
Chapter 3

Contesting the Art Institution: Between “Fine Art” Education and Contemporary Practice

Each case study I have presented so far is set in a specific situation, influenced to no small extent by my own experiences of the respective localities. Together however, the four examples emphasize how artists collectively engage multiple scales of locality; they operate in specific neighborhoods (*1 mile²*), in urban settings (*Kolor Kathmandu [KK]*), in cross-regional formats (*Dhaka Art Summit [DAS]*), and globally referred programs (*Venice Biennale*). Following the artists' movements through these scales allowed me to rethink locality as translocality—each locality as dynamically connected to other localities on multiple scales through the mobility of people and the cultural elements they broker. A thorough rethinking of the relationship between different scales of locality, especially the often unilaterally emphasized local-global connection, strengthens the field of transcultural studies. In the next two chapters, I turn my attention to the art infrastructure. Based on my earlier discussion of Bourdieu and Buchholz, I demonstrate the need to reconsider nationally circumscribed fields of art production and their institutions from a transcultural, multi-scalar perspective. The education system and national art institutions such as the national academies in Nepal and Bangladesh sustain a relatively autonomous logic of competition, with its own values and hierarchies. This horizontal autonomy distinguishes the field of art production from other fields (e.g., computer science or theater). There is however also a vertical autonomy at play that distinguishes the field of art production in Bangladesh or Nepal from a regionally or globally circumscribed field.⁴⁴⁰ The artist collectives, through their multi-positionality in this multi-scalar field, have learned how to manipulate the national field to broaden their scope of action; with their activities they crosscut hegemonic hierarchies (e.g., between different mediums or between fine art and crafts) and stable discourses (e.g., art primarily treated as a manual skill). They offer new avenues for education by organizing workshops and bringing in educators from other fields

440 Buchholz, “What Is a Global Field?” 43–44.

(on the same scale) and localities (on other scales). They build alliances with like-minded artists, with other artist-led initiatives, with private foundations, and with supranational funding agencies that offer their work legitimacy and value. Thus, they are no longer dependent on nationally operating institutions such as the Shilpakala Academy to gain access to economic and socio-cultural capital.

By organizing art exhibitions, talk programs, large-scale events and offering training opportunities, the Britto Arts Trust (Britto), photo.circle (PC), Sattya Media Arts Collective (Sattya), and other collectives have come to operate analogously to art institutions in many ways. Art institutions, like any type of social institution, play an active role in producing and constituting values.⁴⁴¹ They delimit rules and provide structure, security, and opportunity for practice. Yet the same rules also restrict individual scopes of action and often serve the interests of dominating social groups.⁴⁴² As cultural or art institutions, they play a crucial role in the establishment of their respective field (e.g., Archeology, Fine Arts). They have an official administrative status, whether they are considered private or public.⁴⁴³ They might refer to specific buildings, as architectural and physical symbols of this field,⁴⁴⁴ or operate as an “arts framing apparatus” from a more intangible position.⁴⁴⁵

In most self-descriptions, the collectives and art initiatives I worked with define themselves against established art institutions in terms of freedom, flexibility, and experimentation. The out-datedness of art institutions, their conservative and slow bureaucratic structure, as well as the seniority and intransigence of its personnel are often a topic of frustration in hanging-out situations. Yet, it is not about discarding the national frame for a global contemporary. On the contrary, despite their critique, my research partners regularly participate in the programs offered by national institutions. In fact, it is through their critique that they develop strategies that complement or counter the discourses emerging from the national field. These tensions are a central part of contemporary art practice: contemporaneity emerges from the connections and interdependencies between artists and institutions and from the friction between multiple scales of infrastructure.

Infrastructure refers to the “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas.”⁴⁴⁶ It comprises physical structures that facilitate such mobilities (from exhibition spaces to airports), institutions of support and patronage (from travel grants to auction houses), as well as

441 Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Chicago: MIT Press, 1996), 116.

442 Möntmann, *Kunst als sozialer Raum*, 35.

443 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*.

444 Jonathan Harris, ed., *Art, Money, Parties: New Institutions in the Political Economy of Contemporary Art* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004).

445 Deutsche, *Evictions*, 152.

446 Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (October 2013): 328.

lineages of knowledge transmission and discourse.⁴⁴⁷ In short, it makes up for the structures and actors that circumscribe what is considered a valid art practice. Karin Zitzewitz argues for “an integration of the materiality of artistic networks into a discourse preoccupied with their aesthetic and, to a somewhat lesser extent, political significance.”⁴⁴⁸ An anthropological approach focused on transcultural transgressions and scales allows access not only to the political, aesthetic, and material meanings in which Zitzewitz is interested, but also the power relations, asymmetries, and collaborations of and with the enabling infrastructure. Flows of knowledge, artworks, and artists on a governmental scale have different aesthetic, political, and social qualities than on other scales. National policies pertaining to education, for instance, must be seen in relation to transnational ideologies and the agendas of transnational institutions.⁴⁴⁹ In Nepal and Bangladesh, the development of the education infrastructure is closely tied to the nation-building process: the respective governments have played an important role in regulating access to education and controlling its structure. During the Rana oligarchy in Nepal, education in general—and art education in particular—was the privilege of the urban, upper-caste Hindu elite. Under the Panchayat regime, it became part of a larger development plan, formed in symbiosis with so-called Western experts working for the United Nations.⁴⁵⁰ Since the 1990s, education has become the tool of the middle classes, cutting-across and replacing earlier forms of social organization such as caste and family connections.⁴⁵¹ Transculturality sees these local developments as more than a mere “reflection of global trends.”⁴⁵² The unfolding of historical events that led to the current state of the (art) education system are connected to the region—notably to developments in India, dating back to the colonial period—but also to socio-cultural and political shifts in Nepal. To trace these connections, this chapter takes a translocal and a diachronic approach. The collectives’ conscious multi-positioning in search of a multi-scalar scope of action can be read against these historical developments. A nuanced analysis of the negotiations over the values that are operative on each scale allows insight into how new mobilities have unsettled older hierarchies or formed new asymmetries between actors and how an alternative contemporaneity emerges from this tension. This offers a considerable advantage over Richard Florida’s “creative capital thesis,” as it allows us to discuss how different members of the art field and different fields (horizontally and vertically distinct) interact with one another. Rather than following the constitution of a fuzzy creative class, it enables the analysis of what constitutes contemporary art as a practice.

