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Nancy Adajania | Public art?

Public Art? Activating the Agoratic Condition
Delhi's *48°C Public Art Ecology*, held in December 2008, merged twin themes of environment and public art. In a series of features, the *RSA Arts & Ecology Centre* is revisiting some of highlights of the event and examining their insights.
On December 13, the cultural theorist and commentator **Nancy Adajania** delivered this paper looking traditional models of public art and wondering what relevance they have to transitional societies like India.

I shall focus, in this paper, on the political implications of public art within the Indian context. Most often, alternative art practices are seen as a spectacular manifestation of the new and a badge of belonging to the contemporary. Meanwhile, the critical gestures of analysis and contextualisation have lagged behind. Thus instead of asking what public art can mean in our context, the emphasis has been on how do we make public art in our context? As though it were a ready-to-eat meal meant for instant assimilation.

1 I must confess that my aim is to dismantle the idea that public art is a universal category which – while admitting of local variation – may nonetheless be reduced to a reproducible protocol of space use and behaviour modulation that artists develop in relation to the norms of authorities and the expectations of audiences. Rather, I wish to approach "public art" as a set of fluctuating possibilities that emerge from the conflicts and alignments of interests in specific regional contexts and historical moments – and which are, to that extent, context-specific, tactically fluid, and plural in shape, impact and residue.

2 This paper develops from a recognition of two crises in contemporary India, at the intersection of which is formed the array of practices that we describe loosely as public art. The first is the crisis of a citizenry disillusioned with the State and in quest of an alternative politics: a citizenry that is assured of its normative citizenship but is denied, in practice, its performative citizenship.[1]

The second is the crisis of an art-making that is in search of a new emplacement in relation to the urgencies of the contemporary; I am thinking here of artists who recognise that all experience today is highly politicised, that art practice is not only not immune to this, but is particularly vulnerable to surveillance, censorship and proscription; and that artists will have to participate in larger alliances of resistance. The artists have also realised that the nature of the art-work would be radically transfigured; it would assume the addresses of the expanded sculpture, sculpture-installation, video installation, social project, and conceptual probe.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS PUBLIC ART. THERE ARE ONLY ARTISTS WHO USE THE PUBLIC DOMAIN AS A MEDIUM, RESOURCE, LABORATORY, TRAINING GROUND

Where these two crises overlap, we find changes both subtle and dramatic in the role of artists, artworks and audiences and in the relationships among these.
We also find transitions of roles and contexts, production and structure, attended by a sense of opportunity and self-transformation, but also, by anxiety and uncertainty of location. Activists become artists and enter the gallery system; artists find themselves performing activist or pedagogical functions; reports on the ecology or the informal sector double as installations, even as exhibitions contrive to blur the distinction between the white cube and the ecosystem beyond its walls.

3 The situation that I have just sketched has its origins in the upheavals of the early 1990s. Before that point – and indeed, even today, in bureaucratic parlance – the term public art had a charming clarity. It denoted that category of official art which conveyed the various mythologies of the state articulated through the banal symbolisms of national progress, heroism and valour through the medium of the monument: all taking up vantage points in parks, gardens and roundabouts. Today our ideas on public art are no longer fixated on official art and state mythology, and monuments. The vision of what public space is has been radically transformed – so that, when artists intervene in the public domain, they are not making objects such as statuary, but are reflecting on and engaging with the larger social and political processes that govern the area they are working in, the neighbourhood or community with which they have formed a working relationship or an empathetic alliance.

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Poll

As an artist, are you aware of the impact your own practice has on the environment?

◯ Yes, and I consider that when chosing processes and materials.
◯ Yes, but it's better to think of the art first, and the materials and processes second.
◯ No, it's not a consideration when I make my art.

