yellow House, a guesthouse and cafe popular with expats, belonging to Kakshapati's family. Much of the coordination happened through social networks, such as Facebook. The Nepal Photo Project was also instrumental. Initiated by six Nepal-based photographers, the Instagram account offered a platform to share critical information and document what was happening around them in the aftermath of the earthquake. A part of this project was exhibited during *PKTM* 2015, at Patan Dhoka. NepalPhotoProject, Instagram Page, accessed May 16, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/nepalphotoproject/.

MAP

YALA MAYA KENDRA
Patan Dhoka
INFO POINT
TALKS, PORTFOLIO REVIEWS,
WORKSHOPS, DISCUSSIONS
10am - 7pm
Schedule: www.photokthm.com

PIPALBOT CHAUTARI
Patan Dhoka
EXHIBITION
Nepal Photo Project
Multiple Artists
10am - 7pm

PIMBAHAL
EXHIBITION
North Pole
Maia Ruth Lee and Peter Sutherland
10am - 7pm

DHAUGAL - South Wall
EXHIBITION
Everyday Epiphanies
Frédéric Lecloux
10am - 7pm

DHAUGAL - East Wall
EXHIBITION
The 90s: A Democratic Awakening
Bikas Rauniar
10am - 7pm

DHAKHWA HOUSE
Nagbahal
EXHIBITION
Juju Bhai Dhakhwa: Keeper of Memories
Nepal Picture Library
12pm - 4pm

NAGBAHAL
SLIDESHOW
Saturday, 7 November
6:30pm - 7:30 pm

SWOTHA
INFO POINT
10am - 7pm
EXHIBITION
Maya for Tomorrow
Swotha Community
10am - 7pm
SLIDESHOW
Monday, 9 November
6:20pm - 7:20 pm

ZYU
Swotha
EXHIBITION
Time Maps and Memories: The Sumitra
Manandhar Gurung Collection
Nepal Picture Library / Indira Chowdhury
10am - 7pm

MANGAHITI
Patan Durbar Square
EXHIBITION
Patis in Patan
Manoj Maharjan
10am - 7pm
SLIDESHOW
Wednesday, 4 November
6:30pm - 7:30pm

ADARSHA KANYA NIKETAN SCHOOL
Patan Durbar Square
EXHIBITION
History Begins at Home: Diverse Narratives of
Young People Living in Kathmandu
Class 8 students from various schools
10am - 7pm

TWILAKO TOL
EXHIBITION
Living in the Mist - The Last Nomads of Nepal
Kishor Sharma
10am - 7pm

KESHAV NARAYAN CHOWK
Patan Museum
EXHIBITION
Facing the Camera: A History of Nepali
Studio Photography
Nepal Picture Library
10am - 4pm

MULCHOWK ENTRANCE
Patan Museum
EXHIBITION
WE
Tuomo Manninen
10am - 7pm

YALA GUEST HOUSE
Patan Durbar Square
EXHIBITION
Patan Camera Obscura
Laura Diamond Dixit, Miku Dixit and René Fan
10am - 7pm

BHAI DEGA
Patan Durbar Square
EXHIBITION
Portraits of Nepal
Kevin Bubriski
10am - 7pm

OLD COURT HOUSE
Hakha
EXHIBITION
In the Shadow of Hope
Philip Blenkinsop
10am - 7pm

CHAKRABAHIL
EXHIBITION
Patis in Patan
Dikshya Katwal, Sameer Tamrakar, Shreeti Prajapati
10am - 7pm

SUNDHARA
EXHIBITION
Patis in Patan
Bishal Yonjan, Deepak Lopchan, Dujaw Chitrakar,
James Khati, Santosh Jarga Magar
10am - 7pm

CHYASAL
EXHIBITION
Change of Course
Prasiit Stapit
10am - 7pm

NEWA CHEN
Kulimha
EXHIBITION
BND Photobook Exhibition and Library
The BND Collective
10am - 5pm

IMAGE ARK
Kulimha
EXHIBITION
The Man from Limbuwan
Nepal Picture Library / Surendra Lawoti
10am - 5pm

KONTIBAHI
SLIDESHOW
Sunday, 8 November
6:30 - 7:30pm

BIKALPA ART CENTER
Pulchowk
SLIDESHOW
Friday, 6 November
6:30pm - 7:30pm

EXHIBITION   SLIDESHOW   INFO POINT

Figure 15: photo.circle, Photo Kathmandu Map, 2015. Courtesy of photo.circle.

Unlike *CM* in Dhaka, I do not observe different "sectional publics"[785] for the different venues; each location attracts a similarly heterogeneous viewership (tourists, residents, festival guests). This is surely also due to the comparatively close proximity of the venues to each other, making them easily accessible on foot. I do however notice distinct forms of engagement at and with each venue. While many visitors at the Patan Museum, especially foreign tourists, seem to stumble upon the photo studio exhibition by chance during their regular museum visit, beholders of the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa collection are much more deliberate; they consciously (yet sometimes hesitantly) enter the Dhakhwa family home to see the work on display. The exhibition of Kevin Bubriski's *Portraits of Nepal*, located in the middle of the Patan Durbar Square, certainly attracts the biggest, most diverse audience of locals and tourists, accidental and deliberate visitors alike. The prominent location, the noise from the nearby main road, the surrounding shops, and the continuously changing audiences create a high-paced atmosphere, while other open-air exhibitions, such as those of Frédéric Lecloux, Kishor Sharma, or Prasiit Stapit are exposed to a slower day-to-day rhythm. In contrast to Bubriski's work, they are located in the neighborhood's hanging out spaces in the smaller alleys and squares around Patan Durbar Square. Life continues and grows around them unhampered: children play catch, senior citizens enjoy the sun, women go about their

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785 Möntmann, *Kunst als sozialer Raum*.

daily chores drying crop or lentils, dogs curl up and fall asleep, vendors sell goods from their carts. In comparison to the Patan Durbar Square, these spaces are less frequented by non-residents and domestic or foreign tourists. In the days leading up to the festival, several volunteers and festival participants note that, although they have lived in Kathmandu all their life, they have never been to places such as Chyasal or Twilako Tol (see Fig. 15). The slower rhythm of these dwelled-in spaces affects the viewing process; to me, the process seems intimate and distant at the same time. The immediacy of the inhabitants and dwellers, their ongoing daily routines, stand in contrast to my own status as an outsider to this community.

The organizers of *PKTM* master the challenge of bringing together the diverse qualities and rhythms of each exhibition space and making participants, residents, and visitors feel welcome within the overall frame of the festival. They address different sectorial publics, while at the same time being respectful of the locality and its inhabitants. The success of this balancing act is based on the multi-scalar connections that the organizers cultivate. They make sure not to intrude into spaces. Over the years, PC's engagement in the art field and civil society (through the NPL, but also in the aftermath of the earthquake) has enabled its members to establish contact with administrative and community authorities, local business owners, clubs, and residents. This, in turn, allows them to procure the necessary permissions for using community spaces like Chyasal and Swotha, but also established institutions, such as the Patan Museum. Moreover, PC stresses that the residents and shop owners are given ownership of the exhibitions: they are involved in the decision-making processes and given responsibility for the safety of the displays. During my fieldwork, the many local and foreign participants and I repeatedly observed the team's compassionate and respectful engagement with the local communities. The slideshows in the predominantly Newari neighborhoods, for instance, are moderated not only in English and Nepali, but also in Newari, the language spoken by the Newari community. Evening get-togethers are organized in various places, ranging from prominent tourist hangouts such as the Café de Patan to a local *bhatti* in Chyasal. This offers a varied experience to visitors, but it also expands the economic profit from the festival into more vulnerable communities. This inclusive approach inspires volunteers, exhibitors, and guests to engage with the locality in a more open way. Rather than frequenting high-end restaurants and cafes, as many tourists do, they hang out at smaller eateries, local food stores and shops, thus boosting local businesses.[786]

Further, PC offers a set of guiding tools for different audiences, thus making sure that incoming visitors as well as residents are able to make

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786 For a beautiful description of such an eatery, see festival staff member (editorial team and research) Jebin Gautam's blog post about Honacha, a *bhatti* in Swotha: Jebin Gautam, "Honacha," Photo Kathmandu, September 27, 2015, https://photoktm.com/honacha/.

their way to the different exhibitions. Next to the bright pink, tear-shaped signs, bilingual (English and Nepali) info panels, and regular homepage updates (blog feeds about the exhibitions, podcast interviews with the visiting artists, schedule updates), the most important tool is the festival map (see Fig. 15). Like the intangible global art map, these typically A3-sized paper maps have been a constant companion throughout my fieldwork. The *Biennale* map guided me through Venice to the pavilion of Bangladesh, Sattya Media Arts Collective's (Sattya) online *Kolor Kathmandu (KK)* map navigated me through Kathmandu for the first time, and the *1mile²* map (see Fig. 6) was my orientation in the neighborhoods of Old Dhaka. Like the large-scale perennial event, the concept of the white cube, and the figure of the curator, the program-map is at risk of being reduced to a globally circulated standardized format. Much like the Renaissance perspective map, this map represents the standpoint of a "seeing eye," looking at spatial representation from the outside/the top. As a structuring device, it inscribes things into their proper "place,"[787] in this case, the frame of *PKTM*. A distinct sign of this structuring is the stripping away of any information not of direct interest or consequence to the festival visitor; the map exclusively marks exhibition and slideshow venues, information points and important landmarks for orientation, such as temples and ponds.

However, on closer examination, the *PKTM* map reveals interesting characteristics about spatial mobility in the city. Like in Old Dhaka, buildings in Kathmandu do not have addresses based on street names and building numbers. Streets and buildings, if they do have names, are often not known beyond the vernacular. Locals instead use *bahahs* (courtyards), *tols* (neighborhoods), and *gallis* (alleyways) to orient themselves.[788] These places find a way onto the *PKTM* map, thereby educating non-locals about vernacular spatial references. Moreover, the festival map is also a place where other important information is retained. In addition to exhibitions by multiple artists, the festival comprises a multitude of activities for participants (portfolio reviews and workshops for instance) and audiences (slideshows, artist talks, and collateral events). The map thus assumes the function of a calendar—organizing not only space but time. Through it, festival coordinators provide suggestions on how and where visitors should spend their time.

While formats such as the map, the schedule, and the signboard represent a top-down management, the daily life encountered on the way to, in-between, or even in the middle of program points contrasts the effect of this totalizing structure. The festival demands visitors to undertake "forays into the city";[789] participating in its program necessarily includes experiencing the life around. The practice of photography (and of looking at photography), whether archival or contemporary, is inscribed into a wider

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787 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 253.
788 Toffin, *Imagination and Realities*, 96.
789 Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," 328.

socio-cultural fabric of the locality.[790] Images displayed in coffee shops or on construction sites momentarily pull away the gaze from the day-to-day reality of going to work, getting groceries, or visiting family. They break with the habitual visuality by introducing something unexpected to a dwelled-in locality. In a way, the photographs become the (trans)cultural brokers that introduce new visual elements and thus challenge existing visual discourses.

In reference to the earthquake, PC consciously aims to transform the predominant visuality of destruction followed by loss. In her discussion on artist Sanjeev Maharjan's creative engagement with the earthquake in Nepal, Brosius suggests that "photographs slow down the flow of movement through space, and of the flow of the passage of time."[791] To outsiders, the organizer's choice of venue reveals the full extent of the earthquake's destruction; it directs the view from the central traffic axes of Kathmandu to the neighborhoods of Patan and its semi-public community spaces and *gallis* where the destruction is greatest. Simultaneously, the exhibitions distract the gaze from the empty spaces and the stacked bricks. For the people dwelling in Patan, looking at the photographs offers a similar distraction, but adds an element of recognition. Hüsken and Michaels argue that festivals sustain individual and group identity especially in moments of rapid change and crisis.[792] Through *PKTM*, PC allows inhabitants to "take stock of changes as much as of continuities" by giving them a reason to physically walk in the streets that six months before were conceived of as "minefields."[793] Especially the archival exhibitions address rapid change and crisis while pointing to continuity. Through the display of works by Juju Bhai Dhakhwa, Fréderic Lecloux, Kishor Sharma, and other contributors, life in Patan calmed down; locals and foreigners alike strolled the streets leisurely and took their time to see exhibitions that spoke to memories, experiences, and emotions beyond the photographers' individual perception.

CURATING VISUAL ARCHIVES

In his 1991 monograph *Entangled Objects*, Nicholas Thomas poignantly argues that things change context and that every such change entails an alternation in their perception, their meaning, or their value.[794] What is interesting to me is when, where, and why such new meanings come into being. The exhibitions in Dhaka and Kathmandu are linked through the photographs from the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa and the Studio Photography NPL collections. Despite originating from the same archive, the meanings and values they engender in each composition do not necessarily overlap. With

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790 Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," 328.
791 Brosius, "Art in the Aftermath of a Catastrophe," 114.
792 Hüsken and Michaels, "Introduction," 9–10.
793 Brosius, "Art in the Aftermath of a Catastrophe," 114.
794 Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

each exhibition, they are (re)ascribed by diverse factors such as the locality, the curators, the organizers, and the audiences.

Above, I argued that the festival follows, on a larger scale, the same mechanism that PC uses for its monographic exhibitions, regrouping images under a new heading and consciously introducing them into new contexts, new spaces, and to new audiences. *Photographs of Friendship* (2012) was exhibited at the Pipalbot Chautari (an open-air rest stop named after the Pipal or Bodhi tree) near Patan Gate. In contrast, *Postcards and Beyond* was on display at the Siddhartha Art Gallery in Baber Mahal Revisited and comprised a series of lectures by Alban von Stockhausen and other scholars. PC consciously shifts between different scales of places and sectorial publics. Thereby, it allows the NPL to transgress long-established assumptions about the role and practices of archives, both as systems that allow and control the production of knowledge,[795] and as keepers, organizers, and preservers of documents or images in a permanent and stable form.

Van House argues that "the meanings of archived printed photographs are often constrained by annotations, juxtapositioning and sequencing … which reduces the ambiguity and discontinuity of photographs."[796] Because NPL is an exclusively digital archive its materializations in the form of specific exhibitions constantly engender a new assemblage, they become entangled in a mess of dynamic meanings. PC consciously drives forward this process, renouncing the attribution of fixed values and meanings to individual photographs or collections. The archive actively seeks to be more than a container for images frozen in time; it does not aim to fix images at a certain point in their life nor does it salvage content and fix it in a continued idle state. On the contrary, it allows and fosters an active renegotiation, reinterpretation, and recreation of meaning. It uses history to promote social engagement in the present and future. This aim is transferred to the festival, where the images are used to share a ground-up, inclusive history and to bring people together in its experience.

JUJU BHAI DHAKHWA: KEEPER OF MEMORIES[797]

The curatorial team for *PKTM* 2015 comprises PC co-directors Kakshapati and Shilpakar, Chitrakar, Brosius ("Patis in Patan" project), Philippe Van Cauteren ("Jazz and Photo" residency), and Indira Chowdhury ("Time Maps and Memories: The Sumitra Manandhar Gurung Collection"). They are supported by the core PC team. Artist and educator Chitrakar is the curator for the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa exhibition. Already during his time with Sutra, Chitrakar actively worked at breaking institutional boundaries in the art

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795 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* trans. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 128–130.

796 Van House, "Personal Photography," 128.

797 *Juju Bhai Dhakhwa: Keeper of Memories* is the title of a book that PC published on the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa collection. Photo.circle and Nepal Picture Library, *Juju Bhai Dhakhwa*.

field, especially by bringing art onto the streets in the form of public inter-
ventions and performances. During the *Kathmandu International Art Fes-
tival* 2012 (now known as *Kathmandu Triennale*), he worked as a creative
consultant together with Kakshapati and broadened his experiences in the
organization and the curation of art events. Moreover, Chitrakar's personal
background of growing up in *Asan Tol*, a close-nit Newari neighborhood in
Central Kathmandu, and his command of Newari are both crucial to the
exhibition's successful planning and installation.

To me, the most appealing part of the exhibition is its twofold design,
which creates a synergy between the exhibition content and the venue.
The display starts inside the family home of the Dhakhwas and then spills
onto the open space of Naghbahal. Both parts not only diverge in physical
shape, but also in content. The display inside the house is arranged like
a studio or artist museum, reminiscent of the Rembrandt House Museum
in Amsterdam or the Tagore House in Kolkata. Family photos are displayed
next to related objects such as cameras, items of clothing, and family
heirlooms. In this way, Chitrakar enables visitors to gain an intimate, per-
sonalized view into the "ideologies of family"[798] of the urban Newar popu-
lation. Together, the photographs and other material remnants introduce
Juju Bhai Dhakhwa (b. 1940) as the common citizen he was, rather than
as a professional documentary photographer. During the 1960s, 1970s,
and 1980s, Juju Bhai spontaneously recorded what caught his eye. The col-
lection's countless portraits and auto-portraits show that he also enjoyed
being photographed. They indicate Dhakhwa's passion for Bollywood-
inspired fashion, hairstyles, and iconic poses. Moreover, the exhibition
offers an intimate glimpse into the daily lives of his family members, from
women captured doing laundry in the inner courtyard to children in their
school uniforms. These photographs also give access to the rapid eco-
nomic changes of the Dhakhwa family and allow conclusions about codes
of gender, class, and power.[799] Next to images of large celebrations, one
photograph for instance shows the novel practice of cement plaster on the
facade of the Dhakhwa house. Additionally, Juju Bhai's beloved bike is an
indicator of the family's growing spending power. The photographs exem-
plify NPL's unique characteristic: in contrast to the contemporary festival
contributions, the archival photos are not photos taken by professional
photographers. They enable visitors to catch a glimpse of what ordinary
people considered photo-worthy at the time in Nepal.[800]

The display around Naghbahal is more public in form and content.
Most of the photos are fixed on larger panels on the northwestern side of
the open space. Some are dangling from the branches of a tree and oth-
ers are randomly fixed on the facade of neighboring houses. The photos
chosen by Chitrakar still center on the Dhakhwa family, but the narrative

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798   Vivienne and Burgess, "The Remediation of the Personal Photograph," 279–281.
799   Bourdieu, *Photography*.
800   Van House, "Personal Photography," 125–127, 130–131.

opens to include the tight, predominantly Buddhist Newar community in Naghbahal as well as wider public events, such as religious festivals and political rallies. Dhakhwa for instance captured an assembly of the Nepali Congress party, which was forbidden in the party-less, monarchical system of the Panchayat (1962–1990) and were exiled in India until late in 1976. This shot offers insight into his personal political affiliation, as well as to the rapid political changes Nepal was facing. Dhakhwa's photographs foretell the slow demise of the Panchayat system and the democratic opening of the 1990s. Further, they show an urban middle class society amid socio-cultural shifts, concerned with Bollywood-inspired fashion (flared jeans, stylish suits, and sunglasses) and religious ceremonies alike. They constitute important testimonies of *Samyak Dan*, one of the most significant Newar-Buddhist festivals celebrated in all three cities of the valley.

Overall, Chitrakar's design allows festival visitors to gaze into an otherwise uncaptured, un-depicted life. Yet it also transgresses the individual lifeworld of Juju Bhai Dhakhwa; visitors from Kathmandu can connect not only to shared religious celebrations and political movements, but also to clothing styles, sought-after commodities such as radios or motorbikes, and daily chores. Even international visitors whose cultural norms and traditions differ more profoundly from those visible in the photographs can connect to the theme of personal photography and family albums. The ubiquity of the medium of photography in contemporary life allows people to connect and identify with the content of the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa exhibition irrespective of their socio-cultural background.

During the earthquake much of this daily life was disrupted and sometimes lost; houses and temples came down, loved ones and neighbors were hurt or killed, but also daily routines, rituals, and spaces for community life were disrupted. The physical experience of walking through the narrow corridors during the Photography festival, connecting the different parts and inner courtyards of the house to Naghbahal, in combination with the easily identifiable content, allows visitors and organizers to take stock of what was destroyed during the earthquake. Through the display of otherwise ephemeral, everyday gestures and interactions, the exhibition generates hope that maybe not all is lost; it speaks to a wider socio-cultural continuity. This realization allows for a slow re-fabrication of the social-cultural life of the urban neighborhoods. The curation of the exhibition, and on a larger scale the curation of the festival in its entirety, gives people the opportunity to hang out in the areas of Patan, to be distracted by photography, to share memories, experiences, and emotions that transgress the lifeworlds captured by individual photographers. It allows participants to "rebuild a sense of identity," to "heal" and "recover" in the aftermath of a natural catastrophe, and enjoy their neighborhoods and city again.[801]

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801 Dina Bangdel, "Post-Earthquake Art Initiatives," in Brosius and Maharjan, *Breaking Views*, 61. See also photo.circle, ed., *Photo.Kathmandu Catalog: Edition 1 (3–9 November 2015)* (Patan: photo.circle, 2016).

FACING THE CAMERA: A HISTORY OF NEPALI STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY [802]

The exhibition at Northbrook Hall Library in Old Dhaka, which combined photos from the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa and the Studio Photography collections, was intended as a teaser, an introduction to the work of PC and its NPL initiative. The exhibition *Facing the Camera* during *PKTM* 2015 takes on a much broader objective: it embodies PC's use of "history through photography" with the aim to counter hegemonic narratives about the locality of Kathmandu and Nepal. In Old Dhaka, the photos were displayed together on a single large table. The detailed research PC conducted in preparation for *PKTM* allows a much more informed and nuanced presentation of the history of studio photography during the festival. The team, led by Kakshapati, identified different development phases and used these to create thematic sections. The exhibition starts with early portrait photography, for instance by Krishna Bahadur Chitrakar who after finishing his service as Rana court painter went on to establish the first private photography studio in Nepal. The Ranas were the first supporters of the newly introduced medium, hiring photographers to document ceremonies and social events. The second part of the exhibition focuses on the early middle-class clients; in the first half of the twentieth century, photography was still an expensive, lengthy process, which people only returned to on special occasions. The photographs thus often depict large families or couples in rigid poses, reminiscent of early court paintings. In the 1960s, photographs became mandatory on official documents in Nepal, entailing a proliferation of photo studios in urban areas. Although these photographs generally were rather formal, the NPL collection contains numerous examples of clients breaking with the rigidity and symmetry. Some smile or stare into the distance rather than fixing on the camera. Others take on iconic filmposes or play with props.

These experiments, enabled by the technological advance of the medium, became more frequent and elaborate in the 1970s and 1980s. Photos from this period make up the last section of the exhibition. They include a variety of backdrops, from cityscapes to mountain villages and poses copied from Bollywood movies (handshakes between friends or hands pensively held next to the cheek). Photographers experimented with double exposures and offered a variety of props from guitars to radios and flower vases. In our interview, Kakshapati explains that the studio photography exhibition, even more than the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa display, is easily accessible because it evokes stories many visitors experienced themselves.

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802   *Facing the Camera: A History of Nepali Studio Photography* is the title of a PC publication on studio photography. photo.circle and Nepal Picture Library, *Facing the Camera: A History of Nepali Studio Photography* (Kathmandu: Nepal Picture Library, 2016).

> The kinds of responses from that Studio Photo show in Patan Museum, I mean people were—there you know you realized that you transcend this whole lack of visual literacy issue—people connect to it like that [snapping her fingers], because they are not connecting to the visual. They are connecting to their own past. … It is so immediate. It's the most familiar form of photography to them, like a little passport photo or a family photo, or whatever. It's what they are most familiar with. That kind of immediate response you don't get anywhere else.[803]

By bringing these photos—which mostly originated within the private realm of the family or the cramped space of a studio—into the public and into the frame of a contemporary photography festival, PC turns them into cultural brokers transgressing the circumscription of the art field. On the one side, it allows the archival photographs to enter into the wider socio-cultural domain; they become part of a continuous collective memory. On the other side, visitors hitherto unfamiliar with the art field are invited to connect to the medium of photography through their own experiences and day-to-day practices. They do not need to be familiar with the visual discourse and canon that constitute this field; they can access the medium through their physical experience of having been in front of a camera. PC and its application of photography as a means to social change continuously disrupts the relative autonomy of the field of art production. At the same time, the collective continues to broaden the visual discourse and the canon within this field. Its activities question the divide between aesthetic and political, sacred and mundane, high and low culture. This becomes clear when we take a look at the venue of the exhibition.

The Patan Museum was established in 1997 in the premises of the Patan Durbar as the first self-sustainable public museum in Nepal. It is managed autonomously by a board of directors, which, next to employees of Tribhuvan University, the Department of Archeology, and the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, also includes Siddhartha Art Gallery founder Sangeeta Thapa.[804] The curation of its collection is focused on aesthetics; the display, including the choice of lighting, the cleanliness and arrangement of the display cases, and the selection of a small number of extraordinary specimens emphasizes the formal elements of the objects. Mixed with the traditional Newari style architecture, the museum attracts more than 50,000 visitors every year.[805] Patricia Davison argues that the

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803 AR, NGK, December 2015.
804 "Home," Patan Museum, Government of Nepal, accessed May 18, 2021, http://www.patanmuseum.gov.np/.
805 The museum records a visible decrease in visitor numbers, especially among SAARC/Chinese Visitors and Foreigners in the year following the earthquake. While there were 72,670 visitors in 2015, there were only 46,583 in 2016. For 2017, the number climbed to 176,906, indicating a substantial increase in foreign visitors. Government of Nepal, "Home."

institution of the museum authorizes and institutionalizes "versions of the past" as public memory.[806] This process is always selective and exclusive, it "involves both remembering and forgetting."[807] The Patan Museum, according to its mission statement, is dedicated to the preservation and exhibition of "Sacred Art, Culture and Iconography of Hinduism and Buddhism."[808] It thus consciously reminds of the "Sacred" material culture of Nepal's most prevalent belief systems, Hinduism and Buddhism. Especially their aesthetic qualities are inscribed into the visual discourse and canon of the field. The mundane, the common, the everyday, along with other systems of belief and worship, are excluded. The NPL transgresses this mechanism.

In its digital form, the NPL is a potentially infinite and thus dynamic and inclusive archive of Nepal's visual culture. From this repository, PC introduces mundane lifeworlds, ordinary people and their day-to-day practices, into the Patan Museum. For the time of the festival, the museums' collection policy is undercut and its mission to safeguard is extended from what is considered "high culture" to multiple ethnicities, religions, genders, and castes. *Facing the Camera* thus adds to PC's overall objective to contest uniform and exclusive circumscriptions of Nepali history and identity using photography as its main tool. In the interview, Kakshapati explains that this objective has been welcome by the museum itself. Both parties are negotiating the possibilities of a long-term cooperation, including future NPL exhibitions.

Festivals like *PKTM* and *CM* are extraordinary events in the sense that they bring together people from different places and backgrounds under one theme—photography—for a short-term period. The two festivals take hold of spaces outside the realm of contemporary art production, spaces that usually serve other functions, such as a former boarding house in Old Dhaka or the streets in Patan, or that represent institutionalized exclusivist visual discourses, such as the Patan Museum. Thereby they cause "disruptions to the 'business as usual' condition of the city."[809] They momentarily unsettle the lives of all participants, be it the foreign photographers travelling to Dhaka or Kathmandu for a week, the organizers suspending their work and family responsibilities (and often their sleep and eating habits) throughout the duration of the festival, the audiences who take the time to see the exhibitions, or the institutions that suspend their regular operation for the time being. These kinds of disruptions from the daily routine are associated with a joyous atmosphere, but they also create unique

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806 Patricia Davison, "Museums and the Re-shaping of Memory," in *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Gerard Corsane (London: Routledge, 2005), 186.

807 Davison, "Museums and the Re-shaping of Memory," 186.

808 "Mission," Patan Museum, Government of Nepal, November 20, 2018, http://www.patanmuseum.gov.np/content/3/2018/75251176/.

809 Mehrotra, Vera, and Mayoral, *Ephemeral Urbanism*, 38.

opportunities to convey long-term objectives.[810] For both PC and Drik, the format of the festival is a valuable platform to build and sustain alliances on a multi-scalar level. But both festivals are grounded in a set of more durable projects, initiatives, and institutions. By connecting with neighborhood authorities, urban audiences, fellow field members, colleagues from the region, and photography enthusiasts worldwide, they extend their overall reach of action in the emerging field of contemporary art production. Both collectives consciously engage in brokering new visual elements into the discourses they have been socialized and educated in. The collectives contribute to their revitalization by consciously introducing archival material, stories of ordinary citizens, journalistic approaches, fine art techniques, and socio-political issues. They evoke counter-narratives to hegemonic, top-down constructions of identity and nationality: inward, against the state's cultural work of constructing a united national identity based on exclusive economic, cultural, and religions notions (high-caste hill Brahmins or Muslim Bengali middle class), and outward, as a majority world regaining control over its own representation. Both festivals create momentum—a widely visible platform to promote social change through the valorization of vernacular (hi)stories.

The qualities of both festivals are significantly shaped by the positioning of the artist-led initiatives that founded them. The artists involved are able to call upon different scales of connections that they have strenuously built over the years to reach their objectives. The branding and localization strategies employed in my next case study, the *DAS*, are equally dependent on the position of its organizers within the field. The Samdani Art Foundation and its co-founders Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani are part of the economically and culturally powerful art jet set. Similar to the artist-led initiatives, they contest the existing art field dominated by nationally circumscribed *modi operandi*, values, and canons. They aim at instituting more dynamic connections between contemporary art actors especially within the South Asian region. They also aspire to establish the *DAS* as a, if not the, central node for contemporary art discourse and research within this regional network—a "meeting of the minds."[811] Their position within the mobile center connects them to key players from the global art world (curators, collectors, art writers, museum managers, and so on), and allows them to broker cultural and social capital to Bangladeshi artists. What opportunities do these strategies yield for artist collectives and the involved artists? I zoom in on the artwork of Britto co-founder Lipi and examine the way she manages to create a room of her own within the *Summit* and in its frame.

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810 Hüsken and Michaels, "Introduction."
811 Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed., 3.

Interlude: *Room of My Own*

On the morning before the opening of the Dhaka Art Summit *2014, I meet Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman at their home, a few minutes' walk from Britto Space. Together with Britto member Shimul Saha and Nepal-based Sunil Sigdel we cram into a tiny CNG (a motorized three-wheeler running on compressed natural gas) and head to the Shilpakala Academy. We enter the National Art Gallery and take the elevator straight to the fourth floor, where the solo projects will be on view. The atmosphere is both tense and convivial, as it often is on the days before the opening of a festival; a million things need to be done before the opening, and the whole building is buzzing with artists, workers, and volunteers. Britto members Promotesh Das Pulak, Yasmin Jahan Nupur, Kabir Ahmed Massum Chisty, and Ayesha Sultana are nominated for the Samdani Art Award and are setting up their artworks in their respective sections. Tayeba Begum Lipi needs to make a few changes to her solo display, entitled* Room of My Own*, and wants to check in with Istanbul- and London-based Pi Artworks, the gallery representing her work as part of the* DAS *gallery showcase (Fig. 16). She takes me on a tour through the section, making introductions and heartily greeting passing-by acquaintances and friends. We end up at the "Britto Booth," where the collective will be showcasing and hopefully selling artworks by its members. Then Pooja Sood, director of KHOJ and (former) coordinator of SANA drops in and is off to her next round, showing Sood around the exhibition grounds.*

Figure 16: Tayeba Begum Lipi, *Room of My Own*, 2014. Solo Project at the Dhaka Art Summit, Shilpakala Academy. Photo: author.

When I enter Room of My Own *on the following day, the intimate atmos-phere in the dimly lit room immediately draws me in. The hustle and bustle of the opening has calmed and I have the room all to myself. The central piece is a glass dish displayed on top of a white wooden structure. It is filled with clear water and holds a set of eerie looking, severed transparent hands. Two medical clamps and several soaked tampons enhance the unsettling, clinical feeling emanating from the installation. This feeling is furthered by a series of ultra-sound images on the right wall. More than the images themselves, the razor blades that serve as a frame are disconcerting. I know them to be a recurring motif in Tayeba Begum Lipi's work; I have seen them used in the brasseries on display at the* Venice Biennale. *For the first time, however, I am struck by the violence they give off—maybe in juxtaposition with the corporeal and vulnera-ble content of the ultrasound?*

I take refuge in the close-up, black and white photographs in the back. They show the artist playing, almost flirting, with the camera. I catch myself imag-ining the situation in which they were taken and immediately feel a sense of shame; I have become an intruder. I move on to the golden corner piece, which by its shape could be either a womb or a vagina. It is formed out of safety pins that, on closer inspection, look like tiny sanitary napkins. The last piece, a glass box filled with children's clothes, constitutes a harsh contrast to the rest of the installation, especially to the delicate, golden shape in the corner. Otherwise absent from the room, the box is filled with colors: green shirts, red shoes, blue socks, and a bib that reads: "I love mommy."

THE *DHAKA ART SUMMIT* AS A "PRIVILEGED ZONE OF COMMUNICATION"[812]

The Samdani Art Foundation is part of a group of foundations that have established themselves as important actors in the art field in Nepal and Bangladesh. The Siddhartha Art Foundation (2011) and the Bengal Foun-dation (1986) have been engaged in building a translocal network, opening new markets and channeling knowledge (about new mediums, curation, art writing) to the young generation of contemporary artists. The social, economic, and cultural capital that artists access through this network allows them to expand their scope of action by gaining for instance access to gallery representation abroad or receiving financial support for collab-orative projects.