447 Karin Zitzewitz, “Infrastructure as Form,” *Third Text* 31, no. 2–3 (2017).

448 Zitzewitz, “Infrastructure as Form,” 343.

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

450 Bell, *Kathmandu*, 273–276

451 Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 58.

452 Gupta and Sharma, “Globalization and Postcolonial States,” 292.

Education scholars Lesley Farrell and Tara J. Fenwick argue that education systems are the “key levers for knowledge production.”⁴⁵³ As such, the respective institutions hold crucial positions in the social and economic realities of any locality, and they continue to be the subject of important power negotiations and asymmetries in and between these localities. They influence policymaking, social structures, cultural norms, and regulations.⁴⁵⁴ With the growing interconnectedness of economies and labor markets around the world, the demands on educational provisions have changed. The concept of education serves as a powerful transnational tool for economic and social development. Jeffery et al. posit that, more than a means to economic security, education “has become a type of discursive ‘scaffold’ upon which people display their ideas about morality, development, and respect.”⁴⁵⁵ Through the example of Dalits and Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, the authors show how education is commonly equated with respect for elders, proficiency in religious ceremonies, politeness, and good behavior in general.⁴⁵⁶ For my research partners, the value of art education often builds on a tension between education as a tool to economic security, as a means of displaying social and intellectual superiority, and as part of a path to self-realization. They pursue a degree in art because it has become an important part of being recognized as a member of the art community. It is often also a way of self-actualization, of acquiring freedom (from socio-cultural expectations or norms), or a conscious denial of other life choices.

In Nepal, as I stated above, education developed from a privilege of the male, urban elite to a general public-school system with American advisory and financial aid.⁴⁵⁷ In the past three decades, private schools have mushroomed all over the country, turning education into a tool of the upper and especially middle classes; according to the Ministry of Education there were 6015 private schools in 2016.⁴⁵⁸ In Bangladesh, the general education system also remains divided along social boundaries: vernacular general or public education for lower- and middle-class families, religion-based *madrasas* for poorer families, and English-medium or private institutions for urban middle- or upper-class families.⁴⁵⁹ Due to the multitude of public

453 Lesley Farrell and Tara J. Fenwick, “Introduction,” in Farrell and Fenwick, *Educating the Global Workforce*, 2.

454 Farrell and Fenwick, “Introduction,” 6.

455 Craig Jeffrey, Patricia Jeffery, and Roger Jeffery, “‘A Useless Thing!’ or ‘Nectar of the Gods?’ The Cultural Production of Education and Young Men’s Struggles for Respect in Liberalizing North India,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94, no. 4 (2004): 961.

456 Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery, “‘A Useless Thing!’ or ‘Nectar of the Gods?’,” 969.

457 Pratyoush Onta, “Education: Finding a Ray of Hope,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 47 (2000): 4094; Mojibur Rahman Doftori, *Education and Child Labour in Developing Countries: A Study on the Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Bangladesh and Nepal* (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2004), 40–41.

458 Ministry of Education, “Nepal Education in Figures 2016: At a Glance,” 2016.

459 Two different systems of *madrasa* education exist in Bangladesh. The government-assisted system provides a mix of religious and secular curriculum. The *quomi* or *qawmi* system on the other hand, is non-governmental. It exclusively provides religious education and often includes free food and accommodation

and private actors involved in this system, the government is struggling for control.⁴⁶⁰ This also pertains to the art education system, where government institutions compete with private schools.

I start my analysis of the art education institutions with two Interludes. In the first, I focus on artist Sujan Dangol, whose murals of the Rolpo district were already part of my discussion of *KK*. His series of paintings entitled *Graduation* lead me to the development and meaning of art education, particularly in Nepal. While Dangol's mother is proud to display his graduation certificate by hanging it on the wall, the artist perceives the degree as a mere adornment. He questions its real value for his personal development and for status in society. The tension between studying art as a creative endeavor (aimed mostly at self-realization) and a market-oriented production (directed towards economic sustainability and/or critical acclaim) is an intrinsic part of art practice. However, young contemporary artists like Dangol are especially frustrated with outdated art curriculums that do not prepare them for a changing field. While education institutions are focused on medium-specific manual skills, contemporary art practice is increasingly oriented towards mixed and new media, conceptual strength, and discursive practices. The second Interlude continues this discussion for Bangladesh. The multi-media installation of artist Shimul Saha, who received his bachelor of fine arts (BFA) from the Faculty of Fine Arts at Dhaka University (Charukola) in Bangladesh and his master of fine arts (MFA) from Beaconhouse National University (BNU) in Pakistan before becoming a member of Britto, leads me to examine the role of new private institutions in the arts, as well as the involvement of the young generation of artists in teaching.

My research focuses on a young generation of professional artists, meaning artists who have finished their education and have successfully established themselves in the artistic field. Due to a lack of literature on fine art education and education in Nepal and Bangladesh in general, my main source of information is personal testimonies. I drew information from short essays by Nepali and Bangladeshi art writers, from grey literature such as exhibition catalogs and curricula, and from interviews with teachers from different institutions.⁴⁶¹ This means that my collected data does not allow me to talk about art students in general, nor their motivations to study, to discontinue their studies, or the potential alternative paths they have taken outside of the arts.

for students. This makes it especially attractive to poor families, struggling to provide for their children. See Manzoor Ahmed, "The Education System," in Riaz and Rahman, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*, 345–346.