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Lucy Bell Fine Art Photography Gallery: Terry O'Neill Award Exhibition 2010
Whitechapel Gallery: Keeping it Real: An Exhibition in 4 Acts: Act 3: Current Disturbance
David Le Lay Architects: Images of London, artworks by Alex Cave

Environment

4 What is the nature of public space in India? The monopolistic claim made on public space by the state – which marks it with legislations on usage, zoning regulations, and security measures – is increasingly contested by activists, architects, designers, and artists. In their approach to public space, the official fixation on objects is replaced by an exploratory, even a transgressive commitment in processes. The results of such a commitment are not monuments, but a range of effects: from documentation and status reports, to the re-wiring of the social, political and cultural circuitry of a neighbourhood. I would cite, as examples of this paradigm shift for cultural production in public space, Shaina Anand's *Khirkiyaan* and Sarai/Ankur's Cybermohalla Project.[2] Both *Khirkiyaan* and Cybermohalla bring disparate social actors – with differential cultural and intellectual capital and degrees of freedom – together into an evolving space of discussion where the subject is their own lives, their choices, circumstances, and futures.

These evolving experiments in sociological formation and linguistic play embody, in my view, contemporary versions of what Rajeev Bhargava, following C A Bayly, describes as the socio-linguistic "ecumenes" of Mughal-dominated northern India before the advent of print technology. Bhargava speaks of each of these ecumenes as a "small, face-to-face community of poets, scholars, philosophers, urban notables and officials tied together by bonds of affection, who spoke the same language, Hindustani, and who were able to mount a critical surveillance of government and society. Members of such ecumenes had a clear idea of a distinction between just and unjust rule and public criticism of an unjust policy of the government, through a variety of modes such as poetic satire, hand-bills, speeches and theatrical performances... these ecumenes inherited the tradition of Sufi mystics and Bhakti poetry that questioned political and social authority." Bayly argues that such ecumenes were embedded within a circuit of opinion-formation that straddled the boundaries between elite and subaltern, literate and illiterate, court circle and peasant assembly; Bhargava builds on Bayly's argument that "India has long been a literacy-aware society where even illiterate people understood the importance of literacy and, together with the more literate elite, used the written media in complex and creative ways to reinforce an oral culture with its tradition of debate."[3]

5 Every claim on public space is a claim on the public imagination. It is a response to the questions: What can we imagine together? How do we imagine ourselves to be? Are there collective fantasies? Are there multiple pasts and plural futures, or a monolithic past and a preordained future? The largest and most demanding of these questions is: Are we, in fact, a collective; is the collective a site for the testing of alternatives, or a ground for mobilising conformity?

Public art, as we understand it in an assembly such as the present one, marks a series of unpredictable intersections between the desires and expectations of artists on the one hand, and their emerging, evolving audiences on the other. At points, the distinction between artist and audience, participant and observer, mentor and apprentice, dissolve – and public art achieves a degree of collegiality and collaborative energy that enriches the process of working together. The projects from which such effects arise could take one of many forms: the crafting of an object, the organising of a workshop, the protocols of a pedagogical exercise, artists collaborating with students, or artists addressing the everyday needs of a rural community.

6 Adapting a remark that Bill Viola made about video art, **I would suggest that there is, in fact, no such thing as public art. There are only artists who use the public domain as a medium, resource, laboratory, training ground for ethical practice and site of collaboration and new forms of sociality.** The term "public art" is shorthand at best, misleading at worst.

Terms like video art or installation art or public art so easily lose their meaning and become fashionable trends. Are we looking at a canon or at a spectrum of improvisations? What happens when a tactical response to institutional oppression becomes ossified into a canon? In this sense, do the categories of installation art, video art or public art result in an ossification where the transgressive develops a rule-book for its performance? Art that uses the public domain as site and resource does not automatically become radical because it is made outside the hallowed confines of a gallery or because it sidesteps the commodity nature of art. It requires constant negotiations with the authorities and diverse publics it come into contact with. It is not about producing the spectacle of the new but clarifying the relationship of the self with the world.

