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DIALOGICAL PRACTICE

Meenakshi Jha
meenakshijha@wustl.edu

Dialogical Practice

by
Meenakshi Jha

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Director of the Graduate School of Art
Patricia Olynyk

Thesis Advisor
Buzz Spector

Primary Advisors
Patricia Olynyk
Tim Portlock

Graduate Committee
Ron Fondaw
Ila N. Sheren

ABSTRACT

Within an interdisciplinary and dialogical practice where process is as significant as final form/s, I delve in matters not to resolve but to explore them. Digging deep in my studio practice over my philosophical yearnings to talking loud and clear about my life in performances, I venture out in the geographical expanse to connect with self and others. In fact, the more I practice my craft, I feel a lesser and lesser gap between my ‘self’ and others. The walk outwards brings me closer to my internal realizations as a human being. In short, my practice is based on the dualities of conscious and subconscious realizations, historical and contemporary knowledge, ideas and forms, perception and knowledge, macro and micro, and play of femininity and masculinity.

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INTRODUCTION

I am an interdisciplinary artist concerned with the demands of lived experience.[1] Everyday activities, quests and discoveries are fundamental to my art. My life changed drastically with my relocation from India to the US in 2017. I became an immigrant and also a mother. My changing understanding of what it means to be an immigrant Indian artist accompanied my newfound concerns of being a mother. In a sense, I am simply responding to the issues of my daily life as an Indian-Artist-Mother in the US through three connected strands of art: studio practice, collaborative performances and community-based projects.

The daily challenges of domestic life keep my mind and hands engaged. While I have long thought of myself as an apolitical person, I realize that politics impacts my personal life: from monthly budget crises to eligibility criteria for jobs, from the challenges of traveling in and out of the US to the very nationality of my child. It is thus no surprise that artistic work that is deeply embedded in my cultural and personal experience are also politically charged.

My process is organic and evolutionary. I strategically design a larger structure within which I leave enough scope for unplanned and accidental elements to be incorporated in the creative process. Generally speaking, my works evolve over a span of time, which can range from weeks to months or even to years. I often create a cluster of works in a modular fashion. My works are intended to be placed in different public spheres that could vary between a gallery space, a specific site like that of a residence, a public place or within an institution, or in a virtual space such as social media platforms or websites. My choices in production and presentation are impacted by the availability of resources.

I employ an Indian visual lexicon and treatment techniques using material found or procured in my community. Using hybrid visual and textual metaphors, I play with the contrasting

elements for the purpose of creating ambiguity which enhances the intended meaning of the work. Using repetitiveness as a visual and formal tool in my works, I play on the idea of power of repetitiveness itself. This technique is based in the old spiritual tradition of chanting *Mantras*. While I engage with my ideas at intellectual level, my production technique demands intense physical labor hence bear my patina in every aspect. My working methods allude to core emotions: fear, tension, restlessness, anxiety, vulnerability, comfort, and/or a sense of familiarity (or unfamiliarity) with my audience.

Along with this inter-weaving of political and personal subjects and Indian cultural knowledge with American material, I often engage with the tension between history and contemporary life. My several years of training as a historian and archaeologist have instilled in me a method of enquiry that connects current affairs to the oldest reference point in my knowledge. These reference points can be mythology-based knowledge or historical facts. This contrast and comparison of information and knowledge is then projected onto my current socio-political scenario to make sense of my time and space.

Through my artistic practice I initiate dialogue for social change. In addition to stimulating professional discourse around humanitarian issues with the art fraternity through my studio works, I also engage in multi-level strategic communication to initiate the change at functional level. I communicate with social welfare institutions, participants from different socio-cultural backgrounds and with my partner/collaborator artists in my community-based projects to bring forth changes that is believed to improve the social infrastructure. In other words, my practice is dialectical in this regard as well that I am product of my society, but I also try to mend the society for better.

CHAPTER ONE

HERE AND NOW

THE POLITICS OF BORDERS AND IDENTITY

I am translating the perception of myself in a foreign country: my political identity as an alien, my professional identity as an Indian artist in US and my gendered identity as a mother.

When we moved to the US in the fall of 2017, our social support system was yet to be built. Given my pregnancy and need to figure out the functional aspects of everyday life apart from academic commitments, my husband and I evolved into a new union. Our behavior was solely led by survival-oriented co-existence. There was no hierarchy between my duties as a wife and his as a husband. We were beyond the gendered-cultural constructs of Indian society. I was no more just a wife but a companion and bread winner, while my husband assumed the responsibility of house-holder.

This feeling of being a human beyond the social and gendered construct in a critical phase of our lives was translated into five pairs of anthropomorphic wood figures with color-pen drawing on them. Meant to be installed on a wall, these wood pieces are coated with resin layer and resin drops protruding like boils. The dimensions of each pair are 48x36 inches. Each pair has one figure with a sharp protrusion while the other has soft bulges to symbolize male and female forms respectively. The designs drawn on them are primarily floral and geometric in mono or duo chrome. I titled the work “Homo Deus,” a term used by philosopher Yuval Noah Harari for the humans of the future, humans who will represent the next phase of evolution.[2]

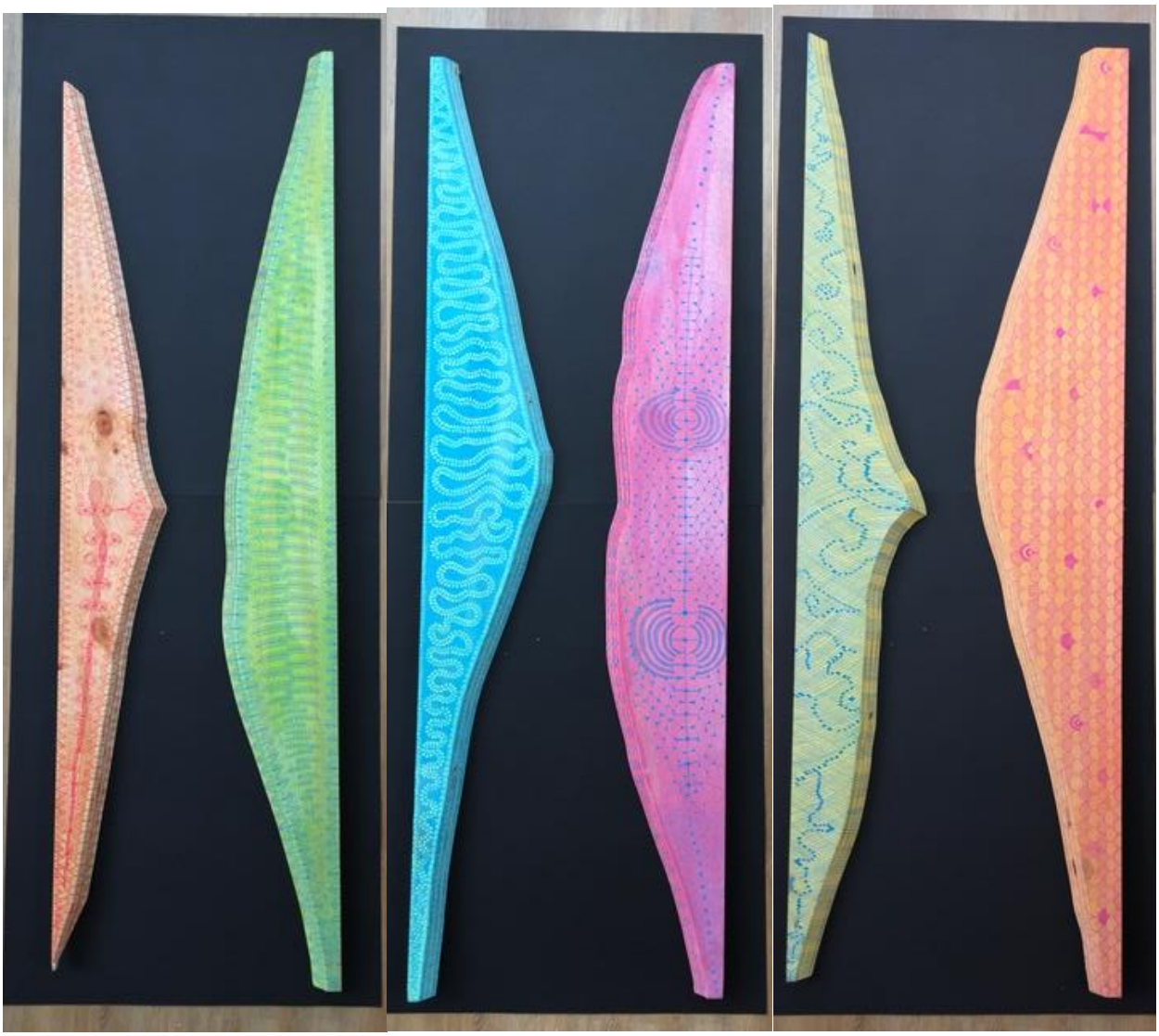

Figure 1: HOMO DEUS. Acrylic pen and synthetic resin on wood,24x48 inch, 2017

At the time I produced this work, the US political system was volatile. Xenophobia was openly expressed by the governing party. Immigrant children were forcibly separated from their parents for indefinite periods of time. The image of a dead Syrian child washed of shore was still in news, and the future of immigrants all over the world seemed very uncertain. It struck me that I too am an immigrant in the US, and I too have an infant. This realization triggered in me an acute

sense of concern and empathy for all the children of immigrants who are at risk of losing their families and/or lives.

Not knowing how to deal with this very human reaction to the way political leaders of the world are advocating violence and propagating hatred across the globe, I started writing the words MY BABY on sheets of paper with red paint. After several pages of this obsessive-repetitive writing, I felt some kind of solace. This text-based work is an evolving installation on 8.5x11-inch white paper. The sheets of paper currently number over 400. I intend to continue writing on more sheets. The word BABY breaks from one line to another but continues until the edge of the sheet. The use of a red and capital-letter font calls out for immediate attention. In this work, I am also emphasizing the power of repetition itself. I have kept the text limited to two words without a title.

Since this particular work originated from sentiments of love and empathy for all the children whose lives are at risk, I tried as many as six installation arrangements. In the end I realized it is an ongoing project since this humanitarian crisis is unlikely to cease in the near future. This project is best conceived as an incessant performance in which I will continue to write MY BABY on sheet after sheets as a form of prayer for all the children in the world whose futures are threatened by the politics of power.