The Samdani Foundation is the most recent addition to this group of supportive actors. It was founded in Dhaka in 2011, the same year as the Siddhartha Art Foundation in Kathmandu. In comparison to Sangeeta Thapa, who had been working in the field for more than twenty years at the time of its founding, Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani were perceived as rel-ative newcomers to the field of contemporary art by most of my research partners. Rajeeb Samdani is very conscious of his role as a newcomer and, in our interview, describes himself through the lens of the Bangladeshi art

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812   Fillitz, "Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art," 90–91.

field: in comparison to them, he only "came to the art scene like four–five years back."[813] The couple belongs to a very small ultra-rich upper class that made its fortune primarily through Bangladesh's most profitable sectors—ready-made garments, pharmaceuticals, and food—since the boom of the industrial and service sectors in the 1980s and 1990s.[814] Nadia Samdani was born in Britain and inherited her interest in art from her family, as she states in various interviews and on the Samdani homepage.[815] She began collecting at age twenty-two and, after marrying Rajeeb Samdani in 2009, passed on her passion.[816] Rajeeb Samdani is the managing director of the Golden Harvest Group, a large business engaged in diverse ventures from food (notably frozen products) and information technology, to real estate and insurance.[817] Their economic resources and Nadia Samdani's British passport allow the couple to be part of a globally mobile business elite. When in Dhaka, they reside in the north of the city where foreign embassies, expat clubs, restaurant chains, and supranational institutions and businesses are located.

Their interest in art and notably contemporary art from Bangladesh and the South Asian region is reflected in their art collection; from an initial interest in modern masters such as Picasso and Rabindranath Tagore, they widened their focus to contemporary art by acquiring works by artists such as Lipi and Naeem Mohaiemen. A large piece by Pakistan-born artist Rashid Rana was prominently displayed in Rajeeb Samdani's office while I was taking his interview. The impressive and diverse collection has earned the couple a position among the biggest art collectors in Bangladesh and beyond.[818] The collection precipitated the initiative of a more supportive role, the first step of which was the founding of the Samdani Art Foundation.[819] One of the Foundation's first activities was to facilitate the participation of two Bangladeshi artists in a collateral event to the *Venice Biennale* in 2011.[820] Since then, they have consolidated their role as art patrons: they

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813   AR, RS, September 2015.
814   Rashed A. M. Titumir, "Industrialization," in Riaz and Rahman, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*, 169.
815   "Our Team," Samdani Art Foundation, accessed September 24, 2018, https://www.samdani.com.bd/our-team/.
816   Brownell Mitic, "Putting Bangladeshi Art on the Map."
817   See "About Golden Harvest," Golden Harvest, accessed February 22, 2021, https://www.goldenharvestbd.com/about.
818   For example, in 2016, Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani were listed on the Artnet News Index of art collectors: "The Artnet News Index: The World's Top 100 Art Collectors for 2016, Part Two," *Artnet News*, June 15, 2016, accessed June 19, 2021, https://news.artnet.com/market/worlds-top-100-art-collectors-part-two-513953.
819   "Our Story," Samdani Art Foundation, accessed September 24, 2018, https://www.samdani.com.bd/our-story/.
820   Entitled OPEN, the International Exhibition of Sculptures and Installations, this event constitutes a collateral program to the *Venice Biennale*. Its fourteenth edition showcased thirty artists from all over the world, including Ebadur Rahman and Ronni Ahmmed, and took place in September 2011. Due to Samdani's involvement in this collateral event, they are often mistakenly believed to have funded the first Bangladeshi pavilion in Venice in the same year. "Bangladeshi

are founding members of the Harvard South Asia Institute's Arts Advisory Council and members of the Tate South Asia Acquisitions Committee. Their flagship project, however, is the *DAS*.

The first edition of the *Summit* in 2012 exclusively centered on the art field in Dhaka. The organizers seem to aim at connecting with and rallying together the established institutions in this urban field.[821] The two main national art institutions, the Shilpakala Academy and the National Museum, are partners of the event. The Academy serves as a venue (as it does until today) and the Bangladesh Museum organizes an exhibition on the master painters.[822] According to a spokesperson of the Foundation, "all the major art galleries" in Dhaka are represented, and a total of thirty artworks are sold "in direct artist-to-buyer transactions."[823] Individual members of Britto, such as Sultana, Pulak, and Rahman are repeatedly mentioned as participants in the press coverage. In the year following the first summit, the connections between the Foundation and the collective expand: in 2013, Lipi and Sultana participate in the *India Art Fair* as part of the Samdani Art Foundation showcase. Moreover, Rahman's multi-media project "The Replacement," on property ownership under military rule in Bangladesh, is supported by the Foundation.[824] The installation, comprising a vintage ambassador car, a mass of discarded army boots, and a video projection, figures prominently at the entrance of the *India Art Fair*.[825] The growing alliance between the Foundation and Britto becomes even more obvious in the *Summit*'s second edition, which is the focus of my discussion. For the 2014 event, the organizers also broaden their focus to the subcontinent: it includes fourteen solo art projects by established artists from the South Asian region, such as Beaconhouse

Art Collectors Participating in Venice Exhibition," *The Daily Star*, August 19, 2011, accessed June 21, 2021, https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-199172.

821 The homepage of the *DAS* only offers information on the post-2014 editions and the press coverage represents a fraction of the later editions. Nevertheless, all major Indian English–language newspapers reported on the inaugural *DAS*. See for instance: "South Asia Becomes New Global Art Hub," *Hindustan Times*, April 25, 2012, accessed June 20, 2021, https://www.hindustantimes.com/art-and-culture/south-asia-becomes-new-global-art-hub/story-E7kdpSZd40V-BUbuw8qJQHM.html; Paromita Chakrabarti, "Early Strokes," *The Indian Express*, April 22, 2012, accessed May 15, 2018, http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/early-strokes/939839/; Gargi Gupta, "Collector's Corner," *Business Standard,* January 21, 2013, accessed June 20, 2021, http://www.business-standard.com/article/beyond-business/collector-s-corner-112030300055_1.html; Shailaja Tripathi, "Art Scaling Heights," *The Hindu*, April 11, 2012, accessed June 21, 2021, https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/art-scaling-heights/article3304061.ece.

822 Tripathi, "Art Scaling Heights."

823 *Hindustan Times*, "South Asia Becomes New Global Art Hub."

824 "Our Story," Samdani Art Foundation.

825 Natasha Ginwala, "The 5th India Art Fair and Parallel Events," *Art Agenda*, February 8, 2013, accessed June 20, 2021, http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/the-5th-india-art-fair-and-parallel-events; Shreya Ray, "Preview, Eastern Promises: Bangladesh at the Centre Stage of This Year's India Art Fair Is a Sign That Collectors Globally are Looking East," *Livemint*, January 25, 2013, updated March 6, 2013, accessed May 17, 2018, https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/HWkxhhNDVbK28n1PN57nnK/Preview--Eastern-promises.html.

National University Dean Rashid Rana, India-based Shilpa Gupta, and Britto founders Rahman and Lipi. Similar to the first edition, *DAS* brings together fifteen Bangladeshi galleries, but also gives space to seventeen galleries focused on South Asia, such as Experimenter from Kolkata, the Siddhartha Art Gallery from Kathmandu, and the aforementioned Pi Art-works operating out of Istanbul and London. Additionally, there are five curated group exhibitions.[826] Moreover, the Samdanis have invited Los Angeles–born curator Diana Campbell Betancourt to organize the solo shows. Campbell Betancourt, who has since moved on to become the artistic director of the Samdani Art Foundation, is joined by a group of regionally active and experienced curators such as Deepak Ananth and Veeranganakumari Solanki to design the group exhibitions. The speakers' panels, also coordinated by Campbell Betancourt, include professionals from major European Institutions such as the Centre Pompidou and the British Museum.[827]

The selection of internationally established curators, panelists, and artists highlights the new connections that the Samdani Art Foundation has formed in the art field since the first edition of the *Summit*. It marks the Samdanis' growing reach, in terms of the social network they can call upon and the economic resources they can mobilize. At the same time, the attendance of these actors shows the organizers shifting agenda, from bringing together a local field focused on Dhaka to "increas[ing] artistic engagement between Bangladesh and the rest of the world."[828] In an interview printed in the French art magazine *L'Officiel Art*, Nadia Samdani elaborates that she aims for the *DAS* to be a research platform for people interested in South Asian art—a place to discover what is happening in Bangladesh. At the same time, the *Summit* should attract a local public wanting to experience art at the "highest standard."[829]

As I discussed earlier, its organizers consciously chose to name their event "summit" in order to distinguish it from more codified formats such as fairs or biennials, as well as to allow themselves a greater freedom in shaping its form. Initially, the event had a mixed commercial and non-commercial agenda, with both gallery representations and group exhibitions. From its 2014 edition onwards, the *DAS* has been branded as "the world's largest non-commercial art festival dedicated to South Asian art."[830] Due to the continued inclusion of gallery representations however there remains some confusion within the wider field about the *Summit*'s nature. This is possibly also related to its Indian namesake, the *India Art Summit*,

826 Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed.
827 Samdani Art Foundation, "Speakers Panel: Curated by Diana Campbell Betancourt," in Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed., 115–120.
828 Samdani Art Foundation, "Dhaka Art Summit 2014 Report," 2014, accessed June 9, 2016, https://www.dhakaartsummit.org/s/DAS-2014-Report-rs.pdf.
829 William Massey, "Coup d'Éclat à Dacca: Conversation entre Diana Campbell Betancourt et Nadia Samdani," *L'Officiel Art* 12 (2014–2015): 123.
830 Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed., 3.

which was inaugurated in 2008. In 2012 the Delhi-based event seemingly embraced its commercial nature and was rebranded as *India Art Fair*.[831] In our interview, Rajeeb Samdani makes it very clear that the *DAS* is not an art fair. He deplores that many people have mistaken the event for a commercial fair due to the gallery sections in 2012 and 2014.[832] His eagerness to clear this misunderstanding is emphasized in an e-mail that reaches me in February 2016; on behalf of the Samdani Art Foundation, I am kindly asked to "correct" a mistake in my initial research proposal, accessible on my university's homepage. It reads: "*Dhaka Art Summit* is and was never an art fair ... the foundation never had any financial benefit on their [the galleries'] participation and if any art was sold, we never claimed any money from them. The *Summit* is a non-commercial platform to showcase South Asian art."[833] Samdani seeks to establish the *Summit* as a "research platform for South Asia."[834] The couple's emphasis on research and quality points to a strategy that is more complex than establishing an exhibition space for contemporary art, or a hub from which Bangladeshi artists can bring their work "to the attention of curators and galleries worldwide."[835] Nevertheless, I understand my research partners' confusion about the organizer's agenda. The actors' position in the art field, as part of a highly mobile jet set with access to global flows of capital and leading institutions, takes effect on the localization of the *Summit*. Moreover, their double position as collectors and organizers of a non-commercial event makes it difficult for artists to assign clear-cut motivations and thus evaluate the nature of the Samdani's intended relationship with the field; is their interest in a certain artist or artwork based on the accumulation of personal economic capital, or is their goal to increase the cultural capital of the field as a whole? In my discussion of the Bengal and Siddhartha art foundations, I already broached upon the potential pitfalls of combining multiple (and possibly conflicting) agendas under the head of one organization. Thomas Fillitz's explorations on the global art market offer a starting point to explore this effect and the *Summit*'s complex *modus operandi* beyond narrow commercial or non-commercial distinctions before I move on to discuss the relationship between *DAS* and Britto.

Fillitz identifies three distinct circles in the "global art world": auction houses, galleries, and art fairs.[836] Each of these circles follows its own rationale: auction houses are based on a logic of gambling, and establish artworks as investment assets; galleries largely operate according to a moral economy, assessing the artwork according to its cultural value; and art fairs follow a logic of glamour and cater to an "economically viable clientele that is ready to express its socioeconomic success in a lifestyle

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831 Brosius, "'Catching up' to the World."
832 AR, RS, September 2015.
833 PE, SAF, February 2016.
834 AR, RS, September 2015.
835 Ray, "Preview, Eastern Promises."
836 Fillitz, "Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art."

that is largely demonstrated through art as a luxury good."[837] This glamour logic not only consists in realizing artworks as "luxury goods," but also in establishing whole events as "luxury commodities."[838] In order to accomplish this, art fairs, in opposition to art biennials, Fillitz argues, "aim at constituting themselves as privileged zones of communication and information," as spaces that generate new ideas and contacts.[839] Although the Samdanis reject any relation to art fairs, their emphasis on creating a "research platform" and their aim to show contemporary art at the "highest standard" in order to put Bangladesh on the map, shows Fillitz's logic of "glamour" at play. This becomes most visible in the *Summit*'s talk program.

Nadia Samdani describes the 2014 talk program, comprised of three panel discussions, one book launch, and two conversations in the VIP section, as a "three-day meeting of the minds."[840] It brings together representatives of renowned institutions that have set the pace for the art field for decades: Richard Blurton (British Museum, London), Sandhini Poddar (Guggenheim, New York), Jessica Morgan (Tate Modern, London), and Aurélien Lemonier (Centre Pompidou, Paris). The motivation to bring these actors to Dhaka is to establish a direct connection between Bangladesh and the centers of the artistic field. This strategy aims to counterbalance the lack of art infrastructure in Bangladesh that would otherwise allow artists to connect to the wider field. Rajeeb Samdani explains that it was easier (and economically more viable) to "bring the world" to Dhaka than fostering the mobility of a small number of artists internationally.[841] Moreover, a direct connection to the center entails a renegotiation of Bangladesh's position in the region, especially in relation to India: "We used to see Pakistan use India as a platform," Samdani is quoted saying in an article published by Indian financial daily *Livemint*.[842] Bringing the mobile center to Dhaka allows artists in Bangladesh to be independent of India's infrastructure and access to the market. By fostering the discourse between central actors and audiences in Dhaka, the Samdanis also aim at shifting existing asymmetries: the "meeting of the minds" in Dhaka means highlighting the fact that Bangladesh is not merely a new participant, but a proactive player within the global contemporary discourse. Despite these efforts, however, the center quickly (re)claims the status quo of power relations. During the talk program, members of the audience ask questions about the possibilities to loosen the prevailing hegemony of European institutions in the art field. Several comments address the fear that contemporary artworks (like innumerable antiquities before) will leave the region and end up in museum collections in Europe and America, inaccessible to South Asian audiences. The panelists' answers reaffirm

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837   Fillitz, "Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art," 93.
838   Fillitz, "Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art," 86.
839   Fillitz, "Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art," 90–91.
840   Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed., 3.
841   AR, RS, September 2015.
842   Ray, "Preview, Eastern Promises."

existing power asymmetries and put Dhaka (and the rest of the periphery) in its rightful place at the "end of the global development spectrum."[843] Richard Blurton and Sandhini Poddar, for instance, agree that there is no infrastructure ready to bear the responsibility of preserving valuable cultural artefacts anywhere outside the West. Therefore, this responsibility lies with the established and experienced institutions.

The Samdanis have become powerful actors in the field and are able to draw in considerable amounts of social and economic capital. They aim at establishing the *DAS* as a critical source of information on contemporary art practice and as a result shift existing center-periphery configurations; they contest the position of Europe and America as the default locations for discourse making, and India's position as an intermediate platform for access to socio-economic capital. Despite their aim to unsettle these existing power asymmetries, they indeed attest to the West's remaining hegemonic position: the Samdani Art Foundation spends a lot of resources promoting the *DAS* as a new entry in the global art calendar. In the 2014 edition, their strategy focuses almost unilaterally on connections to the mobile center, often at the detriment of connections on other scales. Their relationship with the locality of Dhaka and their desire to create spaces for the celebrity lifestyle are examples of their effort to appeal to the high-class art jet set by branding the *DAS* as a "luxury good."[844]

> The Exhibition Grounds are strategically located in the center of Dhaka and well connected with the International Airport and commercial zones like Mothijeel, Paltan, and Gulshan. With a range of high-end hotels, restaurants and markets within close proximity and easy accessibility by public transport, the Shilpakala Academy complex is the ideal venue to host *Dhaka Art Summit* 2014.[845]

This description paints the Shilpakala Academy as an "ideal venue," not because of its cultural value as an established institution in the field of culture in the country, but because of its connectedness in terms of transport (airport, public transport) and economic capital (commercial zones, markets, high-end hotels). This information is not directed at a local, art-interested crowd, but at an internationally mobile and economically affluent audience. The text appeared on the *DAS* homepage, as well as in a twenty-page leaflet that came with a special VIP kit available upon registration with the foundation.[846] The VIP program follows the mechanism of a preview program that many big scale events offer for journalists as well as specialists and professional audiences. It guarantees entrance on the opening day (the general public is only allowed on the second day), access

843 Liechty, *Out Here in Kathmandu*, 4.
844 Fillitz, "Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art," 86.
845 Samdani Art Foundation, "Dhaka Art Summit VIP Booklet." The text used to be available on the *DAS* website but has since been removed.
846 Samdani Art Foundation, "Dhaka Art Summit VIP Booklet."

to the "VIP Lounge" with its restaurant and exclusive talk program, and a special "off-site tour" to the Parliament Building, designed by renowned American architect Louis Khan, as well as a three-hour "Dhaka City & Shopping Tour" to "landmarks" including the Supreme Court, Curzon Hall, and some of Dhaka's "best boutiques."[847] It lists local institutions as "Corollary Exhibitions" (among others Britto Space and the Alliance Française) and gives information on a public art project by Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective.[848]

The choice of the Shilpakala Academy premises as the single venue (beyond these exclusive forays into the city), according to Rajeeb Samdani, represents the organizers' aspiration to allow as many people as possible to see the exhibition in its entirety. Samdani however also stresses that many people visited the different galleries listed in the program; "seventy people visited the Parliament building," and they were taken to "Jatra, Aarong, all those handicraft places."[849] During his elaborations, it becomes clear that while imagining a large, diverse audience, his actual focus is on a small elite that shares his *habitus*. This elite wants to see art in a hassle-free environment, with opportunities to shop and visit corollary events in select galleries.

> We also do not want the people to sit in the crazy traffic. This time, if you see the review of *Istanbul Biennale*, some of the reviews are really bad because of heat. The exhibition was scattered all over the city. We had to walk like crazy. Traffic jam was bad. So, a lot of reviews actually came also quite negative. You also have to think about the comfort of the people.[850]

This quote, especially the comparison to the *Istanbul Biennale*, clarifies that Samdani and the audience he has in mind belong to the high-class art jet set made up of collectors, curators, gallerists, and art writers. Due to their high rate of mobility, they are pressed for time and expect to see art from a certain locality (Dhaka, Bangladesh, or South Asia) "in a nutshell"—as one of the India-based curators put it during a taxi ride.[851] The localities, the cities of Istanbul or Dhaka, in Samdani's eyes, are obstructions to this objective, rather than creative assets. They are marked by time-consuming

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847 Ahmed, *Discover the Monuments of Bangladesh*, 213–214. Curzon Hall was founded by Viceroy of India Lord Curzon upon his visit to Dhaka in 1904. It forms part of a group of buildings combining Mughal and European trends created in the wake of the Partition of Bengal in 1906. It was initially intended as a town hall but is today used by the Faculty of Science of Dhaka University.

848 The citywide public art project by the Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective was entitled *Meanwhile I Elsewhere*. It included 160 billboards and road signs transformed by the collective to display clock-faces and word pairs relating to or opposing each other. Raqs Media Art Collective, "Public Art Project," in Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed., 80.

849 AR, RS, September 2015.

850 AR, RS, September 2015.

851 FDE, A, February 2014

traffic and uncomfortable heat that need to be overcome. The Shilpakala Academy is introduced as a resort: it is located in a well-connected, central area and provides enough space to host the entire *DAS* program. The VIP format is an additional tool to sustain a celebrity lifestyle in this (or any) locality. But what about the "local public" that Nadia Samdani mentions in her *L'Officiel Art* interview?[852]

The Shilpakala Academy is a public, national institution, which allows free admission to all visitors. The 2014 *DAS* edition attracts 70,000 visitors in three days. For *DAS* 2016, which lasts one day longer, the number doubles to 138,000 visitors.[853] The art fair and the lifestyle it sustains, Fillitz argues, "is organized in such a way that it invites a wider audience to join in."[854] The *DAS* organizers are very deliberate in the *Summit*'s educative mission. All local press outlets are invited and cover the event in English and in Bengali. Due to an extensive outreach program, 2500 students from over thirty schools receive tours.[855] Yet there are also "subtly erected barriers for VIP lounges and exclusive events" that keep these wider audiences from fully taking part in the "privileged zone of communication and information."[856] Visitors are welcome to explore the artworks and engage in the public panel discussions, but they are kept separate from the VIP lounge and its exclusive food and talk program. They are denied access to the hassle-free, glamorous lifestyle celebrated during invite-only evening dinners and exclusive shopping tours. The *Summit* thus operates on two different scales: one is a broad local scale that draws in a wider urban audience by taking place at a large, nationally established venue with free admission, through an outreach and education program, and a citywide public art project by the Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective.[857] The other is a very limited global scale that is tailored to the high-class art jet set. Both scales follow their own value system and are purposefully kept apart with no transgressions in between. What Fillitz fails to emphasize is that the global replication of this mechanism in art fairs is in fact the expression of a deeply ingrained asymmetry between what is perceived as center and periphery. Due to their own position in the field, the Samdanis know the mechanisms operative in the global contemporary frame. They are aware of the markets' craving for newness and cater to it. They are also aware of the time constraints and need for comfort expected by the mobile art jet set. By complying with the *habitus*, they manage to bring in large amounts of capital, which they can pass on to the artists. But what about the artists and the contemporary art on display at the *DAS*? Here too Filitz's logic can be seen at play.

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852   Massey, "Coup d'Éclat à Dacca," 123.
853   "Frequently Asked Questions," Dhaka Art Summit, Samdani Art Foundation, accessed June 09, 2016, http://www.dhakaartsummit.org/faqs/.
854   Fillitz, "Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art," 90–91.
855   "Frequently Asked Questions," Dhaka Art Summit.
856   Fillitz, "Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art," 90–91.
857   Raqs Media Art Collective, "Public Art Project."

> The *Dhaka Art Summit* and the Samdani Foundation endeavor to transform the city of Dhaka into a hub for South Asian art and its excellence breaking conventional ideas about where the region's center lies.[858]

This quote from the 2014 catalog again raises the center-periphery discourse; it suggests that it is the *Summit*'s excellence that allows it to circumvent, even surpass, Delhi's role as the region's leading platform to the global art market. Apart from logistics and organization, this "excellence" is foremost related to the exhibition content. In the above-mentioned interview, Nadia Samdani speaks of "art at the highest standard." Rajeeb Samdani asserts that the young generation of Bangladeshi artists are doing "contemporary cutting-edge art."[859] The 2014 catalog advertises fourteen solo shows "by internationally acclaimed and established artists," five of which were born in Bangladesh,[860] among them Britto co-founder Lipi.

ROOM OF MY OWN

Lipi's solo project at the *DAS* 2014, which I describe in the Interlude: *Room of My Own*, denotes the crux of her journey as an artist. It is the result of her conscious decision to disclose the intimate background to a series of previous works, and at the same time to bring closure to a specific chapter of her life. The fact that it is part of the solo projects at *DAS* speaks to the significance of this event in the artist's career. But it allows insights into the type of contemporary artwork foregrounded by the event.

Lipi grew up in the north of Bangladesh as one of twelve children. In our interview during the *Kathmandu Triennale* in March 2017, I ask Lipi to elaborate on her use of materials. When she was growing up, she explains, whenever a child was about to be born, a new, shiny razor blade was bought to cut the umbilical cord. Thus, for her, the razor blade became intrinsically tied to both the pain and joy of childbirth.[861] When she started using the razor blades in 2008, the emphasis was solely on the pain: during a residency at RM Studio in Lahore (Pakistan), a program initiated by artist R. M. Naeem, she was searching for a sharp, violent object to express the delicate political situation between Bangladesh and Pakistan. She found the razor blade.[862] In time however, the blades underwent a physical change, from a dangerously sharp tool to a custom-built stainless-steel artistic element that could be manipulated and shaped in different ways.

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858 Diana Campbell Betancourt, "Then/Why Not," in Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed., 24.
859 AR, RS, September 2015.
860 Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed., 3.
861 AR, TBL, March 2017.
862 Alexandra Alexa, "Tayeba Begum Lipi Wields Razor Blades to Address Violence Against Women," *Artsy*, August 6, 2015, accessed June 18, 2021, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-tayeba-begum-lipi-wields-razor-blades-to-address.

The blade also shifted in meaning, as her work for the 2011 *Venice Biennale* demonstrates. *Bizarre and Beautiful* includes 3000 stainless steel razor blades assimilated to form brassieres. Lipi moves from the national scale of South Asian politics to the intimate scale of matrimonial politics. She addresses the female body and its subjection to the patriarchal structures in Bangladesh. The combination of the blade and the bra emphasizes the dichotomous relation between desire and violence—between passion and abuse in intimate relations. It generates a "sense of foreboding," while also eliciting arousal.[863] One year later, at the 2012 *DAS*, Lipi exhibits *Love Bed*, a life-size bed entirely made of razor blades. It takes up the dichotomy from *Bizarre and Beautiful*, but directly situates it in the "shared space of domesticity, affection, and bliss";[864] the matrimonial bed witnesses the passion and violence in marriage, as well as the joy and pain of conception and childbirth. The razor blade alludes to the first only metaphorically, but constitutes the actual tool used in the latter.[865] After the *Summit*, *Love Bed* is acquired by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and exhibited as part of the exhibition *No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia* (February–May 2013). This exhibition, as curator June Yap poses, engages with transcultural "relationships of intermingling and mutual influence past and present" in South and Southeast Asia.[866] Through this exhibition, Lipi's personal and creative engagement with femininity and gender inequalities in Bangladesh is reintroduced into a discourse about political realities on the subcontinent. The artist's solo-exhibition in Istanbul and London, organized by her gallery Pi Artworks in the same year, brings together a set of works on the topic for the first time.[867] The show *Never Been Intimate* presents objects made from razor blades, such as a baby stroller entitled *The Stolen Dream*. It also exhibits *The Genitalia*, the golden structure made from safety pins included in *Room of My Own* (see Fig. 16).

In *Room of My Own* (2014), a title reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's claim that for a woman to be a writer she needs five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door, Lipi brings together the individual elements of her previous work to tell a complete story. In contrast to the earlier pieces which alluded to issues of gender, love, and sex in a general way, this installation deals with her personal experience with pregnancy, matrimonial life, violence, and her own body. She visually processes the emotional and physical pain of her miscarriage. Rather than forming a specific object, such as a bra or a bed, the razor blades are used as frames, which figuratively

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863 Abul Mansur, "Tayeba Begum Lipi," in Choudhury, *Parables*.

864 June Yap, "Tayeba Begum Lipi: Love Bed," Guggenheim, 2012, accessed June 21, 2021, https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/31321.

865 Yap, "Tayeba Begum Lipi: Love Bed."

866 Yap, "Tayeba Begum Lipi: Love Bed."

867 Pi Artworks, "Pi Artworks London: Tayeba Begum Lipi 'Never Been Intimate,'" 2013, accessed September 7, 2022, https://www.piartworks.com/usr/documents/exhibitions/press_release_url/141/tayeba-begum-lipi-never-been-intimate-press-release_london.pdf, exhibition catalog.
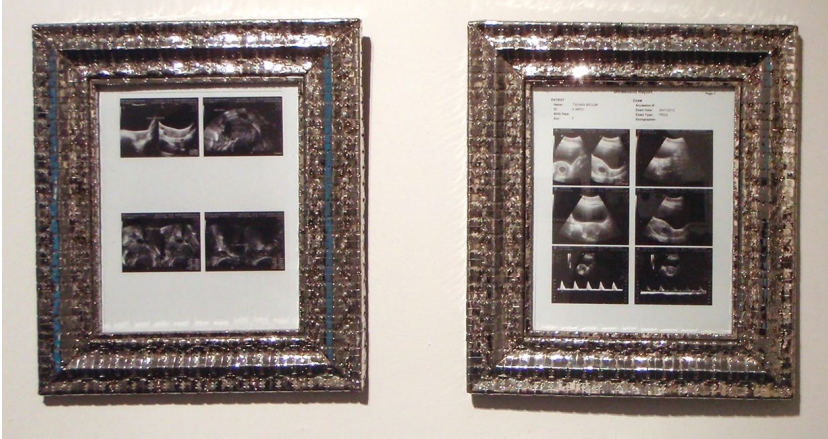
Figure 17: Tayeba Begum Lipi, *Room of My Own* (detail), 2014. Solo project at the Dhaka Art Summit, Shilpakala Academy. Photo: author.

complement her ultrasound images (Fig. 17); in Lipi's childhood memory, the razor blade announces an impending birth, as do ultrasounds for many women. In the context of this specific artwork, however, both come to mean violence, sharpness, and physical and emotional suffering over the loss of a child. The dichotomy between pain and joy established in earlier works finds parallels in the safety pin. It represents protection, as it is often carried by women for emergencies like torn hems and seams.[868] It can however just as easily cause pain when it pierces the skin rather than the cloth. In the shape of a sanitary napkin, as it appears in the installation, it evokes another feminine tool or product associated with both protection and pain. It is in the repetition of this motif, the dichotomy of pain and joy, that the absence of the color red becomes striking; blood is connected to every item in the room: the tampons, clams, safety pins, razor blades, and sanitary napkins. Lipi explains: "I knew that by this time, when I was showing it [the work], I was having menopause. So, it's all gone. And there is no blood."[869] This consideration adds another layer of meaning to the work. There is the joy of expecting a child and the shock of the miscarriage, but also the limitation of the female body, the end of her ability to bear children.

The black and white photographs in the back of the room represent the loving, passionate matrimonial life from which the child was conceived. They were taken by the artist's husband during the year she suffered the miscarriage. They represent intimate moments between the couple; she is playing with the camera, pretending to take off her clothes and acting like

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868 Abigail R. Esman, "No One Home: Tayeba Begum Lipi," in *No One Home: Tayeba Begum Lipi*, ed. Bengal Art Lounge (Dhaka: Bengal Art Lounge, 2015), 4–5.
869 AR, TBL, March 2017.

he is touching her. They are remnants of a very private situation involving the artist's own body and face.

Altogether, the work allows insight into a personal and corporeal process of dealing with womanhood, loss, and ageing. While the work highlights Lipi's very personal grief, the universal nature of the issues addressed also enables the transgression of her individual experiences; the artist is able to connect to women all over the world:

> After making that long journey, four–five years, I was thinking that I should do something that will make me happy, because it was just inside me all the time, and I could not carry it for a long time. So I said, once I did it than I am free. … And then I thought that it is not only my journey. There must be so many women who made a similar journey. They will understand what I am saying.[870]

In our interview Lipi mentions that she was hoping for the work to bring closure, but she found herself avoiding the room during the *DAS*. I ask if she would show it again at another exhibition and she affirms: "I would like to show it again, but I think people always find it too tough to take in." She elaborates that many people are very curious to hear the story behind the work, but when they do, they feel "a little bit out of it."[871] While the individual pieces, the brassieres, the matrimonial bed, and the baby stroller, connect to different parts of the artist's story, this specific installation ties diverse and often contrasting layers together. Due to the fragmentation in the prior works, they lend themselves to a more formal, aesthetic reading. In *Room of My Own*, the painfully personal back-story becomes imminent and thus possibly less easy to digest. The fine line between pain and joy is constantly repeated, and its intensity simultaneously elicits curiosity, voyeurism, shock, compassion, shame, love, and even arousal. Lipi brings these usually very private feelings to the public in the space of the Shilpakala Academy.

The *DAS*, unlike most platforms in Bangladesh, offers a space for the display of contemporary, large-scale multi-media art projects such as *Room of My Own*. As I have argued before, the majority of existing galleries continue to focus on the classical and (locally) commercially viable medium of painting, and occasionally sculpture, because these are easy to install and do not require any special technical resources (such as projectors, storage space, and running electricity) or maintenance. Mixed-media projects like Lipi's, in contrast, require substantial funds to produce, and are difficult, sometimes impossible, to sell. Moreover, many institutions are cautious about public sentiments and prefer to avoid delicate issues. Issues of femininity and womanhood in particular are often sidelined in Bangladesh's public sphere. While discussing Pulak's work on the 1971 war, I touched upon the fact that the Bengali identity does not leave much space for

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870 AR, TBL, March 2017.
871 AR, TBL, March 2017.

women. This applies especially to issues related to sex and sexuality, as for instance evidenced in the conscious marginalization of *birangonas*.[872] Ever since, the mobility of women has been one of the main issues of gender discrimination in Bangladesh; according to "the core cultural ethos of the nation … the proper place of women is within their homes."[873] Although the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal status to women in the public sphere, recognized religion-specific personal laws continue to regulate women's rights in terms of property, marriage, divorce, and child custody.[874] In addition to the legal discrimination of women, social norms regulate everyday life. During a conversation, a female Britto member explains that it is nearly impossible for a woman in Dhaka to be unmarried and not have children, even as an artist; the social pressure, often especially from their own family, is very high, "And then, when you have children, people constantly criticize you for not spending enough time with them."[875] Alongside the outside pressure, she is troubled by her own guilt, on the one hand, for focusing on her family rather than her art practice, and on the other, for neglecting her art practice.

