
Chapter 2

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

TW: ... that pressure, that “I have to produce,” keeps it [the art scene] running and going. That is why I love Dhaka. Because—I told you right?—I love Dhaka and hate Dhaka. I hate Dhaka, but I love Dhaka because Dhaka gives me such a tough time. Always keeps me [thinking]: “I have to produce.”

MH: You constantly have to be there.

TW: Yes.

ME: You can't just shut off.

TW: That intensity is nice. Not in the sense of the market, that I have to be there to serve my own financial need. But it is more like, I have to be there and look at others, look how they are participating in the movement, look at how encouraged and inspired [they are], and the sheer amount of energy they have. Even though they are in a fucked-up city. The harshest possible city.³⁴¹

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

341 AR, TW, November 2015.

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

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

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

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

343 Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996).

344 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.

345 AR, TW, November 2015.

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

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

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

346 Tsing, “Conclusion: The Global Situation,” 471.

347 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 5.

348 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 2, 10; see also Ananya Roy, “Urbanisms, Worlding Practices and the Theory of Planning,” *Planning Theory* 10, no. 1 (February 2011).

349 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 2.

350 Roberta Comunian argues that the idea of the “creative city” in the late 1990s was congruent with the *European Capital of Culture* vision, which focused on improving the city through creative and cultural activities and events. The initiative was developed in 1985. It is managed by the European Commission and applications are collected on the level of national ministries for culture. From 1998 onwards however, the word “creative” became popular in a variety of different contexts, especially for its promise of economic gain. Over time, the concept shifted towards a “creative economy,” based on the production of culture and creative products by skilled labor. Comunian, “Rethinking the Creative City,” 1158.

351 Florida, “Cities and the Creative Class”; Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*.

352 Florida, “Cities and the Creative Class,” 293–294.

353 Comunian, “Rethinking the Creative City,” 1174.

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

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

354 Busse and Warnke, “Ortsherstellung als sprachliche Praxis,” 2.

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

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

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

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

My second case study is a month-long public art project in Old Dhaka entitled *1mile*². Organized by the Britto Arts Trust (Britto) in 2014/2015, *1mile*² brought together forty artists and two researchers. Over the course of several weeks, the participants, among them many Britto members,

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

- 358 Before the presentation of the new Constitution of Nepal in 2015, the country was divided into five development regions (Eastern Development Region, Central Development Region, Western Development Region, and Far-Western Development Region), fourteen administrative zones and seventy-five districts.
- 359 Open Societies Foundations began with the philanthropic work of George Soros in 1979. Today, it is the second largest private philanthropic organization based in the US. It works on creating “inclusive and vibrant democracies” by supporting initiatives related to education, public health, media, human rights, and diversity of opinions in over 100 countries. “Home,” Open Society Foundations, accessed February 14, 2021, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/>.
- 360 AR, YP August 2013; Hariyo Chowk, Facebook Page, accessed August 12, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/HariyoChowk/>.
- 361 AR, YP August 2013.

explored the natural and social ecology of the specific neighborhood of Old Dhaka. Old Dhaka, as the name suggests, is the capital city's oldest and most southern part. Due to its location on the Buriganga River, it was an important node in the regional trade network during colonialism. It quickly became a center of cultural production and circulation with education institutions, libraries, and publishing houses. After the Partition, economic and cultural capital has shifted to the newer urban neighborhoods in the north. In the site-specific artworks displayed during the final day of *1mile*², many of the artists critically engaged with the effects of these developments and addressed notions of urbanization, neglect, and heritage.