7 The working conditions of "public art" produce stresses and strains of their own, as far as the definition of art practice is concerned. Often – working from anti-bourgeois Romantic assumptions that have long been internalised by the bourgeoisie – society expects the artist to be an adversary, an eccentric rebel who opposes society. Meanwhile, the NGO's implicit logic of supporting an artistic project is to deploy the artist as a trainer/educator/ activist.

The reaction of an audience is unpredictable and often undecipherable in a society as diverse as ours is, in terms of ethnicity, caste, class, religion and region. The reactions of an audience to an artist's work can vary from curiosity to a seeming lack of reaction, to bafflement, or worse, to demands for punitive action and a call for censorship, either officially or by mob pressure.

8 I will review, briefly, the interventions made by two artists in a political ecology that ranges from a rural economy to a riverine ecology under stress. These examples show the various entanglements of social and political relationships and the potential for the dramatisation of performative citizenship. Also, these examples extend our understanding of the ecology from a nostalgic perspective restricted to an idyllic, pastoral worldview to a systemic view that

HOW DO WE NEGOTIATE A FRAGMENTED PUBLIC SPHERE?

includes the effects of human activity.

Navjot Altaf has worked in a range of media from paintings to sculpture, to sculpture installations, to video art. From the 1990s onwards, she has worked on collaborative and cooperative projects with colleagues from rural subaltern background in Bastar, Central India. Navjot has had to constantly disentangle the mesh of conflicting ideological positions, whether it is her own metropolitan fine arts background where the crafts are seen as subservient to the fine arts, or it is the rural and tribal crafts background of her colleagues

who have to struggle against caste/class and gender hierarchies. For Navjot, collaboration is not a given verity, but rather an inter-subjective relationship that is always in the making and one in which the dominant actor does not only transform the marginal counterpart but risks being transformed as well. In short, an act of mutual transformation.

Crucially, if we were to consider the art world as a public sphere with its protocols of membership, then Navjot has been able to introduce the practices of her colleagues which have been below the line of social visibility into the conversation of the art world.[4]

I now come to the environmentalist and photographer Ravi Agarwal who has made the reverse journey from the arena of activism and cause-related work to the context of the gallery. Agarwal was designated as an artist in 2002 when he was chosen by Okwui Enwezor to show his photographs at Documenta 11. At Enwezor's path-breaking Documenta, he was represented by images from his projects on work, labour and urban environment in the era of globalisation. Since then, Agarwal has used this special ascriptive status as an artist constructively, to explore what he calls his "personal ecology" to implicate the self with all its philosophical disquietudes onto an environment that is being ripped apart by rapacious consumerism. His work is a good example of how an artist can aestheticise the political and politicise the aesthetic in the same gesture, one without the other would make an inadequate impact. This predicament is expressed in his set of performance photographs from the series Immersion/Emergence where he appears covered in a shroud on the banks of a river. This is an elegy for the displacement of thousands of shantytown-dwellers who were expelled from the banks of the Yamuna in Delhi, by State authorities, in a bid to "clean up" the waterway and "beautify" it, ahead of the forthcoming Commonwealth Games – and with a view to handing over this land to the developer lobby. This powerful protest could be read as an expression of the idea that "ecocide is suicide", that is the murder of the ecology is suicide. At another level, it is also an enactment of the Hindu belief in reincarnation. The remains of the dead body are immersed in the holy Ganga to achieve salvation.[5] In a true sense, Agarwal's photographs and diary notes are productions of what Heine once called the "experimental self".