460 Ahmed, "The Education System."

461 These institutions include, in Bangladesh, the Faculty of Fine Arts at Dhaka University and the Institute of Fine Arts in Chittagong, and in Nepal, the Central Department of Fine Arts at Tribhuvan University, the Lalitkala Campus at Bhotahiti, the Sirjana College of Fine Arts, and the Center for Art and Design at Kathmandu University.

Interlude: *Graduation*

There is nothing on my schedule for the day, so I decide to walk to Babar Mahal Revisited, an upscale multi-use complex near the Maitighar Roundabout in Kathmandu. The Siddhartha Art Gallery (est. 1987), Kathmandu's most consistently operating gallery, is located at the end of the three-story former Rana palace complex. It is my first time back at the gallery since my initial fieldwork in the summer of 2013, and like the last time, I feel slightly out of place between the fancy shops and restaurants. I missed the opening of the exhibition the week before, but from word of mouth, I know that it shows two young, upcoming artists, Sujan Dangol and Anil Shahi.⁴⁶² The artworks displayed are exclusively acryl paintings on canvas. They address a broad range of topics, from urbanization to current socio-political issues. Graduation, a series of three paintings by artist Sujan Dangol, figures prominently on the first floor, right at the top of the stairs (Fig. 7).

The first painting in the series shows a naked male figure facing away from the beholder and looking up to a black graduation robe in the left-hand corner of the canvas. In the second painting, the figure faces the beholder and is revealed as the artist himself. He is now wearing the gown, as a sign of his success; a cocky smile on his face, a bright halo around his head, and the lotus sitting on his chest mark him as an enlightened, proud graduate. In the third painting, the sense of pride and enlightenment have vanished. Instead, the painting strikes a sarcastic tone. The lotus, generally a sign of wisdom, now garnishes a toilet lid. Whether the graduation gown, hanging hollow in the back, has become dispensable waste matter, to be flushed down the toilet, or whether it serves as nothing more than a bathroom decoration, it has lost the value previously bestowed on it.

In my interview with the artist in January 2016, Dangol tells me about his mother and her dream to hang his graduation certificate on the wall in their house. He presumes that it is not really him (his accomplishment) that she wants to exhibit, but her pride and satisfaction over this accomplishment: "You studied at least," he imagines hearing her say. Rather than celebrating his achievement and recognizing its meaning for his personal development, this imagined mother focuses on his changed status in society. The new status is contingent solely on the degree, which separates him from the majority of other members of that society. Dangol questions its significance and immediately offers his answer: "They [the people who have a degree] have something to cover in the society. They have a good thing to cover them, to protect them, so that they

462 From February 14 to March 7, 2014, the Siddhartha Art Gallery showed *Through My Stories* by Dangol and *Smile With Me* by Shahi as part of the Australian Himalayan Foundation Art Award exhibition. Each year the Foundation awards financial support to two artists in Nepal, who in turn commit two works to the Foundation. The exhibition as a whole, as the wall panel stated, focused on the frictions in Nepali society and the artist's own feelings towards people's reaction to them. "Himalayan Art Award," Australian Himalayan Foundation, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.australianhimalayanfoundation.org.au/himalayan-art-award/>.



Figure 7: Sujan Dangol, *Graduation*, 2014. Siddhartha Art Gallery, Kathmandu. Photo: author.

have some good things."⁴⁶³ From the artist's perspective, the certificate, represented in the painting series through the graduation gown and hat becomes a cover, an otherwise hollow cloak that people wrap around themselves. Rather than protecting against unemployment and poverty, it shields one from the curious, judging eye of society. The nakedness, by contrast, becomes a metaphor for the absence of a degree, and maybe also for the shame of not being properly educated.

Maile graduation gareko bhaide bhae chai mero ekdam ramro huntyo. Aba ta mero chaina (*If I had graduated that would have been really good. But I haven't, so it is not good*). It is like they [people without a degree] have no clothes or nothing. They are just naked. But when they graduate ...⁴⁶⁴

A HISTORY OF FINE ART EDUCATION IN NEPAL

During the Rana period (1846–1951), Nepal's rulers focused exclusively on the education of their children and those of affiliated families. Since there were only two higher education institutions established in Nepal—the Durbar School (1892) and the Kolkata affiliated Tri-Chandra College (1918)—many Rana children were sent to India to study.⁴⁶⁵ Besides Sanskrit *pathshalas* (a vernacular type of religious education based on the Sanskrit

463 AR, SD, January 2016.

464 AR, SD, January 2016.

465 I refer to the city using its Bengali name Kolkata, which became the city's official name in 2001. Under British rule, the city was renamed Calcutta, and is often referred to as such in the literature. I use the old name Calcutta only in direct quotes and in the names of well-established institutions, such as the Calcutta Government School of Art.

language) and monastic schools catering to an exclusively male population, public educational institutions were nonexistent; education was a monopoly of the elite.⁴⁶⁶ In the art field, training had long been regulated through caste-affiliation, a topic on which I will elaborate in the next section. After the peace treaty with British India in 1816, the establishment of the British residence in Kathmandu, and the coming into power of the Rana dynasty, access to formal art education became more and more contingent on the personal taste and patronage of the ruling elite: the Ranas developed an interest for European architecture, furniture, and fashion. They started sponsoring the production of European style technique paintings (naturalist scenes, landscapes, family portraits, and still lifes) to decorate their homes.⁴⁶⁷ However, due to the Rana's policy of isolation and the restrictions on foreigners that persisted until the 1950s, exchange in the arts was limited to the elites and the individuals under their patronage. Bhaju Man Chitrakar, a Newari artist who accompanied Jang Bahadur Rana, Prime Minister of Nepal (1845–1877), on his visit to England in 1850–1851 is commonly mentioned as the earliest Nepali artist making use of European styles.⁴⁶⁸ The correlation between the Rana elite and the introduction of “Western” techniques into the Nepali art practice is also retained by the National Museum in Chhauni (Kathmandu), as this extract from a wall panel within shows:⁴⁶⁹

The Rana regime in Nepal brought some changes in the stylistic features of painting. With the growing influence and impact of western style, the Nepali artists could not retain the indigenous beauty and charm of Nepali paintings. The trend of portrait painting in western style canvas painting had started at the time of Rana regime. The technique of oil painting was initiated from the time of Junga Bahadur Rana returned from his visit to England. The portrait of rulers, beautiful women and majestic landscapes were the major

466 Onta, “Education: Finding a Ray of Hope,” 4094; Doftori, *Education and Child Labour in Developing Countries*, 40–41.