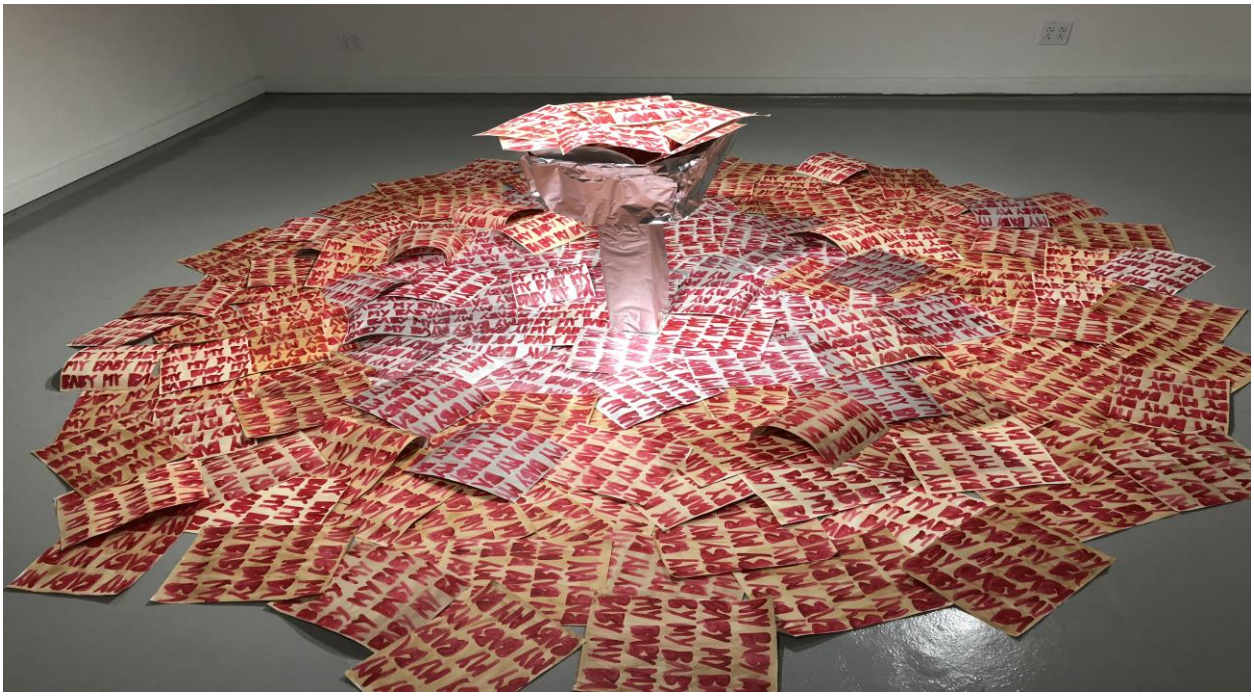

Figure 2: MY BABY, acrylic, paper, mylar, 2017-18

Figure 3: MY BABY, Performance. Acrylic, paper, brush, 2019.

This realization of my status as an immigrant directed me towards questions of political identity as a South Asian person in the US, my class identity as a person from a developing nation living within the borders of an economic super-power, and by cultural-gender identity in an era when these concepts are rapidly changing. In addition to these personal questions, I also intend to connect with the larger international community. With this two-way navigation, I am striving to understand my personal space within the political-public space.

My work expresses the complexity of identity in the context of cultural and economic consumption. I created a set of 15 free-standing forms with wood and recycled fabric obtained from different sources over a period of four months. Through my social networks in St. Louis, I connected with and sourced the fabric from families who have Indian heritage or affiliations. I then used these fabrics to cover the wooden forms. These fabrics are vital to the message that I intend to convey to my public. Fabric is an important visual marker of one's regional, cultural, social and religious identity. Thus, I used these fabrics to assign an Indian or perhaps a non-American identity to these 15 figures.

The tall, free-standing wooden frames vary from 2 feet to 8 feet in height and symbolize human forms. I initially arranged the set as if they were people standing in a queue to address the issue of consumption and waste in America where one American on an average wastes 80 pounds of usable fabric per year. I initially called it O.C.D. Later I reconsidered the installation format and renamed the piece as ALIENS DREAM GREEN. These human-like forms are standing in a semi-circle facing a green panel made of fabric. The panel symbolizes the Green Card, the official card of residency in the US. But this green panel suggests much more than the political permission of residence in US. It also suggests the need for political, social and cultural acceptance as well as dignified, harmonious co-existence of all on the same land.

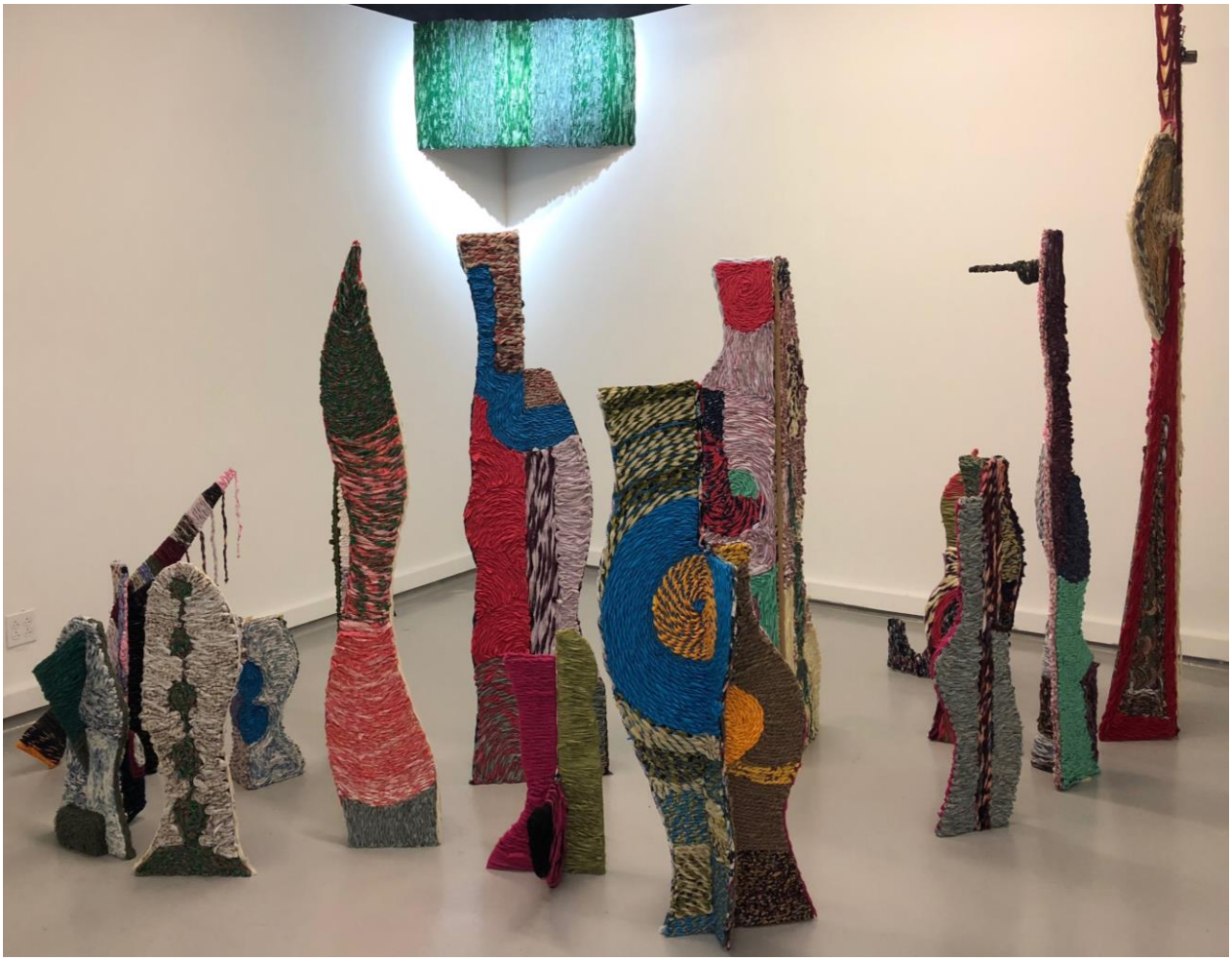

Figure 4: ALIENS DREAM GREEN, fabric, wood, adhesive, 2018.

In my understanding a place cannot be separated from a person. A place comprises history, geography, mythology, sound, smell, textures and colors. These aspects make the place distinguishable from other places. A person from a place carries all these salient features inside oneself. In this sense, a person is a walking "place." This place is visible in the acts, food, language, thoughts and body of an individual. In addition, objects and the treatment of objects are unique to the cultures of which we are products. According to Lucy Lippard, "the sense of place emerges from the senses. The land and the spirit of the place can be experienced visually as well as

kinetically or kinesthetically *(as in performance*)."[3] I carry the spirit of my place in this new time and space.

In my new society, where I am respected for being a mother and where I pursue my profession and academic yearnings, my experiences from India form a stark reference point for comparison. After years of ignoring sexual advances and gestures in public spaces, as a pregnant woman and then as a mother I found that passersby treated me with respect. This experience was awkward for me. Eventually I started looking forward to such greetings in public by random strangers. After a year, when I returned to India, I experienced the familiar vulgar gestures. This forced me to rethink the idea of being a woman as a second-class gender, a gender that was put at the mercy of male gender in the patriarchal societies of India. Confronting the ideas of social worker and champion of female rights Tarana Burke in the time of the #metoo campaign, I revisited the rebellious lives of mythical and historical female figures in India. I identified three female characters who did not conform to the accepted idea of good-women, namely Sati, Sita and Draupadi. They were the first women who retorted against prominent male characters of their time.

In the context of rereading my history in light of contemporary debates about the rights and safety of women, I created a triptych of wall-installed pieces. Again, using fabric as a human signifier, I created forms that suggested the back of female heads with long hair. These females were assigned different colors to their hair depending on the nature of their defiance to the insults they suffered. The sheer scale and placement of the triptych suggests these female characters are larger than life. The fabric pieces are torn in thin strips that suggest vulnerability and rebellion at the same time. The pieces placed side by side represent how these women stand in solidarity with each other and also with all other women who have suffered like them. Measuring 10 feet in height

and 15x7 feet in width and length, these characters stand tall. I traced my past and present identity through these figures; hence, I titled the work PRESENTing PAST.