9
To perform one's citizenship in reality rather than have nominal possession of it in a country like India, we would have to define the nature of our public sphere – where discussions between opposed interests can be held freely and fairly. As the curator and critic Simon Sheikh observes, there is no unitary public sphere, there are oppositional tendencies in the public sphere.[6] What then is the nature of such a fragmented public sphere, and how do we negotiate it? Would we take a cue from Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe's much-cited model of the public sphere, in which, as she says, "the aim of democratic institutions is not to establish a national consensus in the public sphere but to defuse the potential of hostility that exists in human societies by providing the possibilities for antagonism to be transformed into 'agonism'."[7]

While Mouffe's agonistic model of the public sphere appears at first sight to correct the somewhat colourless abstraction and optimistic tenor of the early Habermas, closer scrutiny reveals that her understanding of the contemporary public sphere is almost more clinical and Newtonian than his. Mouffe presents us with an image of fractious interests, irreconciliably opposed and yet able to hold one another in an embrace of amicable enmity. Further her model emphasises respect between irreconcilable positions rather than a productive bridging and melding of differences. This may not be applicable to our context, which is highly volatile at a social and political level.

In her writings and lectures on the subject, Mouffe rarely condescends to describe the humdrum mechanisms and legislative protocols by which her supposedly radical politics is to be underwritten. When she does, her account is in no detail different from the checks and balances of constitutional democracy as we now know it.

Mouffe's theoretical sleight of hand is remarkably unhelpful when it comes to addressing the crises, dilemmas and the often schismatic turbulences that attend transitional societies, such as India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Turkey, Nigeria, Indonesia, Thailand, and South Korea, to name only a few. In these situations, the public domain is a scene for the battle among forces whose agenda commits them to mutual exclusion and sometimes even mutual annihilation. There is often radical disagreement on how to interpret the national past and the national future, on how to distribute power and authority, and what the nature of the State should be. In some of these situations, also, positions are taken on the basis of tactical opportunity and short-term gain rather than on that of long-held principle or reasoned conviction; where vote-bank politics, illiteracy, famine and cultivated regional asymmetries prevail, the ground of politics resembles a quicksand more than it does the floor of a debating room. As applied to such complex predicaments, Mouffe's theories are about as useful as a Lego set to the building of metropolis.

Instead, we could propose the model of the agora: the marketplace that is also a meeting place, a shifting weave of textures of thought, opinion, ideas and convictions; a non-hierarchical space of exchange where thought is multiplied and extended by distribution rather than imparted from a fixed source of authority. The agora of the classical Greek city-state was also, etymologically, the "open space", where merchants, sailors, soldiers,

artists, writers, priests, oracles, and madmen congregated and could voice themselves. In this spirit, we could explore what Ranjit Hoskote has called "the agora function of public places"[8]. According to Hoskote, public places are hybrid sites produced by the "popular re-inscription of public space" – sites that are liminal, allowing for shifts and transformations of identity, where the individual interacts with "the group, the crowd, even the mob", and where the various constituents of society stage and perform their symbolic realities. This is where claims and transactions of different degrees of intensity are proposed, considered and sorted through, by a changing cast of actors. By intervening in public places, by activating and working with the agoratic condition, practitioners of public-art possibilities may well demonstrate an apparently simple but nevertheless startling truth.

Namely: that an art which addresses the public domain as site and resource is nothing less than a means of reclaiming the contours of performative citizenship. It is a wager on the renewal of fossilised democracy by the insurgent imagination. It is through the pursuit and desire of the agoratic that we will be able to produce new forms of associations and new ecologies of dialogue.

Photogaphs:

Top: *Extinct?* Installation by Ravi Agarval, *48°C Public Art Ecology* Delhi 2008
Bottom: *Barakhamba in 2008*, installation by Navjot Altaf, *48°C Public Art Ecology* Delhi 2008.

Notes and References:

1. For a nuanced account of the concept of "performative citizenship", see Nancy Adajania, *The Sand of the Coliseum, the Glare of Television, and the Hope of Emancipation* , Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta *et al* eds., Sarai Reader 06: *Turbulence* (Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2006), pp. 364-375.

