Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

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201 Gerd Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities* (New York: Routledge, 2010 [1999]), 30.

202 Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Langhorne: Gordon and Breach, 1994), 35.

203 Akhil Gupta and Aradhana Sharma, "Globalization and Postcolonial States," *Current Anthropology* 47, no. 2 (2006): 291.

204 Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*, 30.

205 See John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 39; Andreas Wimmer, "The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries: A Multilevel Process Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 113, no. 4 (2008): 971.

206 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

207 Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006 [1983]).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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213 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.

214 Colin Long, "State of Disunion: International Support for Trade Unionism in Bangladesh Must Proceed After Separating the Wheat from the Chaff," *Himal Southasian: The Bangladesh Paradox* 28, no. 3 (2015).

215 Kasia Paprocki, "Anti-Politics of Climate Change: Depoliticisation of Climate Change Undermines the Historic Reasons that Made Bangladesh Vulnerable to it," *Himal Southasian: The Bangladesh Paradox* 28, no. 3 (2015): 54–55.

216 Liechty, *Out Here in Kathmandu*, 4.

217 Bell, *Kathmandu*, 332–333, 338.

218 See Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989).

219 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*, 125.

> conceive of it instead as an imagined conceptual realm, not territo-
> rially bounded, but one that in the imagination of artists and schol-
> ars could both be local and transgress boundaries.[220]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Interlude: *Echoed Moments in Time*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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231 Raghavan, *1971*, 235–263.

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

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

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

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

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

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

235 Raghavan, *1971*, 264–273.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Biennale in 2015 and at the *documenta* in 2017. The latter earned him a nom-
ination for the prestigious Turner Prize in early 2018. See Natasha Ginwala,
"Naeem Mohaiemen," documenta 14, accessed February 8, 2021, https://www.
documenta14.de/en/artists/988/naeem-mohaiemen.
241 Mohaiemen, "Flying Blind," 52.
242 Mohaiemen, "Flying Blind," 50.
243 Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*, 31–32.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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257 Manzoorul S. Islam, "Mahbubur Rahman," in Choudhury, *Parables*, 81.
258 Christopher Pinney, *The Coming of Photography in India* (London: The British Library Publishing Division, 2008), 145.

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

THE COLLECTIVE AS CULTURAL BROKER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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261 Mary Angela Schroth, "Recounting 'Parables,'" in Choudhury, *Parables*, 102–121.

262 The Gervasuti Foundation is an alternative collaborative art platform operating from Venice. The foundation's goal is the revitalization of the area of the Castello, famous for woodcraft and shipbuilding, where the Gervasuti family artisan wood workshop is located. "Home," Gervasuti Foundation, accessed April 13, 2021, http://www.gervasutifoundation.org/.

263 Schroth, "Recounting 'Parables.'"

264 Tayeba Begum Lipi and Fiona Biggiero, "Long Distance Conversations," in Choudhury, *Parables*, 16–17.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TBL*: Even for the Biennale, there was no money from*
the government, although it was a national pavil-
ion. We had to raise every single penny.

MR*: But there were many people who helped us.*

TBL*: That was the private sector. ...*

MR*: Why are you expecting something from government?*

TBL*: That happens from the government*
because it is a national pavilion.[268]

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

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268 AR, MR / TBL, February 2015.

269 Gupta and Sharma, "Globalization and Postcolonial States," 288.

270 The Bengal Foundation was founded by Bangladeshi industrialist and entrepreneur Abul Khair with the aim to grow, proliferate, and conserve the art and culture of Bangladesh. "About Us," Bengal Foundation, accessed April 14, 2021, https://bengalfoundation.org/about-us-2/.

271 The Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development was established in 1996 and is financially supported by individual donors, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Dutch Postcode Lottery. See "About," Prince Claus Fund, accessed April 24, 2021, https://princeclausfund.org/about.

272 Arts Collaboratory is a worldwide network of twenty-three art-related organizations. It was founded in 2007 by DOEN and Hivos, two Dutch foundations, with the aim to support the growing movement of artist initiatives. Within the network, Doen and Hivos have provided smaller grants to independent organizations—Britto has been one of the recipients of these grants. See "Home," Arts Collaboratory, accessed April 24, 2021, https://artscollaboratory.org/.