It is exactly these inequities that Lipi addresses and breaks open in her work. Women are subject to many socio-cultural expectations, such as childbearing and caring. Not wanting, or in this case, not being able to fulfill them is often cause for additional psychological and physical pain. By pulling these issues out of the private realm and into the public sphere, Lipi breaks with social norms. The socio-cultural relevance of her work and its orientation in a wider social context, complement the *DAS*'s objective. Campbell Betancourt, the curator of these solo shows, elaborates that it is the artists' claim of "the impossible" that marks the quality of their work. Their works defy the "constraints that are imposed on creativity" and they "fearlessly" tackle the artistic challenges despite political realities in South Asia.[876] This assessment of artistic value creates the basis for a mutually beneficial alliance: Lipi uses the platform of the *DAS* to showcase her boundary-transgressing contemporary practice and reach wider audiences. The organizers, in return, offer "fearless," cutting-edge works that question and resist socio-political realities in South Asia. Moreover, this example alludes to the self-acclaimed and factual power the Samdanis exude in the art field in Bangladesh; they, in comparison to other institutions, support such works in the face of prevalent norms.

As a consequence of Lipi's participation in the first edition of the *DAS* in 2012, she exhibited as part of the Samdani Art Foundation showcase at

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872 The term *birangona* or *birangana*, literally "heroic woman," was bestowed upon women who were raped during the 1971 war. In spite of its wide use today, the term is problematic as it seemingly "normalizes" the suffering of rape victims. See Hossain, "Trauma of the Women, Trauma of the Nation," 100–102.

873 Amena Mohsin, "The State of Gender," in Riaz and Rahman, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*, 304.

874 Mohsin, "The State of Gender," 295.

875 FDE, A, 2015.

876 Campbell Betancourt, "Then/Why Not," 24.

the *India Art Fair* 2013, where, through the mediation of Rajeeb Samdani, she met Yesim Turanli, the founder of Pi Artworks. Samdani is quick to credit the *DAS* for Lipi's international gallery representation, as well as the acquisition of her work by the Guggenheim Museum, which greatly enhanced her visibility in the art world.[877] It is fair to assume that the platform of the *DAS* contributed to Lipi's subsequent success in New York, as the *Summit* also substantially boosted the artistic careers of other participants. Mohaiemen, for instance, was selected as part of the central exhibition *All the World's Futures* curated by Okwui Enwezor for the *Venice Biennale* in 2015, and Samdani Art Award winner, Sultana (2014), secured a gallery representation with the renowned Experimenter in Kolkata. "You can actually see how Ayesha, just after the Samdani Art Award, how Ayesha went global," Samdani emphasizes in our interview.[878]

The position of the *DAS*, as a direct consequence of the Samdanis' "position-taking"[879] within the global field of art, can open career avenues to artists from Bangladesh and the region. Yet, to emphasize solely the connections between Dhaka and the centers of the art world disregards the artists' multi-positionality in the network. From the perspective of the collectives, the *DAS* is only one of the many scales upon which artists like Lipi operate. Britto's presence at the *Venice Biennale*, the network built through South Asian Network for the Arts (SANA), and the connections to institutions in Bangladesh (such as the *Asian Art Biennale*, the Bengal Foundation, and so on) play important roles in the artists' careers. The ability to operate on, broker between, and foster mobilities across these diverse scales is one of the crucial markers of the artists and collectives that this book had endeavored to foreground.

Lipi's first use of razor blades took place in an artist-initiated residency in Pakistan (RM Studio, Lahore). This context represents Lipi's position within the regional network of artist-run spaces and collectives to which Britto, Sutra, VASL, and others belong. This exchange is characterized by face-to-face, egalitarian contact between artists across contested political borders, such as those of Bangladesh and Pakistan. From here, the development of Lipi's artistic engagement with razor blades continued at the globally renowned perennial art event, the *Venice Biennale*. It was the relation with the Bangladeshi ambassador that allowed Lipi (and Britto) to access this scale. His brokerage, but also the eye-level contact with the curators (artist Paolo W. Tamburella and Sala 1 director Mary Angela Schroth) made the Bangladesh pavilion possible. The alliance with the Bengal Art Foundation, in relation to the pavilion, but also as a facilitator of Lipi's exhibitions in Bangladesh represents yet another scale accessed by the artist. Nevertheless, the solo show at the 2014 *DAS* constitutes a pivotal moment in her

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877 AR, RS, September 2015; see Brownell Mitic, "Putting Bangladeshi Art on the Map."
878 AR, RS, September 2015.
879 Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production.*

development, as it enabled her to tell the full story of the inspiration for her work for the first time.

The Samdani's unique economic and socio-cultural position in Bangladesh allows them to provide a certain "logic of glamour"[880] by marketing the *DAS* as a luxury commodity with easy access to cutting edge works and an exclusive VIP program to the highly mobile center of the art world. Thereby they manage to attract potential buyers, collectors, art critics, and curators. Through the accumulation of social capital, they can offer unique opportunities for artists in Bangladesh and the region. Lipi takes this opportunity to create a room for herself and to advance her artistic practice. Yet their relation is not unilateral. The Samdanis also tap into the cultural and social capital that Britto has accumulated over the years. They market the type of cutting-edge, experimental, and boundary-transgressing art Lipi and others have developed through their fine art education and the participation and organization of workshops and residencies. They profit from Britto's long-term engagement with the urban, national, and regional art fields.

FRAGILE ALLIANCES

Both the Samdani Art Foundation and Britto have a common interest in promoting contemporary art and in generating opportunities for the young generation of artists in Bangladesh. This offers a fertile ground for cooperation, especially given the paucity of other infrastructural support. Emulating Rajeeb Samdani's self-perception as a newcomer to the field, Lipi explains that the Samdanis "came very late." She elaborates that she only met the couple in February 2012, when the first edition of the *DAS* (April 2012) was already in full preparation. They were very good at making connections and they had established relations to many people from the art field in Dhaka including the Charukola teachers, Lipi ascertains.[881] Although the introduction with the Britto co-founders was tardy, they established a close alliance leading up to the 2014 *DAS*. In the 2014 edition, both Rahman and Lipi have large-scale, multi-media solo art projects. Four out of the ten shortlisted artists for the Samdani Art Award are Britto members. Other members such as Munir Mrittik and Annizzuzaman Sohel are part of the curated shows or gallery representations. Moreover, the *Summit* offers a platform to promote Britto's collective work as part of the gallery showcases. Rahman's appointment as a curator for the experimental film and performance programs allows the artist to demonstrate his expertise as a curator and his knowledge on the practice of new mediums. He is further able to create opportunities for artists from his network in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, as I mentioned in my discussion of Sigdel's performance in the frame of this performance hub. Lastly, by cleverly timing collective exhibitions in congruence with the *Summit*, Britto

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880   Fillitz, "The Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art," 89.
881   AR, TBL, March 2017.

demonstrates its continued activity in the art field to the incoming *DAS* audience: from March 30 through April 15, 2012, Britto hosted *Space—An Inaugural Exhibition of Britto Space* in which the collective introduced its new multi-purpose premises at Green Road. Similarly, from February 1 through 9, 2014, Britto celebrated twelve years of collective activities with an exhibition entitled *CrossCasting*, curated by co-founder Rahman. This show deals with the meaning of gender, ranging from the physical condition of a human being to diverse expressions in the Bangladeshi society. Starting from "cross(gender) casting"—a theater tradition in which female characters are played by male actors—the participating artists call attention to the discrimination faced by the LGBTQ+ community. Both exhibitions are marked as "collateral events" in the program of the *DAS* and draw important actors in attendance of the *Summit* to Britto Space. Apart from highlighting the collective's interest in engaging with socio-cultural issues and working at the fringes of wider civil society, these collateral exhibitions also showcase Britto's standing as an established part of the field of contemporary art. The inauguration of Britto's workshop and gallery space at Green Road is the culmination of more than ten years of organizing programs in Bangladesh and beyond. By gaining Britto as an ally, the Samdani Art Foundation taps into its members' knowledge of continuous contemporary practice. The Foundation also draws from Britto's regional network rooted in the SANA collaborations and the legacy this network has built in the region's art field. For example, they host the launch of *SANA: South Asian Network for the Arts*, a publication that celebrates the ten-year existence of the network, during *DAS* 2014 (February 7, 2014). Britto's multifarious role in the 2014 *DAS* is an expression of close cooperation based on mutual aims and hopes. Cooperation between the actors is high in intensity, aims at innovating the field of art production, and yet, like Ziemer's characterization of the notion, is not planned long-term.[882] Alliances between heterogenous actors like this can be very successful, but they are also fragile. This fragility becomes visible in the 2016 edition of the *Summit*.

In February 2016, neither Lipi and Rahman nor Britto are part of the *Summit*. The section reserved for Bangladeshi spaces includes eight "commercial galleries" (Drik, Gallery 21, Bengal Gallery of Fine Arts, and others) alongside three non-profit spaces. These are Jog, an alternative art space (est. 2012) based in Bangladesh's second biggest city Chittagong, Longitude Latitude, a perennial art space that, since 2003, occupies changing venues across the city, and Santaran Art Organization, a non-profit artist initiative (est. 1999), also based in Chittagong. Aside from pointing to the expansion of the Samdani's focus on localities other than Dhaka (such as Chittagong) this selection begs the question: where is Britto? Individual members Wasif and Sultana are present with solo projects. Further, Massum and Nupur are part of the "performance pavilion," and Saha is

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882 Ziemer, *Komplizenschaft*.

nominated for the Samdani Award.[883] As a collective, however, Britto is nei-
ther physically present in the Shilpakala Academy nor is it mentioned in
the 2016 program. As in the previous editions, Britto has organized a pro-
gram at its space in Green Road: "ERROR" encompasses a one-month long
collaboration between thirteen young artists, two of whom are shortlisted
for the Samdani Art Award. And like during the previous editions, I meet
many visitors of the *DAS* at Britto Space, although the exhibition is not an
official collateral event. According to Rajeeb Samdani, Britto's absence is
mostly to do with the fact that the Samdani Foundation faced critique for
awarding Britto a primary position in 2014: "Last time, we just had Britto
and also that raised a question: why only Britto?"[884] He acknowledges that
the foundation initially focused on Britto because of its avant-garde ini-
tiative, but faced with the critique, had rethought its approach, and was
now actively inviting other organizations to join for the 2016 edition. Lipi
and Rahman explain their absence with their heavy workload. During my
fieldwork in summer 2015, they tell me that they are preparing for a retro-
spective show at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State
University, which is set to open in early March 2016, and therefore were
adjourning their participation at the *DAS*.[885]

In his elaborations on skilled brokers, Wolf explains that the broker's
position is an "exposed one."[886] As mediators between the community and
the nation, the brokers he writes about need to serve the interests of two
sides. At the same time, they require the tension between these sides to
persist, as their roles as brokers depend on it. Their mobility gives them
flexibility and access to economic and socio-political capital. Yet, it also
puts them in a position of competition with other actors, especially power-
holders.[887] Britto's working strategy is characterized by multi-positionality,
allowing the collective to be flexible, to broaden its reach of actions, and
to channel opportunities to its network. Many other actors in the field are
bound by their positions on specific scales. The national academies for
instance exclusively act on a national scale and are therefore often consid-
ered to be ignorant of local needs as well as lagging behind developments
in the global art field. The Samdanis, not least due to their position as part

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883 Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit 2016: Exhibition Guide* (Dhaka: Sam-
      dani Art Foundation, 2016).
884 AR, RS, September 2015.
885 This contemporary art museum opened in 2012. Award winning architect Zaha
      Hadid devised its design, and it was named after philanthropists and support-
      ers of the Michigan State University Eli and Edythe Broad. See: "About," MSU
      Broad Museum, Michigan State University, accessed May 27, 2021, https://
      broadmuseum.msu.edu/about. For more information on the exhibition, enti-
      tled *The Artist as Activist: Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman* (March 5–
      August 7, 2016), see "The Artist as Activist: Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur
      Rahman Mar. 5 – Aug. 7, 2016," MSU Broad Museum, Michigan State Uni-
      versity, accessed May 27, 2021, https://broadmuseum.msu.edu/exhibition/
      the-artist-as-activist-tayeba-begum-lipi-and-mahbubur-rahman/.
886 Wolf, "Aspects of Group Relations," 1071–1072, 1076.
887 Wolf, "Aspects of Group Relations, 1076.

of the high class jet set, operate primarily on the global scale; they spend their money and energy establishing exclusive relations to the center, often at the detriment of other connections. Britto, in contrast, can broker on and between the urban, national, regional, and global scales. By doing so, however, the collective becomes a competitor for actors who attempt to or already claim positions on these scales. The critique against the Samdani Art Foundation for focusing too unilaterally on Britto in 2014 is an expression of this competition; other artists and initiatives in Bangladesh and South Asia also desire a position at the *Summit*. Further, the Samdanis want their event to become the primary platform for art discourse on the country and the region; they aim at establishing themselves as cultural brokers between Bangladesh and the international art field. Consequently, the initial reasons for cooperation between the foundation and Britto become a basis for competition. Both Britto and Samdani claim positions as brokers of an avant-garde position in contemporary art. They aim at transgressing the limitations of the nationally circumscribed field and they want to create relations beyond the locality. In the following, I look at their respective strategies of brokerage along three foci: multi-scalar objectives, engagement with locality, and quality of collaboration.

The members of Britto were moulded by the nationally circumscribed art field. Out of twenty-four trustees and members (as of 2018), twenty-one graduated from Fine Arts Institutes in Bangladesh (primarily Dhaka and Chittagong). The majority belong to the middle class and live and work in Dhaka. They understand themselves as avant-garde, individually (in their practice) and collectively (in Britto's activities) pushing forward a contemporary art practice that transgresses institutional, social, and geographical boundaries. This happens through programs, such as *CrossCasting*, or in individual bodies of work, such as Lipi's engagement with gender norms in Bangladesh. Through international residencies and the connection with SANA, Britto gained access to regionally and later globally operating actors, such as the Triangle Arts Trust and the Ford Foundation. These connections in turn have yielded economic and social resources that then enabled the organization of programs and the documentation of activities, such as the catalogs used by the ambassador of Bangladesh to Italy to inform curator Schroth about the situation of contemporary art in his country. In building these translocal ties, my research partners maintain a tension between situatedness, i.e., the ambition to further the "local community" of contemporary artists, and their urgency to connect with a larger network of like-minded artists. Their brokerage both transgresses and maintains autonomy from scale-specific infrastructure (such as national academies) to assure their continued flexibility. They strive to engage in social change in their neighborhoods, their city, and their country, while at the same time connecting to wider artist networks, markets, and discourses. Their activities are based on a balancing act between sustaining concrete, face-to-face connections with local (in this case urban, national, and regional) audiences, institutions, and other practitioners, and fostering mobilities between those actors and beyond.

The *DAS* initially set out to bring together the local art field (2012) and to focus on the South Asian region and reposition Bangladesh within this region (2014). Nevertheless, it reflects a specific directionality towards high-end, Euro-American players. The Samdani Art Foundation's strategy to catch up with or even pull ahead of India and Pakistan's art markets is based on direct access to the Euro-American art field. Through the programming and the invited guests, notably curators and speakers, they establish a privileged zone for communication—this zone is marked by the presence of leading institutions, such as the Guggenheim New York or the Tate Modern. The emphasis on relations with Europe and America—especially visible in the reference made by the organizers in their opening speech to the "more than 500 foreigners" who attended the *Summit*—is one of the main critiques of the artists I talked to. While they highly appreciated the opportunity provided by the *DAS*, many feel that local audiences, actors, and institutions have been ousted. They question the necessity of a VIP program, as well as the absence of important institutions for the region such as the Fukuoka Museum or the Asia Pacific Triennial.

The second focus is related to one specific scale: the initiatives' distinct dealing with the city as locality. "The *Dhaka Art Summit* is extremely strategic and based on market," one of the *CM* curators claims during a conversation. They imply that due to the Samdanis' aim to bring together a highly influential crowd, the event "needs to be compact."[888] This finds expression in the choice to have one well-connected venue and a comparatively compressed timeframe for the invited guests.[889] The attempt to create a hassle-free environment in which to experience the Bangladeshi art scene in a nutshell requires cancelling out time-consuming traffic and uncomfortable heat. Dhaka, in this brokerage, is reduced to its high-end hotels, arts and crafts stores, and structured forays to the landmarks of the city. For arriving guests there is no incentive and no time to experience the city outside this event-frame, and that is also not the purpose of the event.

The initiatives created by Britto and other collectives, such as *1mile²*, *KK*, *CM*, or *PKTM* are characterized by a conscious engagement with the city. My research partners proactively aim at connecting with diverse socio-cultural publics. They are interested in the heritage and history of the locality they and these publics live in—not to preserve them, but to tap into their cultural value. In case that value is no longer recognized, they use their creativity to revitalize these localities for contemporary practice. During *1mile²* for instance, Britto fosters a rethinking of Old Dhaka

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888 AR, A, 2015.
889 The *DAS* lasted for only three days in 2014, a short duration for an intense program, especially in comparison to other perennial events like *CM* (up to one month) or the *Asian Art Biennale* (one month). Over the course of the subsequent editions, the duration of the *Summit* however has increased. The exhibition remained open for nine days, from February 2 through 10, in 2018. This increase can be seen in relation to the growing success of the event and possibly also a growing budget.

as a dynamic space of contemporary cultural production. The collectives' brokerage is not only about gaining better positions for itself and individual artists. Through it, artists proactively engage in changing people's (audiences and participants alike) perception of a specific locality, be it the city or the nation in which they live and work. This transcultural brokerage not only pertains to art but relates to other aspects of locality; it involves a wider visuality, crossing the borders to the economic, socio-cultural, and political fields. Visitors from the neighborhood, from other parts of the city, and from abroad are encouraged to engage with the city beyond the existing image of the elsewhere, the mega-city marked by overpopulation, heat, and traffic chaos. Rather than fixing Dhaka in space (as a "third world" prototype of the negative effects of urbanization, for instance) and in time (in February, every two years), my research partners rethink "the city in a state of constant flux."[890]

The Samdanis use the *DAS* to change the perspective of Bangladesh and shift its peripheral position within South Asia, especially in relation to India. Their focus however lies within a narrow set of important players already in the field: "to an extent America, but Europe is the platform we now need. Because it is where India and Pakistan have secured their position," Rajeeb Samdani explains in our interview.[891] Through the *DAS*, its organizers want to bring the discourse to Bangladesh, but they do not engage in contesting its validity. Their strategy is focused on making the global contemporary frame work in their favor, rather than to question or change the perceived status quo. Put differently, the transgressions they aim for are directed at a "vertical autonomy," rather than a horizontal one.[892] In order to overcome the limitations of the nationally circumscribed art field (i.e., medium-specificity, focus on modern art, and lacking professionalization, especially in terms of discourse and research) they establish a direct relation with the global artistic field centered on Europe. The collectives, on the other hand, also transgress the boundaries to other fields by engaging in wider socio-cultural and political issues, such as rapid urbanization, rising religious fundamentalism, and gender relations.

The specific quality of relationships that both actors (seek to) establish through their initiatives—the values their brokerage is based on—is my third focus. The actors that the Samdani Art Foundation connects with on a global scale represent an elite but diversified group of symbolic producers of art, including curators, collectors, managers, art writers, and museum directors. The actors in Bangladesh are primarily artists, who, in the absence of other art professionals, have ventured into symbolic production to connect to wider audiences. A large part of the existing infrastructure, from galleries, residencies, and workshop programs to the Faculty of

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890 Mehrotra, Vera, and Mayoral, *Ephemeral Urbanism*, 17; Valentine, "Art and Empire," 209.
891 AR, RS, September 2015.
892 Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field?"

Fine Arts at Dhaka University were initially conceived by artists for artists as a means to develop the field from the inside. The commonality of the artists' struggle, the effort and energy they have invested in transgressing the narrow confines of the national art fields against institutional, socio-cultural, and political boundaries, as well as the building-block system with which they set up their spaces evoke the idea of a ground-up, organically-grown system (see Interlocutor I, Interlude: "We have artists, but we don't have the other factors"). During a conversation, a *DAS* participant (2012, 2014, 2016) explains that the *Summit* represented a big change, especially in terms of opportunities for artists in Bangladesh. But these opportunities are exclusively contingent upon "international relations," meaning connections to key players in the Euro-American art world. "They are forced, in a way, to have these characters," the participant elaborates, "but I wish that it will happen more organically here."[893] This comment reemphasizes the structural asymmetries in the artistic field based on the assumption that connections to the global center are necessary to foster the artistic development of the localized periphery. Bangladesh, as a newcomer, is forced to prove its ability to tie in with the global contemporary discourse first,[894] and only those positioned in the center can award this seal of approval.

The Samdanis' acknowledgement and subsequent submission to this top-down perspective institutes a hierarchy into the relation of incoming professionals and the local artists. The shifting alliance between the *DAS* organizers and Britto is an expression of that. Rahman's appointment as the curator for the film and performance program in the 2014 event bears witness to the Samdanis' initial recognition of the collective's accomplishments in the field of contemporary art, especially in terms of new mediums. The collective is seen as an asset to the event and its aim. A year later, Rajeeb Samdani explains: "so then we thought, if we want to promote performance from Bangladesh, we'll have to teach them."[895] He elaborates that in preparation for the 2016 *Summit*, the foundation invited performance artist Nikhil Chopra from India to Dhaka for a workshop and appointed him as the curator for the following edition's performance hub. For many young artists, this workshop represented a great opportunity to develop their practice and engage with an expert in the field.[896] It also established the Samdani Art Foundation as an authority capable of deciding which artists are educated (Nikhil Chopra), however, and which are not (the artists based in Bangladesh). This position is contingent upon the

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893 AR, A, 2015.
894 O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 258; Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions," 438; Fillitz, "Spatialising the Field," 22.
895 AR, RS, September 2015.
896 The workshop was part of a series of "Samdani Seminars" and took place in early April 2015 within the premises of the Shilpakala Academy. Fifteen artists from Bangladesh were selected to participate. See "*Performance workshop* by *Nikhil Chopra*, *Madhavi Gore and Jana Prepeluh*," *Samdani Art Foundation,* accessed March 3, 2021, https://www.samdani.com.bd/performance-workshop-by-nikhil-chopra-madhavi-gore-and-jana-prepeluh/.

Samdani's self-understanding as part of the mobile center and thus knowledgeable in matters of global contemporary art. The relation between mobility, cultural capital, and authority is made even clearer in Rajeeb Samdani's explanation of why the *DAS* has a gallery section: "We did it, the only simple reason is so we can educate them."[897]

By taking up the position of brokers of contemporary art, Rajeeb and Nadia Samdani enter into competition with the already established mediators in Bangladesh. Moreover, the center-periphery asymmetry they subscribe to takes effect on the quality of the relations they build; they are perceived as extrinsic, forced, asymmetrical, even patronizing. The Samdani's course of action emphasizes the artists' inexperience as newcomers to the global field and devalues the collective energy they have invested in their initiatives. Their reaction is one of suspicion and dissociation:

> People will come and go. But we will be here. And we are also artist family, we feel like we are—maybe you don't like the artwork of one artist, but you cannot disrespect that person because that is not what you do. That is unfair. While they were treating the other artists in a bad manner, we didn't like it also. That was a hard thing, for our ego as well. I can talk about one of my family members, in many ways, but if someone else is talking about it, I don't like it.[898]

In this comment by one of my research partners, the Samdanis are identified as the neophytes. Their mobility, especially in relation to their economic status, is perceived in negative terms: they are part of a group of people who "come and go" and thus are of minor consequence to the artists' continuous practice. Their behavior towards the artists based in Bangladesh is conceived in negative terms, as "disrespect," "unfairness," and "bad manner." I encountered several exclamations based on a similar us–them rhetoric: "those people are maybe from business background. And they have a different kind of mindset. When they find one person, they ignore the other person."[899] Another interlocutor explained that they did not want to collaborate with the *DAS* because they suspected the organizers had an ulterior agenda: "they try to use our name for some donations." They also emphasized that "they are not strict on the honesty of the work."[900] The Samdanis' position as an economic and sociocultural elite in the field determines this perception. It is contrasted with that of the "artist family." Based on the comments, the members of this family are less mobile and more connected to the locality of Dhaka (and Bangladesh), likely through their common art education, their struggle

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897 AR, RS, September 2015.
898 AR, A, 2017.
899 AR, A, 2017.
900 AR, A, 2015.

against institutional, socio-cultural, and political norms, and their situated-ness in the urban middle class. This "family" is joined by a common artistic practice that surpasses potential conflicts and disagreements. While this certainly represents a romanticized version of the artist community, it is also an expression of the value of connections that my research partners aspire to build in opposition to those they assume the Samdanis facilitate. The contact they envisage is marked by mutual respect, loyalty, trust, and the belief that everybody, irrespective of their position, contributes to the furthering of contemporary practice. In my observation, this contact assumes exchange and collaboration at eye-level—from fellow member of the artistic field to fellow member. It is similar to the type of transcul-tural contact Kravagna describes in opposition to mere impact or unilateral appropriation.[901] My research partners are interested in mutual invitations, in founding associations and institutions for contemporary art, in recipro-cal advancement, rather than one-sided educative processes.[902] Mobility for them is not a *fait accompli*, it becomes possible through continuous hard work, meticulously established and nurtured social and economic capital, as well as merit in terms of art production.

Large-scale perennial events like the *DAS*, *CM*, and *PKTM* are situated in ordinary processes and span dynamic and multifaceted networks that exceed the connections between a (highly mobile) center and a (local-ized) periphery. This tension between situatedness and connectedness has often been neglected in the research on biennials. The literature that subscribes to the global contemporary not only fails to examine the qual-ities of the events' multi-scalar connections, it also perpetuates an asym-metry between a developed knowledgeable and experienced art center (Euro-America), whose contemporary practice draws from long lineages of knowledge production, and a periphery, whose art practitioners have just appeared on the mobile center's radar and have yet to prove their ability to connect to these lineages. From the perspective of this mobile center, events are perceived as geographically fixed (situated on an imaginary map) and temporally limited (inscribed into a virtual calendar): Dhaka in February *(CM)*, Delhi in October *(Photo Festival)*, Kathmandu in November *(PKTM)*, and Angkor in December *(Photo Festival & Workshops)*.

The actors from whose perspective I am building my analysis of an alternative contemporaneity develop different strategies to deal with this asymmetry. Their approaches are affected by the position they hold within the field. Large-scale events can offer great opportunities to build alliances between actors whose motivations overlap, short-term collaboration as between Britto and the Samdani Art Foundation, or long-term partner-ships as between PC and Drik. However, they also manifest competition over positions in the artistic field, for instance who holds the monopoly on brokerage of locality and contemporary art. The Samdanis form part

901 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, 50.
902 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, 41.

of a new economic elite and aim to establish the *DAS* as a privileged zone for the exchange of knowledge on contemporary art from South Asia. They concentrate on transgressing the field's vertical autonomy by connecting the urban / national to the global artistic field and are thus creating new avenues for many artists based in Bangladesh. In the 2014 edition in focus here, they sustain the autonomy of the field within a small elite group. The direction the *DAS* has taken in the subsequent editions (2016, 2018), however, promises a shift to a more inclusive and interdisciplinary approach to establishing a platform for contemporary discourse.[903] The artists, in contrast, proactively choose multi-positionality. Often born out of a lack of other options, they spend a tedious amount of time on building and nourishing reciprocal contact with other artists and art professionals. They use large-scale events to build and strengthen group identity—as majority world or as vernacular storytellers—beyond the relatively autonomous art field.[904] They deal with crises and create alternative spaces for the material and symbolic production of contemporary art. These spaces are alternative in the sense that they allow for the transgression of established socio-cultural norms and disciplinary boundaries, and the testing of alternative visuality. The flexibility and dynamic recurrence to different scales secures their sustainability.[905] The art community they imagine emphasizes affective qualities and values of reciprocity, respect, and fairness over more formal, professional, and economically driven relations. It is inherently transcultural because it is based on a situatedness in place (a knowledge of the visual discourse from which the respective actors emerged, and programs targeted at invigorating this discourse) and the desire to join and learn from other discourses and actors in a multi-scalar field.

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903 The 2016 edition counted eighteen different talks, launches, and conversations. It included a writing ensemble to "share writing histories and knowledge" and "produce new critical impulses." Nadia Samdani, "Welcome," in *Dhaka Art Summit 2016: Exhibition Guide*, ed. Samdani Art Foundation (Dhaka: Samdani Art Foundation, 2016), i. The 2018 edition included 120 speakers in sixteen panel discussions, two symposiums, illustrated lectures, and a "Scholars' Weekend." The program booklet of the 2018 edition is available for download at the *DAS* website. "Programme 2018," Dhaka Art Summit, Samdani Art Foundation, accessed April 25, 2022, https://www.dhakaartsummit.org/das2018.
904 Hüsken and Michaels, "Introduction," 9–10.
905 Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography," 288–289.

Chapter 6

Situating Connections: International Workshops, Performance Art, and the Translocal Network(s) of Contemporary Art

One of the biggest strengths of the concept of translocality is its understanding of localities as more than a local site of negotiation of global flows.[906] Translocality directs attention to the ways in which different social actors proactively shape different visions of locality. In order to avoid the pitfalls of overemphasizing one scale of locality over another (methodological nationalism) or prioritizing unilateral center-periphery connections (the global cities or global contemporaneity discourse), my research is guided by a methodological "situationalizing" of flows and an awareness of the "interconnectedness of all interactions."[907] In the first five chapters of this book, I focused on specific localities, fields, and events in which flows of knowledge, objects, capital, and people become temporarily situated. I discussed how my research partners broker values about locality, from socio-culturally inclusive circumscriptions of nationality to the values of cultural heritage in the architecture of Old Dhaka; how they mediate interdisciplinary approaches and new mediums into the nationally circumscribed visual discourses; and how they use events to generate momentum for a broader movement of vernacular storytelling against a Western monopoly of representation. This analysis fulfills my aim to recognize the interconnectedness of situations. To accomplish the second part of my aim, I now turn my attention to the connections themselves. I am interested in the content that is brokered, the qualities associated with the connections, and the vehicles by which they are transported. I introduce two settings, first the workshop, and in the next chapter, the hanging-out situation. Both

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906 Brickell and Datta, "Introduction," 5.
907 Mueller, "Beyond Ethnographic Scriptocentrism," 110; see also Hepp, "Translocal Media Cultures," 40.

are crucial for the formation and mediation of flows, and both are often overlooked as research sites, because they often happen on the sidelines of high-profile art events, away from the pressures of the art market, and outside established spaces of representation, such as galleries or museums. Translocal ethnography based on participant observation allows me to follow my research partners into these less established spaces and to investigate them as important nodes of connection.[908] How do artists and other actors meet, hang out, collaborate, and communicate? What are the modalities and qualities of the connections they establish? Which underlying values and conventions of transcultural brokerage become apparent?

The theoretical discussion on networks informs my aim to recognize the "equal weight" of local situations and of circulation in the transcultural analysis of the complexity of social, material, and geographical connections related to contemporary art.[909] Social Network Analysis (SNL) sensitized my attention for the intensity, frequency, distribution, and localization of connections, whereas Actor–Network Theory (ANT) directed my focus to the mediators of flows. In contrast to the field, which connects actors and existing socio-economic structures through practices of negotiating artistic value, I comprehend the network as an artificial construct resulting from the different claims, rhetorics, motivations, and strategies of my research partners.[910] This construct aids me in structuring my findings and in shifting my focus from the nodes of connection to the relations and their conduits.

My examination of large-scale events revealed my research partners' interest in long-term relations, in enabling collaboration and exchange beyond the timescale of a single project or festival. These alliances require care and upkeep—a process often facilitated by a shared agenda and similar mindset: Drik and PC for instance share a common interest in strengthening the practice of contemporary photography as a tool for social change. For over ten years, this goal has been the basis of a continued and mutually beneficial collaboration between the two organizations. As an established member of South Asian Network for the Arts (SANA, 2000–2011), the Britto Arts Trust (Britto) contributed to the facilitation of creative and physical exchange between countless artists across South Asia. So far, I have only paid marginal attention to the effect of these alliances on the contemporary art practice. I briefly discussed the development of Tayeba Begum Lipi's use of stainless-steel razor blades in and through the SANA network as well as the influence of Shimul Saha's studies in Pakistan on his work $E=mc^2$. In the last two chapters, my main focus is the concrete situations in which artists encounter new input and the conduits of this input. This analysis contributes to strengthening my argument on the affinities that durably unite collectives.

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908   Siegenthaler, "Towards an Ethnographic Turn."
909   Mueller, "Beyond Ethnographic Scriptocentrism."
910   Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 131.

Christian Kravagna discusses transcultural "contact" in opposition to "impact," and in relation to terms such as *Begegnung* (encounter), *Austausch* (exchange), and *Allianz* (alliance).[911] He emphasizes the transgression of colonial and cultural boundaries, as well as the de-centered, multilateral, and intentional nature of this artistic contact. His notion expands on Mary Louise Pratt's definition of the "contact zone" as "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict."[912] While Pratt emphasizes the frictious, asymmetrical, and chaotic nature of the contact situation, Kravagna stresses the collaborative, reciprocal factor. Both play a constitutive role in the brokerage of knowledge and the forging of transcultural connections, and both can be temporarily situated in the workshop.