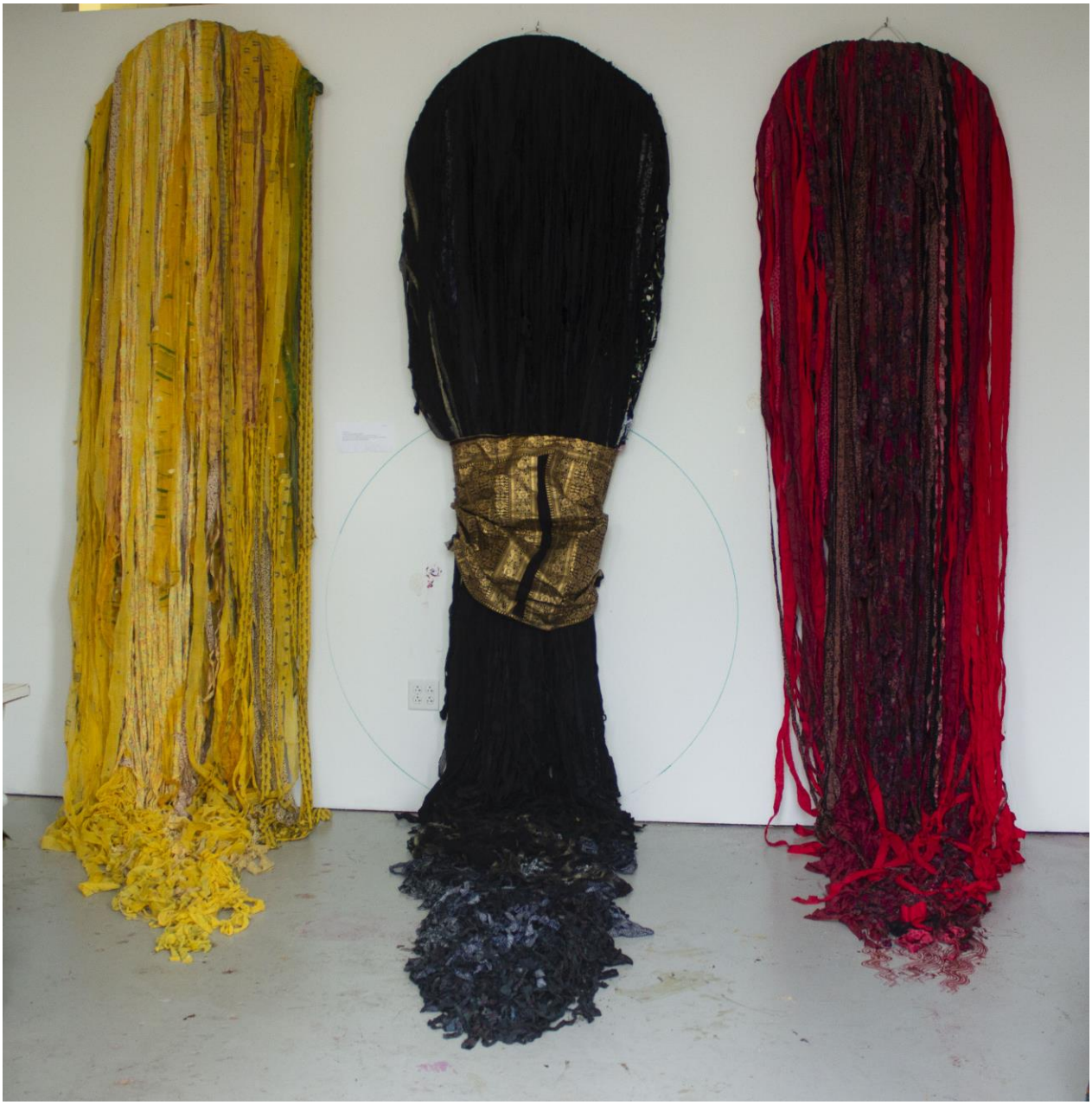

Figure 5: PRESENTing PAST, fabric, wood, adhesive, wire, 2018.

Since 2010 when I started traveling extensively, the ideas of center and periphery have intrigued me. Coming from metropolitan areas to smaller cities and rural areas, I was treated differently by host families. Culturally as well as economically, we seemed different but still

shared some similarities. In my heart I wanted to go back to my ancestral village and live a distinct life unlike the one in the city where we were all just city-dwellers. I had no distinct identity. I also realized that the people from small towns and villages wanted to go to the cities, as these locations were centers of economic and political power. When I moved to the US, I was treated like someone from a small city or village. People were amazed at the fact that I speak English even though I am from India, a developing country where English is common. At the same time the Americans admitted that they consult Indian doctors and have Indian teachers for their kids.

This hierarchy between a city as center of power (both economic and political) and its neighboring regions as the peripheries, inspired me to create an installation titled CENTRAL PERIPHERY. This installation is a kinetic piece comprising of a 48-inch diameter globular structure and numerous small fabric balls. The big round form evokes a globe and has bright mono or duo chrome fabric circle representing popular cities on the map of the world. The black portion represents the regions less know or regions that form peripheries of these popular cities.

The idea of center and periphery are closely knit together. While place is more in our senses, the region is used more in terms of a place according to physical reach or mental familiarity. A region, in other words, is bound by common stories, loyalties, and lore. Michael Steiner offers a precise definition: “the largest unit of territory about which a person can grasp the concrete realities of the land, or which can be contained in a person’s genuine sense of place.”[4]

A region by its very definition means a broad geographical area distinguished by similar features. By this definition any geographical area is a region. But region is not a neutral term. It is a highly subjective apparition that stands for “periphery.” Yet a key question remains: Which region is a periphery, and which is the center? Center and periphery can only be understood in relation to the other. Each one defines the other, or to put it another way, each can be defined as

not the other one. Center is not the periphery and periphery circumscribe the center and defines its centrality. In *The Lure of the Local*, Lippard states that regionalism "continues to be used pejoratively to mean corny backwater art flowing from the tributaries that might eventually reach the mainstream but is currently stagnating out there in the boondocks."[5]

But questions remain unanswered: What is a "center" and who makes the periphery? "Center" is understood as the social or economic powerhouse of any system. And in fact, "center" as discussed here is always the center of commerce that can be either industrial and/or trade. This distinction is critical in the post-colonial era, a period marked by the collapse of imperial rule in colonies and the rise of industrial towns as centers of commerce. This shift of money from empires to industries drove artists from different regions to these centers of commerce. Thus, certain areas became centers and the rest became peripheral regions.

A metropolitan place absorbed all the cultures but instead of developing a conglomeration of all cultures, it assimilates them and creates a homogenized culture where all cultures are diffused and thus lose their identities. In the process of the assimilation of cultures, multiple pasts are buried under a single marker.[6] This culture is described as cosmopolitan. Due to the sheer presence of people from different cultures in these commercial centers, these centers became the international arena of commerce as well as arts. This homogenous culture was fabricated and formulated by the aesthetic preferences and choices of the owner of the commercial systems. Over time these centers became international citadels and the rest of the world became marginal to their existence.

People who allow the centers to function often come from the peripheral regions. They move between their home in the periphery and the workplace that is in the center. This critical co-existential relation between the centers and their peripheries is addressed in my work through the kinetic globe-form placed on a motorized panel that spins two rotations per minute. A ball made

of piles of numerous printed textiles are arranged to suggest that they uphold the big ball and ensure its smooth movement. There are a couple of standing figures suggesting people who have part of this functional system. We, including me and the audience, bear witness to these witnesses who have been part of the larger structure.

Figure 6: CENTRAL PERIPHERY, fabric, foam, motorized base, 2019.

CHAPTER TWO

ROOTED IN TIME

LESSONS FROM PHILOSOPHY, HISTORY AND EXPERIENCES

My philosophical understanding of life is inseparable from the idea and form of my work. My history stands behind me as my reference guide. My humble upbringing reminds me to respect the ordinary objects and experiences of life.

I come from an economically humble background and a culture deeply rooted in mythology. My childhood visual memories are primarily of dolls made of rags and threads and clothes passed on from a number of older siblings and cousins. I find these memories have significantly shaped my practice in terms of forms, treatment of material and scale. The forms I create are crude and suggestive of human forms just like dolls made of sticks and fabric. The materials used come from common households and are very familiar to me. My treatment of material expresses the unique texture of my handiwork, which is deft in traditional craft skills.

Closely associated with my Indian cultural-moral imprints are my earliest philosophical lessons. First among these is the *Sankhya* philosophical understanding. This philosophy, which dates back to the pre-Vedic period in Indian history, proposes that the world can be perceived in the duality of idea and form. The second is *Anekantawad*, an Indian Jain philosophy that dates back to the first millennium CE. *Anekanta* translates as multi-sidedness. It is the idea that reality cannot be perceived in totality (unless one has attained the highest wisdom); thus, there are multiple perceptions of the reality giving way to our perception of truth. Each partial idea of reality should be perceived in reference to the others. Thus, there is a strong presence of multiple elements that act as reference points for each other in my creations. This understanding directly translates into my choice of creating multi-faceted sculptural works. This philosophy, based in a sense of multiple realities, contrasts with the Western knowledge system, which follows the linearity of logic and facts.

Along with this perspective, my academic training in history and archaeology plays a decisive role, especially in the way I choose and treat materials as well as present them in form. Having spent seven years of academic life revering things of the past, I have developed a passion for collecting worn-out, found materials. Materials that are most commonly and abundantly found tend to hold more secrets for me than other objects. For example, a coat button may reveal more about the status, time, and culture of a place than a glass jar, or a door lock may contain more marks of human interactions than a precious object.

My forms are heavily influenced by years of studying the rock arts of Sahara Desert in Africa[7] and, Bhimbetka, Ajanta and Ellora cave paintings in India, the ancient Nasca lines of Peru[8] and the prehistoric abstract humanoid rock figures from Gobekli Tepe[9] (circa 12500-10000 BC) in Turkey[10] and the Egyptian murals as well as Indian traditional murals. Gobekli Tepe is the mountain ridge in Southern Anatolia region of Turkey. This pot-belly shaped hill has oldest surviving architectural complex with 'T'shaped stone pillars that dominate the site. These pillars have arms carved into their sides, a belt on the mid region, and they appear to be wearing Jewelry. This is the reason for my preference for archetypal forms as they deeply rooted in our visual as well as cognitive memory, hence, are familiar to people regardless of their geographical or temporal situations. All these art forms and styles extensively use lines as filler as well as outliner. My drawings, paintings, sculptural installations, textual and assembled art pieces, are all replete with lines. There is another strong influence of these works on my practice; the use of repetitive forms. I develop a form and then play with the same form to create a larger community of them that share clear affinity with each other, just as Egyptian figures replicate each other yet possess enough distinctions from each other to be different characters.

Working on the same realization, I prefer to work with materials and formats for which I have a connection; for example, fabric, threads, kitchen utensils and tools. These materials allow me to project my present political situation onto my past to make better sense of both my present and future.

