

Jeebesh Bagchi - Interview for Khoj Book

(<http://www.khojworkshop.org/project/12245>)

The Khoj Book Interview

Jeebesh Bagchi (artist, curator and new media practitioner) speaks to Ravi Agarwal (artist and environmentalist) – November 2008

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J - What are your expectation of this conversation?

R – I, hope to unravel some of my engagements in life, and how they lead to some of the work I do. Some of which leads to the art world, but some of it also leads to other forms. I think that my being called an ‘artist’ should be a combination of these, since it is not about production of art alone, but also about engagement and thinking about that.

J – Lets look at various different intersections of your practice and then try to see how they help us understand more about the way, and the kind of work you are at present engaging with. I would like to start with something that always intrigues we – this two big, weighty terms called the activist and artist.

There is a very nice formulation by Irit Rogoff who said an activist is someone interested in the uninvited speech. Most of the interesting activism that you always refer to has this quality of that sudden appearance of that speech, which has rigor and presence, but also calls into order, a reconfiguration. So would this proposition about the uninvited speech give a sense of the kind of practice you have been engaged with over the last 20 years?

R – I am not sure if speech is un-invited, or in-vided.– there are moments in time, when different things are invited. These invitations may not be obvious, but I think the speech also is invited through that possibility.

An activist, or an artist, does not operate out of the context of

that moment. I think there are many things, which are playing around that time which can causes the speech to appear.

Within that, who gets ready to speak, to me is a part of a layered personal script, not created at that moment, but one which I have been playing in my case, ever since I remember, since I was maybe 5 years old. It seems unchanged and could be my personal location in the world around me.

The earliest memories of my childhood are when I used to sit on a rope swing in my parent's house's backyard under the mango tree and watch the squirrels run up and down it. It was a closed backyard with high walls, like my little cave. I used to try and trap the squirrel; under a cane basket but the moment I trapped them I used to leave them.

It was the fun of winning and trapping, but not of keeping them there. So that kind of quiet space, from which I operate, has roots in my life, in many ways. And its from that space that I continuously try to work; so, you see this reflects in all kinds of things I do. These reflections are in the art production work, or in my activism work. It is hard for me to change my script outside it, and it has shaped my engagements.

For example, it has made me interested in what I call the 'marginal.' An engagements with the world though its margins, but also ideas of work- labour or separation of man and nature.

J - In this beautiful back story to your own self, there is an interesting personal script and the idea of the cave and of 'less.' I am intrigued if there is some kind of doing away with excess, in the sense of precision. How would you connect these with your engagements?

R – I think the idea of less, or being reduced to the essentials, reflects in all that I do, where there is a constant desire to be minimal in both form and expression. And it has been true for many other things. My 'cave' and 'engagement' connection results in my desire to make my presence, but not to intrude beyond a degree. There is a withdrawal. Like the trapping and releasing of the squirrel. This provides to me the challenge of the everyday and of discovering new boundaries to break. It

keeps me alive.

J – Are they a constant part the idea of the enjoyment that you have to do with the work.

The camera was one great tool for that, because it allowed me put an aesthetic order to the world. That frame is very defining place, where I can see the world the way I want to look, and shut off all I do not want. Secondly it became a safe space to operate from, like from a cave. From my early childhood it became my biggest friend. I started showing work much later, 20 years after I started shooting. So it was just a very personal engagement, and in a sense, my inability to deal all the multiple chaos which the world presented to me. And in some senses it became a psychological escape as well.

J – When I saw your work back in 1993, there was a certain from of a relaxed, non-angst ridden way of dwelling and meeting people in your work. It reminded me of a lecture by Veena Das, where she says that the everyday is an achievement. Later in your work on labour your photographs held the same alertness to that achievement of the daily life, and the praise of someone committed to that living. It struck me as not interested in the representational of the marginal, which a lot of photography has sunk to, but as a way of doing away with the marginal as a category and entering into daily life as achievement. When you look back on those images, do they become a photograph, or part of a riddle of engagement that may be surfacing in a different kind of aesthetic form that you have been working towards these days.

R – What I call the marginal, is in terms of people, ideas, events that are the margins of the mainstream.

There is a desire now to say something more, because I think there is a deeper feeling involved which I could not disengage with, to go beyond the document, and into a different space in myself. I think the practice becomes different, to reflect that kind of space, not only for art production but the other work as well.

J- In Documenta 11, you were struck by the recognition of the

‘global moment,’ which was very important in your own cultural landscape, a recognition that the world had changed. It took you long years after Documenta 11 to actually rediscover a certain way of entering it again.

Besides the global moment, in your own engagements, you also use the phrase ‘the world’. It seems to be something you weave through continuously to make sense of, participate, disengage, engage, withdraw, but it’s always about something that is expansive for you.

How do you reflect on these two terms, ‘the global’ and ‘the world,’ both of which you intellectually inhabit but in very different ways?

R- The idea of life and death is very present in my mind. It gives me a great sense of the immediate. The world to me is a very metaphysical term. The world territory is defined by my body, my ability to feel, touch, experience and to think – to be.

The global is more of a political term. It’s about the society we live in, and it is what I’m deeply interested in and in what is going on around me. Particularly so, in the ideas about power, because I think a lot of what I am has been shaped by the institutions of power, playing itself out. It also leads to my work on nature. But I feel more politically about nature because the separation of man and nature is an idea of power. It’s based on conquering and subordination, as opposed to co-existence which is based on the concept of unity.