For my research partners, the workshop is one of the most important spaces for expanding their knowledge, often by way of meeting new people and further developing their art practice. As a place of collective engagement, the workshop stands in contrast to the more individualized artist studio. Although several artists I met during my research regularly defer to professional craftsmen, apprentices, assistants, or volunteers to realize their projects, the majority reserve a separate space (a studio) for their individual artistic production. Some can afford a supplementary apartment, while others occupy a designated room in their family home, and again others share a space with fellow artists. While the studio is understood as a place of focused individual work, the workshop represents an opportunity to meet like-minded people for the purpose of sharing, discussing, and producing knowledge, expertise, and practical work in the wider field of artistic production. The emphasis is on shared experience detached from the daily routine. Workshops are marked by a certain liminality—as removed from the time and space of day-to-day dwelling and artistic practice. They offer instances for creativity outside the socio-cultural, disciplinary, and geographical limits of the everyday. Moreover, they serve as important spaces to establish and maintain contact with colleagues. Due to their role in cultivating social and cultural capital in a more liberated environment, they have become a popular format offered by actors from inside and outside the art field, but I limit myself to the international workshop. This specific type of workshop brings together artists working in different mediums from various localities around the world for several days or weeks. Its format is closely entangled with the SANA and is a crucial factor in the emergence of an alternative contemporaneity.

As a more concrete example of a flow or connection explored by artists in the workshop, I focus on new mediums, more specifically on performance art. New mediums describe an artistic practice that cuts across the

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911   Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, 50.
912   Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 5–6.

boundaries of the classic fine arts mediums, such as painting, sculpture, and printmaking. The term serves as an umbrella for a variety of artistic practices, from installation to performance and new media art—an art form that deals specifically with digital electronic devices. It can also refer to projects or works that transcend the discipline of visual arts in a broader sense, such as those engaging music, theater, or dance. New mediums have become a salient part of the art field, but they are also cause for friction, especially between an older generation of artists and art educators who fear that new mediums entail a loss of "skill" (e.g., manual command of color, composition, perspective, shade, and so on). Moreover, galleries in Nepal and Bangladesh continue to focus on the classical and commercially viable mediums of painting and occasionally sculpture. Artist collectives such as Britto, Sutra, and Bindu—A Space for Artists (Bindu) have been instrumental in offering training opportunities and spaces to experiment with new mediums. The workshop is one of them.

Through Britto member Yasmin Jahan Nupur's performance *Sat on a Chair* at the 2014 *Dhaka Art Summit (DAS)*, I retrace the artist's development within the medium of performance. Performance art is commonly understood as a mental and physical construction that an artist (or performer) creates in a specific time and space. Unlike theater, it does not require a script, but rather emphasizes the ephemeral, emerging nature of the act. The body of the performer is conceived as the main medium to convey an idea or a concept.[913] The direct presence of an audience can become a constitutive part of the art piece, but the composition and degree of participation of this audience are subject to variation depending on the setting and agenda of the artist.[914] My research partners often emphasize the newness of the medium: in the catalog introduction to the performance art program at the *DAS*, curator Mahbubur Rahman for instance writes about performance art as "a relatively new art form" that "entered" Bangladesh at the beginning of the 1990s.[915] In a similar vein, KHOJ director Pooja Sood refers to performance art as an "emerging" practice in India.[916] While the emphasis on newness here is meant to demarcate emerging mediums from institutionally established ones—as the definition of new mediums that I provide above suggests—there is a danger of evoking tropes of innovation and authenticity. These tropes are often a consequence of the application of eurocentric art history, which commonly locates the beginning of performance in the early twentieth century to other localities, with avant-garde movements such as Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism. The Euro-American art field becomes the site of "innovativeness"—the "origin" of the flow—while the practice of artists in other fields, such as India or Bangladesh, is reduced to appropriation

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913 Serafini, "Subversion through Performance," 321.
914 See, for instance, Bishop, *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*.
915 Rahman, "Performance Programme," 87.
916 Pooja Sood, "Mapping Khoj: Idea, Place, Network," in Sood, *SANA*, 55.

or copy. This denies their creativity and agency and marks performance art as yet another example of a deterritorialized "global flow" in a territorialized locality; "no less viral and global" than the "spectacular" international biennials and triennials.[917] Moreover, the diffusionist rhetoric risks transporting presumed meanings and values in relation to the art practice, rather than examining its multilateral entanglements. The emphasis within the research on "happenings" in the late 1950s,[918] or movements such as Fluxus in the 1970s, is often on the subversive nature of the medium.[919] Notably the unsalability and ephemerality of performance art are highlighted as counter-movements to the conventions of the art establishment, such as key exhibition institutions and the art market.[920] To avoid such presumed meanings and hierarchical notions of innovativeness, I recur to the construct of the network. It allows me to conceive of the flow of performance art as a relation between diverse nodes of connection. Nodes and relations are thereby (solely, for the purpose of my analysis) situated in a multi-scalar network without clear origin or destination. Rather than following a flow from a presumed global visual culture (nevertheless centered in the West), the tool of the network allows me to approach performance art as an example of new mediums through the artistic development of one particular artist.

It follows that the predominantly eurocentric literature on performance art was not very helpful in my approach. I found more productive reflections in texts situated at the crossroads of anthropology, art history, performance studies, and transcultural studies. Based on Victor Turner, Erica Fischer-Lichte argues that "performances epitomize the state of in-betweenness [what Turner conceives as 'betwixt and between']."[921] She elaborates that "a performance comes into being only during its course. It arises from the interaction of performers and spectators."[922] Further, the experience of this liminality that happens in all kinds of performances (in the arts, in rituals, sports competitions, festivals, games, or political events), she suggests, can lead to specific aims but "cannot transmit given meanings."[923] Rather, performances comprised as "aesthetic experiences" emphasize the very process of transition.[924] Drawing on the notion of *communitas*—which Turner distinguishes from brotherhood and sibling

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917 Tan, "Festivalizing Performance," 120.
918 Serafini, "Subversion through Performance," 321.
919 For an interesting discussion of Fluxus from a transcultural perspective, see Franziska Koch, "Nam June Paik: Catching Up with the West? Institutionelle Bedingungen und Grenzen transkulturell konstituierter Autorschaft," in Dätsch, *Kulturelle Übersetzer*.
920 Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 7.
921 Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance: Different States of Being In-Between," *New Theatre Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (November 2009): 391–392; Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).
922 Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance," 391–392.
923 Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance," 391–392.
924 Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance," 394.

relationship, because it "transcends distinctions of rank, age, kinship posi-tion, and, in some kinds of cultic group, even of sex"[925]—Fischer-Lichte conceives the notion of an "emotional community."[926] This community is created during the performance, comprises members of very different cultures, and allows different identities side by side to constitute new transcultural realities. Fischer-Lichte's explanations pertain to the specific situation of the theater, but her transcultural perspective on performance and human relatedness is equally interesting for my research context. First, it emphasizes the collective and transgressive powers of perfor-mance, and second, it directs the focus away from specific origins to expe-riences and effects. Hüsken and Michaels highlight a similar point, not for specific performances, but for festivals as a setting in which performative practices happen.[927] Relying on Victor Turner, they emphasize that cultural performances (in the form of festivals) are "commentaries on (be it cri-tique or celebration of) different dimensions of human relatedness."[928] As such, they are "characterized by liminality, which implies that all kinds of things may happen."[929] The political element of performances as well as the energy of possibility and probability that Hüsken and Michaels expose are important not only within individual performances but also in the setting in which performances are often conceived and carried out: the workshop.

In this chapter, I follow Nupur through a set of performances since her beginnings in the medium in 2004. Her artistic development in the medium notably took place within a network of international workshops in South Asia. I discuss these workshops as liminal spaces that allow for transcul-tural encounters and exchange between contemporary artists. They are marked by collaboration, friction, and liminality, and due to these char-acteristics, constitute key space for artists to develop their artistic prac-tice. Knowledge about visual discourses and practices is mediated through willful, reciprocal, and multilateral exchange. While the workshop is tem-porally and spatially demarcated, the complicity formed between indi-vidual artists can lead to long-term alliances and support. The workshop emphasizes the importance of interaction, collaboration, and discourse in the emerging practice of contemporary art. By organizing workshops, col-lectives like Britto, Sutra, and Bindu have played a leading role as convey-ors of flows of knowledge, practices, ideas, and people in relation to this contemporaneity.

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925 Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 100.
926 Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance," 400–401.
927 Hüsken and Michaels, "Introduction," 11.
928 Hüsken and Michaels, "Introduction," 11.
929 Hüsken and Michaels, "Introduction," 11.

Interlude: *Sat on a Chair*

Yasmin Jahan Nupur's performance is about to start. She slowly climbs up the long wooden ladder. I hold my breath and avert my eyes. I do not dare to look at the ladder or the screen of my small camera. When my eyes return to the pillar, she has already settled onto the chair. Two volunteers remove the ladder. Yasmin Jahan Nupur stares straight forward, fixing on an invisible point on the wall. Held in place only by tree metal cables, wrapped around a big, white pillar, her chair lingers about four meters above the floor. She holds on to the chair firmly, with both hands wrapped around the sides of the seat, her legs dangling freely (Fig. 18).*

Over the next three hours, I try to resume my work, to visit some of the other shows at the Dhaka Art Summit *2014 and to attend a panel discussion on collecting South Asian art, but I feel a constant pull towards the big hall. Whether it is out of curiosity (Is she still sitting there? Did she change her position?) or out of fear (Is the chair still safely attached? Has an accident happened?), I cannot tell. Every time I walk past her, down in the hall or up on the balcony, she sits still, staring at the wall. She has not moved. She is clenching the chair, her feet loose.*

Only when the three hours are over does she slowly climb down the ladder that the volunteers have brought back. She is welcomed by her husband Manir Mrittik and fellow performance artist Reetu Sattar. People applaud. Tayeba Begum Lipi and Kushi Kabir, both founding members of the Britto Arts Trust, come to hug her firmly.

More than a year after the performance, I sit in Jahan's studio in Narayanganj, a city approximately twenty-five kilometers south of Dhaka. She explains that Sat on a Chair *marked a turning point in her art practice. It shifted her focus within the medium of performance art to long duration performances. Only one month after the* Summit*, during a workshop ("No Man's Land") at the borderlands of India and Bangladesh, co-organized by Britto and Shelter Promotion Council (India), Nupur planned a six-hour long performance.*[930] *When Mahbubur Rahman, the curator for the project, asked what she was going to do during that time, she replied: "Nothing, I just wanted to stand."*[931] *Rather than working on or with the national border and its intractable meaning, the artist decided to expose her body to the effects of the land: the sun and the wind. Unlike humans, these natural phenomena do not discriminate between one or the other side of the border. The result was entitled* Flying the White Flag *and showed the artist standing still while holding on to a white*

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930 The project (March 21–27, 2014) comprised artists from India and Bangladesh, meeting and creating artworks at either side of the border between the two countries. The project has its own Facebook group, through which participants and other members continue to share news, memories, and other materials. "No Man's Land Project, International Border, Bangladesh and India," Facebook, accessed March 4, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/groups/1397347313873094.

931 AR, YJN, August 2015.

Figure 18: Yasmin Jahan Nupur, *Sat on a Chair*, 2014. Three-hour art performance at the Dhaka Art Summit, Shilpakala Academy. Photo: author.

flag, as a protective sign of truce or ceasefire. The
Britto workshop marks the second step on the artist's journey to engage more
intensely with time and space. Another international Britto workshop held in
Bogra (Bangladesh) in 2008 shaped her approach to contemporary art practice
on a much larger scale:

> *It changed my life, because so many artists, famous artists came and*
> *their concept—every day we had presentations, long conversations, the*
> *artists were staying together—the environment also.*[932]

THE "INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP" IN SOUTH ASIA

In the quote above, Nupur emphasizes the face-to-face contact with other notably famous artists from abroad as one of the main advantages of the international workshop. The international workshop that Britto facilitated in Bogra in 2008—and that according to Nupur "changed her life"—comprised eight artists from Bangladesh and nine participants from the UK, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Jordan, the Maldives, Mauritius, and Nepal. It was Kolkata-born Susanta Mandal, today mostly known for his conceptual installations, whom Nupur felt most connected to. They have kept

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932   AR, YJN, August 2015.

in contact over the years and are "good friends" today.[933] She elaborates that it was not merely meeting Mandal and other artists that changed her understanding of contemporary art but learning about their concepts and practice. The workshop intended for artists to share their conceptualizations, the challenges they encountered, and their work process on a regular basis. "Everyday we had presentations, long conversations," Nupur describes.[934] The workshop not only encouraged exchange on a creative, professional level, but also in an ordinary way; artists lived, cooked, and spent their leisure time together. Despite their differing geographical origins, their daily responsibilities back home, their socio-cultural and diverse training backgrounds, they came together for a two-week period to focus on the thing they have in common: their art practice.

Based on Nupur's experiences, I retain three main incentives for artists to participate in workshops: to be exposed to new things (concepts, ideas, mediums, techniques), to enjoy creative freedom, and to expand one's social capital. These elements—education, relative autonomy, mediation, and connection—are usually part of the realm of mediating art institutions. However, the dearth of institutional support which I discussed in chapter four has led artist collectives to continuously expand their activities to serve the demands of the field in this regard. The workshop format thereby has proven to be a crucial instrument: it can be organized almost anywhere and does not require a specific art-related space; it does not call for its organizers' long-term economic or social commitment. Instead, the format lasts only for a few days or weeks, in which the participants need to be lodged and fed. Since the focus is on experimentation, the art supplies are often found, repurposed, or recycled materials. Due to this comparatively economical and adaptable character, the workshop has become deeply entangled with the format of the collective. Especially in the beginning, when the collectives started out and did not yet have any fixed structures to rely on, the format offered a platform to broaden their scope. Additionally, the workshop offers time off and away from professional and everyday responsibilities. It frees up space for creative deliberations. Despite its detachment from regular art practice, the workshop and its popularity are embedded in a network of connections, as the case of Britto exemplifies.

In our interview, Britto founder Lipi recalls how she applied for her first residency at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin in the late 1990s. Through an Irish friend, an artist working in the NGO sector in Bangladesh, she heard about the residency and gained access to the application forms. "We filled out the form together," she explains, "… in handwriting. There was no computer at that time. And there was no e-mail also. So it was all like, sending the letters and waiting for the replies."[935]

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933 AR, YJN, August 2015.
934 AR, YJN, August 2015.
935 AR, TBL, March 2017.

Application processes like this were lengthy; they could take up to several months and were dependent on word-of-mouth promotion. Face-to-face connections with people who had access to the international art field (for instance through the NGO sector) were a prerequisite to learn about and apply for residencies or workshops outside one's own country. At the time, Britto did not have an internet connection that would have allowed its members to gain access to these formats. Outside the hegemonic channels of national institutions, mobility and face-to-face connections were the only avenue for new input. In the course of the interview, Lipi describes that it took a lot of work to gain access to a network of art exchange, and how the experiences she and her husband Rahman had through it shaped their imagination of new opportunities for artists in Bangladesh:

> Those friends are still our friends. Since then, we are still in contact with each other. This is actually where something gives you new ideas. So when we came back, we talked about, why don't we, for example, ten of us get together and share the expense to run an art space. That was the thing we were already planning and thinking about.[936]

After their residency in Dublin, the couple travelled to Germany, where they stayed at an artist-run gallery. This experience, apart from initiating an ongoing friendship, made them realize the potential of collective investment. The Germany-based artists had pooled their money together to establish their own exhibition space. This model offered Lipi and Rahman an alternative to the gallery system in Dhaka and its constraints. If local galleries were unable or unwilling to exhibit and sell the multi-media, experimental, and contemporary work they created, they would nevertheless have their own space. The idea for Britto, and later Britto Space, took root.

> During that time, Triangle Arts Trust, Pooja [Sood] and Robert Loder, they eventually came to know about us. ... So it was very easy for them to communicate with us. Because what they were thinking, we had a kind of similar thought. But we did not think that we're going for a network or a permanent venture to take so much responsibility for the artists' community. We rather thought loosely just for our small surroundings, ten to twenty artists, we will be together and create a new platform.[937]

Lipi explains that their Europe-inspired deliberations were met by Sood, director of SANA's first collective KHOJ, and Loder, co-founder of the Triangle

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936 AR, TBL, March 2017.
937 AR, TBL, March 2017.

Arts Trust (Triangle).[938] They were able to offer a structured frame to the couple's loosely shaped ideas about collaborative action. KHOJ had already started organizing international workshops in 1997, and in 2000, Sood undertook a research visit to Dhaka to recruit potential participants. Soon after, Lipi was invited to participate in the KHOJ International Workshop in Modinagar (ca. forty-five kilometers northeast of Delhi). Britto was established in 2002, and much like its predecessors KHOJ and Triangle they started their own International Workshop series in 2003.

Driven by Sood and Loder, these workshops became a unique feature of SANA and the collectives that came out of it. In the introduction to the SANA publication, cultural theorist and curator Nancy Adajania emphasizes the international workshop as a unique feature, setting KHOJ apart from other artist groups and collectives active in India between the 1950s and the 1990s.

> All of these groupings were born from an ideological impulse or responded to an immediate practical need. But Khoj is an exception to this rule. It is the Indian manifestation of a portable model for transcultural artistic conviviality; a model that was originally developed by the New York based Triangle Arts Workshop in 1982, founded by the British sculptor Anthony Caro and businessman Robert Loder.[939]

While other artist initiatives, Adajania contends, responded to the immediate needs of one group or one locale—and much like Ziemer's accomplices disbanded once the initial impulse was satisfied[940]—KHOJ focused on wider possibilities and thus managed to sustain itself over the course of 20 years. Since its beginnings in 1997, KHOJ has run through a variety of avatars. Today it is a firmly established cultural institution with a permanent space in Khirki village (South Delhi) offering exhibition spaces, artist studios, and resident accommodation.[941] Its first avatar however was a very fluid form of yearly workshops aiming at connecting artists from India internationally. The word international, which also appears in the label

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938 Before establishing KHOJ, Sood was the director of the Eicher Gallery in New Delhi (1994–1998). She received an MA in art history (Punjab University, Chandigarh) and management (Symbiosis Institute of Business Management, Pune). For more information on Sood's biography, see "Pooja Sood," KHŌJ, accessed March 4, 2021, https://khojstudios.org/person/pooja-sood/. Robert Loder (1934–2017) was a British businessperson, philanthropist, and art collector. Before he co-founded the Triangle and established Gasworks (Triangle's main hub in London), he held the position of treasurer and later chairperson at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. See "Robert Loder (1934–2017)," *Artforum*, July 24, 2017, accessed June 19, 2021, https://www.artforum.com/news/robert-loder-1934-2017-69961.

939 Nancy Adajania, "Probing the Khojness of Khoj," in Sood, *SANA*, 3.

940 Ziemer, *Komplizenschaft*.

941 See "Our Studios," KHOJ, accessed June 28, 2022, https://khojstudios.org/our-studios/.

"international workshop," first refers to the diverse origins of the workshop participants from all over the world. Yet it also emulates Adajania's reference to a "transcultural conviviality" and alludes to the situatedness of the workshop within a wider, geographically transgressive contemporary frame. In the introduction to *The Khoj Book*, Sood explains that the idea of using workshops as a means of international exchange and networking was "offered" by Loder, the "visionary" founder of the Triangle.[942] Triangle is a non-profit art institution founded in New York City in 1982. The artists' workshop—initially conceptualized as a two-week, one-off experiment— was Triangle's first program and brought together twenty-five artists from the US, the United Kingdom, and Canada (hence the name triangle). These workshops have happened on a regular basis over the last thirty-five years. According to their self-conception, they support artists by giving them "space and time" for communication to "exchange ideas, knowledge and skills with each other."[943] The focus is not on the creation of a final product, but on the "process of making."[944]

This processual nature is one of the main markers of the workshop and the reason for its important role in contemporary art. It also separates the workshop from the artist studio, which is conceived as a place for regular continued production in my interviews. The workshop, in contrast, is described as time off, a time-out from this daily routine, a space for experimentation and testing. The emphasis is on the contact with other people as opposed to an individual practice. This contact is here already very specifically qualified: as international, or "transcultural conviviality," as Adajania calls it.

The first Triangle workshops only included artists from the initial US– UK–Canada triangle, but then

> Became increasingly international, as artists from all over the world applied … . Invigorated and inspired by their experiences at the workshop, many of the artists returned to their home countries and started their own workshops and art spaces while maintaining contact with one another.[945]

In this description, international is not only connoted with cross-border contact and conviviality. It implies notions of exportability that is also present in Sood and Adajania's accounts. The vocabulary is reminiscent of the diffusionist rhetoric employed in the global contemporary frame, in which institutions and artists in the West form a deterritorialized, global visual culture, and the rest of the world is divided in distinct, localized cultures

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942 Pooja Sood, "Mapping Khoj: Idea/Place/Network," in *The Khoj Book, 1997–2007: Contemporary Art Practice in India*, ed. Pooja Sood (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2010), 5.
943 "Mission and History," Triangle Arts Association.
944 "Mission and History," Triangle Arts Association.
945 "Mission and History," Triangle Arts Association.

of which artists, even if they are mobile, become spokespeople. Therefore, the question should not be where the format originated and where it was "adapted," but why it became so popular. Why did it speak to artists all over the world?

The members of Britto and the other SANA collectives (Vasl, Sutra, and Theerta) were only beginning to realize the potential of collaborative action, exchange, and mobility, when Loder and later Sood had already established themselves as highly mobile members of an international art field; they could afford to undertake research visits. For artists in Bangladesh and Nepal, this kind of mobility was still only an option for a handful of privileged artists, such as Lipi and Rahman, who were able to access larger scopes of action through their social network. Most artists did not possess the necessary economic and social capital to travel or participate in international programs. The format of the international workshop promised mobility—the opportunity to overcome the constraint of the local gallery system, the prevailing institutional and disciplinary boundaries—and to create platforms for experimentation and exchange between a wider number of artists.

When Sood explains her reasons to initiate KHOJ and thereafter SANA, her words not only resonate with the description of the Triangle workshops, but also with countless testimonies and descriptions that I have collected in the course of my research.

> At a time when Indian artists felt isolated and unsupported, it provided the possibility for young practitioners to create an open-ended, experimental space for themselves on their own terms; a space where they could make art independent of formal academic and cultural institutions and outside the constraints of the commercial gallery. It offered the chance to establish international networks without institutional support. Artist-led, it was an initiative for artists by artists. It provided the liberating potential of creatively intervening in the prevailing status quo.[946]

The obvious reason for this resonance is the fact that along with the format of the workshop a related language is transmitted. Words such as "experimental space," "independent," "artist-led," "initiative," "potential," "creatively intervening," and even "network" have become part of contemporary art writing. They are used in proposals for supranationally operating funding agencies, such as the Ford Foundation or the Prince Claus Fund, and in applications for residencies and workshops. They are propagated by art-related magazines, homepages, and social media. The fact that English has become one of the main languages for art writing increases this proliferation. I return to the English language as an important connector in the network in the next chapter. The second, less obvious reason

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946   Sood, "Mapping Khoj: Idea/Place/Network," 5.

is that many contemporary artists, no matter the locality in which they live and work, face similar challenges. In the introductory quote, Adajania claims that KHOJ was sustainable because it was not conceived as a direct response to local needs and instead adopted a wider scope. In fact, KHOJ is based on the same desire to invigorate a local community of artists and the urgency to connect with a wider network—a tension between autonomy and transgression—more than each of the collectives I discuss. KHOJ responds to needs emerging from the locality, such as the constraints and disciplinary boundaries set by galleries or art education institutions. It also reacts to the artists' desire to transgress the local field(s) they emerged from. In the above quote, Sood emphasizes the wish to feel connected to other creative practitioners across socio-cultural and national boundaries. Moreover, she addresses the requirement of space (temporal and physical) for unobstructed development and experimentation. Lipi similarly stresses the urgency for a space in which experimentation with new mediums is accepted as a valid form of cultural production. The international workshop became a tool for building this space. But despite its flexible and comparatively economical nature, the mobility of artists across South Asia and from everywhere in the world required logistical support: access to funding for travel grants, visas, and communication equipment (e.g., phones, computers, internet connections), as well as a workforce to organize the application process and coordinate accommodation, working spaces, and provisions. Through the six-year Ford Foundation funding, SANA was able to offer this support to the collectives and organize regular network meetings.

In the *DAS* 2014 "Pioneer Panel," Sood describes the challenge of finding artists from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh to participate in the first workshops in India. Over the years, using the annual international workshops as nodes of connection, she slowly started to establish a South Asian network. Within the timespan of three years, four collectives in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan began holding regular workshops and drawing in more and more artists. Theertha International Artists' Collective (Sri Lanka) and Vasl Artists' Collective (Pakistan) both held their first international workshops in 2001. Britto started in 2003, and Sutra followed with its first International Workshop in Patan, Nepal in 2004.[947] It is important to notice that despite the common origin in the fluid format of the workshop, these collectives took very different paths when the funding from the Ford Foundation ran out. In Nepal, Sutra stopped organizing activities by the end of the 2000s, partially as a result of frictions over financial decisions. Theerta and Britto struggled to maintain a regular program. In fact, Britto only organized one more international workshop in 2013, after the Ford Foundation funding, and thus SANA, ended in November 2011.[948] Yet, Theerta, Vasl, KHOJ, and Britto remain active. Despite the

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947   Sood, "Mapping Khoj: Idea, Place, Network," 58.
948   Pooja Sood, "Preface," in Sood, *SANA*, x–xi.

formal closure of the network, the established connections, formats, and platforms did not dissolve. During the SANA book launch at the *DAS* 2014, Sood explains that the collectives have grown stronger in their individual ways: Britto established its own space in March 2011 and continues its activities; Theerta, after a few setbacks, reopened its gallery in 2014 and continues with a biennial residency program; Vasl consciously decided to keep its fluid form, offering a broad variety of programs; and although Sutra has dispersed, I have shown that its energy lives on in spaces like Bindu, the Kathmandu University (KU) Center for Art and Design, and newer avatars like ArTree or Artudio.

Irrespective of their development and form, the workshop remains one of the most prevalent formats of collaborative action within and outside the former Triangle–SANA network. In fact, every artist-run initiative I worked with, including the Sattya Media Arts Collective (Sattya), Bindu, Drik, and PC, organize regular workshops that include participants beyond the national fields. This highlights the far-reaching commonality of contemporary artistic demands and the flexibility of the format. The workshop is adaptable in content, degree of difficulty, timeframe, and location to current circumstances and demands. Founding director of PC, NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati, for instance, describes the main requirement for PC's activities as contingent upon the people who could benefit from them. Since the immediate network of PC is predominantly regional, with mostly friends from Bangladesh and India coming to Nepal to give workshops, she has come to realize that despite the geographical proximity, the realities in the neighboring artistic fields are very different. She gives the example of a photobook-making workshop that *Chobi Mela (CM)* curator Tanzim Wahab and India-based photographer Shourab Hura had suggested for the first *Photo Kathmandu (PKTM)* festival in 2015. Kakshapati immediately knew that it would not make sense to organize this workshop during the festival because all advanced Nepali photographers were too busy with the organization of the festival. Instead, a "Photo Book 101" workshop took place in early 2017 and brought together ten advanced storytellers from Nepal and India. Workshops can offer great opportunities if they take into account the potential participants' interests, needs, and capacities.

THE WORKINGS OF THE WORKSHOP

The total freedom of making art without any ideological pressure or intra-artistic group rivalry—and, more crucially, without the anxiety of performing to a market—emancipated the artist to a considerable degree.[949]

In this quote, Adajania describes the effect that the KHOJ workshops have on the art scene in India. Rather than demanding the creation of polished

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949   Adajania, "Probing the Khojness of Khoj," 24.

end products, they allow artists to work outside the pressures of the art market. Above, I noted creative freedom, exposure to new things, and socializing as the three main incentives for artists to participate in workshops. Adajania's comment refers to the first: the work created during the workshop is only seen by a limited audience, very often fellow participants who are aware of its processual nature. There are hardly any rules about the size, the medium, or the need for salability. Even the objective to impress curators, collectors, or buyers is sidelined. The artist's emancipation from the market, however, is only one part of the freedom artists experience in the workshop. The example of Nupur shows that the format also stimulates creative and mental liberation from institutionally established notions of art. It renounces conventions of display and fosters a renegotiation of the artist-beholder relationship.

Jahan conceived her first performance in a 2004 workshop that was co-organized by Rahman and took place in Bangladesh's second largest city, Chittagong. It was led by French artist Awena Cozannet:

> That time, Britto arranged a workshop in Chittagong. Some from Chittagong, some from Dhaka, and one artist was a French performance artist, Awena Cozannet. It was also mess in my head because what she said I did not understand. But I can catch up, what is the performance. She told that performance is like a sculpture is moving. This is the main concept.[950]

The workshop catalog states that the idea was to approach sculpture through other mediums such as installation, performance, and photography, thus reflecting Cozannet's own interest in scenography, sculpture, installation, and the human body.[951] The workshop was divided into two parts: one in Dhaka, comprising eight participants, and one at the Jagatpur Ashram orphanage near Chittagong, comprising twelve artists including Nupur. At the time, Nupur was in the final year of her painting and drawing studies at the Chittagong Fine Arts Department and it was difficult for her to follow Cozannet's explanations: "It was also mess in my head, because what she said I did not understand."[952] She had not encountered performance art before, and unlike today, she did not have access to the internet to do research on the medium. She was dependent on what she learned at the university and old art catalogs she could find at the local book market. Over the course of the workshop however she slowly started to connect to the idea of "performance art" as a moving sculpture. Although she was enrolled in the painting department, the

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950 AR, YJN, August 2015.
951 Awena Cozannet, "Aborder la sculpture. To approach the sculpture," in *Movement Will Become Sculpture*, ed. Britto Arts Trust and Pousses Rouges (Dhaka: Britto Arts Trust, 2004).
952 AR, YJN, August 2015.

medium of sculpture was familiar to her; performance was not part of the conventional curriculum.[953]

Jahan's first performance was inspired by the voice of a boy she had encountered during a walk in the area of the Ashram where the workshop took place; the voice moved her to tears. She explains that she did not know whether he was singing or praying, but she decided she wanted to include him and the nearby Hindu temple into her work.

> He was praying and his voice was so amazing. I felt like crying. I was crying for a while. And I thought, let's do it like this. And all through, I did not know what was the performance. What is the installation.[954]

She felt like she still had not fully comprehended what the medium of performance art was. Nevertheless, she decided to try and let herself be guided by her emotions. In her account of the performance *Music of the Horizon*, she especially emphasizes the relationship with her own body and the audience. She remembers people taking photographs of her, while she walked up the stairs to the temple where the boy was singing. "I felt I am someone else. I am maybe someone who is clicking [taking a photo of] me."[955] She mentally switches roles with the onlooker, taking photos of her own performance. This out-of-body feeling was contrasted by a simultaneous sense of extreme imminence; while walking past the gathered audience, she became very aware of the presence of her own body, which was subjected to this gaze. The constant "clicking" of their cameras irritated her, she explains, but also made her feel like a "star." Being the center of attention while experimenting with an unfamiliar medium caused insecurities to surface; she explains that she was especially scared of boring people with her work.[956]

This first performance presents an experimental, unstudied, and almost naive approach to the medium. Yet, it contains all the elements that distinguish Nupur's performance practice today, notably her ambiguous relationship with the audience and her conscious engagement with the concepts of time and space. The constitutive moment of the 2004 performance becomes clearer when put in relation to her performance at the *DAS* ten years later. Nupur remembers that people from the audience tried to engage with her several times during *Sat on a Chair*. They wanted to divert her attention or to provoke a response, but Nupur consciously refuses to interact with the audience: "I didn't want to talk with the audience. … For me it felt interesting, … just sitting, without moving."[957] Her explanations indicate the integral and simultaneously disruptive relationship she sustains with her beholders since the performance in Chittagong

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953 AR, YJN, August 2015.
954 AR, YJN, August 2015.
955 AR, YJN, August 2015.
956 AR, YJN, August 2015.
957 AR, YJN, August 2015.

in 2004. Rather than communicating a preconceived meaning, Nupur's approach emphasizes her imminent experience of the situation. She emulates Fischer-Lichte's understanding of performance as arising "from the interaction of performers and spectators with unforeseen reactions and responses constantly changing the planned course."[958] Although Nupur consciously defies the connection with individual beholders, her performance engages the audience by eliciting imminent emotions. At the *DAS*, Nupur's actions, her ascent to the tied-up chair, her idleness and immobility, her surrender to the height, evoke the creation of an "emotional community."[959] As onlookers, we are united in our experience of horror, vertigo, and curiosity. I am constantly drawn to the room where the performance is taking place, unable to focus on my other work. Nupur's husband, Manir Mrittik, and fellow Britto members rush to welcome her after the performance, marking their engagement in the performance and their investment in her well-being.