467 Susanne van der Heide, “Traditional Art in Upheaval: The Development of Modern Contemporary Art in Nepal,” *Kailash: A Journal of Himalayan Studies* 14, no. 3–4 (January 1988): 233–234.

468 Van der Heide, “Traditional Art in Upheaval,” 234. Madan Chitrakar has disputed Bhaju Man's role as the “sole founding father of modern forms” (“modern” is here synonymous with “Western” forms). He claims that Raj Man Singh Chitrakar already created “drawings and sketches with the definite notion of Western concepts including a sense of light and shade and the perspectives” in the 1820s–1840s in the service of Brian Hodgson, the British Resident in Kathmandu. Chitrakar, *Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany*, 85, 88–90.

469 This museum is the first public museum of Nepal. It initially constituted a repository of weapons and hosted the private collections of the royal family and the Rana Prime Ministers. It only became accessible to the public in 1938 and was formally established as a National Museum (*Rastriya Sangrahalaya*) in 1967. “About Us,” National Museum, accessed April 24, 2021, <https://nationalmuseum.gov.np/about-us>.

themes of the Nepali painting, no issues of social reality were highlighted under the strict regulation of the rulers.⁴⁷⁰

The influence of colonial British and European techniques (naturalism, light and shade, perspective) are clearly perceived as markers of change in the Nepali art field. While the majority of narratives I gathered on this topic describe this change as a departure into the modern phase, the above panel also bemoans the concurring loss of “indigenous beauty and charm.”⁴⁷¹ I observed a similar rhetoric of modernity (as something foreign) and tradition (as something indigenous) in many institutions operating on the national scale, especially the National Art Academies.

The next important shift is set at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Chandra Shumsher Jang Bahadur Rana, Prime Minister of Nepal (1901–1929), sent two young artists, Tej Bahadur Chitrakar (b. 1898) and Chandra Man Singh Maskey (b. 1900) to the Calcutta Government School of Art in India to further their skills in painting. In India, the establishment of education institutions was largely influenced by the colonial need for skilled workers and administrative staff. A private School of Industrial Arts had been set up in Kolkata in 1854. Only ten years later it was taken over by the government and renamed the Government School of Art. Its art teaching focused on applied and industrial arts with the aim to provide vocational and technical training to future draftsmen, surveyors, engravers, and lithographers.⁴⁷² The curriculum had a strong bias: while fine art was seen as the monopoly of the colonizers, the colonized were supposed to acquire technical skills. This bias was first challenged by Ernest Binfield Havell, who became a fierce advocate of India’s art traditions and attempted to Indianize the curriculum in the late 1890s, and later by Abanindranath Tagore (nephew of eminent poet and Nobel-laureate Rabindranath Tagore). Tagore was appointed vice-principal of the renamed Government School of Art in 1905. He continued to rethink the school’s role in art education and rejected the Western academic training. With these reflections, he led a movement that argued for the importance of *Swadeshi* (*swa*, own; *desh*, country) values in Indian art. The movement eventually resulted in the

470 “Portrait Painting,” The National Museum of Nepal, wall panel, recorded April 2014; author unknown.

471 This includes conversations in the field as well as vernacular and academic texts such as: van der Heide, “Traditional Art in Upheaval”; Chitrakar, *Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany*; Madan Chitrakar, “Nepali Art Has Ugly Faces – Too,” *Spaces Nepal*, November–December 2011; Abhi Subedi, “Nepali Art: Nepali Utopia,” *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 22, no. 2 (1995); Yam Prasad Sharma, *Nepali Painting: A Critical Analysis* (Kathmandu: Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, 2014). It also includes historical overviews such as Sangeeta Thapa, “A Brief Review of the Contemporary Art in Nepal (1920–2014),” *NepalNow.blog*, August 2014, accessed August 17, 2022, <https://www.nepalnow.blog/important-re-post-kathmandu-triennale-art-nepal-1920-2014/>; Dina Bangdel, “Modern and Contemporary Arts of Nepal: Brief Overview,” Nepal Art Council, accessed April 24, 2022, <https://www.nepalartcouncil.org.np/modern-and-contemporary-arts-of-nepal-brief-overview/>.

472 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 143.

establishment of the Bengal School of Art.⁴⁷³ At the time of Tej Bahadur Chitrakar and Chandra Man Singh Maskey's studies, Abanindranath Tagore had already left his post as a vice-principal and fine art had been reintroduced to the curriculum to be taught alongside "Indian Painting."⁴⁷⁴ While Chitrakar and Maskey had been sent to Kolkata in service of the Rana elite, they were exposed to Western-style fine art teaching, as well as the ideas of the Bengal School and its nationalist *Swadeshi* ideas.

Chitrakar and Maskey returned to Kathmandu at the end of the 1920s but struggled to align their acquired artistic and political knowledge with the prevalent socio-political conditions. Chitrakar, who did not belong to one of the higher Newar castes, faced exceptional difficulties finding a job and a place in society.⁴⁷⁵ Maskey, despite his more fortunate social background, also struggled with the repressive political climate. A few years after his return, he was arrested for allegedly drawing Rana-critical cartoons, and ironically, Chitrakar was tasked to take over his position as an art teacher at the Durbar High School.⁴⁷⁶ From there, Chitrakar moved on to become the headmaster of Juddhakala Pathshala, the first art school in Nepal. Following the Indian colonial model, the school had been founded by Prime Minister Juddha Shumsher at the beginning of the 1940s as a part of the "technical school."⁴⁷⁷ Ram Ashish Giri comprehends this technical training school as a "modest effort" by the Rana regime to keep up with the pressure of "modernization" elsewhere, notably colonial India, and the need for low-level workforce in the development sectors.⁴⁷⁸

The roots of fine art education in Nepal thus grew from a threefold nexus of transcultural connections: first, from the painting techniques and values mediated by European art through the British colonial power (and the Calcutta Government College of Art); second, from the nationalist and anti-colonial ideologies propagated by the Bengal School in India and brokered by mobile artists like Chitrakar and Maskey; and third, by the taste and demands of the Rana elites. Access to these connections was the privilege of a very small group of artists, dependent on favors from the Ranas.