Undoubtedly, the trajectory of my personal life incorporates all of my inherited knowledge and experience. The idea of communal co-existence is strongly embedded in my cultural and personal identity. My perspective is wide, which is reflected in my preference for creating works consisting of multiple pieces.

CHAPTER THREE

MATERIALS

3.1: FABRIC

Recycling is my obsession. I use this obsession of hoarding objects to gather stories and collect visions of the world I live in. But form itself falls short, and I move to narration. When words beguile, I perform.

I primarily work with repurposed objects, perhaps out of concern for ecological issues. But primarily because making dolls with old garments is my oldest memory of my childhood. I request people to give me an object of personal value. People pass on their objects for many declared or undeclared reasons: they cannot use the object, they do not want to use it anymore, they can't be used anymore, or they want to be part of my art projects. In all the cases, the participants are aware of the fact that I will use their objects for my artistic purpose. In almost all cases, these objects are ordinary, damaged or worn-out objects due to long-term use. For me ordinary means anything that can be easily found, used in a given socio-economic set up and/or discarded without much effort. Fabric is one such object that I have often received.

The use of everyday material has become part of contemporary art over time. Matisse's use of paper-cut collage is an appropriate example of ordinary material in fine art in the late 1940s. Similarly, Picasso's paintings incorporate nails and wood pieces. Everyday objects as art material became more popular in the 1960s. In 1967, Italian art critic Germano Celant coined the term "Arte Povera," which literally means poor art. In the words of Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the idea of poor art can best be understood in reference to other contemporary international art movements, such as minimalist and conceptual art. Alighiero Boetti's *Manifesto* (1967) is a good example of this idea. This work features the last names of artists printed in red on the left margin of filing paper with some abstract signs for each name in the same arrangement on the right side of the

paper. His work falls under what Umberto Eco called “Open Art,” artwork that is open to many interpretations.[11]

The critic Robert Lumley expands on the notion “poor art”: “The initial conceptualization of Arte Povera referred exclusively to art practices and their relationship to everyday life.”[12] However, over time, Arte Povera began to be identified with materials based on the usage of simple/poor gestures and materials like twigs, stones, metals, and fabric in contrast to materials used in high art[13]. Some of the artists who initially worked under the aesthetic of Arte Povera began to reject the title as it addressed only the material aspect of their practice. Eventually Jean-Christophe Ammann developed a new definition of Arte Povera. According to Ammann,

> Arte Povera designates a kind of art, which, in contrast to the technologized world around it, seeks to achieve a poetic statement with the simplest of means. This return to simple materials, revealing laws and processes deriving from the power of the imagination, is an examination of the artist's own conduct in an industrialized society.[14]

To the definition proposed by Ammann, Germano Celant added the subversion of linguistic conventions with political critique of technology and capitalist society.[15] Celant’s redefinition was influenced by the writings of American philosopher John Dewey who advocated bringing emotions to the fore, against the grain of rationalist thinking.[16]

The appropriation of everyday objects as my art material and my improvisational approach to creation is a strategic choice. Improvisation mostly concerns the availability of resources and embracing accidents and unexpected developments in the creative process. Studies of history and archaeology trained me to read into the conditions of objects and discover their personal and social past. For this very reason, everyday materials hold richer meanings for me than those meanings most would find. Similar to Michelangelo Pistoletto, who works with ordinary objects used in daily life, such as used fabric pieces, brick, paper or mirrors, I prefer material that has a stronger affinity with people from many different economic, cultural and social backgrounds. Some of the

examples are textiles, soil, paper, kitchen utensils, food, spices as coloring pigment, etc. Also, since my scale is large, and my budget is low, these materials help me achieve my goals within limited means.

Fabric as a material for my studio and relational art projects is a natural choice for me given the political and economic history of cottons and natural dyes in India. The political economy of cotton cultivation connects the Indian subcontinent and African colonies of British and Dutch colonial powers. The cotton economy was directly related to the slave economy that connects with the history of the US as well. Colonial cotton cultivation needed slave trade to keep it thriving and profitable. In the 20th century Gandhi used cotton weaving as a tactic to fight against colonial oppression and for betterment of economic condition of Indian weavers. The colonial economy depended on mill production of cotton fabric that used cheap Indian labor. The mill cotton was cheaper and easily available; thus, it adversely impacted the domestic small-scale textiles industry of India.

In addition to these socio-economic and political significance, there are philosophical and spiritual significances as well for me to work with fabric. Indian philosophers like Kabir has compared body with fabric. Like fabric, our bodies get worn out and thus with death we need to change the body. In spiritual practice discarding regular kind of fabric and accepting an ascetic robe is associated with transition. Also, garments are like our second skin that not only protects us from the weather elements but also a social veil which has strong implications in Hinduism, Islamism and Sikhism. Not just these garments are our first introduction to the external world, it can also be a marker of our aspirations and achievements. Hence my use of fabric as a marker of people fits perfectly in the given context of my practice. Chiharu Shiota, who works with garments and thread, works on the similar line of thought. Shiota is quoted saying “For me, dress always

means a second skin. We have a first skin, …and a second skin … The second skin sometimes explain more about a person, because it goes beyond skin color and nationality.[17]

My use of everyday objects also addresses contemporary political issues; in my work, personal life reflects larger political events. Artists like Hasan Elahi and Ai Weiwei are known for their politically charged works; their art is inspired and triggered by political actions and decrees that impacted their lives significantly. My approach is a little different, as I am using ordinary material like everyday fabric, as opposed to Elahi's use of bullets or technology and Ai's use of industrial and construction materials. While these artists created political works using relatively neutral objects, my material and treatment technique is rooted in my culture (Indian rural culture). This is similar to Abdoulaye Konaté's treatment of fabric with dyes. Konaté chose dyed fabric as his main materials because much of the Kenyan population depends on the dyeing industry for their economic survival. Konaté is using the modular pattern of creating a flag with little flags to address political issues. I too resort to using fabric, but my treatment technique of twisting the taxtile strip into a chromosome-like pattern is rooted in Indian tradition. Fabric is also an effective choice because it is easy to reuse and procure and is simple to treat and store. All these factors make me comfortable with fabric as my main material.

Assimilation of crafts besides fine art skills like drawing, photography, painting and sculpting helps my works render a phenomenological experience to the audience besides addressing a personal-political subject.

At this point it is important to understand that this use of cultural lexicons and regional/ national identity in the art world began in the 1970s. It was steered as a movement by under-represented communities. This was a time when male dominance in the art world was challenged

by women, and the "white" monopoly was challenged by artists of color. Moreover, high art[1] was challenged by what was then considered low art. Till late 20th century the larger arts world was called 'High art' or the institutionalized fine art practice, monopolized by while male population. The apparition 'low art' was primarily used for arts beyond the parameters of the high art that included embroidery, knitting, painting, craft-based art and sculptural forms practiced by men and women alike in the world. In fact, as I later mentioned, all arts across the world that was not European or North American was considered low art. The Feminist Art movement coincided with the second phase of the decorative art movement for the simple reason that decorative arts, which were rooted in the crafts, were generally associated with domesticity and thus with women. In the 1970s, feminist artists -- including Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and Faith Ringgold, Louise Bourgeois and more recently Judith Scott, Ann Hamilton, Kimsooja and Sara Lucas -- used embroidery and other handcrafts to tell powerful and disruptive stories.

The Western tradition of European folk art began to emerge as a distinct category in the visual arts during the mid-nineteenth century.[18] Warren Cohen argues that "in early twentieth century Americans began to accept East Asian art as real art, and that marked the step of accepting East Asians as real people."[19] Even deeper than the divide between Eastern and Western art is the divide between state arts or arts patronized by states and the arts of the people. Indian folk art began to be recognized by the West only as late as the 1970s. Due to long standing colonial understanding of people's art and crafts as uncouth, artists from countries rich in crafts like India have largely not been placed on the same platform as the sources of "high art."

Pakistani-American artist Shahzia Sikander, for example, has encountered queries regarding the incorporation of contemporary elements like collage and painterly abstractions

within traditional art forms like miniature art that she uses heavily in her work. She believes it is "neither subversion nor a continuation of tradition." Here is an excerpt from a conversation between art critic Homi Bhabha and Sikander:

> HB- "…your work…deals with the miniature tradition, and other contemporary work coming out of the third world, particularly India, is that the distinction between tradition and the avant-garde profoundly problematized, confused in your work…Since that is something that happens in your work- the reinvention of a technique, the reevaluation of tradition to the extent that tradition is no longer opposed to modernity."
> SS- "Although I didn't set out with the aim to subvert, let alone reinvent, a tradition, those boundaries became blurred simply through my engagement with miniature paintings, through the act of making them. I was aware that I was indulging in Anachronistic practice, labor intensive, limited in the scope of its impact. But I was interested in an art form whose present was of the past… I was interested in the cultural and historical dimensions, not simply as they relate to visual pleasure but at a more fundamental level. … So the decision to engage with miniature painting was independent of the intent to blur boundaries between tradition and the avant-garde. That happened after the work existed.[20]

Artists like Mrinalini Mukherjee's jute rope sculptures, Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander's miniature art, Nomin Bold's Mongolian paintings, Kimsooja's traditional Korean fabrics, Ranjani Shettar and Rina Banerjee's[21] use of beads, thread, wax, wire, feather, and Ruby Chishti's use of rags and twigs, are some of the examples where female artists across the globe employed their traditional cultural lexicons as their visual and/or material tools in the contemporary art scene.

At the same time, Richard Saja, an artist who uses embroidery in his art work, has stated, "No matter how advanced machine embroidery becomes, it will never be able to mimic the gestural aspects of human imbues into stitching." One of the salient features of the craft-based technique is the labor-intensive nature and repetitiveness imbedded in it. My obsession with repetitiveness with tactile form and textures brings my practice closer to artists like Lisa Lou and Chiharu Shiota. The way these artists embrace the repetitiveness in their art is engaging and ingenious. Lau, who primarily works with glass beads, creates fauna-like sculptural forms and wall-hanging pieces. The treatment of these beads makes the difference in the tactility of the form. Similarly, Shiota transforms the space with her delicate fiber threads into a tense dream-like state that creates a

different space within the given space. The threads become more like a chronology, tracking the time of the idea and the artwork.