Jahan's performance also embodies a liminal, "betwixt and between" state.[960] Regarding *Sat on a Chair*, the artist describes how, on the one hand, her mind felt conscious about what her body should not do: "don't move, don't eat, don't go."[961] This gave a very imminent feeling to her body, a very conscious being in space. On the other hand, she mentions feeling out-of-space, absent—as she was observing herself from above.[962] This dual experience of being "out-of-space" and very much "in-space"—of time flying by and standing still—exemplifies the artist's deliberate questioning of the very concepts of time and space; both can be manipulated by the body. What interests her is how these concepts change meaning when the body moves or does not move. How does changing one's position in time and space shape new perspectives? "I should have been down the pillar, but no, I was up."[963] The world she creates in her performance is upside-down, reversed, abnormal. As a beholder, this is easy to comprehend: the white dress lets her fade into the background. Yet, the unexpected position within the building (on top of a pillar) simultaneously conceals her within the architecture and foregrounds her (in)action (see Fig. 18).

The international workshop was an important space for the artist. By way of the workshop, Nupur connected to Cozannet and her conception of performance art. On the other hand, the format allowed her the space to experiment and thus develop her voice through the medium. Over the course of ten years, she came to her own conception of what performance art is. In her artist statement for *Our Own Private Anthology*—an ongoing performance project on traditional family structures and food

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958   Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance," 391–392.
959   Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance," 398.
960   Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*.
961   AR, YJN, August 2015.
962   AR, YJN, August 2015.
963   AR, YJN, August 2015.

preparation—Jahan elaborates on this conception.[964] She explains that she uses her "body as a means of expression" while also aiming to "generate new possibilities" through the immediacy of the audience. Further, she understands the performance as an art form in which "the Self is made open to confrontation" yet is empowered at the same time.[965] This statement re-emphasizes the liminal betwixt and between state Nupur experiences during her performances; especially her wish to consciously be in space while also feeling out-of-space. It takes up the ambiguous relationship with the audience that is already visible in her description of the 2004 performance. The audience is a constitutive part of the performance; impulses for new possibilities come from this interaction. At the same time, this confrontation also makes the self vulnerable—exposes it like a magnifier.

In previous chapters, I discussed how the transmission of knowledge about art in Nepal and Bangladesh is still largely organized by state-controlled institutions, such as art schools and the academies. These are increasingly contested as sources of knowledge as their curriculums are considered outdated. Their focus on traditional mediums, manual skill, and Western masters no longer fits the requirements of the young generation of contemporary artists. The artist collectives are emerging as important actors in art education, either as educators in the newly established private schools or by organizing alternative training formats. The workshop has thereby become an important space to explore, learn, and circulate news techniques and new mediums. Especially the international workshop offers a platform for multilateral and reciprocal exchange of knowledge, rather than a top-down transmission. In this regard, the format also differs from newer platforms, such as the *DAS*. Its organizers aim to establish the *Summit* as a platform for the generation and transmission of knowledge about art practice in South Asia. Yet, this transmission is as unilaterally structured as in the state-controlled institutions, the expertise is merely shifted from the national to the global scale. The international workshop in contrast focuses on a multi-scalar transmission and collective development of knowledge.

In our interview, Lipi describes how, when she came back to Bangladesh after her first residencies, both Rahman and she started thinking about what was absent in Bangladesh: "Is there a medium we are missing? Maybe we can go to neighboring countries to learn the medium and

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964   The artist statement is available online on the homepage of the HH Art Spaces Foundation, an artist-run residency space in Goa since 2014. In December 2016, HH Art Spaces curated a performance program in collaboration with the *Serendipity Art Festival* in Goa. On the occasion of this festival, Nupur performed the third part of *Our Own Private Anthology*. The performance lasted for four days (nine hours per day) and highlighted the artist's extensive engagement with the concept of time and space. "Yasmin Jahan Nupur (BN)," HH Art Spaces Foundation, accessed June 28, 2022, http://www.hhartspacesfoundation.org/2015/1p0129kojk4jx55iispi98v4jz60xp.

965   "Yasmin Jahan Nupur (BN)," HH Art Spaces Foundation.

come back and do by ourselves."[966] Besides the idea of a collective exhibition space that I discussed above, she was thinking about how to enable and foster flows of knowledge into the Bangladeshi art field. In the early 2000s, performance art was not part of the fine arts curriculum and only a handful of artists had been exposed to the medium, with fewer still who practiced it. Those who did, did so on their own, seemingly without much effect on the wider field. Theater and Performance Studies scholar Shahman Moishan claims Kalidas Karmakar to be the first Bangladeshi artist to do a performance in Paris in the 1980s.[967] Travelling certainly represents an important way of accessing knowledge. In the 1980s however this mobility was limited to a small group of privileged artists. From the 1990s onwards, a small group of artists in the Chittagong area started to collectively work on performance art. From one of the Charukola teachers, I learn that Polish-German artist Christian Rothmann conducted a workshop in Chittagong in 1992.[968] In this workshop, he introduced the medium of performance art to the early generation of contemporary artists in Bangladesh including Niloofar Chapman, Dhali Al Mamoon, and his wife Dilara Begum Jolly (the latter two were members of the Shomoy Group).[969] A little later, Rahman started to experiment with the medium. Starting from his first performance in Lama, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1994, he has repeatedly used his own body as a medium to evoke, most notably, socio-political issues of the Bangladeshi nation.[970] His appointment as the curator of the performance art program of the *DAS* 2014, which I discussed

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966 AR, TBL, March 2017.

967 Shahman Moishan, "Socio-Aesthetic Genesis of Performance Art," *Depart* 14/15, 2013, accessed June 20, 2021, http://www.departmag.com/index.php/en/detail/262/Socio-aesthetic-genesis-of-performance-art.

968 AR, A, 2015.

969 The Shomoy Group was one of the first artist collectives in Bangladesh, founded in 1980 and active throughout the 1980s, promoting mixed-media, figurative, and political art that deviated from the styles taught at Charukola. In an interview with *Depart* editor Mustafa Zaman, Dilara Begum Jolly explains that it was through a series of workshops—the first organized by Porapara Artists' Space (an artist collective based in Chittagong) in collaboration with eminent performance artist Seiji Shimoda from Japan—that she began to realize performance as a "language through which [she] could express [her]self." She does not mention the workshop with Rothmann in Chittagong. Mustafa Zaman and Dilara Begum Jolly, "Performing the Self," *Depart* 14/15, 2013, accessed September 17, 2018, http://www.departmag.com/index.php/en/detail/268/Performing-the-self-.

970 In the catalog for Rahman's solo exhibition at the Bengal Art Lounge in Dhaka (2015), curator and museum professional Amit Kumar Jain gives an overview of the artist's performances since the late 1990s. Starting with *Nature Salutation* (1997), a comment on the rapid and unplanned urbanization in Dhaka, he moves to *Artificial Reality* (2002), which deals with the social structure of Bangladesh, and *Transformation* (2004), which focused on the stagnant economy of Bangladesh. Rahman reenacted this performance in front of the Parliament in Dhaka in 2014, thus highlighting his continued engagement with the political and social issues in Bangladesh. Amit Kumar Jain, "The Body as Dust: Performances by Mahbubur Rahman," in *Mahbubur Rahman: Dust to Dust 2010–2015*, ed. Bengal Art Lounge (Dhaka: Bengal Art Lounge, 2015), 4–6.

in the last chapter, bears testimony to his consistent engagement with the medium. Among my research partners, he is frequently credited for establishing the medium in Bangladesh. Rahman himself emphasizes the importance of collective engagement; the recognition of performance art, he states, was driven by the younger generation of artists who rather than engaging with performance individually "started working on it collectively."[971] Moishan retraces the history of performance art in Bangladesh and paraphrases Rahman's view on the limitation of this medium, caused by "the members of this society [who] do not want to share their experiences with each other."[972] Both statements emphasize the importance of collaborative engagement as a vital framework for learning about and experimenting with new mediums. The workshop, and the artist collective as its primary organizers, fosters this kind of engagement.

The importance of multilateral exchange in the transmission of knowledge is also highlighted by my research partners' reflections on the *Asian Art Biennale*. Organized by the Shilpakala Academy in Dhaka since 1981, this biennale has been an important, regular opportunity for many artists in Bangladesh to acquire knowledge on what is going on in the art fields of their neighboring countries. Artist and *Depart* editor Mustafa Zaman for instance explains that the *Asian Art Biennale* was the first and most important event for artists to be exposed to contemporary art, especially new mediums.

> *Asian Art Biennale* is the one particular site where we encountered installations, for example. The first installation probably was by Japanese artist. … We were very very ambivalent, regarding whether these were art or not art. Still we admired the scale and the way they sort of staged their art. … We interiorized a lot of things from artists who came from Japan, artists who came from Australia.[973]

Zaman illustrates that the artists of his generation were not exposed to new mediums through the university curriculum, but through the mobility of artworks between art fields. Due to the absence of installation from the fine art canon and the unavailability of other sources of information, especially art writing, the artists did not have the expertise to evaluate these works at first, and they were "ambivalent" about their status in the field. Zaman mentions especially Japan and Australia as mediators of new input, pointing to the *Asian Art Biennale*'s orientation towards the East, rather than the West.

Lipi's assessment of the *Asian Art Biennale* is more critical. She emphasizes the difference in the quality of exchange offered by the state-organized biennial event and the programs facilitated by SANA.

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971 Rahman, "Performance Programme," 87.
972 Moishan, "Socio-Aesthetic Genesis of Performance Art."
973 AR, MZ, September 2015.

> This kind of connection was not very strong, but at the same time it was the only window to see. Just to learn what Pakistani, Indian, or Nepali art is. But still, you don't learn from the exhibition only. You need more to see. More exchange. Once we started with Britto … that was the first time, I would say that we got real connection with South Asia through Triangle Network. We started doing some exchange programs, like Pakistan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka. … We built SANA that time, as part from Triangle Network.[974]

Lipi compares the connections built by the government-run *Asian Art Biennale* to the relations made possible through SANA. Taking the South Asian region as an example, she explains that the mobility fostered by the *Biennale* was limited to the physical mobility of artworks based on direct government-to-government exchange. SANA in contrast allowed for a novel quality of contact. It ran on inter-personal relations, the exchange of ideas, techniques, and challenges, with artists as transcultural brokers of these flows of knowledge. Both Zaman and Lipi acknowledge that the *Biennale* allowed artists who, for economic, political, or social reasons could not travel (twenty years ago, this was the majority) to get a glimpse of the art practice in the neighboring countries. But these connections have been predominantly limited by government-sanctions (on the sending and receiving end) and bound by the materiality of the artworks. Even though mobile artworks can carry styles, contents, and other information about the visual practice in one field, they are not able to broker conceptualization, daily practice, inspiration, thought processes, and so on. The type of connections that Lipi describes as real allow for a face-to-face, extended exchange on both the individual working process and the personal history of fellow artists. The international workshops opened the possibility of multilateral and reciprocal communication, rather than unilateral, one-sided consumption. This evaluation resonates with one of the first conversations I had after arriving in Dhaka. In September 2013, I asked how Britto had managed to sustain itself for more than twelve years. Both Rahman and Lipi agreed that it was, above all, due to the format of the workshop. The workshop continues to be a space where artists come together and exchange knowledge in a non-hierarchical manner. It allows them to work autonomously and connect on equal grounds. This kind of translocal contact was made possible for the first time through the workshops organized among the SANA collectives.

In addition to the cultural capital gained from the specific type of exchange offered, international workshops foster the accumulation of social capital. Above, I quoted Sood explaining how she used the first KHOJ workshops as nodes of connection to establish a South Asian network for contemporary artists. These connections have had a critical and long-lasting effect on the national and regional fields of art. On a global

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974   AR, TBL, March 2017.

scale, the participants of the first two KHOJ international workshops in Modinagar, such as Anita Dube, Subodh Gupta, Sudarshan Shetty, Bharti Kher, and Quddus Mirza are today India's most renowned contemporary artists. On a regional scale, the workshops allowed artistic contact across contested national borders, such as between Bangladesh and Pakistan. In the aftermath of 1971 there have been continuous rifts in the diplomatic relations between both countries, impeding the mobility of goods and people. SANA has allowed connections in the art field that would not have been possible and are still not possible in other fields. On a national and urban scale the international workshops have enabled artists to connect to like-minded peers in their own country. In my interviews, many Britto members describe how they came to know about and later joined the collective through the format of the workshop. Others have repeatedly collaborated with the collective. The workshop is a place where one-time random encounters can grow into decisive professional alliances. This is as important for the organizers as it is for the participants. Awena Cozannet, the facilitator of the 2004 performance workshop, for instance, had been a participant in the 2003 Britto international workshop. A year later, Britto invited her back to Bangladesh for an artist residency, in the framework of which, she organized two workshops in collaboration with Rahman under the header "movement will become sculpture."

> The Britto workshops … encourage artists to explore issues of site specificity. They will live and work in a specific place like [an] isolated haven perfect for enhancing creativity. They have begun to experiment with materials from their everyday surroundings. They will mainly work with new and less practiced art in this region including installation, site specific work, performance, etc.[975]

This description, taken from Britto's homepage, reemphasizes the value of the workshop as a mediator of new things, to cultivate the multilateral flow of knowledge, to foster social capital, and to allow for creative freedom away from the constraints of the field. For the workshop to have this intended effect, it needs to present a liminal character. For the duration of several days (or weeks), the workshop becomes an "isolated haven." The rules of the artistic field and especially the market are relegated to the background. Artists are expected to free themselves from both professional and family responsibilities in order to focus on their immediate environment, their creative practice, and the other participants. In a sense, the participants form a "liminal group" of comrades that transcends individual social, cultural, and economic backgrounds.[976] Some organizers provide

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975 "Britto International Artists' Workshop," Internet Archive, Britto Arts Trust, accessed January 31, 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20160204144949/http://www.brittoartstrust.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=85&Itemid=540.
976 Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 100.

input in the form of experts in a certain field or medium that share their experiences. Others merely predetermine a topic while the participants structure the content based on their experiences. Some workshops have a particular goal, an open studio or exhibition at the end of the given time-frame, while others consider experimentation to be the preferred form of "aesthetic experience."[977] Participants focus on the process of transition rather than the "transformation *into* something."[978] Regardless of the particularities, the common denominator of the international workshop is to offer time off and away—a liminal space between the autonomy of the individual practice and the connection with like-minded artists. The importance of this becomes clear when compared to other types of workshops.

During a session of *Chakati Guff*, a talk-series organized by Mcube Gallery owner Manish Lal Shrestha, Kathmandu-based artist Ragini Upadhyay Grela urges her colleagues not to participate in workshops.[979] Aware of SANA's workshop-based success, Upadhyay's position initially seems perplexing to me. Upadhyay, however, is talking about a very particular kind of workshop, namely the two or three day workshop that has recently become popular among non-governmental organizations (like Water Aid or UNESCO) and local businesses and institutions (from hotels to private schools). These actors have recognized the format as a convenient tool to promote their activities and to raise money for specific social or political causes (gender awareness, natural catastrophes, hygiene, and so on). They invite artists to work on a specific topic and ask them to donate at least one painting to the cause in return for materials and exposure. Upadhyay argues that artists are selling out their talent by giving away free (for charity purposes) artworks that, on top, are produced in a rush. The audience of the talk is divided. Many of the attending artists regularly participate in these kinds of workshops, because they see it as a way to showcase their work. Some are motivated to "give back to the community," to escape the monotony of their studio, or to "socialize." Others share Ragini Upadhyay's skepticism. As a former member of Sutra, Shrestha is well acquainted with the workshop format and the way it was used in the SANA network. In a magazine produced for the tenth anniversary of Sirjana College of Fine Arts he utters a very similar critique to that of Upadhyay:

> Why do many institutions arrange one day workshops for artists? I admit not to be part of it because it ruins the mechanism of practice and at the same time it never fullfills the degree of emotional

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977 Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance," 392.
978 Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance," 392.
979 The name is derived from the word *chakati*, a flat, small, round or square cushion that is used in Nepal to sit on the floor. During *Chakati Guffs* at Mcube, artists and other members of the creative community can take their own *chakati*, listen, and discuss a talk by a member of the artist community. Invitees have been among others Dina Bangdel, Lok Chitrakar, Madan Chitrakar, and Ragini Upadyay Grela.

milieu. But it is good for socializing. We see the value of the painting created on such one-day events worth more than the per-day salary of Mr. President I suppose. Creation is impossible within an hour; it is like giving birth to a child.[980]

Shrestha here jokingly compares the value of artworks produced in one-day workshops to the presidential salary, highlighting the ridiculousness of the process. He explains that creativity and creation require time. Moreover, he elaborates that the value and quality of artworks is contingent upon the artist's determination, dedication, emotional attachment, and knowledge—qualities that cannot be achieved in short-term workshops.[981] Even though Shrestha focuses on an individual process of creation (for instance comparing it to giving birth), rather than the collective character of the workshop, his critique emphasizes the importance of the right timeframe.

In addition to the right duration (not too short, not too long), the spatial setting of the workshop is an important factor. This is emphasized in a comment by a Kathmandu-based photographer who I interviewed during a residency in which we both participated. They explain that in the medium of photography, workshops are either too expensive or too short to actually be able to commit to creating new work. In the course of the interview, they mention PC as one exception to this generalized critique. Their main point is that most workshops happen within the limits of the city and do not offer enough mental and geographical distance to everyday life and the responsibilities it holds.

Workshops, I prefer not to go. Especially when it is happening here. … Residencies, yes, because they give us a time and space to be dedicated onto what you really feel like doing. If you are at home, even in the workshop, you don't have that much commitment because, if it is happening in Kathmandu, you'll have your family responsibility, you'll have your occupational responsibility, so you won't give as much time. So if, residencies, that is where you really get the time to think what you are doing.[982]

Apart from the time factor, being spatially removed from everyday obligations is an important part of art practice for many artists I talked to. To create art at home (in a dwelled-in place), for instance in the personal studio or in the course of a local workshop, is always linked to the potential for social and economic responsibilities getting in the way. This not only pertains to the close proximity of people who represent these obligations

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980 Manish Lal Shrestha, "Nepali Art in a Verse of Transition," in Sirjana College of Fine Arts, *The Creation*, 58.
981 Shrestha, "Nepali Art in a Verse of Transition," 58.
982 AR, A, September 2013.

(family members, work colleagues, bosses), but also to the preoccupation of the mind with mundane things. Creative production, the quote implies, requires a certain mental space. This is only provided in long-term residencies or workshops that require relocation to a specific, collectively shared space. Residencies are in fact another format that has become popular, but in comparison to the international workshop, they emphasize individual creative development over the collective, multilateral exchange on which I focus.

I have discussed the importance of distance, temporally and physically, for transcultural brokerage. By being outside their originating visual discourse and encountering novel elements from other discourses, artists are able to create a third virtual space. From this space, they can question and contest the discourse shaped by their upbringing, media consumption, and formal education.[983] For Nupur, the Britto workshops represent this third space. At the time of the International Britto workshop in 2008— which the artist describes as a "life-changing moment"— Nupur spends much of her time in the capital city, where she lives and works.[984] Many artists have a love-hate relationship with Dhaka. Photographer and curator Wahab, for instance, juxtaposes Dhaka's positive "intensity"—the "energy" of its people—with the negative agitation in the "harshest possible city."[985] Being in close proximity to millions of other people often implies a balancing act between the overabundance of socio-cultural opportunities (and obligations), and one's individual art practice. In addition to the full social calendar (family and work responsibilities, exhibition openings, talks, and so on) the city environment with its traffic jams, its scarcity of open spaces, and its general humdrum keeps the mind occupied. Having the opportunity to leave for two weeks, to be in nature and have a clear mental space for reflection, contemplation, and new ideas, represents a welcome change for many artists I met.

Nupur explains that from her rooftop apartment in Dhaka she used to see her neighbor going about her daily chores—doing the laundry, hanging it out to dry. While executing these tasks, the women wore a type of burqa, "which is not really our tradition."[986] On the one hand, the claim that the majority of women in Bangladesh wear a *sari,* rather than a *shalwar kameez* (baggy trousers and long shirt) or a burqa, is commonly used as a way to distinguish Bangladesh from other Muslim majority countries. I often encountered this claim as part of a larger argument to establish one's belonging to a Bengali culture. On the other hand, I have observed

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983 Clark, "Asian Artists," 21–22.
984 In comparison to the venue of the workshop, Bogra (68.63 km², 93,351 households, 400,983 population), and Nupur's current (2017) home, Narayanganj (12.69 km², 66,045 households, 286,330 population), Dhaka is much bigger and more densely inhabited (316 km², 2,034,146 households, 8,906,039 population). Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, "Population & Housing Census 2011."
985 AR, TW, November 2015.
986 AR, YJN, August 2015.

a rising number of women in Dhaka wearing the burqa over the last decade. In Nupur, the observation of the woman doing laundry in a burqa initiated a thought process. She was intrigued by the fact that she and her neighbor belonged to the same Muslim faith, but apparently had very different conceptions about the appropriate practice of said faith. This reflection caused Nupur to ponder about her own religious upbringing, especially about her mother, who also, she explains, covers her head. In her imagination, the three women came together. "I am from a Muslim family and she [the neighbor] is also from a Muslim family, but mentally this Islamic mentality is not similar. ... Even when she was drying her clothes on the roof, she wore the burqa."[987] This difference-in-similarity continued to intrigue her. The workshop in Bogra offered her a way to address the topic:

> Since it was hammering me and then, when I was in the workshop, I thought, let's do the one about her body. She [the neighbor] is like transforming the body in time also. How she felt inside the body. So, the performance was about fourty minutes. I saw the burqa and also in my head I remembered the sculpture is movement. So, I kept these materials, it is like metal—the fabric was almost like metal— and then I am moving with that. So, when the sun shines on it is almost like a sculpture is moving.[988]

Nupur describes how the setting of the workshop offered a platform to inquire about her neighbor's body, its relation to faith, its movement in the city, and how it changes or is made to change in different settings. She refers to the 2004 workshop with Awena Cozannet in which she discovered performance as a medium to deal with issues of the body in time and space. In an extension of the "performance as moving sculpture" concept that she learned in the workshop, she hand-stitched a burqa out of shimmering fabric and made it move in the light through her own body. With the performance, Nupur not only initiates a discussion over what it can mean to be a Muslim woman, she also constitutes her own faith, Islam, as a discursive tradition, in which three women can have three seemingly incompatible positions about their body in relation to their faith.[989]

Hüsken and Michaels remind us that for Victor Turner cultural performances and the wider social arrangements in which they take place are commentaries on human relatedness.[990] This commentary can take both the form of a critique and a celebration. What is significant is that the liminality of the situation allows for cultural elements to be disordered and

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987 AR, YJN, August 2015.
988 AR, YJN, August 2015.
989 Nadja-Christina Schneider, "Applying the Lens of Mobility to Media and Gender Studies: An Introduction," in *New Media Configurations and Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Asia and the Arab World,* ed. Nadja-Christina Schneider and Carola Richter (Baden-Baden: Bloomsbury; Nomos, 2015), 235–236.
990 Hüsken and Michaels, "Introduction," 11.

reordered. In other words, the performance (and the workshop as its set-ting) are prime situations for the process of cultural brokerage. The in-between state of being in the moment, with an audience of comrades, and at the same time outside the constraints of ordinary norms, allows Nupur to question the different visual expressions of religious belief in her coun-try. She uses her body to inquire about the motivations of individuals to express their faith in the way they do. She does not pass judgement on either expression but surrenders to the different possibilities. She thus opens the discourse to herself and the audience. Beyond the single per-formance, Nupur develops her position as a contemporary artist, able to raise issues out of their daily, seemingly banal context and offer them as a comment or question upon the society in which she lives.

Like every format I have discussed so far, the workshop is not an iso-lated situation, it is embedded in a network of nodes and connections that represent the multiple scales of the field of contemporary art production. The international workshop offers an ideal setting for artists to be exposed to, to share knowledge about, and to experiment with new practices, but there are more long-term demands that the format is ill equipped to meet. Workshops are for instance not a place for proper education, as Shahidul Alam contends in our interview.[991] *CM* curator Munem Wasif similarly mentions the need for a more durable infrastructure for the education of photography when talking about Nepal-based PC from his perspec-tive. He explains that whenever he collaborates on a workshop at PC, the organizers "find these people who come from nowhere and then there is no continuation."[992] This shows that although the format of the workshop is intrinsically directed against more stable forms of infrastructure, it is at the same time always interconnected and co-dependent on a wider insti-tutional framework, including supranational funding agencies such as the Ford Foundation and education institutions. Furthermore, KHOJ and Tri-angle have evolved into indispensable and stable institutions themselves.

AUTONOMY AND CONNECTEDNESS IN THE NETWORK

As organizers of workshops, the collectives must deal with infrastruc-tural and logistical challenges. Despite the fact that workshops represent a time-out for participating artists and bring about connections in a rather organic way, organizers need to recruit facilitators, coordinate open calls, secure locations, and so on. Economic sustainability in general is an issue that preoccupies many of the collectives I researched. Initiatives such as PC and Drik have found commercial avenues to access economic resources, but they depend on securing additional funding. The majority of collectives rely on supranationally operating institutions such as the Prince Claus Fund (Netherlands), the Arts Collaboraty (Netherlands), or the Danish Centre

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991   AR, SA, September 2018.
992   AR, MW, September 2015.

for Culture and Development (CKU, Denmark) in order to sustain regular activities (workshops, residency programs, exhibition projects). The alliance with such donors offers evident economic opportunities, yet it also creates dependencies, and, consequently, vulnerabilities. First, the incoming funding usually has a time limit; I already mentioned how the SANA collectives struggled when the Ford Foundation funding stopped. Second, even though these foundations are globally operating, they are nationally based and sometimes even affiliated with a specific ministry. They are thus subject to political decisions in the country in which they are registered. An example for the resulting effects is the sudden ending of the CKU funding to PC and the Siddhartha Foundation Education Initiative after the Danish Government decided to "phase out" its foreign assistance to Nepal and focus on other countries instead.[993] Third, the recourse to foreign funding causes contestations towards and within the emerging alternative field of contemporary practice.

Several collectives deal with allegations that, alongside the funding from European or American organizations, they also embrace and disseminate related cultural forms. These allegations are fed by the tropes of origin and authenticity effective in the global contemporary frame and pinpoint potent asymmetries in the field of contemporary art.

> I don't know very much about their official activities, but being an outsider, what we saw is that most of the time [collective's name] do the work as they were told by [funding agency's name].[994] Because the funding is [coming] from there. Most of the time they don't think "is this project appropriate in my society, in my condition, in my perspective?" That is very—I think that causes a contradiction in today's practice.[995]

Similar to the criticism directed at Sattya for its alleged unilateral focus on the so called Western way during *Kolor Kathmandu (KK)*, this quote contains an accusation against the supranational funding agency and the respective collective. The first is believed to impose its conception of contemporary art, and the latter to adopt this conception unchallenged. The critique bespeaks a legitimate concern about the cost of relying on foreign

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993 I learned of these developments form the initiatives themselves. There does not seem to be an official statement from the Government of Denmark as to why this funding stopped. An article in *The Copenhagen Post* (Denmark's only English-language newspaper) mentions the cuts to foreign development aid suggesting the funds will be relocated to the growing refugee crisis. "Denmark Will Cut a Further 1.5 Billion Kroner From Foreign Aid Budget," *The Copenhagen Post*, November 20, 2015, accessed August 31, 2022, https://cphpost.dk/?p=33944.

994 I chose to omit the name of the artist-run initiative, as well as that of the funding agency, to prevent definite allocation, but also to emphasize the wider generality of this claim.

995 AR, A, 2015.

actors and institutions. Many art historians, art writers, and curators take positions in a highly mobile arts center, from which it is easy to conceive a global contemporary condition based on a shared global visual culture in which all contemporary practitioners are co-present. The less mobile actors or those travelling "tourist class"[996] have their fields and experiences denigrated as localized and hierarchically subordinate. Institutions based in the centers of the art field (New York, Paris, London, Berlin, and of late Hong Kong) continue to control the discourse on contemporary art. They regulate access to funding and knowledge. On the one hand, the collectives rely on these institutions to organize programs, because those situated in the fields they emerged from do not have the resources, capacities, or motivations to fund mobilities. On the other hand, the collectives are aware of the dangers of dependance. How then do they position themselves in a contemporary field that grows bigger and more connected every day?

Underlying the above comment is a fear of being subsumed into a homogenized global visual culture or, alternatively, of becoming a marketable spokesperson for a specific art-culture-territory. The experience of this double threat is connected to a widely propagated trope in globalization studies. Whether in popular media, politics, or academic discourses, globalization is mostly discussed in terms of flows of economic capital and labor; culture plays a marginal role. Lydia Haustein argues that this rhetoric has led to subordination of cultural shifts to economic processes, meaning to the assumption that economic globalization constitutes a cause for change, whereas shifts in culture are merely consequential.[997] On a similar note, Niru Ratman identifies an asymmetrical discussion of "economic" globalization as a cause and cultural globalization as a "series of effects."[998] The fear underlying the above comment shows this trope in effect: the assumption that, because the West dominates flows of capital, it necessarily controls flows of culture. The artists I encountered adopt different strategies in the face of this trope: Some attempt to disengage from influences considered foreign and focus on vernacular practices. This unilateral focus on the local (urban, national, or regional) scale may lead to conceptions of authentic and traditional practices originating in a specific culture-territory construct. The vast majority of my research partners however adopt a multi-scalar strategy of transcultural brokerage. This strategy is arduous, as it requires the upkeep of a constant tension between the autonomy and the connectedness of their collective field as well as their individual practice. They are concerned with what their practice means for their localities, and in sharing a contemporary practice with like-minded actors across geographical and cultural boundaries. In order for neither connection to become too unilateral, they need to engage in a continuous dynamic readjustment of said connections.

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996 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*; based on Medina, "Inundaciones."
997 Lydia Haustein, *Global Ions*, 145–146.
998 Ratnam, "Art and Globalisation," 287.

The international workshop is a crucial example to discuss the mediation of connections. Inward, it represents a situation in which the flow of new mediums is temporarily situated. It emphasizes my research partners' preference for a decentered and multilateral exchange of ideas and practices over unilateral adaptations of global flows. This approach allows me to comprehend new mediums not as new because they come from outside, but because they arise from the contact between hitherto isolated actors and ideas. Like the performances by Nupur I used as a case study in this chapter, the workshop does not transmit given meanings. Its liminal character is constitutive for the emergence of novel visualities. As a collective situation, the workshop allows for the delegitimization of set discourses and the opening-up of artistic, socio-cultural, and political practices for discussion.[999] Consequently, the flow of new mediums is not about the transmission of "meaning" (what new mediums mean in a Euro-American context, for instance), but about the transition—the liminal and collective negotiation of performance art created anew.

This transcultural perspective exposes the oversimplified and diffusionist rhetoric involved in the classification of specific formats (such as the workshop, the biennial, or the public art program) as foreign to a locality. This rhetoric does not reflect the experience of the actors involved. Research on alternative contemporaneities needs to examine the values that are being created and expose the asymmetries in transcultural connectedness, not retrace origins and adaptations of flows. The network is a helpful tool. It allows a conception of the workshop as one of numerous nodes in a temporary network, in and through which flows are brokered. The workshop and the creations it brings forth are liminal and momentary. Yet, they engender long-term connections in the forms of interpersonal friendships and alliances between collectives. Another important space for transcultural brokerage is the hanging-out situation along with mediators such as the English language and media technologies. The availability of e-mail, and later social media such as Facebook, plays a crucial role in the artists' realization of transcultural affinities.

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999   Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance," 391–392.

Chapter 7

Hanging Out in the Translocal Artist Community:
New Media and English as Tools of Cultural Brokerage

My research partners use the notion of community to describe people connected to the arts. This relatedness at times circumscribes all actors engaged in the art field in a defined locality, including art mediators and other professionals. Most often, however, it is an invocation of affinity, of like-mindedness, of mutual understanding and respect between art practitioners. It can be based on a shared struggle to overcome society's expectations and choose an unconventional professional path. It can be based on a common effort to find one's own creative style of color, composition, or medium, or be related to the challenge of finding balance between family life and work, especially for women. Affinity among artists can arise from the challenge of finding a job or sustaining oneself financially. It can also be based on a common interest in social activism, in advocating for a more inclusive society, or in resisting Western (visual) hegemony. Because of this focus on shared values and the qualities of connections, the term community can be made to refer to any scale of locality. Depending on the context, it may circumscribe artists working in the same city, the same country, or contemporary artists across the world. Tayeba Begum Lipi, for instance, comprises a loose group of contemporary artists practicing in Bangladesh when she states that "Being part of a network was a way for Britto to answer the needs of our local community of artists."[1000] Nayan-Tara Gurung Kakshapati uses the phrase "photo community in Nepal" to refer to a similarly loose group of photographers based in the country.[1001] Sujan Dangol in contrast demarcates a finite group of artists by referring to the participants of *Kolor Kathmandu (KK)* as "a very nice community."[1002]

1000   Begum Lipi, "Extending and Expanding the Idea and Space," 172.
1001   AR, NGK, December 2015.
1002   AR, SD, January 2016.