With the political shifts in the 1950s and the abolition of the Rana oligarchy, new actors, most notably recent graduates from India and beyond, entered the stage. Upon their return to Nepal, these artists laid the groundwork for the infrastructure in place today. They not only founded the central institutions of the art field, but also brokered the visual discourses

473 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 155–165.

474 Lala Ruhk Selim, "50 Years of the Art Institute: (Part 2)," *Art: A Quarterly Journal* 4, no. 3 (1999): 4.

475 Van der Heide, "Traditional Art in Upheaval," 235–236; Madan Chitrakar, *Tej Bahadur Chitrakar: Icon of Transition* (Kathmandu: Teba-Chi [TBC] Studies Centre, 2004), 34–39.

476 Chitrakar, *Tej Bahadur Chitrakar*, 40.

477 Chitrakar, *Tej Bahadur Chitrakar*, 40; Banshi Shrestha, *RN Joshi: Widening the Horizon of Nepalese Art* (Kathmandu: Park Gallery, 2006).

478 Giri, "The Power and Price of English," 214.

and aesthetic values these institutions came to stand for. Artist Lain Singh Bangdel graduated from Kolkata and continued his studies in Paris in the 1950s.⁴⁷⁹ He came to Nepal on the invitation of the newly crowned King Mahendra and was appointed first as a member, then as vice-chancellor, and finally, in 1979, as chancellor of the Royal Nepal Academy. He also co-founded the Nepal Art Council in 1962–1963 and became the first treasurer of the Nepal Association of Fine Arts (1965), the precursor of the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). Shashi Bikram Shah, Krishna Manandhar, Indra Pradhan, and Basta Gopal Vaidya, all graduates from Sir J.J. School of Art in Bombay, returned to Nepal at the beginning of the 1970s, and, inspired by the Progressive Art Group in India, formed one of the first artist collectives in Nepal: SKIB-71.⁴⁸⁰ They also set the path for the establishment of the Sirjana Contemporary Art Gallery, and in 2001, the Sirjana College of Art. Another important actor was Rama Nanda Joshi, the founder of Park Gallery (1970). Joshi returned to Nepal after graduating from J.J. School of Art in the mid-1960s. He was quickly dissatisfied with the conservative methods of art education at Juddhakala Pathshala, as well as with the modern abstract painting practiced by many of his contemporaries. As a result, he developed his own curriculum and started teaching students in private classes, emphasizing outdoor, real-life, and watercolor painting. From here the idea for the Park Gallery developed.⁴⁸¹ Likewise, two other returnees, Sangeeta Thapa from Great Britain and Shashi Kala Tiwari from the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, founded the earlier mentioned Siddhartha Art Gallery (1987).

I will return in more detail to these mediating art institutions and their founders in the next chapter. Here, I want to focus on the more general shifts that allowed these returning graduates' initiatives to take root and for the "fine art" education to take the shape it largely still has today. In 1951, the Rana oligarchy and its policy of isolation were both abolished. After a brief period of democratic opening, King Mahendra took over rule and envisioned a "new nationalism" under the frame of the Panchayat system (1962–1990).⁴⁸² The second half of the twentieth century was marked by the king's attempt to strengthen the national infrastructure, often in concurrence with the foreign actors (notably the development industry) who

479 For a detailed account of Lain Singh Bangdel's life, see Narendra Raj Prasai, *The Glory of Nepal: A Biography of Lain Singh Bangdel*, trans. Sangpo Lama (Kathmandu: Ekta Prakashan, 2003); Donald Alan Messerschmidt and Dina Bangdel, *Against the Current: The Life of Lain Singh Bangdel; Writer, Painter and Art Historian of Nepal* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2004).

480 Rather than a common style, the collectivity resulted from a common wish to promote modern art in Nepal through the organization of group exhibitions and other activities. The name SKIB-71 is a combination of the members' initials and the year of their foundation. Chitrakar, *Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany*, 96–98.

481 AR, NJP/NJ, May 2014.

482 Sangeeta Thapa, "Introduction: The Hermit of the Hermitage and his Drawings," in *In the Eye of the Storm*, ed. Manuj Babu Mishra and Siddhartha Art Gallery (Kathmandu: Nepal Investment Bank, 2009), 9.

had entered the country in the 1950s. These actors advised and funded the formation of a national education planning commission (NEPC) which conducted research on the country's educational needs. Additionally, a general school system was started.⁴⁸³ In 1959, all colleges formerly accredited by Indian universities were brought together under the Tribhuvan University (TU), the country's first higher education institution located a few kilometers south-west of Kathmandu.⁴⁸⁴ The Panchayat system strengthened general education as a means to unify the nation. Its conscious disregard of diversity and its centralization on Kathmandu however increased the exclusion of non-Nepali-speaking and rural populations from the education system. The subordination of education to a nationalizing mission was furthered by the National Education System Plan (1971), according to which all newly created private, communitarian, and government colleges in the country were put under the patronage of TU.⁴⁸⁵ Although several regional universities have opened since then (for instance the Mid-Western University in 2010, or the Pokhara University in 1997), TU still receives more than 85 percent of enrollments in higher education in the country.⁴⁸⁶ Inequity has not only persisted along the rural-urban divide; the national literacy rate of 52.4% is still much lower for women, ethnic minorities, and indigenous caste groups.⁴⁸⁷ Kathmandu University (KU), founded in 1991 through a private initiative, is part of the growing sector of private schools and universities spreading in Nepal. They have increased access to good quality education, but at the same time have deepened that rift between lower-class, rural and middle- or upper-class urban families; often, only the latter have the necessary economic resources to pay for the high fees in private institutions.⁴⁸⁸