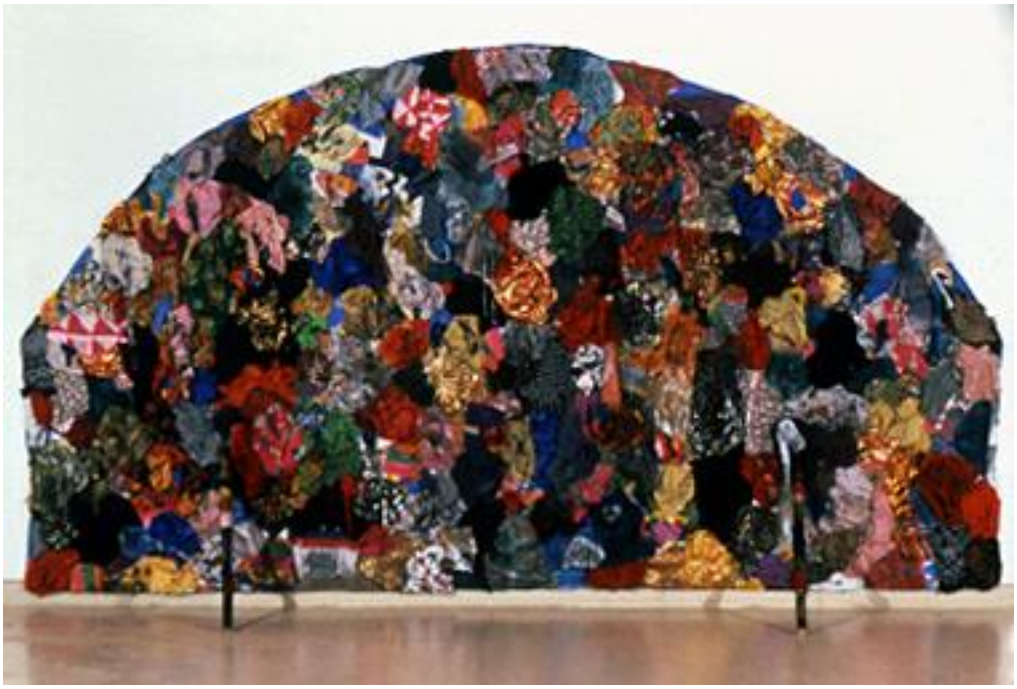

Figure 7: Kimsooja.

3.2: OBJECTS

"The thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it and can never actually be in *itself* because its articulations are those of our very existence." -- Maurice Merleau-Ponty [22]

I inherit and solicit objects from a diverse group of participants. Some of them are heavily loaded with cultural and geographical markers. A wedding head-gear, a bridal dress, vintage camera, a piece of jewelry, ancestral dress, statues of demi-god, accessory of official dress or beloved broken idols, musical instruments are some of the objects I have received. When I ask people to share an object of sentimental value with me, I insist on knowing the story of the object. This helps me position the sentimental as well as cultural value of the object in present time and context. This then impacts my treatment of the object. Then I impose on these objects a meaning

that extends or is inspired by the original value of the object. I am continuously creating a narrative, a narrative inspired from an older narrative, or I am creating a completely new narrative within which all these smaller narratives fit like puzzle pieces. My practice is akin to the photography of Fabrice Monteiro, who bases his work on an artificial narrative about the plight of natural elements, as if the elements were suffering beings due to human abuse of natural resources. In his *Prophecy* series[23], the created dresses from garbage and then was photographed. In my work, I modify common objects stylistically or decoratively to express their journey more clearly.

The donated objects become part of an ongoing project called *Shared Memoirs*. In the years 2015 and 2017 (Project Memory), I created two sets of installations with these objects. I modified these objects to make their story visually evident and placed them together with other such objects. The objects came in conversation with each other and seemed to form a mega-narrative that incorporated all their individual stories within one.

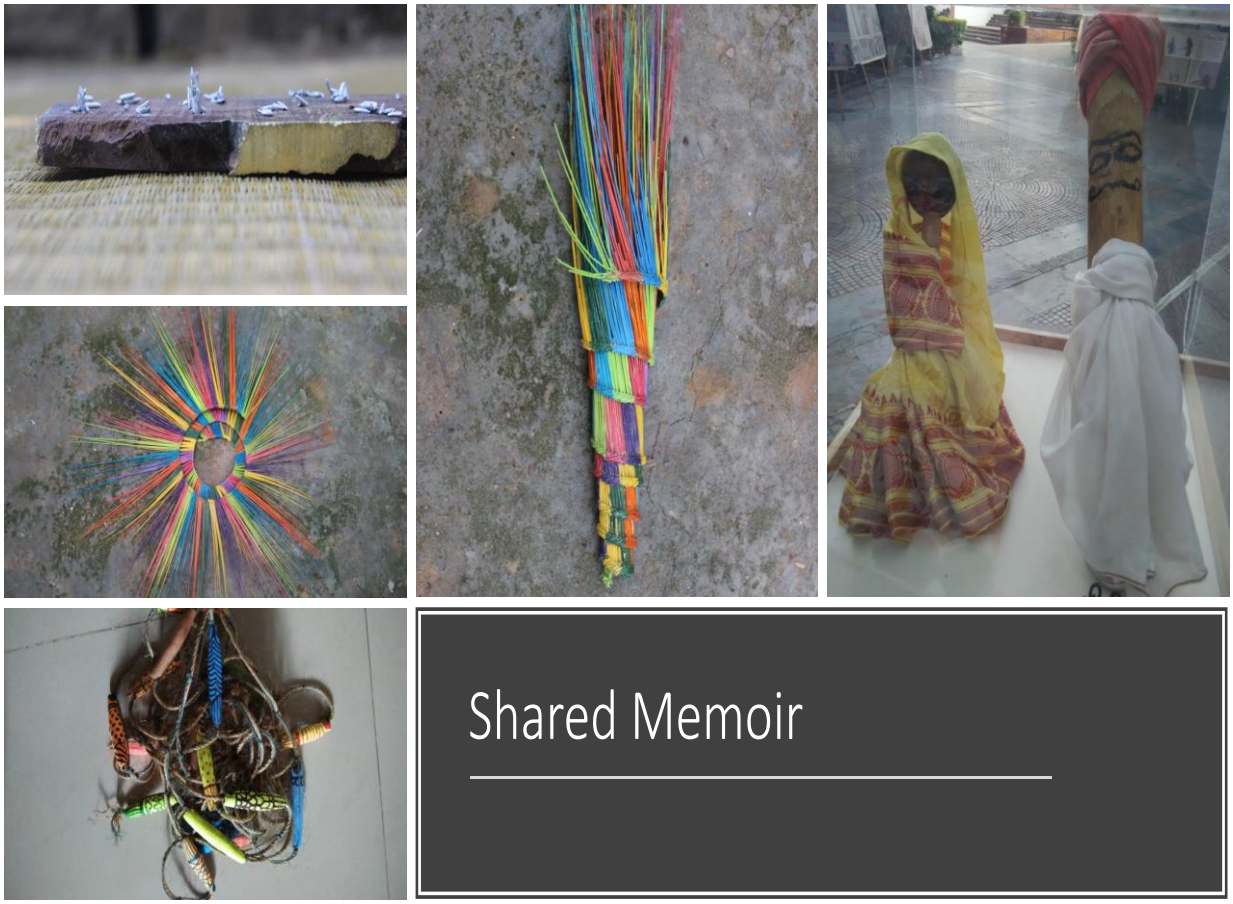

Figure 8, From top left to bottom and right: mahogani wood with rice grain and acrylic, tribal grass broom and acrylic, fishing net and acrylic, tribal broom, wooden hammer and hand-hukkah and fabric, 2015

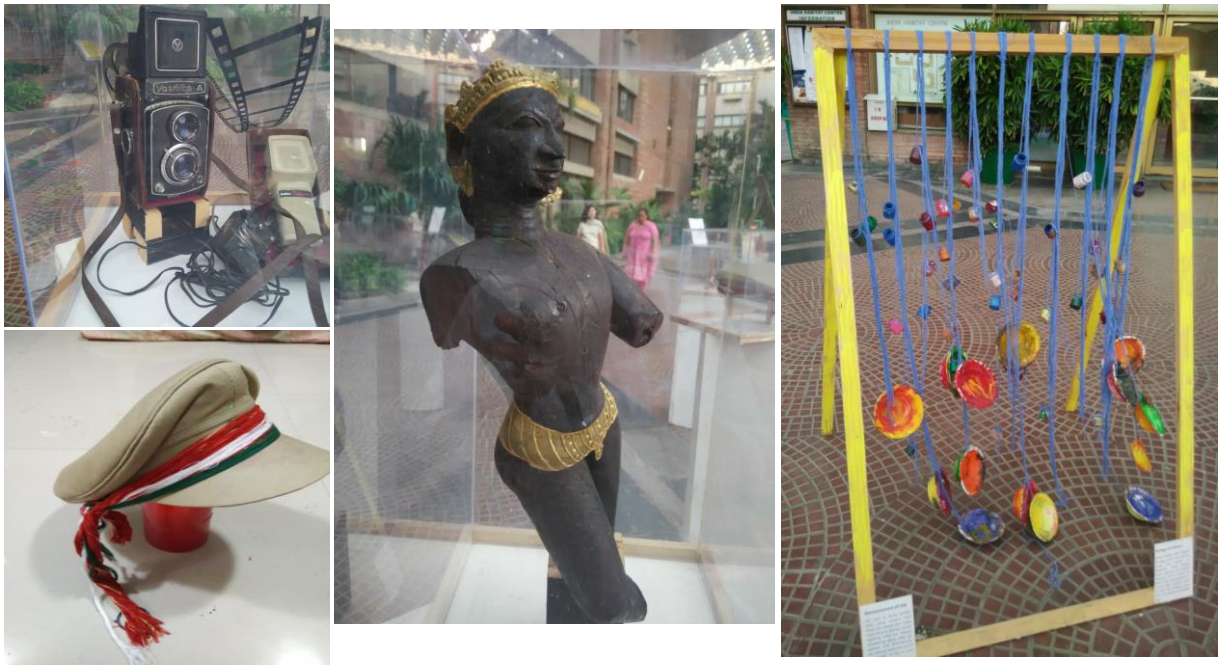

Figure 9: Top left to bottom to right: camera, police uniform hat, wooden statue, assembled discards, 2015

3:3: **SELF AS SUBJECT**

In my performance projects, I often am the subject of my projects as an artist. This means that I also become the object to discuss the subject of being an artist. It is a complex play of creator and creation where the line between performer and performed fuse. In projects like the 'I in Togetherness' where Jey and I, are talking about a couple's life through our lives and '365 Days Mee & Jey' video series where I am living life as an art project for a year, the play between self and projected-self becomes complex. These projects require me to develop a distanced vision of my own activities and experiences that help me perform 'myself' for others. This technique of playing the 'self' is in absolute contrast with traditional performances where the performers

personify different characters by putting aside their own characteristics. These projects where I am my own subject are committed to spontaneity and are parts of life unlike performances that replicate or implicate life.