There is no direct personal link between the two collectives, Sattya and Britto each take different approaches to collectivity. Sattya's understanding is rooted in a "do it together" spirit that goes beyond the artistic field. It is guided by values of participation and volunteerism that intersect with neoliberal mechanisms. In this sense, it is perhaps better described through Geza Ziemer's concept of "complicity" as a momentary, pragmatically and swiftly organized collaboration.³⁶² Britto's conception of collectivity is based on a long-term commitment with the aim to support and expand opportunities for the "local community of artists."³⁶³ Despite their distinct missions, the collectives' respective projects *1mile*² and *KK* both represent "intense short-term interactions that physically transform the urban space," and which function as "strategies for social and spatial binding."³⁶⁴ They are creative interventions that represent a collective aim; both projects are based on a shared belief in the benefits of artistic exchange across national and socio-cultural boundaries, in building alliances outside the art field, and in countering hegemonial claims to city space. Both act through the medium of ephemeral site-specific art but engage in cultural and spatial brokerage that engenders physical and socio-cultural transformations with long-term effects.

Interlude: *Kolor Kathmandu*

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

362 Ziemer, *Komplizenschaft*, 9–11.

363 Begum Lipi, "Extending and Expanding the Idea and Space," 172.

364 Rahul Mehrotra, Felipe Vera, and José Mayoral, *Ephemeral Urbanism: Cities in Constant Flux* (Santiago: ARQ Ediciones, 2016), 38.

365 Unfortunately, the map and the homepage are no longer available.

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

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

THE CITY AS "MUSE AND MEDIUM"³⁶⁷

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

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

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

367 This phrase was quoted by geographer David Pinder and stems from the (no longer active) homepage of one of his case studies, Brooklyn-based artist collective *Toyshop*. Pinder, "Arts of Urban Exploration," 385.

368 Yuki Poudyal, "Our Story," in *Kolor Kathmandu: 75 Districts, 75 Murals*, ed. Ashish Pradhan, Kate Walton, Priti Sherchan, and Yuki Poudyal (Kathmandu: Satty Media Arts Collective, 2013), 1.

369 Poudyal, "Our Story," 1.



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

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

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

370 Islam, “Mahbubur Rahman,” 47.

371 See for example Greg Richards and Julie Wilson, “The Impact of Cultural Events on City Image: Rotterdam, Cultural Capital of Europe 2001,” *Urban Studies* 41,

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

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

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

372 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.

373 Comunian, “Rethinking the Creative City.”

374 There are a few important exceptions: Brosius, “Emplacing and Excavating the City”; Minna Valjakka, “Negotiating Spatial Politics: Site-Responsive Urban Art Images in Mainland China,” *China Information* 29, no. 2 (2015); Siegenthaler, “Towards an Ethnographic Turn.”

375 AR, YP, August 2013.

376 AR, YP, August 2013.

MURAL ART AS A COLLECTIVE TOOL

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

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

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

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

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

379 AR, YP, August 2013.

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

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

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

380 AR, YP, August 2013

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

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

VISUALIZING THE NATION IN THE CITY

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

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

382 Gupta and Sharma, “Globalization and Postcolonial States.”

383 Hangen, *Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal*, 4, 31–32.

384 Poudyal, “Our Story,” 1.

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

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

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

385 From 1982 to 2015, Nepal was divided into five development regions (Eastern Development Region, Central Development Region, Western Development Region, Mid-Western Development Region, Far-Western Development Region). Adhikari, Portnov, and Schwartz, “Urban Growth in Nepal,” 927.

386 Adhikari, Portnov, and Schwartz, “Urban Growth in Nepal,” 927.

387 Bijaya K. Shrestha, “Housing Provision in the Kathmandu Valley: Public Agency and Private Sector Initiation,” *Urbani izziv* 21, no. 2 (2010): 86.

388 Barry, N. Haack and Ann Rafter, “Urban Growth Analysis and Modeling in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal,” *Habitat International* 30, no. 4 (2006): 1056–1057.

389 Shrestha, “Housing Provision in the Kathmandu Valley,” 86.

390 AR, YP, August 2013.

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

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

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

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

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

392 AR, NT, January 2016.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

393 AR, SD, January 2016.

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

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

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

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

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

395 AR, KM, March 2016.

396 AR, KM, March 2016.

397 AR, KM, March 2016.

SPATIAL BROKERAGE—WHOSE RIGHT?