These general developments also affected the art education. After the reforms of the NESP in 1971, Juddhakala Pathshala was renamed Lalitkala Campus of Fine Arts. Like many other institutions of higher education, it was and remains affiliated with TU and thus under government control. Until the foundation of Sirjana College of Fine Arts in 2001, Lalitkala remained the only art education institution in the country. It offered an intermediate (IFA) and three-year bachelor (BFA) degree in Fine Art. Students who wanted to pursue a master's had to study abroad, and the majority opted for India. The MFA was only introduced at TU in 2009 after a student protest and protracted negotiations between faculty members of the Lalitkala Campus and TU authorities. Hit Man Gurung, one of the initiators of "Walking on the Street" (2007), explains that the students'

483 Onta, "Education: Finding a Ray of Hope," 4094.

484 Pramod Bhatta, "Privatization through Affiliation: Trajectories of Higher Education Expansion in Post-1990 Nepal," *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 20, no. 2 (2015): 303.

485 Onta, "Education: Finding a Ray of Hope," 4095.

486 Ministry of Education, "Nepal Education in Figures 2016."

487 Ministry of Education, "Nepal Education in Figures 2016."

488 Onta, "Education: Finding a Ray of Hope," 4095.

main motivation to join the protest was the need for security in the field. He argues that not all BFA graduates have the economic resources to continue their studies abroad. Their education, he contends, should be made available by the Nepali government.⁴⁸⁹ Although, like Sunil Sigdel, Gurung grew in and through Sutra workshops and carries on the values of collaborative art practice with contemporary artist collective ArTree Nepal (est. 2013), he identifies the state as the responsible authority in providing education.⁴⁹⁰ Through their multi-scalar cultural brokerage, the young generation of artists is not attempting to dismiss the national institutions. On the contrary, the novel ideas, aesthetic values, and meanings they have been exposed to animate them to push for a revitalization. Already in the 1960s, especially fine art graduates returning from abroad felt dissatisfied by the limited, elite-focused, and Europe-oriented training institution in Nepal. This dissatisfaction fostered new impulses and led to the creation of alternative education institutions, both formal, such as the Sirjana College, and less formal, such as Rama Nanda Joshi's outdoor watercolor classes. Next to the integration of new ideas and new mediums, this revitalization also includes a demand for the national institutions to keep up with contemporary developments in the art field as well as in other fields worldwide. Many of my research partners share Gurung's opinion that education should inspire a feeling of security. This includes equal and affordable access to higher art education as well as a promise of security beyond education—a promise of a sustainable life as a full-time artist. Even with the MFA in place, this security is not (and may never be) given. The question arises whether the newly established private art education institutions can offer this sense of security, either by better preparing students or by raising the competition and thus pushing the national institutions to change. Today, a handful of institutions in the Kathmandu valley offer a degree in art, and of those, only two are government institutions. Bijeswori Higher Secondary School offers a +2 in Management and Fine Arts (in Nepal, many high schools use a 10+2 system, which is gradually replacing the intermediate level system in secondary education), Sirjana College of Fine Arts (+2 & BFA) and the Center for Art and Design of KU (BFA) are private institutions, while Lalitkala Campus of Fine Arts (BFA) and the Department of Fine Arts at Thribhuvan University (MFA) are public institutions.

489 AR, HG, September 2013.

490 See Marlène Harles and Sheelasha Rajbhandari, "Contemporary Artists' Response to Heritage in Times of Crisis: 12 Baishakh and Photo Kathmandu," *Material Religion* 13, no. 3 (2017); ArTree's initiatives are socio-political in nature. They deal with issues such as gender discrimination, migration, and political injustice. Further, they foster critical dialogue and a dynamic understanding of identity and culture through an interdisciplinary art practice. "About Us," Artree Nepal, March 1, 2017, accessed February 14, 2021, <http://artreenepal.blogspot.com/>.

CASTE-BASED TRADITION AND CLASS-BASED EDUCATION

With his *Graduation* series, Dangol raises issues that lie at the intersection of middle-class imaginaries of modern futures and the education system's orientation towards a dominantly middle-class market. Scholars and observers of education in Nepal such as Pratyoush Onta and Ram Ashish Giri deplore the inefficiency and ineptitude of the education system, especially with regard to rising underemployment, the resulting labor migration, and continued centralization on male, high-caste, urban elites.⁴⁹¹ In contrast to the rest of the country, the number of education institutions in the Kathmandu valley is steadily growing and crosscutting old social hierarchies. Liechty shows that Kathmandu has seen an "education explosion," from less than six schools in 1951 to 1727 schools in 1993.⁴⁹² He argues that education is no longer a privilege of the socio-political elite, as it was during the Rana period; it has increasingly become a tool of the urban middle classes. Access to education is contingent on economic capital, rather than on caste or social status. This means that children of different castes and ethnicities "are brought together according to what kind of education their parents can afford"⁴⁹³ instead of what their social status allows them access to. Bhatta further argues that especially higher education has been increasingly commercialized over the past decades and that most university programs focus on those matters that are easily sellable to the middle-class market, such as medicine, engineering, and management.⁴⁹⁴ Liechty relates the shift towards commercialization to a middle-class striving for modernity: "Education is the mantra that middle-class parents repeat in hopes of propitiating the vagaries of an unknowable 'modern' future."⁴⁹⁵

Dangol stems from a middle-class, urban family. He attended a private school and, in agreement with what the majority of his peers did, joined a management course.⁴⁹⁶ Liechty explains that the motivation of many youths to study at least up to a bachelor's degree is often stirred by the hope to join the civil service, or to gain "employment in business, management,

491 Onta, "Education: Finding a Ray of Hope," 4093; Giri, "The Power and Price of English"; Sijapati and Limbu demonstrate that labor migration to India, Malaysia, and the Gulf countries has been a strategy for many Nepali families to counteract the effects of unemployment and poverty. As evidence, they cite the significant contribution of remittances to individual households and the national economy, which amounted to 23% of the GDP in 2009 and 20% in 2010 and 2011. Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*, 3.