Drawing parallel with myself as subject and object, Allan Kaprow (1927-2006), an artist, historian, critic and teacher, lived a larger part of his life as art. In Kaprow's words, "Artists were increasingly thinking of the work of art as 'a situation, an action, an environment or an event."[24] Heavily influenced by John Cage, he incorporated chance and randomness within predetermined parameters for time-based experiments.

In the late 1950s, Kaprow invented a form of performative art and called it "Happenings". It comprised of a number of events happening simultaneously and spontaneously. They were never to be repeated exactly again.[25] His works became increasingly introspective from the 1980s onwards, till his death in 2006. His practice space shifted from large public places to more intimate settings increasingly blurring the boundary between life and art.[26]

Similar to Kaprow, my performances become a experience of life rather than imitation of life and self. I am increasingly exploring my personal and social scape through these on-going interaction between my life and artistic practice. I am blurring the line between the performer and performed, the subject and object, and the artist and observer.

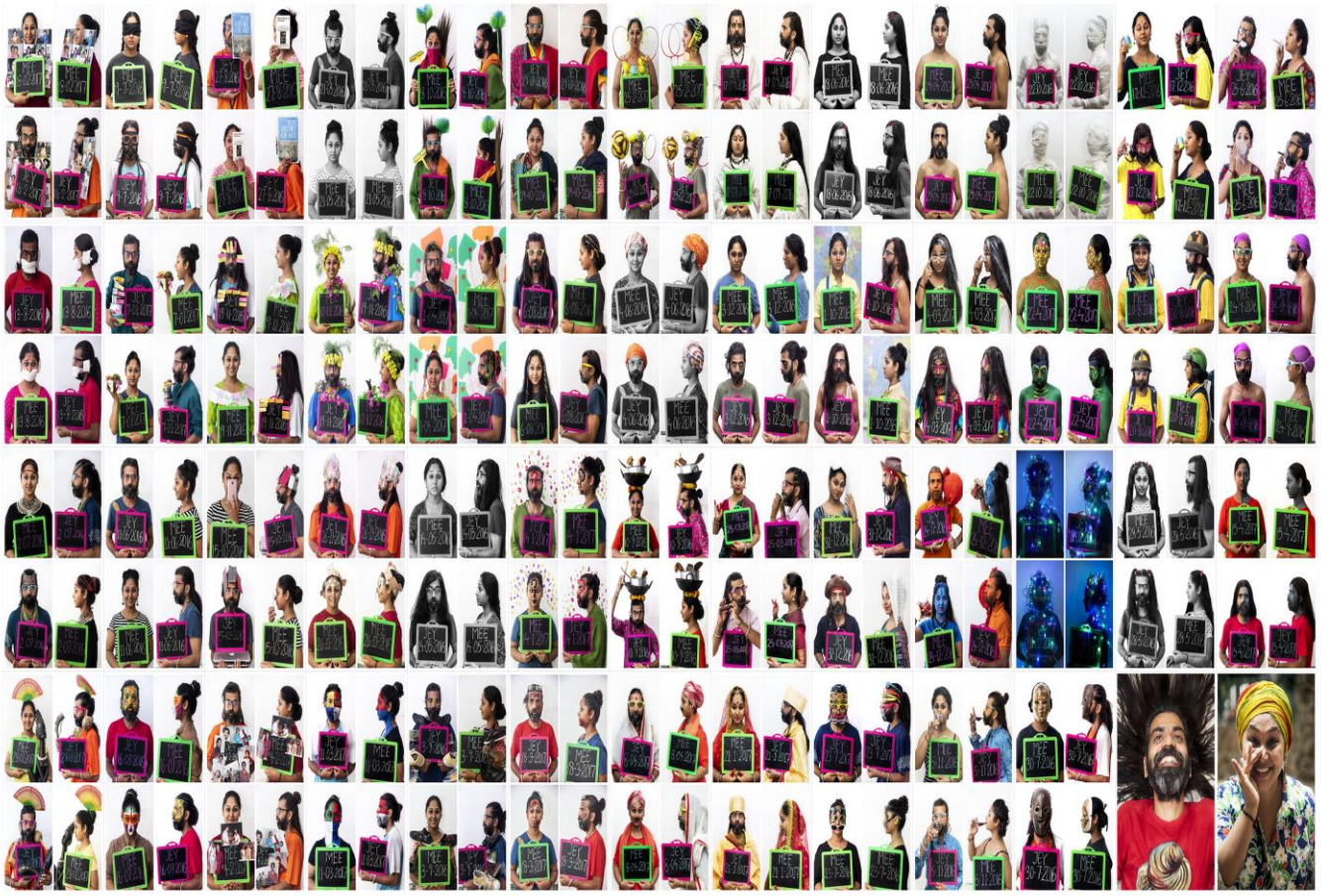

Figure 10: I IN TOGETHERNESS. 52 week photograph based performance. May 2016-May 2017 (Mee & Jey), 2018

CHAPTER FOUR

SITUATING PRACTICE IN SPACE

4.1: IN AND OUT OF A WHITE CUBE

My objects travel in time and space to reach me. My forms live through the present to evolve in the future. Actions happen to be witnessed in the present.

White Cube is a term that represents the sacred abode of art, also called the gallery space. This space is almost always built with neutral white walls to isolate idea and form from their cultural elements for aesthetically privileged viewing. It loses its markers of time and place. In the initial years of my practice, I felt intimidated by this white cube. Its glass doors, shiny floors and austere setting made me feel lost. Many friends of mine refused to enter such space and found it intimidating. The gallery space is elitist by its sheer economic and architectural nature. Art in white cube is expensive and exclusive. Art administrator Linda Fyre Burnham related the gallery space to "white yuppies"[27] and added that "there is too much going on outside."[28]

Art and creative practices have been part of life, and artistic movements have borrowed heavily from these traditions. Abstract art, Decorative art, Craft-based art movements are just a few such practices. Art not only serves utilitarian purpose but also performs as a social binder and conduit for transmitting knowledge. As an Indian, decorative craft skills have shaped my artistic journey. I realized the power of art as an agency to initiate dialogue about less discussed issues and also bring forth changes through it. My studio art pieces speak to major political and social problems, but they do not directly engage with the people whose lives will have life-altering impact with these policies. Faced with my constant quest to strike a dialogue between my immediate and larger audience, I moved into the space beyond the physical bounds of the white, cube-like gallery space into the homes of people.

In the year 2013, I decided to travel and experience the arts of India. This journey evolved into an art project that was based on the gift economy. Families and institutions hosted me and

gave me a real-life experience of their arts and creative traditions, and in return I facilitated them to paint a mural in their residential and/or work space on the subject of their choice. This exchange of experience and knowledge became so popular that in the past six years we have painted over 72 murals in 19 states of India.

In my recent practice each set of works almost always consists of multiple pieces. This multitude of forms or elements helps me create multiple layers of contexts. I intentionally play with the internal organizational and the physical-structural set-up to amplify the contextual meaning and sensorial experience. My modular pattern of working is a direct reflection of the way I perceive the world: a large whole made of tiny units. This play between micro and macro is evident in my work. Almost always my work represents multitudes either in quantity or in quality. The internal organizational context produces implicit comparative value of the individual pieces while the physical space concerns the larger social and political meaning of the work. The modular building of macro with micro is also found in the works of Do ho Suh's sculptural installations made with army dog tags. Do Ho Suh's fabric architectural works referring to the idea of home consists of several fabric cubes that are gathered together to create a sense of a residential unit. There is difference in the sensorial experience of a single room-structure as a home and a complex which consists of room-structures. I also connect with the manner Ann Hamilton plays with the idea of micro and macro. Hamilton literally created a mountainous form with tiny objects like visiting cards and uniform shirts. By simply playing with the quantity of ordinary things like visiting cards or work uniforms, the objects transform from ordinary to intimidating, which is far from the character it possessed originally.

The scales and sizes of my works often depend on the nature of the subject. The treatment of material tends to rely heavily on my instinctive, improvisational and organic methods of

functioning. I prefer to have that organic element prominent in my works. Often an emotionally disturbing subject shall adopt a handy size like an 8x11-inch sheet of paper (micro form), which in turn grows in a fractal pattern to become a macro unit. In contrast, a subject like my political identity in the US can best be addressed in relatively large, free-standing sculptural forms eventually developing into a sculptural community like the Sound-Suits of Nick Cave.[29] Interestingly, I share several similarities in my practice with Cave. An artist from Missouri, Cave engages with studio and community-based practices. Very much like him, I, too uses a variety of craft material including fabric, fiber and beads extensively to address the idea of cultural identity and as community building tools.

4.2: VIRTUAL SPACE

The immediate audience is the people in the art world with whom I connect in the gallery space, site-specific art spaces and professionals who live and breathe art. My larger audience includes those who may or may not have direct and daily interaction with art and art professionals. In order to reach a yet larger audience with limited finances, I had to move out of the white-cubical space. I resorted to traveling in order to creatively engage with my larger audience in 2013. This was the year when I, with my partner Jey Sushil, started the relational-traveling art project titled "ARTOLOGUE: Art for All." Based on gift economy or exchange economy, I engage with a community that invites me into their space, and in return of their hospitality, I co-create murals with them on their residential or institutional walls, focusing on a subject crucial to them. The decision of engaging the host in the creative process and painting a mural are deliberate. Since this art project is an attempt to engage the larger audience in a creative dialogue initiated by me, their equal or larger participation creates a greater sense of responsibility and authorship; hence, they cherish the experience and preserve the mural as a source of inspiration and memento.

I believe that one of the main purposes of contemporary art is to direct our gaze and thoughts to neglected issues that need attention. This neglect could be simply by chance or it may be intentional. I engage in a process of directing the gaze and thoughts of the host community towards a critical issue in their community through this creative process with the help of the host (welfare) organizations that invites us to work with the community. The slow and subtle process of discussing difficult, rarely talked-about issues and the expression of these issues in creative form became the identifying characteristic of this community-based practice. Over the span of four to six days, we have observed significant change in the perception of the participants on the concerned issue.

Jey documented the whole experience of engaging and creating a mural with the community and published it on our website as well as our social media sites including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and YouTube. The project gained huge exposure on the social media sites in a short time. A large number of people from across countries connected through comments and expressed their wish to host us for this creative purpose. I began using social media sites more actively to engage with more varied communities. Interestingly, a large number of invitations flowed in from recreational and social welfare organizations working for people with cognitive and physical impairments and for promotion of education and hygiene, especially for women, eradication of female feticide and child marriage. This was my first realization of the power of virtual space as a medium for exhibition.