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

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

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

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

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

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

399 AR, A, 2016.

400 AR, A, 2016.

401 AR, A, 2016.

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

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

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

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

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

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

405 AR, YP, August 2013.

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

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

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

406 AR, A, 2016.

407 AR, A, 2016.

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

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

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

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

408 AR, A, 2013.

409 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, 50.

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

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

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

Interlude: 1mile²

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

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

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

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

With Ruplal House, as with Boro Bari (big house) a little further up the street, I am glad that the artists exhibiting here have already taken me inside before today. I might otherwise not have dared to enter it on my own. Intruding into people's homes and their lives feels brazen, but it is exactly what artist Yasmin Jahan Nupur dares visitors to do. Her sound installation is hidden at the far side of Boro Bari, among large piles of paper from the nearby printing press. The sound pieces allow access to the inhabitants' histories and memories of the building, which Jahan has recorded over the past weeks. I leave the house again and continue to follow the green footsteps that mark the 1mile² perimeter (Fig. 5e). Finally, I end up at Beauty Boarding, one of the erstwhile famous boarding houses frequented by writers and other intellectuals of the area. Over the last couple of weeks, it has become the main hub of 1mile²; artists have been sharing lunches, tea breaks, and dinners in-between their explorations of the neighborhood. A number of artists have chosen the space for their projects. Munem Wasif displays his work on the box camera, one of the oldest methods of photographing, still practiced in the area in one of the simple, ground floor rooms.

URBAN FABRICS AS INSPIRATION FOR CREATIVE PLACE-MAKING⁴¹⁰

1mile² was initially launched by a London-based organization called Visiting Arts.⁴¹¹ The 2009 pilot program took place in eight countries (Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan, England, Iran, Scotland, and South Africa) and has since included more than 13,500 artists, ecologists, and researchers from ten countries around the world. Britto's co-founder and the co-organizer of *1mile²* in Bangladesh, Tayeba Begum Lipi, explains that the overall aim of the initial project was to explore the natural and social ecology of the specific square mile that participants are most familiar with; the

410 Parts of this chapter have previously been published in the form of an article, see Marlène Harles, "Creative Place-Making: Contemporary Art Practice and Urbanization in Dhaka," *Visual Ethnography* 7, no. 2 (2018).

411 Visiting Arts is a platform for the promotion of intercultural understanding through the support and connection of artists around the world. The organization was registered as an independent charity in 2001. Visiting Arts, Facebook Page, accessed September 7, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/visitingarts>.



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

neighborhoods in which they live and work. When Dona Vose, Visiting Arts' program manager for *1mile*², approached Britto, its founders were eager to participate in the project. Yet they did not like the idea of working in Dhanmondi, even though this area is home to most art institutions, artists, and art spaces, including Britto.

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

Lipi characterizes New Dhaka's neighborhoods as marked by ordinariness. In contrast to Robinson, whose claim to the "ordinary city" is a means to overcome the biased categorizations of global/megacities,⁴¹⁴ ordinary for Lipi is synonymous with monotony. New Dhaka offers its inhabitants a limited range of daily habits, living facilities, and occupational fields. Many neighborhoods in this area are characterized by an overabundance of multi-storied buildings and concrete high-rises, an absence of green or open spaces, and a large density of private tenants—mainly Bengali middle class—businesses, and factories.⁴¹⁵ However, it is not only the visual and socio-cultural uniformity that keeps Britto from engaging with this area in the frame of the *1mile*² project. Their experience of having lived and worked in the area for a long time makes them very aware of its pace: during an afternoon of hanging out at Britto, some collective members tell me about an artist from Europe who had done a residence at Britto a few years back. This artist had planned to organize a public art event in Dhanmondi. Both Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman had tried to dissuade them from going through with this plan, arguing that "their" city was not like

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

413 AR, TBL, February 2015.

414 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.