492 Liechty, *Out Here in Kathmandu*, 8. Figures from 2016 show 35,222 schools and nine universities in Nepal. Ministry of Education, "Nepal Education in Figures 2016."

493 Liechty, *Out Here in Kathmandu*, 8.

494 Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 216; Pramod Bhatta, "Privatization through Affiliation," 324, 326.

495 Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 216.

496 AR, SD, January 2016.

or nongovernmental 'development' work."⁴⁹⁷ At the same time, the anthropologist asserts that the tertiary economy nowadays is so inflated that finding a job has become very difficult.⁴⁹⁸ This is the reason that pushed Dangol to create the *Graduation* series: the discrepancy between people's perception of a degree and its actual value on the employment market:

It is only a cover. Inside you are you and I am I. Maybe it will help a little. ... In Nepal lots of people say: "I studied this much, and the government has no job." "Did you ask the government for a job? Did you make a contract with the government that if you graduate, they will give a job?" That is the story.⁴⁹⁹

On the one hand, Dangol debunks the belief that education is a means to economic and social betterment. He affirms that there is no correlation between graduating and finding a job in the government. In fact, he emphasizes it would be foolish to rely on this idea. Yet, at the same time, his artwork confirms the hopes that many people hold: to reach economic safety through education. Moreover, his work challenges the discrepancy between the meaning of the certificate for a person's individual development and its influence on their social status. The degree is a way to display individual accomplishment to the wider society. It for instance improves people's marriage prospects, he explains. Yet this is only an outward meaning. His *Graduation* series seems to ask if the access to social status represented by the certificate is more important than the actual knowledge to be gained.

When I inquire about his motivation to work on this topic, he explains that it is closely linked to his personal struggle to receive a degree and develop an individual creative practice. He admits that he dropped out of school for a few years after his private secondary education and before joining a management college. "I didn't know Lalitkala College," he explains, "that is why I went to the management college. But I threw everything. And then somebody suggested me to go to Lalitkala College and I went there."⁵⁰⁰ The art education woke his interest, but still he "did not study very well."⁵⁰¹ He continued his art studies at the Center for Art and Design at KU, from which he graduated in 2012. At the time of our interview, he is enrolled in the MFA program at TU.

Dangol's description of his education contains repeated allusions to "timepass,"⁵⁰² to hanging out at teach-shops, passing time between classes

497 Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 211.

498 Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 211.

499 AR, SD, January 2016.

500 AR, SD, January 2016.

501 AR, SD, January 2016.

502 Craig Jeffrey, "Timepass: Youth, Class, and Time among Unemployed Young Men in India," *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 3 (2010): 471.

with friends and “painting with the sky.”⁵⁰³ His education resembles a drifting more than a series of deliberate choices. Throughout my research, I met many artists whose artistic development was not straightforward, and instead filled with periods of timepass, doubt, and deviation. Many also struggled against their parents’ wishes to learn something more tangible, such as medicine, management, or computer science. Especially this last point is a symptom of the ambiguous status of art education that Dangol addresses with his work. On the one hand, fine art education represents a higher education, which supposedly offers access to cultural and social capital. As such, it appears to fulfill middle-class dreams of modern futures,⁵⁰⁴ access to sustainable jobs, economic capital, and thus a better, more secure position in society. On the other hand, art education does not seem to satisfy these hopes because art is not recognized as a cultural and economic value among the wider population outside the artistic field.

In an assessment of the state of art education in Nepal, Madan Chitrakar offers an explanation for this ambiguous status and considers it the art education institutions’ responsibility to change the situation.⁵⁰⁵ His main argument is based on the fact that art is not part of the general school curriculum in Nepal. Although private schools have started art classes, the absence of art from basic government education, he believes, is a major reason for the poor reception of secular art in the country. In his recent publication on the history of the Chitrakars, Madan Chitrakar also suggests that the low esteem of art in Nepal can be traced back to the low social status of traditional artists. *Chitrakar* in Nepali literally means image or picture maker. The name originated in the fourteenth century when King Jayasthiti Malla decreed a hierarchical ordering of the Newar population according to Hindu policy.⁵⁰⁶ In his social reforms, specific vocations were exclusively allocated to specific groups (castes) in society. The Chitrakars became the exclusive producers of art; nobody “was supposed to paint an image of a deity or any other tasks related to the Art of Painting other than the Chitrakars.”⁵⁰⁷ Along with the techniques to make and mix the natural paints, and the utensils, so-called *thyya safoos* (sketch books or manuals) were passed along from one *Thakali* (most senior member of a Chitrakar

503 AR, SD, January 2016.

504 Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 216.

505 Madan Chitrakar, “Art Education in Nepal: Time for a New Dynamics,” in *The Creation: A Souvenir Published on the Occasion of the Fifth Anniversary of Sirjana College of Fine Arts*, ed. Sirjana College of Fine Arts (Kathmandu: Sirjana College of Fine Arts, 2006), 7–12. Madan Chitrakar is an artist, art-writer, and the former chairman of the Artists Society of Nepal (1992–1998).

506 David N. Gellner, “Introduction,” in *Contested Hierarchies: A Collaborative Ethnography of Caste among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal*, ed. David N. Gellner and Declan Quigley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 1–37, 8; Madan Chitrakar traces the history of painting in Nepal further back to a community of monk-cum-painters that settled in the Kathmandu valley after the Muslim invasion of India, starting in the twelfth century. Chitrakar, *Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany*, 48–49.