2. For an account of Shaina Anand's *Khirkiyaan* project, see Nancy Adajania, *Probing the Khojness of Khoj*, in Pooja Sood ed., *Ten Years of Khoj* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, forthcoming 2009). For an account of the Cybermohalla project, see Nancy Adajania, *Der Sand des Kolosseums, der grelle Schein des Fernsehers und die Hoffnung auf Emanzipation*, in Georg Schöllhammer ed., Documenta Magazine No. 2, 2007/ *Life!* (Kassel: Documenta GmbH/ Köln: Taschen, 2007).

3. Rajeev Bhargava, *The Artist and the Modern Public Sphere*, in Harsha V. Dehejia and Makarand Paranjape eds., *Saundarya: The Perception and Practice of Beauty in India* (New Delhi: Samvad India Foundation, 2003). See also C A Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

4. For an account of Navjot's interventions in public spaces, see Adajania, *op. cit.* , 2006. See also, Nancy Adajania, *Scaffoldings of Survival: Reflections on a Life of Projects* (exh. cat. essay; Bombay: Sakshi Art Gallery, 2004).

5. See Ravi Agarwal, *Immersion/Emergence* (New Delhi: self-published, 2006).

6. See Simon Sheikh ed., *In the Place of the Public Sphere?* (Berlin: B_Books, 2005).

7. Chantal Mouffe *For An Agonistic Public Sphere*, in Okwui Enwezor *et al* ed., *Democracy Unrealised* (Ostfeldern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002). See also, Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

8. Ranjit Hoskote, *Hyphens and Ellipses: Popular Appropriations of Ceremonial Spaces*, in Rahul Mehrotra and Guenter Nest eds., *Public Places – Bombay* (Bombay: Max Mueller Bhavan/ Urban Design Research Institute, 1996), pp. 36-43. *

The ideas presented in this paper have been developed and elaborated, during the last seven years, through the following essays and lectures concerning the political implications of public art, as well as the relationship between art and the public sphere, and the relationship between artists, public space and the mixed origins and motives of 'public art' in India:

Nancy Adajania, *Mutation/Resistance: The Crisis of the Secular Imagination in Contemporary India*: lecture presented at ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2002. (http://on1.zkm.de/zkm/stories/storyReader$2736)

Nancy Adajania, *The Predicament of Contemporary Indian Art: Populism as Threat, Democratisation As Opportunity*: paper read at the symposium, *Populist Politics and its Consequences for Cultural Production and Display* Danish Contemporary Art Foundation, Copenhagen, 2003. (http://www.e-flux.com/shows/view/687).

Nancy Adajania, *From One Crisis to the Next: The Fate of Political Art in India*, in Shudhabrata Sengupta, Monica Narula *et al* eds., Sarai Reader 04: *Crisis/Media* (Delhi: C entre for the Study of Developing Societies , 2004), pp.86-91.

Nancy Adajania, *A Work In Progress* (*Public Art Review,* Vol.16, Number 1, Issue 31; Minneapolis, Fall/ Winter 2004).

Nancy Adajania, *The Dream of a Common Language? Contextualising Public Art Practices in India*: lecture presented at a symposium conceived by the author, titled *Space Available: Strategies of Accommodation* (National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay), while critic-in-residence at the Khoj Workshop, Bombay 2004.

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Adajania has proposed several new theoretical models, including "a new mediatic realism" (tracking the effects of mediatic reality on painting); "new-context media" (mapping the postcolonial location of video and net-based practices); "Aladdin's cave, a new urban sociology of self-representation" (accounting for the politicisation of visual culture; and "televisual assemblies" (tracing the illusion of democratic performativity produced by contemporary mass media).

Her essays include: *Probing the Khojness of Khoj* in Ten Years of Khoj (Harper Collins, forthcoming 2009), where she has studied the history of artists' initiatives from the 1950s to the present in India; *New Media Overtures Before New Media Practice In India*, in Art and Visual Culture in India:1857-2007 (Marg, 2009), where she provides a context-specific history of new media art in India.

This essay was also published in Matters of Art.

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