In my research community is an emic category, not an analytical one. When I use the term outside of direct quotes from my research partners, I mean a group of people who, based on the way they speak and act, consider themselves to be connected in a distinct way. I do not mean a territorially bound group with a shared system of cultural traits and values,[1003] nor do I invoke a utopian, egalitarian community without asymmetries.[1004] The communities my research partners imagine include ethnic, national, class, religion, caste, and gender related asymmetries. Because of its volatile but often essentialist meaning, the notion of community has faced ample critique in the academic discourse over the past decades, which has cemented its difficulty as an analytical category. In the discipline of anthropology, the concept has most famously been criticized for being "invoked to fill the vacuum of location once filled (literally) by place."[1005] This critique resonates already in Eric Wolfs' 1956 text on cultural brokerage. In it, he concludes (in tune with the then prevalent structure-factionalist approach) that the communities that anthropologists have hitherto studied as self-contained units need to be conceived as parts of larger systems. He comprises communities as "local termini" that fulfill special functions in a multi-scalar network, extending from the scale of the community to that of the nation. He shifts focus from the content of communities (the beliefs or practices that were/are considered to bind them) to their relations with other scales of the network. The role of brokers, then, is to mediate between the interests of the community and the national scale. Despite Wolfs' decisive shift in perspective, his approach does not tell us anything about the concrete situations in which this brokerage happens, nor through which channels of communication. This is the focus of my last chapter. I am not proposing a new definition of community, but I aim to examine the kind of behavior that the emic category points to. In this regard, I disagree with Postill and Postill and Pink who argue against the use of community as an empirical and scientific category, claiming that the mere invocation of community does not actually shape people's practices of exchange and togetherness.[1006] It does not—but it does tell us to where to look.

I look at the artists' use of community through the lens of Fischer-Lichte's "emotional community."[1007] This community does not "abolish or blur differences." Rather than being based on a "feeling of oneness," it celebrates a "state of in-between, in which different identities are possible side by side."[1008] The imaginary of a translocal artist community that I discuss in

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1003 See Amit and Rapport, "Prologue: The Book's Questions," 3; Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction*, 15.
1004 Harris, "In and Out of Place," 33–34.
1005 Amit and Rapport, "Prologue: The Book's Questions," 3.
1006 Postill, "Localizing the Internet," 416; John Postill and Sarah Pink, "Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web," *Media International Australia* 145, no. 1 (November 2012).
1007 Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance," 394, 398.
1008 Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance," 398.

this chapter arises from a potential to establish contact based on a shared understanding of contemporary art among artists, irrespective of their locality. Transcultural brokerage plays an important part in the practice of this community: latent, as a byproduct of mobility, or manifest, as a tool for artists to seek out and mediate knowledge about visual discourses and practices. Actual physical contact among the members of this community happens during a variety of formats, but especially during workshops and hanging-out situations. New media, which refers to a variety of media that can be created and displayed through digital electronic devices such as digital images, digital video, or e-books,[1009] have enabled artists to imagine an artist community beyond this face-to-face contact. They have broadened the motility and the options for transcultural brokerage.

Marcus Michaelsen argues that the participatory and networked character of digital media as well as their ability to "make out like-minded people" and "perforate the boundaries between private and public domains" renders them capable of changing the social behavior and the way people communicate.[1010] New media technologies have altered the artists' lives, first, as communication tools—by easing cross-border communication, for instance between the South Asian Network for the Arts (SANA) members—or by facilitating and speeding up applications for workshops and residencies. They have increased the artists' agency by allowing them to access opportunities (scholarships, travel grants, or calls for submission) outside the fields of art they dwell in. Online social networks like Facebook have enabled instant news exchange, crucial for instance during crises such as the earthquake in Nepal. New media also open up new artistic mediums, offering new ways for artists to express themselves in the form of new media art. According to Oliver Grau, media art "attains a key role in the reflection of our information societies."[1011] Third, new media have become a "new force to the imagination in social life today."[1012] They allow for the imagination of a new art setting, converging in the idea of a translocal artist community. In these three capacities, new media have allowed artists to transgress geographical, disciplinary, and socio-cultural boundaries, and thereby substantially increased their agency to act in or on their localities. Like new mediums, new media are often subjects to a diffusionist rhetoric of global flows. Despite allowing global networking, I want to emphasize that so-called global media are neither global in themselves, nor deterritorialized. On the one hand, the devices (cables, computers, servers, etc.)

1009 I use "new media" and "digital media" as synonyms. I also use the term "internet" to highlight its dominance in the displaying, sharing, and storing this media. "New media" and "digital media" differ from "mass media" in that the latter also include analog media such as print media.

1010 Marcus Michaelsen, "Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age: An Introduction," in Schneider and Richter, *New Media Configurations*, 309.

1011 Oliver Grau, "Our Digital Culture Threatened by Loss," in *Media Art: Towards a New Definition of Arts in the Age of Technology*, ed. Valentino Catricalà (Online Publication: Gli Ori, 2015), 39.

1012 Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes," 197.

that materially make up the internet are physically localized. On the other hand, media cannot be separated from the people who make use of them. In the edited volume *New Media Configurations and Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Asia and the Arab World*, Richter and Schneider emphasize that "new media technologies are still appropriated according to the specific social needs of the protagonists as well as the political structures and cultural environments they are located in."[1013] It is thus important to focus on how new media are used and understood in the context of specific interactions. Within these situations they cannot be uncoupled from "classical" media such as language, particularly the English language.

Further, "digital media mobilizations cannot replace the tedious work of organization building, electoral politics, or legal and institutional change."[1014] The example of Lipi applying for her first residency in Europe shows that there were ways to access larger networks and enact agency on a broader scale before the advent of digital technologies and the internet. SANA emerged from the effort of a small group of people and a fluid format of yearly workshops, from where it snowballed into a large network without much access to novel communication technologies. Through the internet, the artists gained access to new scales of action (in speed and in convenience), yet the foundation of the network already physically existed. Word-of-mouth systems and face-to-face exchange based on the accumulation of social capital were (and still are) a legitimate and crucial form of social contact and communication. Therefore, I not only look at how new media have allowed an easier, faster, and more wide-reaching communication, but also at how the English language and the conventions of hanging out (of talking, of eating, of documenting) continue to constitute the art community.

The media that facilitate contact are comparatively easy to fathom, as the vast emerging literature on topics like digital media communications or "global Englishes" shows.[1015] Yet, the situations in which these mediums are used to negotiate cultural, political, and social commonalities, challenges, and successes—in short, the sort of affinities that allow the imagination of community—are often located at the margins betwixt public art projects, official meetings, and large-scale events. In contrast to the workshop, which I also characterized as a liminal space, these are moments that serve no pre-defined purpose. Workshops are liminal by design. In situations like lunches, dinners, lazy afternoons, or parties, however, people do not expect anything of relevance to the arts (and thus my topic) to

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1013 Carola Richter and Nadja-Christina Schneider, "Introduction," in Schneider and Richter, *New Media Configurations*, 19.

1014 Michaelsen, "Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age," 309.

1015 See Alastair Pennycook, "Global Englishes, Rip Slyme, and Performativity," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7, no. 4 (November 2003): 513–533; Pennycook, *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows* (London: Routledge, 2007); Suresh Canagarajah, *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations* (London: Routledge, 2013); Hepp, "Translocal Media Cultures"; Michaelsen, "Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age"; Richter and Schneider, "Introduction."

happen. They are people, sometimes friends, hanging out. And because neither I nor the artists were working in our official capacities as artist and anthropologist, these moments proved difficult to examine.

The notion of "hanging out" refers to an "established (if poorly explicated) method" in anthropology.[1016] It was first mentioned by Renato Rosaldo (1994) in order to emphasize the distinctiveness and validity of ethnography in the absence of extended co-residence. The notion was taken up by James Clifford to describe the particularities of Karen McCarthy Brown's urban fieldwork on Voudou in Brooklyn.[1017] Her method was not understood as "intensive dwelling," but as "repeated visiting" and collaborative work.[1018] Despite its vast application today, as Walmsley accurately observes, "there is very little literature available on deep hanging out."[1019] Further, in my case, the interest to focus on hanging out did not arise from the absence of long-term co-residence, but from the motivation to better grasp the values of contact.

I use hanging out in a double capacity: first, as a method which focuses on collaborative work, it is process oriented, more passive, less directed and systematic than the go-along.[1020] In practice, this meant that I actively participated in conversations, asked questions, but did not try to purposefully steer the conversation into a particular direction. I took notes only after the fact, from memory, or brought up interesting aspects in more formal situations. Second, I treat hanging out as a particular node in the network of contemporary art—as a situation in which connections are temporarily situated. These situations, much like the ethnographic method, are marked by a casual but process-oriented and collaborative practice. As such, they stand in contrast to concepts such as "timepass."[1021] Hanging out does not denote "surplus time." It is not a directionless drifting, loitering, or expression of uselessness and idlenesslike hanging out at teashops or passing time in-between classes.[1022] Rather, it is an essential part of collective and individual creativity; they are situations technically marginal to the production of art, but effectively crucial for the constitution of a collective contemporary art identity. The concepts of timepass and hanging out overlap in the fact that both are successful mechanisms to bind solidarities and promote group identity.[1023] Artists exchange information on other artists, mutual acquaintances, their current projects, and other events in the art field. These situations fulfill an important role in brokering cultural and social capital. The brain keeps working, despite (or because) of the influence of food, good conversations, and alcoholic beverages. I exemplify

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1016   Walmsley, "Deep Hanging Out in the Arts," 273.
1017   Clifford, *Routes.*
1018   Clifford, *Routes*, 56.
1019   Walmsley, "Deep Hanging Out in the Arts," 276–277.
1020   Kusenbach, "Street Phenomenology," 463; Clifford, *Routes*, 56.
1021   Jeffrey, "Timepass," 471.
1022   Jeffrey, "Timepass," 465.
1023   Jeffrey, "Timepass," 465.

this through a set of situations that I frequently participated in during my research: the lunch, the dinner, and the party. The instances that I use as an Interlude to this chapter are derived from my fieldwork notes, pertaining to one specific event, yet they bring together a much wider set of observations.

Even though hanging out proved to be a valuable tool, and the situation itself a crucial constituent of alternative contemporaneity, it entailed two problems: the first ethical, and the other the dearth of anthropological research on relationships beyond kinship. First, the situations I comprise as hanging out frequently involved illicit or at least socio-culturally ambiguous activities, such as the consumption of alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs. Furthermore, the way they were recorded, either by me or the other attendants (in photographs, Facebook posts, or my notebook) brought into question rights to personal space and privacy. I tried to solve this ethical problem by seeking individual permissions and anonymizing situations, but sometimes I consciously chose just to not write something down. Second, the terms my research partners use to refer to the contact in hanging-out situations, like friendship, family, and community have a complicated history in anthropology. While the notion of community has been mangled, the theoretical differentiation of friendship is still in its beginning.[1024] As emic categories, they offer a way to describe situations, but not to analyze the outcome. Barcellos Rezende's analysis of friendship as an "idiom of affinity and togetherness … played against that which is seen to differentiate and potentially separate" is helpful as it points to the artists' understanding of community through their use of the label of "friends" (and "family").[1025] My research partners focus on affinities, such as their common struggle against institutional boundaries or their anchorage in a wider social idea, rather than their differences (religion, ethnicity, or nationality), thus enabling them to situate themselves in the "same social world" of contemporaneity.[1026]

1024   The rather scarce literature on friendship has largely focused on demarcating boundaries with "kinship," rather than developing content for what the relationship labeled "friendship" entails. The two most crucial publications are *The Anthropology of Friendship,* edited by Sandra Bell and Simon Coleman, and Desai and Killick, *Ways of Friendship*. Miller writes that friendship is often understood as "an expression of choice," in opposition to kinship "as relationships based on obligation." As Carrier writes, it is regarded as "based on spontaneous and unconstrained sentiment or affection" in contrast to the constraints associated with bureaucratic, professional, or kinship relationships. Moreover, the anthropological research on "kindship" and "friendship" is undercut by tropes of modernity. Thereby, the first is still often seen as a "traditional" model of social organization (prevailing especially in the non-West), whereas the second marks a changing lifestyle, phrased in terms of modernization, urbanization, globalization, or increasingly individualized lives. Miller, "The Ideology of Friendship," 380; James G. Carrier, "People Who Can Be Friends: Selves and Social Relationships," in Bell and Coleman, *The Anthropology of Friendship*, 21.
1025   Rezende, "Building Affinity Through Friendship," 92–93.
1026   Rezende, "Building Affinity Through Friendship," 92–93.

Interlude: Lunch–Dinner–Party

LUNCH

We climb up to the fifth floor, where I find Saurganga Darshandhari's apartment. As I take off my shoes (a common practice in all private and semi-private places in Nepal), a man enters the balcony. Darshandhari addresses him as "Prithvi, the one I told you about in my e-mail." We go in, and the number of canvases and sketch papers lying around immediately takes me aback. This is not an apartment; it is a studio. I ask whether they live here, and they explain that sometimes they do. Prithvi Shrestha used to work on the upper floor and then this apartment became free, so they rented it. We sit down on the floor in the biggest room, and I start my first conversation with artists in South Asia. We talk about Bindu—A Space for Artists (Bindu) and how it was created to support the development of arts in Nepal. I am surprised to hear that the idea actually came from Mahbubur Rahman, whom I have not met yet, but whom they know from their college years. It had been several years since Rahman had been in Kathmandu and Darshandhari had received her MFA from the University of Development Alternative in Dhaka—"Now, we are family." After going through their recent works and talking about their respective art practices, we slowly drift off topic. We talk about the mountains and how you should go trekking with somebody before marrying them. They advise me on where to get the best dal bhat *(a dish made from lentils, rice, and vegetables) and Newari* khana *(food). Dharshandhari then explains how people tried to force her to eat beef in Bangladesh. I mention that it is time for lunch and that I should probably leave now. Shrestha makes a phone call and twenty minutes later a man delivers* aloo paratha *(potato flatbread) and* dal *(lentil soup). While we eat, we talk some more about Bangladesh, and it quickly becomes clear that the Britto Arts Trust (Britto) has much more resources, and therefore is more globally visible. Tayeba Begum Lipi travels a lot, while Dharshandhari has never been to Europe. They give me tips about who to see and who to talk to when I go to Dhaka in September. I find it interesting how a part of my fieldwork that has not happened yet suddenly becomes the main topic of a conversation in the present. After lunch, we go to the rooftop, from where you can see the ocean of houses covering the Kathmandu valley. Shrestha remembers how the place looked like in his childhood, and Dharshandhari recounts the story of how Manjudeva sliced the mountains in the south with his sword to drain the lake that covered the valley.*[1027]

DINNER

I am invited to Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman's Green Road apartment for dinner. We talk about Nepal, people we both know. About how one of their friends has now started a space for young artists. It is important to have

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1027   There are many such accounts of the origin of the Kathmandu valley, but this is the one that I encountered most through conversation. See Bell, *Kathmandu*, xxiii–xxiv.

a space for artists after they finish their education, Rahman explains. They need to develop further, to conceptualize, and to be supported on the way to establish themselves as professional artists. But it is not good to take students out of their network, he cautions. They become outsiders at school. They already have exchange there. The conversation moves over to the living conditions and prices of food in Nepal. Despite the difference in scale, the traffic in Nepal is worse than in Dhaka; it is impossible to catch a ride after eight pm. That is a shame, because Nepal has very nice family-style restaurants. You cannot eat outside in Dhaka: the food is bad, too expensive, the atmosphere is not nice, and they do not serve alcohol anyway, Rahman adds jokingly. Then our food arrives. It is the physical representation of a South Asian network of artists—the fish was made by Sayantan Maitra Boka, an architect and scenographer from Kolkata, who has been collaborating with Britto on the "No Man's Land" Project. The fish is so spicy I can hardly eat it. Tayeba Begum Lipi took charge of the vegetables. And Nilofar Akmut, a London-based Pakistani artist currently working on a project in Dhaka, serves a mild curry. Over dinner, the conversation continues, in a fast mix of Bengali, Urdu / Hindi, and English.

PARTY

Together with the "Nepali gang"—the Nepali photographers who came to Dhaka for Chobi Mela *VIII—we take over the dancefloor. Pathshala has been transformed into a party-hub; lights flicker from the huge mango tree and a band covers all-time favorite rock and pop songs. At the sound of Bon Jovi, the senior photographers become the center of attention. Cameras point and shoot. A fellow participant enthuses about how friendly and nice everybody is. How the festival has created friendships and bonding over similar interests in a short time. At 11:30 the music is over, but the party continues. I leave. I wonder how many of the images taken tonight will end up on Facebook tomorrow?*

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

> Facebook possesses no power but is tremendously powerful. As long as there is electricity and as long as the internet is working, Facebook enables people in different places to form new units of consciousness and actions—to achieve new emergent scales.[1028]

Biao Xiang's notion of the emergent scale refers to the "scope of coordination and mobilization" that results from collaborative effort.[1029] It brings about new skills and competencies for the actors. Emergent scales do not have definite shapes; they are actor-centric and activity-specific. In the quote above, Xiang explains that Facebook is an effective tool to spawn coordination, mobilization, and in turn generate new scopes of action for

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1028   Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography," 285.
1029   Xiang, "Multi-Scalar Ethnography," 284–285.

users. In other words, it allows actors to access different scales of exchange and contact. A large number of people today—including me—take the fact that digital media are border-crossing communication tools as a matter of course.[1030] I exchanged e-mails with Saurganga Darshandhari even before I set out for my first fieldwork in Nepal. Through her and the Facebook pages, blogs, and the other internet presences of Britto, Sattya Media Arts Collective (Sattya), and Bindu, I gained my first insight into the art scenes of Nepal and Bangladesh without being physically present. This was valuable information, not only in formulating possible research questions and hypotheses, but also in easing the transition into a completely new situation—my field.[1031]

The borders crossed by digital media are not necessarily geographical; new communication technologies affect almost every part of our daily life, from personal social interactions to huge political mobilizations.[1032] They often blur the lines between private and public. Private actions, such as a home video or a status update, can become political statements; news is "propelled" into private homes at incredible speed, and contributions to public communication can be made from any point with internet access.[1033] Just a few minutes after the earthquake in Nepal on April 25, 2015, the news broke on Facebook—the internet, especially mobile data, being one of the only communication tools not affected by the fall-out. From my laptop screen in Germany, I witnessed the almost instant sharing of images about the damages caused. I received messages from friends, acquaintances, and research partners who did not know I had returned a week earlier asking if I was ok; if somebody I knew was hurt, and if I had heard from this and that person.

Moreover, new media "make out like-minded people."[1034] *Chobi Mela* (CM) VIII for instance, did not only manage to physically bring together people interested in photography in the lecture theater of the Goethe-Institute in Dhaka, but—by streaming live all the talks and lectures—united photography amateurs and professionals worldwide. Tools, such as comment sections, sharing buttons, or even view counts allow distant audiences to

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1030   Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined* (London: Sage, 2015), 17.

1031   I do not mean this in the sense of Malinowski's memorable (and much criticized—see for instance Clifford, *Routes*, 56) arrival scene: "Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight." Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: Routledge, 1978 [1922]), 3. Despite the fact that I had spent time in South Asia before starting my doctoral research, and that I had gathered a little fieldwork experience from my master's thesis research in Bangladesh, heading to Nepal (or to any place in general) is both exciting and frightening. The internet and the information it offers are great tools in softening that transition.

1032   Michaelsen, "Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age," 315.

1033   Michaelsen, "Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age," 315.

1034   Michaelsen, "Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age," 315.

feel connected, even if they do not actually make use of these tools. Seeing that 478 people watched the same video gives you a sense of being part of a larger interest group. In a similar line of thought, Sattya core member Yuki Poudyal explains that the collective mainly uses Facebook to "reach out to people" and to "get [their] network together."[1035] Through Facebook, Sattya becomes aware of like-minded fellow creatives, invites workshop facilitators, and connects to other collaboration partners. I am reminded that I too came to Sattya through this channel. Like Saurganga Darshandhari, I had contacted Sattya via e-mail prior to my first fieldwork in Nepal. When I did not get an answer, I posted on their Facebook group page, and less than an hour later received several helpful comments and was invited to "please stop by Sattya."[1036]

In addition to the border-crossing social aspect, the use of new media technologies as artistic mediums—as "new media art"—has become an important part of contemporary art practice. According to Valentino Catricalà, early developments in new media art can already be found at the end of the nineteenth century.[1037] From here, he argues, a complex media system has unfolded. This system exceeds the mere recording and presentation of images in motion to include "an idea of *liveness*" paired with a "mathematical sectioning of information."[1038] Encompassing both the natural and the artificial or technological realm, this system is embodied in works such as Man Ray's 1920s rayographs, or Wolf Vostell's incorporation of a television set in "German View from the Black Room Cycle" (1958, Berlinische Galerie).[1039] Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the system evolved into its own field, with artists such as Nam June Paik, whose room installations transgressed the boundaries between artistic disciplines, cultural contexts (e.g., TV Buddha, 1974), nature, and culture, or Steina and Woody Vasulka, who were pioneers of video art.[1040] The seemingly infinite and transgressive possibilities that digital media offer to artists today are also visible in contemporary expressions such as Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's large-scale, urban interactive video art installations.[1041]

Grau suggests that because new media art makes use of technologies that fundamentally shape our society, it is perhaps more accurately

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1035   AR, AS, September 2015.
1036   PE, June 2013.
1037   Valentino Catricalà, ed., *Media Art: Towards a New Definition of Arts in the Age of Technology* (Online Publication: Gli Ori, 2015), 66.
1038   Catricalà, *Media Art*, 66, italics in the original.
1039   The rayographs resulted from placing objects on photosensitive paper and exposing this paper to light. Light is both the subject and the medium. For visual examples and an explanation of Man Ray's process, see, for instance, "Rayograph," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed March 5, 2022, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/265487.
1040   Valentino Catricalà, "On the Notion of Media Art: Theories, Patterns, Terminologies," in Catricalà, *Media Art*.
1041   Examples, such as "Under Scan" (2005–2008, UK) are available on the artist's homepage: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, "Under Scan," Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, accessed March 5, 2021, http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/under_scan.php.

equipped to grasp the complexity of contemporary times.[1042] Britto member Manir Mrittik's "City Life" is an example of how contemporary challenges can be addressed through art. The multi-media work shows the front facade of a typical Dhaka high-rise building. Some of the windows are illuminated and through them a selection of videos made by the artist can be seen (as small pictures on the bottom). An integrated camera captures the onlookers' image and introduces it into the central window as a "live video." This image then appears to catch on fire and beholders are forced to watch themselves burn (a)live. Life around them, in the other windows, goes on unobstructed. The work paints a bleak picture of the anonymity, loneliness, and isolation that the artist experiences in the city. "Cities try to fold lives into neat little compartments," he explains in his artist statement. He describes cities as "mechanical wasteland," filled with "grey, soulless husks."[1043] The work was realized in the 2013 Britto international workshop and represents a sharp personal comment on the atmosphere in the city at that time. From his home in Narayanganj, Mrittik commutes the twenty-five kilometers to Dhaka for his job in an advertisement company every day. He spends several hours in the car and I have often heard him complain about the congestion and pollution he experiences on his daily route. "City Life" however is not only about traffic, overpopulation, and "soulless husks"; it is also about how politics repeatedly disrupt life in the capital city. The international workshop took place in 2013 at the Shilpakala Academy, a stone's throw away from where the Shabhag movement was gaining momentum; in the aftermath of Abdul Quader Mollah's sentencing through the War Crimes Tribunal, Dhaka was plagued by *hartals* (general strikes). Vehicles were set on fire and violence broke out on the streets, adding to the city's uninhabitability. The fact that Mrittik chose an interactive video format for his work almost seems ironic. While the work is interactive and depends on the physical presence of a beholder, the city life he describes is unengaged. The artist alleges that nobody cares about the lives that are led behind illuminated widows (Fig. 19).

In addition to using digital media to express or comment on contemporary society, artists use digital media to record, store, and present their work. Thereby they affect the development of other mediums. Performance art, for instance, is generally contingent upon the use of the body and therefore difficult to conceive without the physical presence of the artist. This experience of imminence and liminality by both performer and beholder, which I described in the last chapter, limits options of exhibition, distribution, and consumption. Yet, this is changing due to digital media. New technologies have, at least partially, made it possible for artists to preserve, share, and exhibit their otherwise ephemeral performances on a larger scale. Reetu Sattar's four-hour performance *5000 feet under*, which she conceived for the opening of the *Asian Art Biennale* in 2014, was one

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1042   Grau, "Our Digital Culture Threatened by Loss," 39.
1043   PE, MM, October 2017.

Figure 19: Manir Mrittik, *City Life*, 2013. Interactive video. Courtesy of the artist.

of the first performances ever included in the show. It was recorded and exhibited in digital form for the remainder of the biennial.

As postulated by Arjun Appadurai, digital media can be seen as a new way of imagining social life.[1044] In his essay "Global Ethnoscapes," he argues that "more persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before."[1045] One of the main reasons for this shift, Appadurai explains, is the mass media. By offering a vast array of alternative lives, they enter not only the "lived imaginations of ordinary people" but also the "fabrication of social lives."[1046] "Fantasy is now a social practice," Appadurai concludes, not as a "simple matter of escape," but as a generation of something new (communities, politics, needs).[1047] The imagination and fabrication of a new, translocal social setting converges in the idea of a translocal artist community: artists feel connected to fellow artists everywhere in the world not exclusively but to a great extent

1044   Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes," 197.
1045   Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes," 197.
1046   Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes," 198.
1047   Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes," 198.

because of the availability of digital media. On a smaller scale, the shifts described by Appadurai have manifested in several other effects.

The new possibilities offered by digital media have freed artists from the constraints of the physically accessible field; they have increased their motility. This is particularly obvious in the way knowledge about new techniques, mediums, and events is acquired and further disseminated. In the Cross-Generational Panel at the *Dhaka Art Summit (DAS)* 2014, senior artist Syed Jahangir observes that art students today have direct access to the workings of a global art field due to the internet.[1048] They no longer depend on the teachers' mediation of art histories, styles, and techniques. This assessment is ambiguous; on the one hand, it suggests that the internet has weakened the teachers' status as respectable brokers of knowledge and thus adds to the growing dissatisfaction with the fine art education. On the other hand, this accessibility has allowed art education to expand beyond the available library collections or the scope of the teachers' knowledge. Students and teachers can equally make use of the internet to inform themselves. In comparison to the workshop, which I discussed as an important conveyor of knowledge, the internet offers a steadily available flow. A fine art graduate from Nepal, for instance, explains that they use YouTube tutorials to learn about "color flow"—a technique that consists in tilting the canvas or paper and thus controlling the flow of the paint. Similarly, a photography student from Bangladesh claims to use web and social network sites such as Instagram to keep updated about trends and happenings in contemporary photography. Most of my research partners use Facebook, especially its "multisemiotic" form, which combines a variety of media, such as texts, images, videos, and hyperlinks.[1049] Through photographs, comments, and descriptions, they can "mind-walk"[1050] through exhibitions and events that they are not able to physically attend. "Unfortunately, I was not able to visit the exhibition, but I saw the images on Facebook," was a frequently uttered sentence.[1051] Using the internet has become part of the artists' practice, their research, and is used as a way of broadening their knowledge. They stay updated and in contact with the art world; they learn about residencies, workshops, and funding opportunities, send their applications, and are no longer dependent on word-of-mouth communication systems.

1048   The panel was entitled: "Where have we come from and where are we headed? A Conversation among artists about art and art making in Bangladesh," and took place at Shilpakala Academy on February 7, 2014, from two to three pm. It was moderated by curator Rosa Maria Falvo and included Syed Jahangir, Wakilur Rahman, Mohaiemen, and Sultana—each representing a particular generation of artists from Bangladesh.

1049   Bal Krishna Sharma, "Beyond Social Networking: Performing Global Englishes in Facebook by College Youth in Nepal," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 16, no. 4 (2012): 506.

1050   Tim Ingold, "Ways of Mind-Walking: Reading, Writing, Painting," *Visual Studies* 25, no. 1 (2010).

1051   FDE, A, 2014.

There is a general sense among my research partners that the internet has made the field more inclusive. This inclusiveness pertains not only to the fact that everybody can, if they chose to do so, access information. It also allows them to reach wider audiences. Several of the talks during *CM* VIII touched upon the fact that camera phones and social media plat-forms have changed the profession of the photographer.[1052] Flickr, Twitter, and Instagram allow professionals to gain viewership far beyond the physically reachable public. One of the speakers for instance explained that they manage to reach about 150 million people a day by posting on Instagram, tweeting, and writing a couple of Facebook status updates. Undoubtedly, access to word-of-mouth systems requires social capital and privileges actors with well-connected positions in the field. Yet, new media have also brought about advanced modes of surveillance, invasions of pri-vacy, and, most notably, new forms of exclusion. In the institutional chap-ter, I showed that the growing artistic interest in new mediums fosters new asymmetries, especially between the affluent, urban middle classes with access to infrastructure (electricity, internet), technical equipment (com-puters, cameras, software), know-how, and other social groups.

> As a site of community, we can expect Facebook to have all the con-tradictions found in the kind of community that Alana lives in. You simply can't have both closeness and privacy. You can't have sup-port without claustrophobia. You can't have this degree of friend-ship without the risk of explosive quarreling. Either everything is more socially intense or none of it is.[1053]

In his groundbreaking work "Tales from Facebook," Daniel Miller con-cludes that Facebook establishes and sustains a sense of community.[1054] He immediately concedes the contested nature of the notion of commu-nity, "whatever we mean by that term."[1055] Nevertheless, he continues to argue that the internet fosters the emergence of values such as care and concern, friendship and reciprocity—values that we would com-monly qualify as marking a community.[1056] Yet, at the same time, he adds, Facebook also engenders negative notions of contact, such as invasion, even devastation of privacy. Miller shows that this twofold capacity—to establish and abuse contact—is not a unique feature of new media.

1052 The talk in which the topic was most salient was entitled "So you have taken some great pictures. Now What?" It took place on January 29, 2015, at the Goethe-Institute Dhaka and included Alam, Lens founder James Estrin, and photographer Teru Kuwayama. The talk is available through the *CM* YouTube channel, see "So you have taken some great pictures. Now What? | Shahidul Alam | Chobi Mela VIII," Chobi Mela, uploaded September 27, 2016, YouTube video, 1:07:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-v0g9aTihE.
1053 Daniel Miller, *Tales from Facebook* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 27.
1054 Miller, *Tales from Facebook*, 24.
1055 Miller, *Tales from Facebook*, 24.
1056 Miller, *Tales from Facebook*, 24.

Rather, it is part of a more general social behavior that, due to the development of digital technologies, has been extended to these new modes of communication. This becomes clear when we include offline interactions in the discussion.

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Since its beginnings, ethnography has included the proficiency of vernacular languages. James Clifford lists the ability to master at least one language from one's field as a "powerful technique" used in ethnographic research.[1057] For Gupta and Ferguson, learning a local language is among the key tools that a fieldworker employs to gain experience.[1058] It also sets them apart from other types of travelers and tourists. I acquired a basic understanding of Bengali during my studies and I started taking private Nepali lessons from my second fieldtrip (2014) onwards. I soon realized that although knowing the local language even a little facilitated things like grocery shopping and moving around the city (and set me apart from tourists), I rarely made use of it in direct conversation with the artists, neither in Nepal nor in Bangladesh. Almost every artist I met was more or less fluent in English.

Alastair Pennycook, the author of "Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows," exposes the same tropes (of globalization, of modernity, and of development) that have guided the studies on contemporary art and urbanization and the research on language, globalization, and new media.[1059] He notably criticizes the widespread view that the worldwide proliferation of the English language happens in a "neutral" and "uncontested" way. Further, he identifies a diffusionist understanding of global flows, which sees the proliferation of English as either the best example for, or a tool of, globalization-as-homogenization (or Westernization). Rather than succumbing to these notions, Pennycook advocates for a focus on "agency, resistance, or appropriation" that does not lose sight of the political context of the spread of English.[1060]

Both Nepal and Bangladesh have contested language histories. While discussing art education, I explained that the education institutions, which existed in South Asia before colonialism (Sanskrit *pathshalas*, monastic schools, and *madrasas*), were based on the classic languages: Sanskrit and Arabic. The English language spread with the British colonizer and its institutions. In Nepal, English was associated with the economic and political elites, the Ranas, as a symbol of power, socio-economic privilege, and

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1057 James Clifford, "Spatial Practices: Fieldwork, Travel, and the Disciplining of Anthropology," in Gupta and Ferguson, *Anthropological Locations*, 201.
1058 Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Discipline and Practice: 'The Field' as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology," in Gupta and Ferguson, *Anthropological Locations*, 31.
1059 Pennycook, "Global Englishes, Rip Slyme, and Performativity," 516.
1060 Pennycook, "Global Englishes, Rip Slyme, and Performativity," 516.

status.[1061] With the proliferation of English-medium schools in the 1990s, especially in the urban areas, English became more widely circulated, but it remains a sign of the urban middle and upper classes. Moreover, in both countries, the vernacular tongue has a strong political role in constructing the "superethnos."[1062] This has led to the marginalization of languages spoken by ethnic minorities, but also arguably hindered the flow of English. In Nepal, the Panchayat System administered the "one language" policy, pushing Nepali as the predominant language. In Bangladesh, the 1950s were marked by a violent uprising against the government's attempt to establish Urdu as the official language. The Language Movement, strongly supported by master artist Zainul Abedin and other Charukola professors, led to the recognition of Urdu and Bengali as official languages. With the independence in 1971, Bengali became the new state language, thereby consolidating the marginalization of other languages.[1063]

It is not within the scope of this research to address the particular uses of English in Bangladesh and Nepal in general.[1064] Pennycook's critique, however, serves as a guide to discuss the valuation, the circulation, and the politics of English within the field of contemporary art. The following quote from an interview with Britto member Anisuzzaman Sohel serves as a base for this discussion:

INTERVIEWER (MH)*: What is the role of language [in contemporary art]?*
INTERVIEWEE (AS)*: Language, meaning the art language?*
MH*: Also.*
AS*: … and the communication language. It is very important, because the maximum of our artists, we don't talk English properly. It really is a problem. I am saying one thing, you understand another thing, because we [Bangladeshi artists] are not so good in English. … It is a problem. But* Pathshala*'s students they are a little better than Charukola students. Because they are smart, they are English-medium generation. … I think Charukola should take initiative for better English. …*
MH*: So, you think that English is important?*
AS*: Very important.*
MH*: Why?*

1061   Giri, "The Power and Price of English," 213.
1062   Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*, 30.
1063   Raghavan, *1971*, 7–8; Islam, "Life and Times of Literary Magazines," 79.
1064   For Bangladesh, see Shaila Sultana, "Young Adults' Linguistic Manipulation of English in Bangla in Bangladesh," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 17, no. 1 (2012); Shaila Sultana, Sender Dovchin, and Alastair Pennycook, "Transglossic Language Practices of Young Adults in Bangladesh and Mongolia," *International Journal of Multilingualism* 12, no. 1 (2014). For Nepal, see Sharma, "Beyond Social Networking"; Giri, "The Power and Price of English."