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

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

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

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

416 FDE, TBL/MR, February 2015.

417 For an overview of the most important monuments of Old Dhaka and Bangladesh, see Ahmed, *Discover the Monuments of Bangladesh*; Roxana Hafiz, "Conservation in Dhaka," in *400 Years of Capital Dhaka and Beyond: Rājadhāni Dhākāra 400 bachara o uttarakāla*, ed. Sharif Uddin Ahmed (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2011); Qazi A. Mowla, "Urban Aesthetics: A Study on Dhaka," in Ahmed, *400 Years of Capital Dhaka*.

418 Bahadur Shah Park (until 1947 "Victoria Park") is named after the last Mughal emperor. It is considered a monument for the 1857 failed Sepoy Revolt and the British rule in South Asia.

419 Emdad C. Haque, "The Dilemma of 'Nationhood' and Religion: A Survey and Critique of Studies on Population Displacement Resulting from the Partition of the Indian Subcontinent," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 8, no. 2 (January 1995); Ul Haque and Salma P. Khan, "Dispersing Dhaka," 150.

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

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

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

420 Clark, "Asian Artists," 21–22.

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



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

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

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

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

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

423 FDE, SS, February 2015.

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

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

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

424 Kusenbach, "Street Phenomenology," 459.

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

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

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

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

426 GA, MR, February 2015.

427 GA, MR, February 2015; Nazrul Islam, *Dhaka Now: Contemporary Urban Development* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Geographical Society, 2005), 67.

428 Mohaiemen, “Flying Blind,” 50. In his review of Bose’s *Dead Reckoning*, Mohaiemen points to the controversial “Vested Property Act,” a remnant of the Pakistan era. It allowed successive Bangladesh governments to seize Hindu property, thereby disadvantaging the population economically.

429 AR, MR, February 2015.

430 Ahmed, *Discover the Monuments of Bangladesh*. Lalkuthi (red house), as the Northbrook Hall is locally referred to for its red brick facade, was built in honor of Lord Northbrook’s visit to Dhaka. He was the viceroy of India between 1872 and 1876. The building was initially conceived as a town hall, but its auditorium is currently used as a theater. The public library was added on the southeast side a few years later.

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

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

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

431 GA, MR, February 2015.

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

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

BROKERING OLD DHAKA AS PLACE OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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

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

433 FDE, AS, February 2015.

434 FDE, MW, January 2015.

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

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

The individual artworks each highlight different aspects of the Old Dhaka area: its heterogeneous socio-cultural organization, the historical, cultural, and economic value of the area, and the continued political discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities. As a whole, *1mile*² claims a renegotiation of the neglected neighborhood, its architecture, its people, and their cultural practices. It dares people to remember the important role that the area once played, as a nodal point for economic and cultural distribution. Rather than preserving this role, Britto reestablishes Old Dhaka as a site of cultural production. It shows that Old Dhaka should not only be valued for the role it played in the past, but that it is also an important, inspiring locale for contemporary art production.

Similar to *KK*, the project claims an ephemeral occupation of space; Britto had to agree with the local authorities to take down all the works on the evening of the open studio. The exhibition spaces are thus immediately freed up for other engagements, like religious ceremonies, musical concerts, or ordinary dwelling. *KK* and *1mile*² constitute "temporary celebratory landscapes" that disrupt the daily pace and habitual practices of neighborhoods for a fixed period of time.⁴³⁵ Despite the artists' short-term physical engagement, they celebrate the localities in all their complexity and transform thinking about the urban space in the long run.

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

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

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

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

436 Brickell and Datta, "Introduction," 5, 10.

437 Brosius, "Emplacing and Excavating the City," 75.

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

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

438 Begum Lipi, “Extending and Expanding the Idea and Space,” 172.

439 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; John Postill, “Localizing the Internet beyond Communities and Networks,” *New Media & Society* 10, no. 3 (2008).