I think my movement from pure documentary, was an attempt to think of how one engages with different modes and forms. Since 2006 my engagement has constantly shifted, but also deepened. It led me do the first self per formative work, which I call “The Shroud.” It was not meant as work, it was just something I wanted to do. I could not have done that in 2002, but I did it in 2006. And it was also a freeing of the self, because the possibility of the expression ‘free’ is the possibility of the self. It was no longer about any one medium, photography or another, but about the idea of something. A medium, as skill to me is a boundary which is meant to be broken. Boundaries have discipline, but discipline is not a limitation, but a way of

moving ahead. I started experimenting with video, as it allowed me to break the frame, and introduce time and sound in a very different way than in a photograph. A video in the art space is very different to me than in a cinema space. Time can be non-linear, non-narrative, and be 'no time' though there is movement. Doing my first video was not hard, but to get to that point was a long journey, and I had to shed many many things before I could do it. I think it has been an intense thinking and engagement in my own mind, which has allowed the travel into this space.

J- The more you now to talk about yourself and/ or your⁵ practice is the moment where you want to actually seem to want to be silent, or withdraw. This is a double bind of a public life of the self in any practice: when you become the most precise and pursue what you want to do, is the moment when they want you to say the least. It has the danger of seeming to fetishes the idea of the self, or seeming aloof.

Your own practice, over a period of time, both art and activism have done away with the idea of the stance, and become more contingent on specific engagements, like a specific intellectual who is not willing to make a statement unless rigorously engaged with the specificity of thing.

So I'm just interested, what are your own thought of the way in which art practice needs to speak to your thoughts, by the way of taking a stance over things.

R- I do not hold angst about silence, because I have trust in my own self to be able to engage. This is also an assimilation time for me, and there is an honest desire for some quietude. To go within the self; to be able to consolidate the self, in some way. It could lead to many new things, to other levels or kinds of engagement. In the NGO work I do, which occupies almost 60 percent of my extended day there is a very intense public engagement, but there is also a desire to see one's role in that public life. In the art space, there is an ebb and flow, some times some of the work reflects as withdrawal but then other works comes back to an engagement.

I have been doing this for a long time, since I was small, being

intensely engaged without being engaged. For seven years I ran a manufacturing unit with 60 people working the heart of one of the most politicized industrial areas in the city. I can say I was disengaged as well, but it was a successful venture. So the self can operate in many levels in many possible ways. As the engagement become even more intense, the 'disengagement' becomes much more important.

J- What kind of institutional or practical forms of arrangements you would like to be brought alive in this city that gives a space to the kind of practice that you value in yourself and in others?

R- The city lacks conversations, real conversations. It really lacks a real social space. It's such a divided city. And they're in no place to enter that space. And if you don't belong to one of the other configurations, whether it's professional or otherwise, you just belong nowhere in the city. It's hard to define who the citizen of the city is today.

If you are not an architect, you cannot talk to an architect. If you are not an urban planner, you cannot talk to an urban planner. If you are not an environmentalist, you cannot talk to an environmentalist. The citizen as one who inhabits multiple space of the city is completely missing. It has become a highly stratified and professionalized in a way. Like a knowledge based caste system.

Democracy is not only about knowledge, there is something more. More than elections, or the rights of citizen. I really deeply miss that. I miss that in the art world, and in the environmental world. I also miss that on the road and it makes one very alienated in the city. I don't like that feeling and it adds to my wanting to withdraw from everything else around me. I personally think that this is one of the outcomes of capitalism, not only as manifested, but also as a 'desire' for capitalism of some sort. It creates this deep belief of 'capital' as the way of fulfilling one's future. Like Erich Fromm says – to have vs. to be.

In institutional public space ideally where there is a possibility of multiple conversations, a discursive place, which is

empathetic. We only have semblances of this. Also we talk of 'practice' in very fixed terminologies, and I think this is the code for exclusions. How does it help my practice, or my ability to be a richer human being? We need spaces which are not driven by the anxiety of achievement.

J- You participate in KHOJ, and have done an interesting set of works too. The inchoateness of Khoj is very interesting, and also it has globalised itself very intelligently, and is very practice based. It has created a kind of cultural eddy in the city. Ideally you should have been invited to Khoj in 2003, but it was the hostility of the art world that did not see value in inviting you earlier, while there is recognition now that the world has shifted fundamentally and many other people are slowly being invited. But how can a practice like Khoj set up a challenge to itself and re-invent itself?

R- Firstly there is a challenge of being Khoj. So mostly it has to be consumed with that challenge, and maybe it is then ask the question of its evolution.

Besides the issue of survival, is also to create a space for constantly revisiting practice. The moment the practice becomes mainstream, how does then one revisit it?

As a process based institution, it has to constantly look at the engagement with the processes themselves. That can be done through intelligently inviting the right kind of conversations within it. The edge of practice is definitely an intellectual idea. It should be done as a part of institution building, but this is an internal challenge, which all such institutions have. Not all are able to because there is a fatigue of keeping the institution alive – and they are so fragile – both in capital and intellectual terms. The danger also is that always also become so mainstream that you become irrelevant to yourself. But Khoj can, I believe.