> AS*: If you want global, and you don't [think] … "I do my work,*
> *I am not interested to communicate [with] any foreigner."*
> *But that part is also a problem. Because what is happen-*
> *ing in Bangladesh, what is happening in South Asia, other*
> *people don't know. This is the problem. But that is why we*
> *need to improve our language.*
> *…*
> MH*: What does global mean for you? "Global" mane ki?*
> AS*: Global mane* "prithivi" *[= earth, world, globe].* "Prithivi"
> mane "shara" *[= whole].* "Prithivi shamgra jog"
> *[= connection of the whole world]. Capitalist, their*
> "Dauratma" *[= violence],* mane power, global power … .
> MH*: And global art?*
> AS*: Global art is a different thing. All over the world, art-*
> *ists are the same maybe. Artists are very selfish type*
> *of people. They are doing their work. What they love,*
> *they will do. Artists and capitalists are a different kind*
> *of—but nowadays some art will be a product.*[1065]

In the beginning of the excerpt, Sohel repeatedly states that he sees the fact that many artists in Bangladesh do not speak proper English as a problem. The consequence, he comments, is an inability to communicate with "foreigners." On the surface, this comment is based on the perception that English is a widespread language. Because of its cross-border geographical reach, proficiency allows communication on a larger scale, i.e., beyond the 242 million Bengali speakers in the world. The comment however also contains an assumption that artists will benefit from communicating on this larger scale. It further uncovers a generational and class shift. Sohel graduated from Charukola in the 1990s, a time when English-medium schools were not as common as they are today. Although Charukola, as part of Dhaka University, is among the public institutions that teach in Bengali as well as English, my interviewee does not consider this education sufficient. He recognizes the geographic and socio-economic heterogeneity of Charukola students and insinuates that the faculty has not fully recognized the benefits of fostering proficiency in English. The younger urban generation, on the other hand, to which he believes the private Pathshala South Asian Media Institute's students belong, have profited from the proliferation of English-medium schools in the city. Of 150 English-medium schools in Bangladesh, 135 are located in the Dhaka Division, and they make up approximately 6 % of the total enrollment in junior and secondary schools in Dhaka.[1066] Based on my own observations in Bangladesh and

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1065   AR, AS, September 2015.
1066   Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), *Bangladesh Education Statistics 2016*. Although there are no accurate numbers for Nepal, it is safe to assume that the vast majority of institutional (private) schools teach in English. Giri estimates that there are 8500 private boarding

in Nepal, the vernacular remains the common medium in art education. Yet, the importance of English has grown enough to cause disparities, not only among the students, but also within the wider art field. English has become the medium in which applications, proposals, and artist statements for international workshops, residencies, or festivals are submitted. This is not only true for events happening in English majority countries, but also in other regions; the broad diversity of languages in South Asia, or the presence of international participants and facilitators for instance, often requires a language compromise. And this compromise, more often than not, involves English. Owing to the fact that my research partners consider face-to-face exchange with fellow practitioners to be a crucial advantage of such events—as I discussed in the previous chapter—it is easy to comprehend why a linguistic common ground is necessary. It is in this setting that Britto member Yasmin Jahan Nupur deplores her inability to communicate in English.

> When I was a student, when he [Mahbubur Rahman] talked, it was going over my head. I couldn't understand anything, because his level and my level were completely different. And also I told you, my academic curriculum was so poor because I studied in Bengali medium. So I could read only Bengali. I couldn't read English. So, it is like another boundary.[1067]

In this excerpt, Nupur describes how she participated in a workshop facilitated by Rahman when she was still a fine art student. The first part of the comment pertains to her inexperience with the emerging contemporary practice, especially relating to new mediums, which Rahman stands for. The second part refers to his use of language in particular. Nupur sees her struggle to understand Rahman as a shortcoming, which she attributes to her education in a Bengali-medium school. Like Sohel, she perceives the inability to accurately understand and especially read English as a boundary to accessing knowledge. The comment contains a feeling of inadequacy that goes beyond the purely linguistic capacity and speaks to a larger notion of education; the Bengali-medium schooling not only prevented her from learning English, but subsequently from accessing knowledge conveyed in that medium. Besides facilitating the communication with fellow artists and experts, fluency in English also allows access to art writing and history beyond the vernacular. The struggle to understand or

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schools and colleges in Nepal, about 2500 more than the 6015 private schools counted by the Ministry of Education. Sharma explains that these private schools have agreed on an institutional policy "declaring these sites as English-speaking zones." He further mentions that English has become a prerequisite for many jobs in the private and public sector and that most education institutions and workplaces use written English. Giri, "The Power and Price of English," 216; Ministry of Education, "Nepal Education in Figures 2016"; Sharma, "Beyond Social Networking," 486.

1067 AR, YJN, August 2015.

communicate matters of contemporary art is not solely contingent upon the English language. It is often related—as the first part of the comment suggests—to an inability to express or voice art practices through words. In many interviews, especially with young artists, I observed their difficulties in talking about their own works, in expressing their concepts and ideas, in finding the right vocabulary, even in their mother tongue. While this can be related to a more general inexperience based on their age, it also points to the fact that talking about art (or writing about art) in either language is not particularly encouraged in the fine arts education.

In the second part of the longer quote above, Sohel reemphasizes his assessment of not speaking English as a problem and expans upon the benefits of linguistic competency. Mastering English, he argues, is necessary to access and operate on a global scale.[1068] His idea of global is related to the outreach and exchange beyond the national borders of Bangladesh. This is evident from the statement that "other people" (publics and possibly art professionals outside the country) are not informed about what is happening in the nationally circumscribed artistic field. Rather than reaching out to other fields (vertically and horizontally), he argues, many Bangladeshi artists fixate solely on their individual practice. He does not articulate why he considers this a problem. Through other conversations however, I know he is concerned with the stereotypical portrayal of Bangladesh in the media (as a poverty catastrophe stricken "third world" country) and with the fact that artists from other national fields are better represented in international exhibitions, events, publications, and other formats. A wider recognition and visibility of Bangladesh's field of contemporary art—an opinion he shares with most artists I met—would counterbalance the country's unidimensional media depiction and engender more opportunities for its artists. In the interview, he further emphasizes the significance of culture and especially cultural exchange for the national identity of a country. English thus is not only a medium for face-to-face communication with foreigners, but also a way to collectively connect to art consumers and a general public outside South Asia.

At the end of the quote, Sohel differentiates between global as "connecting-the-world" in a negative way, illustrated by the worldwide entanglement of capitalism as a violent, dividing force (rich and poor, powerful and powerless), and global as a positive, unifying condition for the arts. This differentiation reemphasizes why the rethinking of spatial vocabulary, especially of the local–global dichotomy, is indispensable. Global as dividing economic and political force is here denounced, while global as unifying, connecting momentum in contemporary art is positively encouraged. Different actors assess and value processes, which are often lumped together under the header of globalization, in distinctive ways. Moreover, my interlocutor characterizes artists as selfish, as focused on "what they

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1068   AR, AS, September 2015.

love"—their work.[1069] The emphasis on similarity in this self-designation is telling; rather than on economic profit or socio-cultural differences, he establishes art production as a transgressive, collective, binding factor, which in turn can be based on economic desires.

My research partners' emphasis on transcultural "outreach" is one of the main observations that drew my interest to the artistic fields of Nepal and Bangladesh. Over the course of this book, I established that the focus of this outreach is the creation of decentered and mutual contact with like-minded people. This contact requires a common language as the basis for communication, which is, more often than not, English. However, despite its capacity to facilitate transcultural contact and brokerage, the proliferation of the English language does not happen in a neutral and uncontested way, as Pennycook cautions us.[1070] There is no uniform reaction to the growing importance of English in the art field. Based on my observations, the actors individually and collectively deal with linguistic issues, especially when they cause asymmetries, in varying and dynamic ways. The organizers of the *Photo Kathmandu (PTKM)* festival, for instance, consciously decide to use bilingual (Nepali and English) tags and information panels. Further, they provide a Newari commentary for the slideshows taking place in Newari neighborhoods. This strategy is an expression of PC's overall inclusive agenda. In hanging-out situations, I observe a similar inclusive and dynamic negotiation process. For example, the dinner situation I describe in the Interlude: Lunch–Dinner–Party highlights the fact that a discussion between a handful of people can easily involve several languages, in this case Bengali, English, Hindi, and Urdu. The choice of language is the result of a negotiation process that has an implied political dimension.

New media and the English language have allowed a faster, easier, and participatory translocal communication. Yet, this process is beneficial to one section of society in particular, namely the young, urban, middle class population. This generation of artists belongs to Bangladesh's and Nepal's economically rising middle classes, who benefit from the proliferation of English-medium schools and private universities. They can finance housing in the capital city (at least during their university education), and most importantly, own an internet-connected device. The older generation of artists and the vast majority of fine art students in the country today however depend(ed) on public education and its mandatory English classes. As a result, they are at a disadvantage when attempting to increase their scope of action by applying for international residencies or workshops, by sending their portfolios to curators and exhibition institutions, and when talking to critics. Their access to channels of knowledge outside the fine art curriculum, such as English technical literature, internet blogs and homepages, YouTube tutorials, and so on, is limited. Here, collective initiatives offer a means to redress these asymmetries by fostering multilateral

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1069   AR, AS, September 2015.
1070   Pennycook, "Global Englishes, Rip Slyme, and Performativity."

contact among artists. These connections allow artists to share laptops and cameras, forward information about residencies and exhibitions, offer advice, and support each other in applications and proposals.

From the negotiation of these politics of access arise identity politics. In the Cross-Generational Panel at the *DAS* 2014, artist Naeem Mohaiemen addresses the relation between the global scale and language. He explains that there is an assumption that English has become the *lingua franca* of the art world, and in order for an artist's work to become known and circulate internationally, the artist needs, first, an e-mail address (i.e., access to the internet) and second, to write and speak in English. Mohaiemen gives the example of a journal called *Kamra* that is only published in Bengali and therefore does not circulate beyond the Bengali speaking audience. He asks himself and the audience why this matters. On the one hand, his comment confirms my observations about the use of digital media in imagining alternative lives.[1071] Mastering English expands an artist's motility. They become part of a motile center—travelling not tourist-class, but virtually—to international events. They participate in online workshops, listen to talks, see exhibitions, meet and learn from fellow artists. In turn, this participation allows them to imagine themselves as part of an actually mobile global art jet set. They can conceive of being picked up by the art market or exhibiting at the *documenta*, irrespective of whether or not this actually happens. On the other hand, Mohaiemen's comment broaches a valid question: what does compliance to the supposed *lingua franca* English entail? Why reach out to a wider scale? And at what cost? His subsequent comment on gallery spaces in Dhaka—many of which use English tags and description panels—leads to the consideration that such mechanisms not only broaden vertical outreach, especially on the global scale, but also potentially limit horizontal relations with the Bengali-speaking public in Dhaka or Bangladesh.

Most of my interview partners and the initiatives I worked with are concerned with finding a balance between these scales, yet there are also more intransigent positions among the young generation:

> In Crack, in *1mile²*, and other things, they are very original people. They are too strong in making original things. They don't believe in copy. They are very proud to be Bengali. Nepali people are very proud to be American or European or speaking in English. Each function they are speaking in English.[1072]

Prompted by the participation in an artist-initiated program in Bangladesh, one of my Nepal-based research partners reflects on national identity. They perceive the use of English as foreign to Nepal and the result of a wider process of Americanization or Westernization. Their experience

1071   Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes," 197
1072   AR, A, 2016.

in Bangladesh has led them to believe that artists there resist the spread of English because they use their vernacular language in talk programs and presentations. His fellow Nepali citizens, in contrast, are vicariously embracing a foreign identity ("American" or "European") through language. More than that, they are proud of this new identity.[1073] Language, in this quote, becomes the expression of a territorially based and nationally bound cultural identity. Preserving this identity, rather than substituting it for another, becomes a matter of pride and, even more so, socio-cultural survival. While Sohel emphasizes the importance of cultural exchange in his conception of national identity—and English being a means to that exchange—my research partner above claims a linguistically bound identity. Both are expressions of asymmetries caused by processes generally referred to as globalization. Sohel's conception of the current contemporary situation is an optimistic and transcultural one, based on cultural exchange and multilateral artistic advancement. Yet, he is also fully aware that for artists in the periphery to reach visibility in other scales of the art field, especially the globally connected one, they need to accept the mediums of communication it uses. Mastering English is a necessary and inevitable part of that connection. The asymmetry in the latter quote is perceived as a threat: the cultural flows emanating from Europe and America that have become global endanger the cultural integrity of people in Nepal. By submitting to them, they lose their original practices. Underlying both comments, irrespective of the chosen course of action, is the experience of an ongoing hegemony of Western institutions in defining the rules of visibility in the global art field.

Neither the English language nor new media technologies as mediators of flows proliferate in a "neutral" or "uncontested" way.[1074] My research partners are well aware of the asymmetries these mediators represent, and the politics of access and representation they engender. They are able to calculate the value in and risk of recurring to these tools. Both mediators can be valuable facilitators of communication, able to connect different scales of the artistic field, both vertically and horizontally, across cultural, social, and national borders. They can help bridge the gap between center and periphery. However, they can also widen existing asymmetries. Horizontally, both new media and English create rifts between older and younger generations of artists. They widen the gap between the lower and middle / upper classes with access to English-medium schools and between rural and infrastructurally better-equipped urban areas. Vertically, their mastery often indicates closeness to an assumed global visual culture centered in the West. How these flows are experienced and negotiated depends on the position of the respective actors in this art field, as well as on their position within other fields; it is affected by their socio-economic privilege, their ability to access socio-cultural capital, and their political

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1073   AR, A, 2016.
1074   Pennycook, "Global Englishes, Rip Slyme, and Performativity."

opinion. The collective plays an important role in this "position-taking" and thus in the way flows are negotiated.[1075] Collaborative strategies can substantially shift individual positions, and collective situations, such as hanging out, are crucial for this negotiation.

HANGING OUT AND THE IDEA OF A "TRANSLOCAL COMMUNITY OF ARTISTS"

My observations of hanging-out situations, represented by the examples in the Interlude: Lunch–Dinner–Party, reveal three commonly recurring elements. First, many conversation topics during lunches, dinners, and parties revolve around fellow members of the art field. The sharing of anecdotes, gossip, and information about mutual acquaintances creates a repository of knowledge for all participants to be used as a resource in and for cultural brokerage. It exposes affinities as well as friction, and in turn, dissuades or fosters opportunities for future contact. Eating and drinking is another important part of hanging out. These activities illustrate the transcultural conventions of contact in the emerging contemporary field; they emphasize the conscious focus on similarities related to practice over individual socio-economic and political differences. Lastly, the situations manifest the crucial importance of spaces for hanging out. These spaces need to some extent be autonomous, free of the conventions of visibility and the behaviors that otherwise regulate social life. At the same time, and in opposition to the workshop, for instance, they need to be accessible on a regular basis. Hanging-out situations might seem liminal to the material and symbolic production of contemporary art, but they are crucial for the negotiation of positionings in the field, the maintenance of multilateral and decentered contact, and as a result, the imagination of a translocal art community.

I became aware of one of the main characteristics of the hanging-out situation only in hindsight, when organizing my research material: While I meticulously documented interviews or events like exhibition openings in the form of photographs, descriptive notes, and audio recordings, I often summarized hanging-out situations as "we / they talked about people they know" or "we / they talked about people who are not present." I wrote down where and whom I had lunch or dinner with, and documented information that I perceived to be important for my research questions, such as comments on exhibitions or specific institutions. Upon closer examination of my notes, I realized that discussing other artists, mutual acquaintances, especially travel encounters with members of the artistic field and their current projects, is a constant part of hanging out. In my first exchange with Saurganga Darshandhari and Prithvi Shrestha (see Interlude: Lunch–Dinner–Party) we extensively talked about various Britto members, even before I had met them face-to-face. Looking back, this was not only

1075   Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production.*

a casual way to ease into our first ever conversation, but also a way to figure out each-others' position and agenda. It gave me an opportunity to talk about my research frame without having to relate it to the two people directly present. For both parties, it was a way of (unintentionally) keeping distance, by speaking not about the self, but about others. At the same time, it created a kind of closeness, by establishing a common knowledge perimeter and tracing a shared network.

The second example from this Interlude, the dinner, shows that talking about "people we know" is also a way of keeping informed about the members of the network. The members' initiatives become a basis for critically reflecting one's own practice and more general developments in the art field. Rahman for instance comments on a common friend's plans to open a space for students. His judgement reveals as much about his own convictions as about this friend's initiative. By sharing his belief that art spaces should be for artists who have already completed their formal education, Rahman emphasizes his position as experienced in the field. He knows that students often have their own networks and support systems among the student body. Additionally, they can return to housing, art materials, and studio space provided by the university. After their graduation however, this support stops, and artists often struggle to maintain their practice. It is at this moment, Rahman believes, that they benefit most from collaborative action; they have finished their formal education, have reached a level of maturity in their practice, and are looking for new creative input. Further, Rahman accredits the work he has done with Britto: the collective and its activities are valid because they follow (t)his conviction and provide space for artists after their graduation.

The situations in the Interlude also offer insight into the artists' valuation of scale. Saurganga Darshandhari does not mention Britto's online presence, its website, or its Facebook group page. Instead, she refers to how much and where its members have travelled. She measures the collective's scale of action, its resources, and global visibility by its members' mobility and their ability to engage in face-to-face contact with other members of the field. While Lipi can travel to Europe and America, Darshandhari has never been outside Asia. This information (added to the details I have gathered from my preliminary research in Germany) allows me to infer that the Britto members are more motile than their colleagues in Nepal: they have means to purchase flight tickets, to provide the necessary bank statements for visa applications, and to cover their day-to-day expenses. Even before meeting the Britto founders, I am able to presume that they hold more economic resources—possibly through large-scale donor organizations or personal sales—than Bindu. These socio-economic differences however do not seem to affect the valorization of the relationship between Darshandhari, Shrestha, and the Britto founders. On the contrary, the way they describe the contact is affectionate and respectful, as demonstrated for instance by their use of the label family. The reason for this close relationship is probably also related to the support that the

Dhaka-based artists have given to Darshandhari and Shrestha over the years. Rahman was instrumental in helping them to establish their own space, and through the couple's mediation, Darshandhari was able to pursue her MFA at the University of Development Alternative (UODA) in Dhaka before the master's degree was introduced in Nepal.[1076]

Based on this particular interaction, I was able to identify other situations in my notes during which my research partners came up against socio-cultural and economic differences and frictions. In the majority of cases, the differences were outweighed by a sense of respect and a recognition of support. Another situation from my later fieldwork emphasizes this: During an exhibition opening, a group of artists mock a fellow artist for their public demeanor. Their tone takes me aback as I have not encountered this type of mockery before within that group, so much so that I make a note of it. While making fun of people and their mannerisms is commonplace—as it often is among friends—I have never experienced it happen behind somebody's back. Very quickly the joking stops and everybody asserts that the person in question is actually a valued member of the artist community, who deserves respect for their commitment. This quick turn-around is reminiscent of a quote I referred to in an earlier chapter:

> People will come and go. But we will be here. And we are also artist family, we feel like we are—maybe you don't like the artwork of one artist, but you cannot disrespect that person because that is not what you do. That is unfair.[1077]

In both cases, a sense of respect is invoked that is based neither on individual merit nor on the quality of artwork, but on the belonging to a collective. In the first case, this collective is labeled "community," and in the second "family." Both terms are indeed invoked, as Barcellos Rezende argues, in order to demonstrate affinities and similarities and to allow artists to conceive of themselves as part of the "same social world."[1078]

Talking about commonly known people and their activities happens rather blatantly. The topic of politics, in contrast, is much more nuanced and latent. In my notes, issues like corrupt governments, infrastructure malfunctions, or traffic chaos repeatedly emerge as matters of small talk and everyday frustrations. More extensive issues, such as the border contestations in South Asia, the reach of capitalism, or the treatment of migrants, are consciously deliberated on as part of projects or specific artworks. "No Man's Land," for instance, a project coordinated by Britto

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1076   As I explained in chapter three, the MFA was only introduced in Nepal in 2009 at Tribhuvan University. Before that, artists had to go to India, which often was a considerable financial strain. The University of Development Alternative was established in 2002 and is one of the two private institutions in Dhaka that offer fine art (BFA and MFA) programs.

1077   AR, A, 2017.

1078   Rezende, "Building Affinity Through Friendship," 92–93.

and the Shelter Promotion Council India that I briefly referred to above while discussing Nupur's performance practice, aimed at consciously engaging the contested borderlands between India and Bangladesh. The project took place in 2014 but triggered an extensive ongoing discussion between its participants. It is one of the reasons that brings project participant Boka to Rahman and Lipi's kitchen (see Interlude: Lunch–Dinner–Party) a year later. Boka's cooking partner Akmut also engages with contested national borders in an ongoing project on the war of 1971. On one of the following evenings, she invites two friends to the flat. One of them is working for the Liberation War Museum and confesses that they were initially highly skeptical about the artist's project.[1079] Their experiences with Pakistanis working on the conflict have not been positive. Akmut however showed them a small excerpt of her work and convinced them that her motivations were not ill placed. They started to support her and her project and admit that the artists in fact "gave them much to think about."[1080] The relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan is a complex one, especially when it comes to the narratives of 1971. Opinions on both sides have been largely determined by public narratives through the media and school education. In the first chapter, I cited Srinath Raghavan's argument that the 1971 war is still primarily perceived as a Bengali betrayal against the idea of a united homeland for Muslims in Pakistan.[1081] The mobilities made possible by SANA and continued by the individual artist collectives have allowed exchange between the two countries. The multilateral contact between the artists has revealed the tropes and political propaganda behind specific narratives and visualities. Several Bangladeshi artists who were able to travel to Pakistan in the frame of artist residencies or workshops for instance spoke of encounters with Pakistanis who were not aware of the events that unfolded in Bangladesh in 1971. They explained that, according to their experience, the war is neither part of the school curriculum nor a matter of public discourse in Pakistan.

Through the frame of art projects, the engagement with such political issues is not only condoned but often a desired objective aiming at transgressing hegemonic conceptions of locality. Outside the frame of creative and collective projects, however, issues of nationalism, ethnicity, caste, class, or religion are rarely a topic in hanging-out situations. My notes from another evening get-together illustrate this. During the evening in question, one of the guests starts to put forward political ideas in a very strong manner. He is almost immediately dismissed by the other attendees and the topic is abandoned for the rest of the night. After the

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1079   The Bangladesh Liberation War Museum is a government-independent museum dedicated to the documentation and examination of the 1971 war. "Home," Liberation War Museum, accessed June 12, 2021, http://www.liberationwarmuseumbd.org/.
1080   Conversation, February 2015.
1081   Raghavan, *1971*, 5–9.

party, I walk home with a group of the attendees and take the opportunity to inquire about their reasons for this resolute reaction. They explain that aggressive and disruptive outbursts, especially in relation to politics, are unwelcome; they consider the artist space in which we had hung out a safe and free space. The focus, in their opinion, should be on the art practice. As long as political issues are discussed in a productive manner, i.e., beneficial for a collectively shared art practice, they are an important and welcome topic of engagement. Talking about politics and religion in order to cause "unnecessary" fights and ruptures, however, is distracting from the art.[1082]

In a similar way, my attempts to talk about personal religious or ethnic differences or frictions were often either evaded or brushed aside. These things, I was told, do not matter for relationships in the day-to-day art practice, which, from my observations, was true. Without exception, all the artist-run initiatives I worked with comprised members from various ethnicities and religions. Including demographic variations (such as the prevalence of Newars in the Kathmandu valley and therefore also within the art field), the network I retrace here comprises atheists, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus of different castes and social backgrounds. Even among these larger groups, personal beliefs and practices vary greatly. While these differences undeniably cause asymmetries and friction in daily social interactions, they are consciously subordinated to art in collective situations. Talking in the art field, I therefore suggest, in large part involves talking about the art field. Issues from other, horizontally autonomous fields, are welcomed only when they serve the collective contemporary situation. The emphasis in contact is on affinities: the collective aim to transgress medium limitations upheld by art institutions, to extend the agency of the artists within the art field (especially in socio-cultural debates on the meaning of locality), to claim control in the symbolic production of art, and to foster translocal mobilities—unless the topic is food. The preparation and consumption of food in hanging-out situations regularly brings issues of nationality, religion, and caste to the forefront.

One of the most remarkable experiences during my fieldwork in South Asia was people's openness and willingness to meet, hang out, and talk about their practice. I made ample use of social media to gain my first insight into the field, to contact people and arrange meetings. While doing so, the most frequent answer to my online requests for studio, gallery, or event visits was a variation of "sure, just come by," accompanied by a phone number and the request to call when I am in the neighborhood. While this behavior can surely also be attributed to a more general hospitality as well as my position as a researcher (and potentially an art promoter), I soon realized that it was part of what characterized the quality of contact in the artistic field: an openness to and interest in meeting people with a common interest in contemporary art, and the prospect of

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1082   FDE, A, 2015.

a good time and interesting conversation. The situations that followed, in addition to abundant talk, were almost always associated with the consumption of food, be it in the form of tea and cookies, or more elaborate lunches. In the dinner example (see Interlude: Lunch–Dinner–Party), which represents numerous other evenings of a similar nature, each guest is responsible for the preparation of one dish. Akmut cooks a curry dish, Boka prepares fish, and Lipi looks after the vegetables. Several people collaborating on a meal like this—buying groceries, preparing the ingredients, contributing snacks or drinks—was a common occurrence during my research period. More than an extension of collaborative practice, I have come to see it as an expression of solidarity. Most of my research partners belong to the urban middle class, yet many experienced dire financial straits at one point or another in their life as artists, especially during their student years. Everybody contributing to the meal balances out such financial concerns; everybody can afford to participate. Moreover, especially in situations involving foreign guests, such as Akmut, Boka, or me, contributing to a joined dinner is an expression of gratitude for received hospitality—a way of paying back for a space on the couch, a guest room, or assistance with a project.

It also reflects a more general appreciation for home-cooked foods from different regions. The complex socio-cultural preferences and religious food taboos especially in South Asia however presuppose a rather elaborate negotiation process. This process is often mediated through humor, especially in instances where one party cannot relate to the other's personal choice or religious taboo. My conscious decision not to eat meat for example entailed much teasing from the atheist, Muslim, or meat-loving faction of the art field. Despite this teasing, my research partners always made sure that there would be a vegetarian option for me. Nepali artists jokingly complained about friends from Bangladesh touching common food items with their fingers. Whereas this touch is of no (ritual) consequence to the non-Hindu Bangladeshis, the remaining food is considered *juṭho* (ritually impure) by many Nepalis.[1083] The common mood in these interactions and negotiations over who can (or cannot) eat what was mostly humorous yet affective. Similar to issues of ethnicity, religion, and caste, the adherence to related food taboos is respected, but subsumed to a casual, amicable, yet productive hanging out. I only observed one instance in which the tone became more intense: one artist, in whose religious practice eating beef is considered a taboo that they consciously follow, recounts that they struggled with people constantly trying to "force" them to eat beef during their stay in Bangladesh.[1084]

In conjunction with food, hanging out also often involves the consumption of stimulants, such as alcohol, cigarettes, and other substances. The

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1083   András Höfer, *The Caste Hierarchy and the State in Nepal: A Study of the Muluki Ain of 1854* (Lalitpur: Himal Books, 2012), 13–14.
1084   FDE, A, 2015.

ambiguous nature of these practices is fairly obvious in my notes: I rarely wrote about the topic, and when I did, I usually performed some kind of self-censorship (e.g., "bottle" or "drink" rather than a direct reference to alcohol). While alcohol is legal in Nepal, its purchase and consumption is restricted for Muslims in Bangladesh.[1085] Smoking is legal, although banned in certain spaces, whereas the consumption of drugs is illegal in both countries. The legal status of these substances, however, reveals little about related socio-cultural norms and actual practices. Consuming alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes is often subject to what I call "conventions of visibility." These mostly non-verbalized conventions can take different shapes, from keeping the consumption beyond the frame of the camera to juniors refraining from smoking and drinking in front of their seniors, or women refraining from smoking in public at all. Nevertheless, and maybe specifically because of these conventions, the practices are often an important part of membership in the art field. In relation to cigarettes for instance, one of my female interview partners explains.

> So he took me to the art school... I went there and I saw some of the students, girl students... And they were like seven–eight girls, standing, and they were wearing T-shirts and having cigarettes, and some of them were having paints on their hands... I looked at them, and I looked at my brother and I said: "This is my clothes." [laughing] The freedom, that freedom I enjoyed. It is not about the smoking, because I did not smoke. I just loved the freedom that they were enjoying. So I said: "I want to come here."[1086]

My interlocutor here describes the freedom to smoke, to wear non-traditional, "stylish" clothes, to stand around, and to chat. They experienced this freedom for the first time while visiting the Fine Arts Campus and it became part of the reason they wanted to study art. This experience of freedom from rules and norms regulating ordinary social life rings true for a lot of artists I talked to. The art campus especially represents

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1085   In Bangladesh, Muslim citizens are not legally allowed to purchase alcohol, but individuals may receive permission to consume alcohol for "health reasons." There are caste-specific norms for the consumption of alcohol in Nepal. Nevertheless, I have not observed these to be of effect to most of the people I worked with, except in situations of mourning. In February 2017, the government of Nepal endorsed the "National Policy on Regulation and Control of Alcohol 2017," which includes, among other things, the introduction of pictorial warnings, a legal drinking age of twenty-one, and a ban on retail shops selling alcohol from five am to seven pm. So far, however, this has only been mildly enforced. Gourab Dewan and Fazle Rabbi Chowdhury, "Alcohol Use and Alcohol Use Disorders in Bangladesh," *Asia Pacific Journal of Medical Toxicology* 4, no. 2 (2015): 84; Höfer, *The Caste Hierarchy*, 17–18; Manish Gautam, "Gov's Stringent Policy to Regulate Alcohol Products," *Kathmandu Post,* February 22, 2017, accessed November 13, 2017, http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2017-02-22/govs-stringent-policy-to-regulate-alcohol-products.

1086   AR, A, 2017.

a place of both education and freedom of choice. A similar idea of freedom, self-determination, and possibly also of non-conformity to hegemonic socio-cultural rules is related to the consumption of alcohol. Many artists I met during my research greatly enjoy sitting together while enjoying alcoholic beverages. Yet, there is also the potential for a covert religious asymmetry in this observation. In Hindu, Buddhist, and especially Muslim-majority countries, it is not conventional to serve alcohol during gatherings and parties, as its consumption is subject to different religious taboos. In most Christian-majority countries however, the consumption of alcohol—in the form of toasts, receptions, *Sektempfänge* (reception with sparkling wine), and *vin d'honneur* (literally wine in honor of someone)—constitutes an essential part of cultural programs and functions. Arguably, this could create an expectation and potentially a pressure to serve alcohol during large-scale events, related functions, or when hosting foreigners, especially those from the highly mobile center of the art world.

Ultimately, the consumption of food-related items marks the fine line between the informal and nevertheless particular character of the situations I describe. The meals I enjoyed in hanging-out situations were never excessively extravagant. They were home-cooked, time-tested, and elaborate comfort meals. This reflects the general atmosphere in hanging-out situations that is also, and maybe especially, visible during parties. Parties, like the one I describe in the Interlude to this chapter, are seemingly casual, yet a little fancy; the venues are decorated with lights, chairs or *chakatis* (cushions) are kept ready, music is played (live, or from a phone or laptop), and guests make an effort to wear a neat *sari*, *kurta*, or shirt. The attendees' behavior is collaborative and process oriented; people move around and make an effort to talk to everybody. Some might even have a mental list of guests to talk to, questions to ask, insider information to pursue, social capital to build. Yet, unlike a meeting, there is no overall fixed agenda or bullet points to go through. Art parties are about work—about making connections, exchanging gossip, gaining valuable knowledge, gathering business cards, and keeping updated with the art field—the guests move around and converse rather unsystematically. Popular party foods reflect this character; meals like *biriyani* in Bangladesh (mixed rice dish) or *samaybaji* in Nepal (set including beaten rice and cowpea) are established festival foods. The fact that they are served on one plate makes them easy to handle and ideal to move around with. They are festive and practical at the same time.