In the year 2016, I collaborated with Jey and started a weekly performance series titled "I in Togetherness." This series was an attempt to address the critical issues of life of a couple. Subjects ranging between differences of taste, clothes, weather, usage of money, socialization to less-talked issues like sexual and gendered identity, insecurities, violence, disease, nudity, ageing and death were discussed using props and a pair of slates. We photographed each other in front and profile shots holding slates with our names and date similar to the way criminal suspects are documented. This collage of four photographs was published on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Youtube on every Saturday for 52 weeks between May 2016- May 2017.

We resorted to virtual space as instant exhibition space instead of documenting the whole performance digitally and then exhibiting it in a gallery. I decided not to document the performance and exhibit it later to the audience because I wanted to create a sense of witnessing and being the first one to see or experience the art/performance. I wanted to create a sense of proximity with my

immediate and larger audience in terms of physical sense (using the mobile technological gadgets) and temporal sense (immediate reach). I used the technology as my medium and space.

In these 52 weeks of performance, the virtual space not only became a place for documentation and presentation but also an important channel for interaction with our larger audience. By simply custom designing the format where visual content was dramatically treated to address the issue, we also added texts by each of us on the same subject. The combination of strong visual content with textual content boosted our reach to a larger audience.

Gradual understanding technology and audio-visual media helped me realize the desire of the audience to see the un-edited aspect of the artist's life. Since my practice is heavily inspired from everyday life, I found I could create more impact if I talked of everyday life in an everyday setting; the setting that was not tailored as a stage but as a functional domestic set-up like any other regular household. I, again, partnered with Jey and started a video-performance project intended to continue for 365 days between January 1, 2019 to January 1, 2020. A series of two-minute videos recorded in my home with a recording device focuses on issues that are important to us as artists. The audience is able to share in the performance as a livelier sensorial experience that includes audio, visual and short text.

CHAPTER FIVE

AUDIENCE

5.1: FROM ARISTOTLE TO MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) argued that "art is embedded in the interaction between the work of art -- poetry, drama, painting, sculpture, music and dance -- and the audience."[30] According to Aristotle, art has its own independent structure, which is understood, evaluated and appreciated by the audience through a range of concepts derived from experience and life.[31] In other words, he identified the audience as the completer of meaning of all arts.

Dave Beech elaborates more on the idea of audience and its role vis-à-vis art.[32] He discusses how the audience in completing the meaning of art through differing degrees of interaction. First, he notes interactivity, meaning acting with each other and responding to the user. Second is participation, meaning having a share, taking part or being part of the whole. The third degree is collaboration and co-operation, which relates to working together or co-laboring.[33] In my work, all three connected strands of practice engage the audience, who connect and strike a dialogue in all these differing capacities.

In the contemporary art world, Marina Abramović is one of the leading performance artists who gives not just significant agency to her audience as the completer of the meaning but also as the driver of the whole act of performance.

> Performance is a mental and physical construction that I step into, in front of an audience, in a specific time and place. And then the performance actually happens it is based on energy values. It is very important that a public is present: I couldn't do it privately; that wouldn't be performance. Nor would I have the energy to do it. For me it is crucial that the energy actually comes from the audience and translated through me- I filter it and let it go back to the audience. The larger the audience, the better the performance, because there is more energy I can work with. It is not just about emotions.[34]

My practice lies between the two ideas of audience as passive interactor as presented by Aristotle and as the driving agency for the performances of Abramović. My connection with my audience is multi-layered. From as little agency as viewing the work to co-creating the work, I share a varied

range of authorship with my audience. In my studio works, the audience is muted, almost reduced to mere donors. In my collaborative projects, they share ideas and related knowledge, which may get incorporated in the process, depending on the nature of performance. In the community art projects, the audience co-creates with me and the authorship lies with the audience as well.

The engagement of my audience in the process and presentation of my projects is as much a part of my functional strategy as my presentational set-up. In my studio projects, the presence of the larger community is muted. They are limited to passive participation. I reserve the final authority of selection of material although from the lot of material extended by the participants; the method of treatment and the arrangement of the objects follow the order of my preference.

However, in the collaborative or performative projects I give viewers/participants a stronger agency. They can influence the execution process if their suggestion is complementary to our project. In my collaborative project, where the participants have been engaging actively, I assign them center stage and they become part of the final exhibit. I conducted this experiment in my phot-performance project where participants were photographed, and their photos were shown along with our photo exhibits.

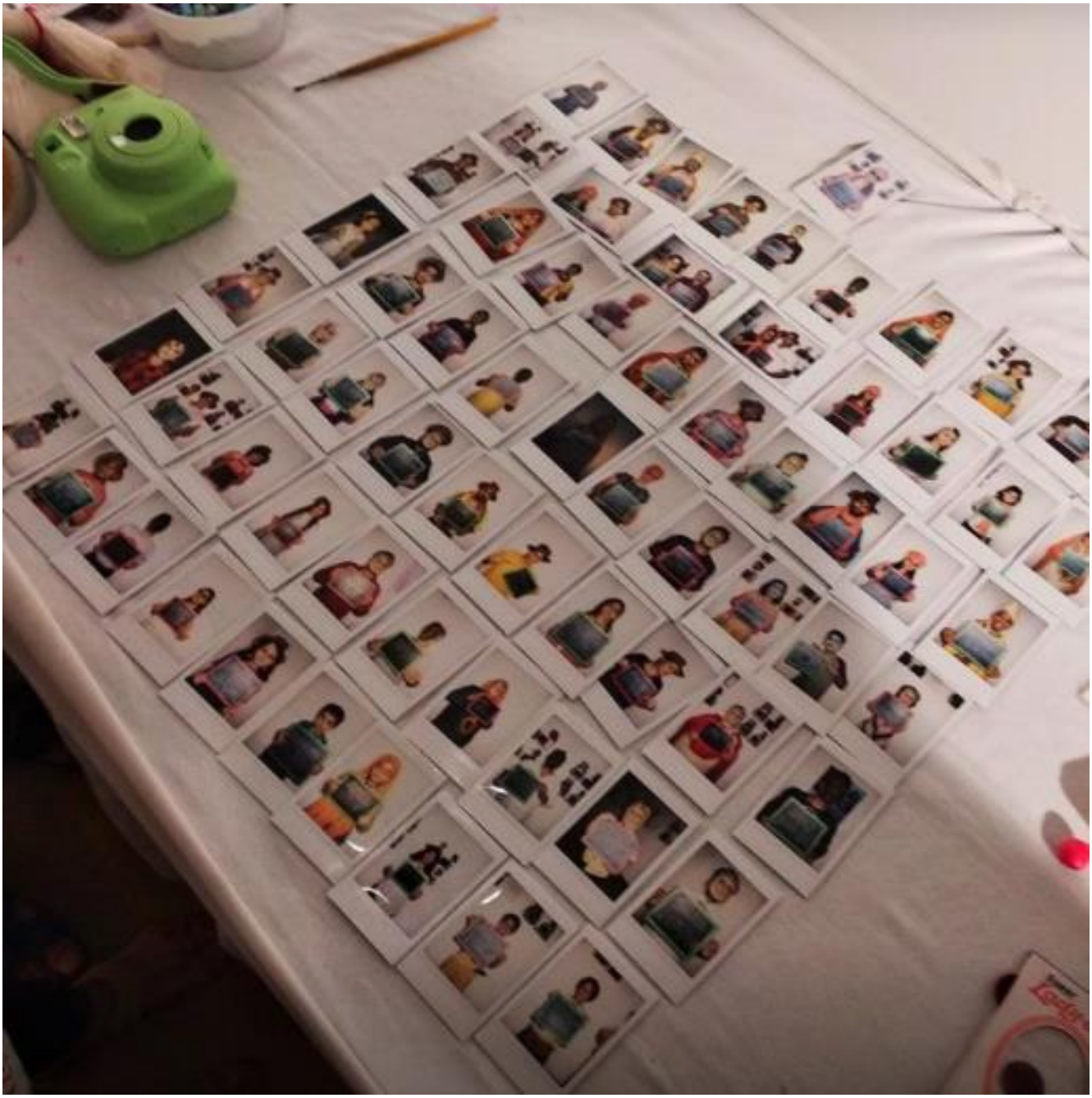

Figure 11: Participants whose performance were documented as photographs. These photographs became part of on-going exhibition. I in Togetherness, New Delhi, 2018

In the community-based art projects, by contrast, the audience achieves a larger share of control. In these projects I join the participants in the final performance of production thus practically blurring the divide between the art/artist and the audience. I prefer to use the term

"relational art" for the community-based projects. In 1998, French art curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term "relational aesthetics" in order to account for an increasing number of socially engaged art practices which emerged in the 1990s. Bourriaud proposed that by "systematically transforming everyday activities outside of their mundane and private spaces artists initiate new relations—and new aesthetic contexts—as art becomes a frame around actions and events are connected to everyday existence, not merely separated from it. In other words, in relational art, the audience is envisaged as a community."[35]

Art has always been a method of communication for artists to convey their idea and impressions to the audience. Rather than the artwork being an encounter between a viewer and an object, relational art produces intersubjective encounters.

Claire Bishop emphasizes that Bourriaud does not regard relational aesthetics to be simply a theory of interactive art. He considers it to be a means of locating contemporary practice within the culture at large: relational art is seen as a direct response to the shift from a goods to a service-based economy. It is also seen as a response to the virtual relationships of the Internet and globalization, which on the one hand have prompted a desire for more physical and face-to-face interaction between people, while on the other have inspired artists to adopt a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach and model their own "possible universes".[36] This emphasis on immediacy is familiar to us from the 1960s, recalling the premium placed by performance art on the authenticity of our first-hand encounter with the artist's body. The main difference, as Bourriaud sees it, is the shift in attitude toward social change.

My community art practice can be situated closer to the practices of Claudia Bernardi, in the manner that the communities I work with are primarily under-privileged. While Bernardi

established a model called School of Art and Open Studio of Perquin, for art and education and human rights that are based on the partnership and collaboration with the community. This model of education and community building through art has been initiated in Colombia, Guatemala, Canada and Argentina.

Akin to Bernardi, I have travelled and worked with over 70 different communities in India and St. Louis over the past six years. However, unlike Bernardi, each of my interactions with the community is crafted according to the needs and nature of the community. The reason for this approach is that a model for people in legal custody may not be effective for the physically or mentally challenged people. Likewise, a different approach is required for interactions and engagement with tribal families, police officers stationed away from families, and people diagnosed with life-threatening disease.