THE ART PAVILION AS (TRANS)LOCALITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

are allowed in the Shilpakala building. The international crowd of artists, col-
lectors, media, and other registered guests is eagerly waiting for the perfor-
mance to start.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

296   AR, SSi, December 2015.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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314 Jha, *Battles of the New Republic*, xxv.
315 Harsha Man Maharjan, "Vote for Prashant Tamang: Representations of an Indian Idol in the Nepali Print Media and the Retreat of Multiculturalism," in *Political Change and Public Culture in Post-1990 Nepal*, ed. Michael Hutt and Pratyoush R. Onta (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
316 The Madhesi Movement arose in the 1950s during the brief democratic opening that followed the abolition of the Rana oligarchy in Nepal. It is based on the idea of a common ethnic and cultural identity of the inhabitants of the Madhes (the southern lowlands of Nepal, see fn. 145), and directed against the continued socio-cultural and political dominance of the high-caste Hindus primarily from the country's hill and mountain regions. The series of movements is led by various political parties, which claim that this identity should be recognized. Their demands comprise equal political representation, the creation of an autonomous region, and the recognition of other languages besides Nepali. The first movement took place in 2007, shortly after the presentation of the draft for the Interim Constitution (2006); contrary to the hopes of the Madhesi leaders, this draft did not include the word "federalism" and thus cemented a continued centralization of the state. The second movement took place in 2008 and resulted in the recognition of Nepal as a Federal Democratic Republic in the Interim Constitution, acknowledging a certain regional autonomy. The third movement (2015) followed the presentation of the new Constitution of Nepal. Protests against the newly proposed federal boundaries—which the protest leaders felt undercut previously recognized regional autonomy—resulted in a wave of protests and a six-month blockade on the border with India, causing a severe gas and petrol shortage in Nepal. During this blockade, political leaders in Nepal repeatedly blamed India for instigating, even controlling, the blockade as a means to assert its influence over the Nepali neighbor. These allegations fed into long-running suspicions about India's intentions in Nepal. Bilateral relations between Nepal and India, despite the "open border" (citizens do not require any kind of documentation to cross the border) are marked by a delicate balance between economic and political support, and hegemony and dependence. Jha, *Madhesi Upsurge*, 47–48; Hachhethu, *Trajectory of Democracy in Nepal*, 3; Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*, 10; Maharjan, "Vote for Prashant Tamang."

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

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

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

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

THE PERFORMANCE HUB AS (TRANS)LOCALITY

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

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

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323 Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.*, 39; Wimmer, "Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries," 971.

324 "Biennale Arte 2017, over 615,000 Visitors," La Biennale di Venezia, November 26, 2017, accessed January 17, 2018, http://www.labiennale.org/en/news/biennale-arte-2017-over-615000-visitors.

325 Samdani Art Foundation, "Dhaka Art Summit VIP Booklet," 2014 (Dhaka: Samdani Art Foundation, 2014); Gianne Brownell Mitic, "Putting Bangladeshi Art on the Map," *The New York Times*, October 22, 2015, accessed June 19, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/22/arts/international/putting-bangladeshi-art-on-the-map.html.

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

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

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

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326   Paran Balakrishnan, "The Dhaka Canvas," *The Telegraph India*, March 16, 2014, accessed January 27, 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20160404141226/https://www.telegraphindia.com/1140316/jsp/graphiti/18084429.jsp.
327   Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed.
328   Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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338   Rahman, "Performance Programme," 87.

THE COLLECTIVE AS A CULTURAL BROKER

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

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

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339   The Siddhartha Art Gallery was co-founded by arts manager Sangeeta Thapa and artist Shashi Kala Tiwari in 1987. It has become one of the most persistent private art institutions in Nepal. See Interlude: *Graduation* and chapter four for a more elaborate discussion of the gallery and its situatedness in the art infrastructure of Kathmandu.
340   The Kuart Center was established by Sutra co-founder Sujan Chitrakar and UK-based educator Aidan Warlow in the early 2000s. During the first few years, the center offered a one-year diploma course with six students. In 2003, it became affiliated with Kathmandu University, and now constitutes the Center for Art and Design.

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

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

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

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

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