In order to engage with contemporary art collectively, to be able to organize parties, to hang out, to exercise the freedom to break—even if only temporarily—with the norms of the wider society, to consume cigarettes, to wear non-traditional clothes, to sideline religious, caste, and ethnic particularities, the right space is imperative. Such spaces are rare in the city. Coming back to a point I have repeatedly made in this book, the city is considered the space for artistic inspiration and energy among most of my research partners. Many artists are connected to this locality through

an ambiguous love-hate relationship; its intensity simultaneously con-stricts daily life and inspires creativity. Artists who live outside Dhaka and Kathmandu, such as Sunil Sigdel (Pokhara), Munir Mrittik (Naryanganj), or Kabir Ahmed Massum Chisty (Narayanganj), describe their homes as favorable to the execution of their artistic work. At the same time, they voice concern over the lack of discourse or exchange with fellow artists. Artists based in the city, on the other hand, complain about the abundance of ongoing programs (talks, film screenings, and openings) or family and work responsibilities that prevent them from focusing on their art. For many of these artists, the workshop offers the perfect in-between space: contact and discourse without social responsibilities or conventions—autonomy and connectedness. Workshops however only happen at irreg-ular time intervals. They presume logistical effort, such as collecting the necessary funds, selecting participants, finding a facilitator and an ade-quate yet interesting location. They are thus are not suitable for more impromptu but regular hanging out in the city.

In the Interlude dinner situation, Rahman deplores the fact that there are no nice "family-style" restaurants in Dhaka to hang out in; that is some-thing he enjoys in Kathmandu. On another occasion, we talk about the fact that many artists in Dhaka invite me to their homes, whereas in Kath-mandu, I am asked to meet in their studios, in collective spaces, at cafes and restaurants. In Rahman's opinion, this is because the existence of the latter is very limited in Dhaka. Almost cynically, he tells me that people literally have no other choice but to invite me to their home and offer me lunch or dinner.[1087] Rahman's assumption is specifically related to my fieldwork, yet his comment also pertains to being in the city in a more gen-eral sense. In Kathmandu, I regularly encountered groups of young peo-ple sitting in public spaces, especially around temples. Further, tea *pasals* (shops), *momo* shops (Nepali-style dumplings), cafes, eateries, and spaces like the Nagarjun National Park or the Botanical gardens offer places for socialization in or near the urban center. In New Dhaka, I often had trou-ble finding a place to hang out by myself. Apart from Dhanmondi Park, or the occasional coffee chain, there are few places that offer a safe, quiet, and comfortable atmosphere to just be and meet people. Moreover, the type of places Rahman enjoys in Kathmandu (and wishes for in Dhaka) imply the spending of money and thus are not convenient, especially for young artists.

Rahman's comment about his Nepali friend's plan to open a space for students alludes to a related issue. The Fine Arts Campus is a place of free-dom, of affordable foods, and ample hang out spots. While hanging out at a tea shop near the Fine Arts Faculty of Dhaka University with a group of students, I was jokingly informed that *charukola* (literally: fine arts) quite tellingly also refers to *cha* (tea), *ru(ti)* (bread), and *kala* (banana), a contrac-tion of the students typical foods (typical because they are affordable).

1087   FDE, MR, February 2015.

But Charukola is also exclusively a place for students. Once artists graduate, they no longer have access to this space on a regular basis. Facilities like on-campus dormitories, studio spaces, libraries, and canteens are no longer available to them. Freshly graduated artists, especially if they are not originally from Dhaka or Kathmandu, thus have no accessible space to practice or talk about art within the city, let alone to experience the type of freedom to which they have grown accustomed.

Moreover, the dense urban living conditions imply not only social, but also spatial constraints. Both in Bangladesh and in Nepal, most young artists I worked with still live in their parents' home. Alternatively, they are married, have children, or live in joint families with elder relatives. They often do not have a separate studio in the house, and don't have enough money to rent one externally. Private space, which for the large majority still means the family home, thus is often associated with social obligations; from assisting with household chores to being social during the day. Privacy in general is rare in the city. One artist explained that many houses in Dhaka are built almost window to window and the neighbors therefore are "never far away." They insinuated that these neighbors were very observant and would become suspicious of frequent, larger get-togethers.[1088] Owners, especially of middle class residencies, are weary of too much foot-traffic. They control the entrance to their buildings through guards and door attendants.

Resulting from both the spatial and social confinements, the need arises for spaces to continue artistic development, experiment, and exchange, especially after graduation. Such spaces need to be free from the constrictions experienced in wider society, a fact that often also excludes the established institutions, such as the National Academies. Workshops can fulfill this function only temporarily. While collectives such as Vasl (Pakistan) consciously operate entirely in the fluid form of workshops, most artist-led initiatives I worked with gradually felt the need to establish more permanent forms and spaces. Drik and KHOJ have expanded into multi-layered institutions. Britto and Sattya have managed to establish fixed spaces that can serve multiple purposes.[1089] Their rooms operate as studios, working spaces, galleries, workshop locations, residency accommodations, and hang out spaces. Britto for instance has effectively used a loophole in the dense urban and social fabric by establishing Britto Space in a semi-commercial building. This location is more anonymous in the sense that neither the other tenants nor the owners have control over who goes in and out, and after the shops close in the late evening there is little to no traffic in the lower two stories, which guarantees a certain degree of privacy and freedom. Other initiatives make do in sometimes

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1088   FDE, A, 2014.
1089   After the end of my research period, and during writing, the Sattya Media Arts Collective moved from its original location behind the Jawalakhel Zoo to a new residence in Ekantakuna (Patan). The new residence still seems to have multiple purposes.

creative ways. Bindu operates from Darshandharai and Shrestha's apartment-cum-studio, offering a place for hanging out, for residencies, and for talks. PC uses its offices as workshop space and occasionally also for hanging out. This versatility exemplifies that it is not so much the physical nature and the available facilities—despite being a welcome add-on—but the people working and meeting there that create the value of these spaces.

The face-to-face contact in hanging-out situations is an important part of belonging in the art field. Nowadays, hanging out, or any other social situation for that matter, cannot be imagined without new media. Everything can be researched in seconds, located through map applications, photographed, and recorded. More classical formats of documentation, like guest books or attendance lists, are still in use during talk programs and exhibition openings. Nevertheless, digital media have become an important source and propagator of information. Most artists own and carry a digital camera or a camera phone. They use it to capture their environment, be it senior photographers dancing at the *CM* party (see Interlude: Lunch–Dinner–Party) or visiting a particular art event, such as an exhibition opening or artist talk. Many of these photos find their way to social media and are thus shared with a wider artist community. They create a digital repository of who was where, with whom, doing what. This information chronicles the collaborations, alliances, trends, tastes, and values that are effective in the art field. The repository it creates allows absentees (and researchers like me) to keep informed about what is happening. On the other hand, and more than once during my fieldwork, I met people who knew exactly which artist studios I had visited and which openings I had attended, because they had recognized me in tagged Facebook images. This practice borders on intense scrutiny, but also expresses the values that mark one's belonging to the art community. As Daniel Miller argues, any community, whether digital or face-to-face, is shaped by both negative connotations, like surveillance, control, and interference, and positive values, like care about people's well-being, interest in their practices, or concern for their health.[1090] Further, Facebook fosters "multisemiotic" forms of discourse, which can lead to entire discussions, even disputations taking place in the comment section of posted articles, photos, or videos.[1091] One artist bemoaned that Facebook has made it so easy for many people to join in one discussion that it has started to replace face-to-face hanging out. Artists, poets, and musicians who used to meet up for tea and *adda* (conversation) nowadays debate their opinions on Facebook, they explained. This might be the case for specific instances, but I did not observe a decline in hanging out. In fact, I agree with Michaelsen that digital media is (at least currently) not replacing the "tedious work" of

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1090   Miller, *Tales from Facebook*, 24.
1091   Sharma, "Beyond Social Networking," 506.

multi-scalar relation building that is so decisive for my research partners' positioning in the art field.[1092]

The time passed in face-to-face hanging-out situations is crucial to build solidarities and promote group identity.[1093] It is about building and maintaining relationships with people from the field from which artists themselves emerged. Moreover, especially on the sidelines of large events like *CM* or *DAS*, it is about connecting with people in other fields (vertically and horizontally). Through the creation of a multi-scalar network of connections, my research partners extend the values that their understanding of the local artist community builds on to a larger idea of a translocal art community. This community transgresses the vertical and the horizontal autonomy of the field by establishing connections with like-minded people and thus including them in the network of emerging contemporaneity. Consider for instance my last encounter with Lipi and Rahman at artist Catrine Val's apartment in Kassel, Germany in August 2017. We discuss our experiences of *documenta* 14, we share foods contributed by everybody around the dinner table, we take photos that almost instantly appear on Facebook, and we all agree on how much better it is to stay with friends than in a hotel. Rahman and Lipi met Val during *PKTM* in 2016, where she was participating in a residency organized by PC and facilitated by Rahman.[1094] The latter had been invited to curate this residency after he met PC director Kakshapati during *CM* 2014 in Dhaka. Kakshapati's participation in the *CM* in turn, was the result of her long-standing relationship with Drik founder Shahidul Alam. This series of interconnections, to which many other globally spanning connections could be added, perfectly illustrates the organic but deliberate expansion of this contemporary art network. The types of connections between nodes in the network may vary, from professional gallery representation to marriage, and from short-lived complicity to more durable institutions, but they always favor and stimulate the value of decentered, reciprocal, and multi-scalar exchange.

In the lunch example in the Interlude, Darshandhari explains that Britto founder Rahman played a significant role in the foundation of Bindu in Nepal. His engagement is reminiscent of Pooja Sood's support for Britto and the other South Asian collectives and Alam's role in encouraging the foundation of PC in Nepal. It also recalls the origins of Britto, based on its co-founders' experiences with an artist-run space in Germany. These examples are expressions of the respective actor's conviction that platforms for exchange, freedom of expression, and collective engagement are crucial for the development of an alternative contemporaneity. Moreover, they highlight their wish to expand the multi-scalar network I trace. The emic categories of community and friendship used by my research

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1092   Michaelsen, "Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age," 309.
1093   Jeffrey, "Timepass," 471.
1094   See the *PKTM* homepage for a residency description and a list of other participants: "Residency: Mixed-Media Residency," Photo Kathmandu, updated August 11, 2016, https://archive.photoktm.com/2016/residency.

partners point to the affinities that these categories are based on, the openness, mutual respect, and the willingness to collaborate on a multilateral and decentered level. These are expressed in the conventions of remaining informed about the community-members and their activities, taking part in hanging out, contributing to meals, offering one's guest room or bed, and subsuming political, religious, ethnic, socio-economic, and caste-related opinions under the shared practice of contemporary art. The invocation of community denotes a shared mindset, a common claim to freedom of choice and experimentation, and the desire to expand the multi-scalar agency of contemporary artists.

New media and the English language are crucial tools in the expansion of these values from a local face-to-face community to an imagined translocal community of contemporary artists. This expanded community represents an idea—a potentiality. The prerequisite for claiming membership or being perceived as a member of this community is to participate in the symbolic and material production of contemporary art and to subscribe to the above-mentioned conventions of contact. Access to economical accommodation, family-style dinners, and good company in localities all over the world are assets of this contact. Others include the expansion of professional relationships to curators, art managers, gallerists, and art collectors. The fact that these connections become independent of locality—that they can potentially connect any actor or locality on any scale—marks the community's translocal quality. The dinner in Kassel emphasizes this quality: the connections that were temporarily situated in Kassel during the *documenta* 14 could technically be situated anywhere in the world, as long as there are two or more members of the emerging contemporary art field hanging out and adhering to its conventions. For these situations to be conceivable and enacted, there needs to be a mutual agreement to emphasize practice-related affinities over other socio-economic, cultural, and political differences.

Independence from locality and valuation of practice over background, however, does not engender "placelessness," as is imagined to be "celebrated" in the art world. We are not in a deterritorialized global utopia where artists and curators are free to circulate, with nationality and ethnicity no longer mattering.[1095] The translocal community of contemporary artists that emerges from and through my research partners based in Nepal and Bangladesh is neither egalitarian nor deterritorialized. On the contrary, one of its core values is the continued interrogation of the circumscriptions of locality and cultural practice through transcultural brokerage. Resulting from the artists' collective engagement and their mobility, this brokerage (whether latent or manifest) constantly questions, contests, and delegitimizes the status quo of effective visualities, institutional boundaries, religious norms, representation, gender constructs, and the many other issues that have served as examples in this

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1095   Harris, "In and Out of Place," 33–34.

book. The practices I outline then correspond to the three defining and scale-invariant characteristics that Buchholz distills in her analytical reduction of Bourdieu's "field."[1096] My research partners act on the firm belief that their contemporary art practice is distinctive, independent, and more valuable than that of other fields (horizontal autonomy), and that which is circumscribed by the national fields of art they emerged from (vertical autonomy). This belief undoubtedly comes with a new set of asymmetries, especially between the younger and older generations of artists, as well as between the urban, English-educated middle classes and other art practitioners. It excludes a large part of the national artistic field and visualizes more intransigent positions. Through the format of the collective and the multi-scalar network of connections that I retrace, however, they are creating a new multilateral and decentered peer system. This system is based on practice-related affinities rather than socio-cultural background, and thus crosscuts older socio-cultural and political hierarchies. Lastly, the artist run initiatives (from perennial international workshops to permanent exhibition spaces) serve as infrastructure. This leaves me to conclude that my research partners' practices mark the emergence of a translocal field of contemporary art production in(between) Nepal and Bangladesh.

1096   Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field?"

Final Thoughts

A TRANSLOCAL CONTEMPORARY

This book set out to look at a contemporary situation in the artistic field(s) of Nepal and Bangladesh marked by transcultural contact. My aim was to provide a nuanced record of the spatial, institutional, and socio-cultural mobilities within these fields, and through them, to develop a refined theoretical approach to examine the processes of transfer and exchange commonly lumped together under the header of globalization. I was especially interested in mapping a situation marked by actors in locales outside the center who are not claiming a position in a global contemporary, but actively shaping a dynamic, multi-scalar contemporary field through their positionings.

The widely established notion of a "global contemporary"[1097] is marked by the persistent belief in the authority of European and American actors, institutions, and sites in defining artistic values, not only in Euro-America but in a global art field. Researchers, curators, and art writers adhering to this theory have created the impression of a deterritorialized, omnipresent global visual culture to which all contemporary artists, no matter their origin or current base, have free access.[1098] However, the idea of a synchronous and open global artistic field hides asymmetries that remain constantly visible to the artists attempting to move in it, especially those based in what is perceived as the periphery. The contemporary practice of artists from the so-called periphery is treated like a local application of a global trend. The events they organize are discussed as local replicas of globally travelling formats, and their fields are localized in a territory-culture construct, celebrated as new additions to the contemporary art map, or deplored as sites at the "end of the global development spectrum."[1099] As a result of these localizing practices, artists are treated as spokespeople for a specific nation-culture.[1100] The tropes that continue to locate innovation and modernity solely in the center of the presumed global visual culture and their accompanying asymmetries go hand in hand with economic

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1097   Bydler, *Global Art World*; Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, *Global Contemporary*.
1098   Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art"; Harris, "In and Out of Place"; Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*.
1099   Liechty, *Out Here in Kathmandu*, 4.
1100   Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 47.

disadvantages, visa restrictions, and the lack of infrastructural support in the national fields of art from which they emerge. Together, these mechanisms impede the motility of artists outside the center.

Above all, this book shows how over the past two decades the young generation of artists in Nepal and Bangladesh have used the format of the collective as a strategy to level these asymmetries. They push into new spaces using diverse formats, from public art projects to international perennial events. Thereby they not only grow their reach of action by connecting to diverse actors in and outside the field, they also actively contest the way their localities are represented and coproduce the fields from which they emerged. For researchers working in the mobile center of the artistic field, the connections that artists build to the center (its institutions, events, and actors) are most evidently visible. Although I had worked in Bangladesh before starting my research, I became aware of its contemporary art scene only through its first appearance at the *Venice Biennale* in 2011. Our investigation into contemporary art practices needs to go beyond unilateral local–global connections lest we continue to comprehend the contemporary situation exclusively through the entry of the Other into a eurocentric global field, as has been the dominant perspective since Jean-Hubert Martin's exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre George Pompidou in 1989.[1101]

Anthropology makes it possible to "follow" the multi-scalar positionings of actors as a collective strategy, from their perspective.[1102] It allows for a dynamic, multilateral, and decentered record of contemporary practices. This book is the result of five years of research and repeated long-term visits in Nepal and Bangladesh between 2013 and 2017, during which I followed contemporary artists involved in collaborative action—referred to here as my research partners—from the Venice-based large-scale art event, to a street art festival in Old Dhaka, to an alternative art space on Green Road in Dhanmondi. I followed two archival photography collections from a heritage building in Old Dhaka, to the Patan Museum, to a Newari neighborhood in Kathmandu. I followed the medium of performance art through the practice of one artist, and I followed my research partners into more intimate and personal hanging-out situations. Through this multi-sited and multi-scalar ethnography, I was able to observe the cultural brokerage in which artists manifestly or unconsciously engage while being mobile.[1103]

Through their physical and digital mobility, artists are exposed to hitherto unknown people, practices, ideas, and visualities. These encounters represent an "outside" to the discourses they emerged from, a state which they often experience as creative freedom—an undominated space from

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1101   Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art," 58.
1102   Marcus, "Ethnography In/Of the World System"; see also Siegenthaler, "Towards an Ethnographic Turn."
1103   Von der Höh, Jaspert, and Oesterle, "Courts, Brokers and Brokerage."

which creative realization can arise.[1104] The new experiences and the resulting creations transgress the visual discourses that artists emerged from or dwell in; they question hitherto acquired knowledge, delegitimize hegemonic visualities, and unhinge settled circumscriptions. It is this transgression—the contestation of established boundaries, the experimentation with and the formulation of novel approaches—that turns mediation into transcultural brokerage. Because this brokerage presupposes mobility, my research partners feel an urgency to connect beyond their face-to-face contacts. Yet the developments and changes that they pursue through their brokerage are in many cases directed at this face-to-face community (their colleagues, partners, and friends) and the locality in which they dwell. Transcultural brokerage thus hinges on a balance between a tendency toward autonomy and a desire to connect.

The Britto Arts Trust (Britto) uses the *Venice Biennale* as a platform to actively question the socio-cultural and religious norms that divide people in Bangladesh. Tayeba Begum Lipi investigates gender roles, while Mahbubur Rahman examines the repercussions of religious division in daily practices, like the treatment of livestock. Promotesh Das Pulak more directly contests the cultural labor of the state that goes into creating an identity for the comparatively young nation of Bangladesh. This identity, promoted by political propaganda, schoolbooks, national media, and other institutions is based on the construction of a unified Bengali people, a "superethnos" that continues to legitimize the nation's claim for political independence.[1105] Pulak's manipulation of archival photography from the 1971 war questions these unilateral national narratives. *Echoed Moments in Time* creates a space of encounter for alternative identities—a space where more inclusive narratives become imaginable.[1106] Through the exhibition in Venice, Pulak and his Britto colleagues connect to a young generation of intellectuals, writers, and bloggers in Bangladesh demanding the negotiation of a more inclusive conception of national identity. The ability of the young generation to foster a rethinking of current socio-political processes seems even more relevant at a time when political organs use their power to actively silence such critical voices. The case of photographer and Drik founder Shahidul Alam comes to mind. In August 2018, Alam was charged under Section 57 of the Information Technology and Communication Act (2006) for the dissemination of critical comments about the nation-state in relation to protests over road safety.[1107] His arrest, although cause for deep concern, is also a testimony to the crucial role artists have in brokering the concerns of wider civil society.

1104   Clark, "Asian Artists."
1105   Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*.
1106   Pinney, *Coming of Photography in India*.
1107   Khademul Islam, "Jail Time in Bangladesh," *Himal Southasian*, September 14, 2018, accessed September 24, 2018, http://himalmag.com/jail-time-in-bangla desh-shahidul-alam-central-jail/.

I chose Britto's presence at the 54th *Venice Biennale* as my first case study because it manifests my entry into the field of contemporary art production and because the artists' works led me to a theoretical investigation of the nation-states that figure in the title of this book: Bangladesh and Nepal. Despite growing critique for its nation-based format, the biennial in Venice continues to be perceived as the "*grande dame*" of perennial exhibitions by artists, researchers, and publics alike.[1108] But due to the strategies of young contemporary artists such as those I investigated in Nepal and Bangladesh, events outside the established art centers have become crucial nodes for the distribution of cultural and social capital. Since its initial edition in 2000, *Chobi Mela (CM)* has become an important node for the forging and sustaining of alliances with a worldwide photographic community. Further, festivals like *CM* and *Photo Kathmandu (PKTM)* emphasize the artists' dynamic relation with their locality. Through their organizers' strategic interventions, photography and art become instrumental in unsettling fixed notions of "locality," rethinking it as a complex matrix of various rhythms and socio-cultural and political entanglements. Contributing artists claim the right to represent a majority world and to contest hegemonic visualities by bringing ordinary people (in the form of archival studio photography) or topics like gender and sex (Lipi's "Room of My Own") into the discourse. The contemporary generation transgresses the relative autonomy of their national art fields, vertically, by connecting with funding agencies, curators, and artist-run platforms on other scales, and horizontally, by fostering interdisciplinary exchange and consciously intervening in socio-political processes. This is part of the artists' avant-garde practice, making them desirable to an art market that craves newness. Rising actors like the Samdani Art Foundation can be powerful allies in transgressing the nationally circumscribed fields and connecting individual artists to art markets. Yet accessing markets is only one of my research partners' avenues and it often happens on an individual, rather than a collective, level. In collective initiatives, which was my research focus, the strategy is primarily focused on building solidarities and improving the conditions for contemporary art production. Here, erstwhile allies can become competitors in the claim for authority of representation and defining artistic values.

The motivations to launch perennial events are multilayered and go beyond the intention to establish relations with the center, i.e., to get on the global art map. The dynamic strategies and know-how underlying large-scale events, however, can only be captured through long-term ethnography. Being in the field before, during, and after events allowed me for instance to posit *PKTM*'s archival photography exhibitions as part of photo.circle's (PC) extensive strategy to use the visual archive, the Nepal Picture Library (NPL), not as a fixed repository for personal memorabilia but as a dynamic generator of vernacular stories; in ever new constellations, the photographs (re)write a more inclusive national history. Due to

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1108   Bydler, *Global Art World*, 100.

the multi-scalar intent of their strategies, the collectives that shape these events (by organizing or participating in them) contest the national institutions' authority in defining the values of art and culture. The events become platforms that connect like-minded actors, ranging from inhabitants of specific neighborhoods to international photography communities. Through these multi-scalar connections, my research partners initiate a new peer system, in which the meaning of their work neither depends on national institutions nor the centers of the art world. Instead, it arises from the shopkeeper, who agrees to exhibit an artwork in their shop, from the local authorities who allow their community center to be used as an exhibition ground, from women in Bangladesh who feel represented by Lipi's work, from young photographers in South Asia who are looking for visual inspiration beyond Western media representations, from international curators who connect to the values of multilateral contact, from supranational funding agencies, and from collectors and buyers.

Moreover, large-scale events do not happen in a vacuum. They create momentum, but for my research partners, they are only one part of a year-round program. *1mile²* or *Kolor Kathmandu (KK)* are month-long projects that, despite the ephemerality of the site-specific artworks, cause long-term engagements with the city, be they a new consciousness for cultural and architectural heritage, or an appreciation for street art. Both case studies constitute examples for a holistic approach to the city that recognizes its different fabrics and interconnectedness. Fluid formats like street art festivals, workshops, and residencies also reveal the need for more stable, continued institutions. One strategy of transforming the nationally circumscribed art fields in a more substantial and lasting way is to engage in higher education. Alam founded the Pathshala South Asia Media Institute in order to guarantee a more structured inflow of knowledge beyond perennial workshops. A similar motivation pushed Sujan Chitrakar to establish the Center for Art and Design at the Kathmandu University (KU). Through these diverse formats and approaches, each based on long-term personal experience and tailored to specific desired outcomes, the artist-initiatives become "spurring factors;" they manipulate, crosscut, and transgress social, disciplinary, and geographical boundaries of national fields.

THE ROLE OF COLLECTIVE EFFORT

I have devoted a large part of this book to describing the various instances in which artist collectives become important driving forces in the artistic fields of Nepal and Bangladesh. The collective hub at *Unseen Amsterdam* is the latest, but surely not the last, expression of their accomplishment. The recognition of their cutting-edge art practices by the organizers in Amsterdam emphasizes their continued transgression of established field boundaries: their experimentation with both inherited practices and new mediums and techniques, as well as their conscious engagement with socio-cultural and political issues. While the global contemporary

framework acknowledges the art market's craving for innovation and novelty, its underlying diffusionist rhetoric does not recognize artists working in the periphery as the creators of new visualities, meanings, and discourses. Rather, it constrains them as novel expressions of already established formulations. It is important to consider my research partners' multi-scalar positionings alongside the prevailing asymmetries in the global field of art production. Their positionings are not always the result of strategic choices; in many cases, they are born out of a necessity—an attempt to use every accessible resource in order to gain agency. The use of public spaces as exhibition sites during *PKTM* for instance is primarily due to the lack of available galleries and museums in Nepal. Similarly, Britto's hands-on mentality and convivial place-making during the installation of their exhibition in Venice resulted from a lack of financial resources. Hard work underlies the young generation's flexibility and dynamic scope of action. This is the reason why the format of the collective is so crucial.

"Collective" is an emic category that I initially used as a *Denkfigur*,[1109] an idea to examine creative collective practices. Over the course of my research, I realized that the collectivities I observed consisted of more than specific collaborative initiatives—they mark a tension between affinity and autonomy. On the one hand, the format of the collective offers emotional and practical support in terms of shared responsibilities, economic resources, socio-cultural capital, and the transmission of decentered and multilateral knowledge through workshops, shared libraries, and talk programs. On the other hand, it facilitates the experience of freedom: creative freedom, freedom from disciplinary and personal norms, from social expectations, responsibilities, and rules. At the same time, being a member of a collective requires commitment in the form of time and energy spent for the collective good, and in the form of forwarded socio-cultural capital. The position of the collective in the field can substantially shift individual positions. Yet collectivity is also strategically used to reach multi-positionality; it is directed towards the needs of the local artist's community, and serves a desire for global connection.

One of the most important characteristics of the artist collective is its inclusion of different ethnic, religious, caste, and gender identities. Over the past decades, class has become a new identifier. However, this notion of class is less related to socio-economic background than to actual everyday life practice: The vast majority of my research partners live in or near urban areas. They hold a university degree, speak English, and are, to a certain extent, mobile. At the same time, many have experienced economic insecurities during their lives and continue to depend on travel grants, networks of hospitality, the occasional odd job, or the support of their family. Irrespective of their individual backgrounds, collectively they can cut across older social hierarchies and recent socio-political conflicts.

1109   Mader, "Einleitung."

Less established situations on the margins of the artistic field, like the international workshop or hanging out, are crucial nodes for the negotiation of this notion of collectivity. The workshop proactively fosters multilateral, decentered, and mutual transfers of knowledge about new mediums, techniques, and current visualities. It is this multilateral exchange and its reciprocal intent, paired with the practice of transcultural brokerage and the resulting unsettling of established discourses, that distinguishes "contact" from mere "impact."[1110] While the workshop creates contact by intent, the hanging-out situation serves this purpose more latently. Talking about other members of the field allows like-minded actors to keep updated and connected—to feel some sort of belonging to a community. This idea of community is formed through an extension of the values of collectivity to a larger group of people—face-to-face, as the international participants in the workshop, or imagined as a potential translocal artist community. The idea of community, irrespective of scale and form of contact, points to shared behavior: transcultural brokerage as the basis for the formulation of new ideas and practices paired with the tedious work of multi-scalar institution building. Rather than on presumed socio-cultural communalities defined by geographical proximity or national belonging, my research partners' reference to community indicates a conscious focus on "affinities,"[1111] such as shared challenges and successes, an openness for new ideas, mutual respect, the conventions of hanging out, and the interest in and responsibility of the community's well-being. However, this does not mean that individual positions are of no consequence; they can become substantial motivations to create art or lead to collective reflections on the politics of representation and identity.

The invocation of community does not actually determine affinities,[1112] but it can have a galvanizing effect on collaborative force. I argue that in the case of the young generation of contemporary artists in Nepal and Bangladesh, it brings into being a new translocal art field. The actors in this field, my research partners, believe that the practices they share are different from those in other fields. There are transgressions of other fields, conscious and latent, vertical and horizontal, and collaborations across disciplines; the field's autonomy is relative. Through their connections on multiple scales, my research partners have created a system of peer criteria, in which supranational funding organizations determine the field's values as much as the shopkeeper offering his space during *PKTM*. Lastly, initially fluid formats such as perennial workshops or small events have been crucial vantage points from which to negotiate more durable connections and spaces. Over the past two decades the artists have been engaged in developing an artist-run infrastructure that operates complementary to, and sometimes also in competition with, established infrastructure on other scales.

1110   Kravagna, *Transmoderne*.
1111   Rezende, "Building Affinity Through Friendship," 92–93.
1112   Postill, "Localizing the Internet."

LOCALITY FROM A TRANSCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE— TRANSLOCAL ETHNOGRAPHY

How does this discussion of collectivity and contemporaneity contribute to the growing field of transcultural studies? This book maps contemporaneity beyond universally aimed and homogenizing theories like the global contemporary, as well as beyond anthropological relativisms that often treat research sites (even if conceived as multi-sited) as autonomous units. The latter runs the risk of presupposing communalities based on shared geography, religion, or language, rather than following what actually engenders connection. Contemporary art is a transgressive force. By following its practice through a polymorphous translocal ethnography, I investigated its autonomy—the definitions, meanings, canons, and infrastructure active in this field—through processes of mobility and the connections built by artists in Nepal and Bangladesh. I showed how every situation, every field, and therefore every locality—as the lived experience of space—is interconnected and multi-layered. And every connection, every flow, is temporarily situated. Only in conceiving locality through this dynamic process of shaping and reshaping can we overcome conceptions of globalization as deterritorialized flows and of localities as territorialized expressions. And only in looking at shared practices and affinities, rather than presuming established commonalities, can we overcome the academic traditions of methodological nationalism and area studies.

The uniqueness of the anthropological approach is its ability to investigate contemporary art beyond established spaces of material and symbolic art productions, such as the studio, the museum, or the gallery. By applying anthropology's most crucial method, participant observation, I gathered empirical knowledge about what it means to be part of the contemporary fields of art in(between) Bangladesh and Nepal.[1113] I learned about contemporary art practice not only from observing and talking to people, but from actively partaking in projects: I helped to install exhibitions, assisted in the realization of art installations, wrote catalog texts, and cooperated with the documentation team of a festival. I accompanied artists into private homes, tight knit *tols* (neighborhoods), classrooms, and shared lazy afternoons. Only together did these localities and the related practices give a glimpse into the dynamic and processual formation of contemporaneity. They show how a new generation of contemporary artists use collective effort and collaborative action to contribute to the production of their localities and their artistic fields. Their cultural and spatial brokerage is instrumental in unhinging the status quo of socio-cultural and political processes, hegemonic claims to locality, eurocentric canons, and outdated curricula—and is instrumental in shaping them anew.

1113   Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 342.

A QUEST FOR NEW ENTRIES?

The work of the collectives mentioned in this book—Britto Arts Trust, Bindu—A Space for Artists, photo.circle, Drik, Sattya Media Arts Collective, ArTree, and many others—distinguishes itself through a focus on affinity. Its members are driven by a common interest in furthering art through reciprocal and decentered exchange. What happens if these collectives become too institutionalized? Too commodified? Canonized?

By writing a book about the emerging contemporaneity in(between) the artistic fields of Nepal and Bangladesh, I have contributed to the canonization of the collectives and artists mentioned. I have also engaged in the quest for new entries by bringing Nepal and Bangladesh into the academic discourse of visual culture and contemporary art. Neither the artists, nor we as researchers or curators, can avoid this quest. For my research partners, the strategy of multi-positionality seems to have paid off. It allows them to maintain their flexibility to jump scales, contest asymmetries, and broaden their reach. For us, I believe that it is important not to succumb to ready-made and generalizing theories, nor treat our case studies as self-contained units. Instead, we must recognize the motivations that drive the actors we work with, the asymmetries they face, and the boundaries they transgress. From there, we can contribute to the construction of bases for multilateral exchange and transcultural solidarities.

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10

HEIDELBERG STUDIES
ON TRANSCULTURALITY

Artist collectives emerge as driving forces in the art field. They activate new spaces as locales of artistic practice and display. They shape emerging formats, from neighborhood arts projects to large-scale biennials. In their practice, the artists challenge established notions of art as well as hegemonic circumscriptions of locality. This book results from a long-term engagement with artists in Nepal and Bangladesh and follows an actor-centered approach to unravel notions of contemporaneity and collectivity. Its focus on collaborative art practices together with its multi-scalar and translocal perspective urges us to rethink the use of terms such as the city, the region or the global that often transport hierarchies.

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