Social practitioner artist Suzanne Lacy has advocated to create "effective communication with people not ordinarily attentive to the arts." To bridge this gap between the common people and artists' and the art world, I have been taking arts to people's homes and out of gallery spaces in a manner that echoes Lacy's approach. I strongly agree with her idea that "it is essentially the metaphor of self and other...we have to resolve...the sense of no-self or all-encompassing all-self...in art we have to do at least some negotiation between our reality and other realities."[37]

However, there is an important distinction between social practitioner Lacy's vision and my own in terms of my participation in community art projects. Unlike me, she keeps the authorship of the final product whether it is in value or content. I assign authorship and ownership to the community I work with as Claudia Bernardi has done.

My community art project creates space for two-way interaction which, in the words of Grant Kester, is "dialogical art" and advocates what Nicolas Bourriaud propagated in his

discussion of relational aesthetics, which focuses on how the art community is a micro community and how art can be a way of living. This kind of practice depends heavily on the degree of participation. Participation can be at the level of passive audience or active collaboration with the co-creator. The degree of participation helps evolve the scale, nature, outcome and resonance of the experience that my work provides to the participants.

Figure 12: Cognitively Challenged participants, Artologue, community art project, Jharkhand, India, 2014

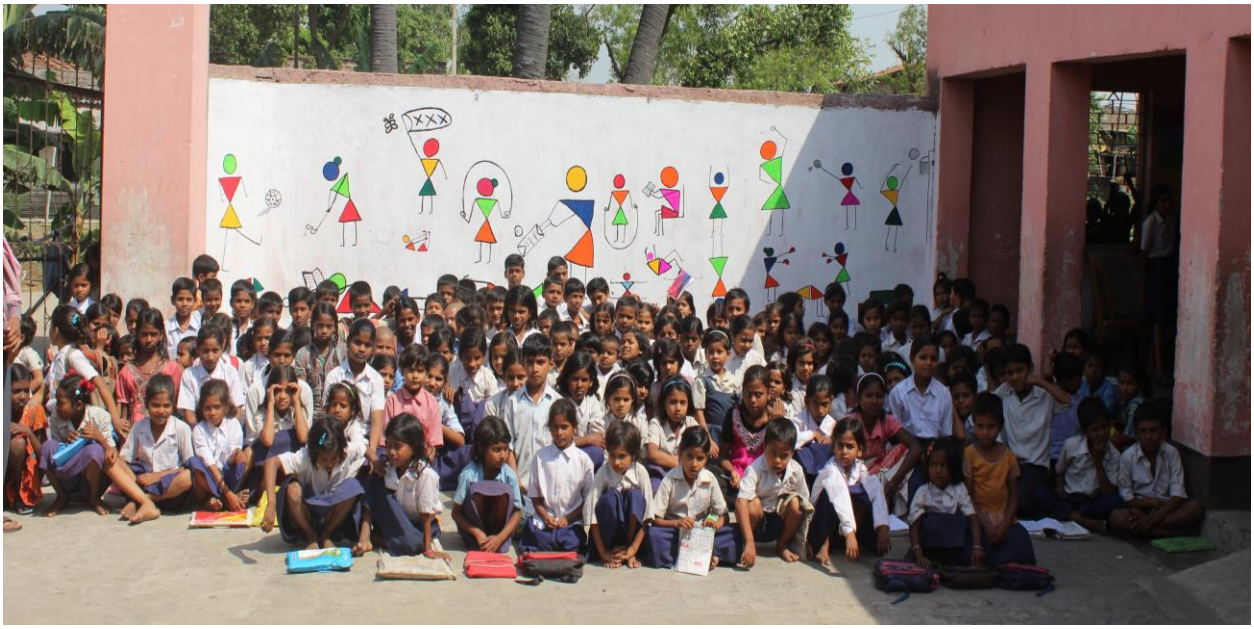

Figure 13: Government School Children ,community art project, India, 2015

Figure 14: Rajasthan, Community art project, India, 2016.

Most of the girls in this photograph are married before the legal age. They stay home and are semi-literate.

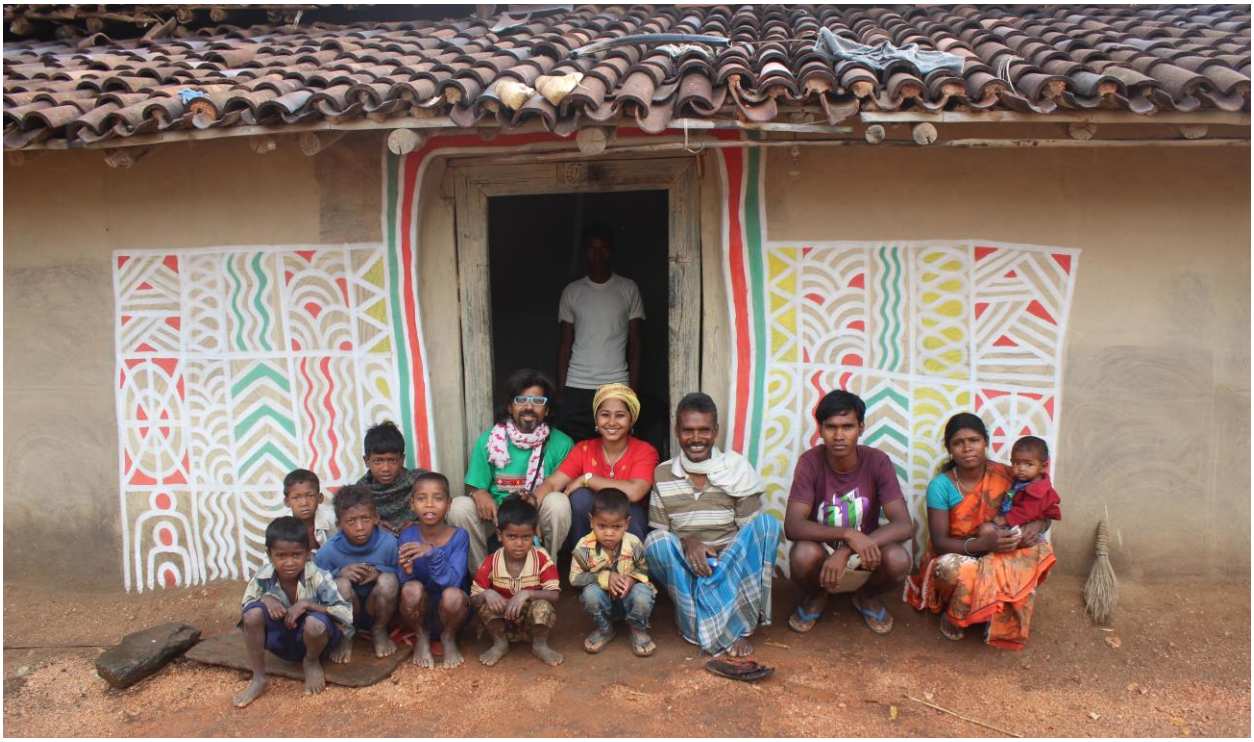

Figure 15: A tribal host family, Community art project, India, 2016

CONCLUSION

As an artist my growth has been experience based. Characterized by experiments, this approach helps me create works beyond logic and beyond rational knowledge. My ideas precede the form, and forms find their way to materials from mundane life. My work follows a modular pattern in which I create a cluster of works comprising similar or complementary elements that complete each other. The works have internal as well as structural coherence that yet follows my instinctive, non-rational vision.

In the end, my works are all about people. The ideas, forms, materials and processes of creating art are always about humanity or always engage humanity. This vision applies to my studio as well as collaborative and community art practice. In other words, my work is dialogue-oriented. Different figures or elements seem to interact with each other; simply put, my hope is to start a dialogue with the audience.

The two main elements of my work are figuration and repetition. At the same time, organic and recycled materials are central to my art. I play with archetypal forms and arrangements. Inspired deeply from rock and tribal arts, I also enjoy playing with abstract-figuration in my works. I enjoy the organic quality of my figures. The unpolished nature of my art works opens a door for multiple interpretations, and by doing so my work widens the horizon for various visions within the same material/artwork. The organic nature of work can be defined in my understanding as evolving, growing, fluid and non-definite. Non-definiteness also invites the audience to look for more meanings. I believe the crude or unpolished nature of my art creates more space for personal association and interpretation.

Repetition is another important aspect of my practice. Rooted in the Indian spiritual tradition of chanting, my inclination towards the monotonous yet calming process of repeating a technique and visual or material form comes naturally to me. These repetitive designs are highly

controlled and systematic; hence, they create a kind of fractal visual effect. In my work, I contrast spontaneity and predetermined elements, which in turn represent the evolutionary patterns of the work. These repetitive designs and patterns are drawn from my Indian cultural heritage and knowledge of traditional folk paintings. These designs represent my cultural identity.

Another prominent element in my works is the use of handicraft. I was born and raised into a family (culture) where knowledge of crafts of various kinds is a virtue. Raised by a highly creative mother and grandmothers, use of traditional crafts is an obvious choice for my work.

My connection with my audience is multi-layered. From developing as little agency as viewing the work to co-creating the work, I share a varied range of authorship with them. In my studio works, participants are more muted. In my collaborative projects they share their ideas and related knowledge, which may enter into the process, depending on the performance. In the community art projects, we have a shared sense of creation and authorship.

From sculptures to large-scale murals and installations, my intention has been to create a life-size experience of viewing the works. I prefer to use spaces that are open and welcoming to people, the kind of spaces are outside of the gallery. Residential complexes, welfare institutions, public spaces, mobile surfaces -- as well as virtual spaces, canvases and objects themselves -- all have been sites for my work's execution and exhibition.

Through all these varied elements of my practice, I seek empathetic response from my audience as Rachel Corbett is quoted "to observe with empathy, one sees not only with the eyes but with the skin"[38].

END NOTES:

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In the chapter *Connective Aesthetics: Art After Individualism* Suzy Gablik discuss the need to step out of the gallery spaces. The full quote is "Real life is calling. I can no longer ignore the clamor of disasters-economic, spiritual, environmental, political disasters- in the world in which I move." This connects with my next argument that my personal life is decided by the political circumstances by the place I inhabit.
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[28]Lacy, 7

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[33] Walwin, introductory key essay.
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[35] "Http://Karenmoss.Art/Touch/," n.d.
[36] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Collection Documents Sur l'art (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002), 13.
[37] Daniel Birnbaum et al., *The Hospitality of Presence: Problems of Otherness in Husserl's Phenomenology* (Berlin ; New York, NY: Sternberg, 2008), 2.
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