507 Chitrakar, *Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany*, 48–49.

family) to the next.⁵⁰⁸ This system ensured that the tradition of creating illuminations of sacred texts or *Paubhas*, as they are called, was kept alive and almost unchanged over the centuries.⁵⁰⁹ For a long time, the art was exclusively religious, but with the changing taste of the ruling families for European style paintings, some Chitrakars began branching out. They started to incorporate hitherto uncommon styles and poses, from Mogul paintings and especially from European naturalist portraits.⁵¹⁰

Chitrakars, along with other artisans and craftsmen, were ordered in the lower ranks of the caste system. Madan Chitrakar argues that although the caste system was lawfully abolished, this has had a lasting effect on the current position of artists. "Up to the present moment some orthodox segments of Newar society like to follow this antiquated notion obediently and think it proper to treat the 'Art of Painting' as of inferior profession," he writes.⁵¹¹

Chitrakar's account of the roots of art practice in Nepal highlights several major shifts. Over the past one hundred years, the social context of art education in Nepal has changed from a caste-specific vocation to a freely chosen profession, open to everybody with the necessary economic capital. This has had a fundamental effect on the role of the artist in society. The Chitrakars' economic and social position in the art field, despite their low caste status, was secured through their exclusive right to produce religious art needed for specific rituals. This raised their position within other fields and gave them access to economic capital; it ensured regular commissions by private persons and religious institutions and thus safeguarded their profession. Thereafter, their position was secured by the taste of the ruling elites, acting as patrons of the arts, and providing access to education in India. The opening of art education institutions in Kathmandu allowed a wider social group to aspire to become artists, thus crosscutting older social hierarchies. Moreover, with the abolition of the Rana rule and the shifting elites, social ties to patrons and clients changed. The vacuum caused by the political shift seems to have temporarily been filled by the monarchy. Regardless of their own political standing, artists active in the 1970s and 1980s for instance often reminisce about King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya's interest in and support for the arts. However, with the waning power of the monarchy in the 1990s, and its official abolition in 2008, the vacuum in patronage fully emerged. Although many art functions I attended were presided by social or political figures, such as ambassadors and development activists, the indifference of local politicians towards the arts was a repeated cause for critique. The middle

508 For detailed information on the techniques and utensils used in Paubha Paintings, see Renuka Gurung (Pradhan), *Paubha Painting: The Traditional Art of Nepal* (Lalitpur: Simrik Atelier, 2010).

509 Madan Chitrakar, *Nepali Painting: Through the Ages* (Lalitpur: Patan Museum, 2017), 31–51.

510 Chitrakar, *Nepali Painting*, 52.

511 Chitrakar, *Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany*, 48–49.

classes, to which most of the artists I worked with belong, have become the main consumers of education, but they do not invest in the artistic field.

NEW CHALLENGES IN THE FIELD OF CONTEMPORARY ART PRODUCTION

The local Nepali urban and national art market is modest and largely limited to the Kathmandu valley. The fine art educated and established artists I spoke to have a small collectors' base from the upper-middle or upper class, among them foreign ambassadors and long-term expats. Some work as illustrators for schoolbooks and newspapers, others receive portrait commissions, and again others sell landscapes through commercial galleries in the tourist areas of Thamel (Kathmandu) or Lakeside (Pokhara). Especially photographers can earn assignments from one of the tens of thousands of NGOs and INGOs operating in Nepal.⁵¹² The vast majority of the urban middle classes however, I am told, do not spend money on art. "People in general, in Nepal, think that art is only beautification," one artist offered as an explanation.⁵¹³ According to them, people are unwilling to spend money on art or on the services of artists (as designers for instance) because they do not recognize the surplus value. Whether Chritrakar is right to argue that this is due to the low caste vocation, or whether it is a persisting mindset that relates art purely to religious worship, or to the ruling elite, is unclear. Any meaningful discussion on the value of art in the broader population would require a more systematic quantitative study which I cannot offer in the frame of this book. What I want to emphasize is the disparity between the cultural capital promised by a degree and the access graduates have to that cultural capital. Beyond this practical contestation, there are more ideological questions: What is art supposed to do? What does it do in and for society? What strategies can be employed to instigate an understanding for the value of contemporary art in the wider society? The young generation of artists is asking these questions and the art education institutions are not able to provide satisfying answers.

Another source of contestation is the matter that is taught, and the way knowledge is transmitted. Here the emphasis of contemporary art on new media and discursive practices are important topics that art students feel are being ignored by the existing curriculum. Further, the growing amount of exchange and art events, from South Asian Network for the Arts (SANA)-facilitated residencies to large-scale exhibitions in the region, as well as the newly established translocal connections, open markets. Artists living and working in Nepal are no longer limited to the art market in Kathmandu. Supranationally active galleries and foundations, events such

512 "List of NGOs affiliated with SWC," Social Welfare Council, accessed August 17, 2022, <http://swc.org.np/pages/391>; "List of SWC INGOs," Social Welfare Council, accessed August 17, 2022, <http://swc.org.np/pages/389>.

513 AR, A, December 2015.

as the *DAS*, platforms like the Triangle Network, and most importantly the internet and social media have opened new possibilities for them. Yet the access to these avenues requires the artists to have specific know-how that the art education institutions are not able to offer.

The two challenges that emerged in the past two decades—the vacuum in art patronage and the disconnect between the national art education and the new demands of the contemporary field—mark a common ground for contestation, shared by the contemporary generation. Sujan Chitrakar, a founding member of Sutra and, since 2005, the Academic Program Coordinator of the Center for Art and Design at KU, touches upon the roots of this contestation:

When I studied in India, in Benares, I really felt that I also needed to learn sculpture. In my second year, I went to my friends' studio during their sculpture class. One Saturday morning, we collected money and hired a rickshaw puller to pose for us. And I also did a bust. ... we had this very well-known sculptor from India as a Dean, Prof Dr. Balbir Singh Katt. He visited while we were working because he was very friendly with his students and reviewed all the works. I asked him: "sir, this is the work I have done." He even did not look at my work. "You are from painting, na? No no no, you go to painting." And he left, I was so furious and heart-broken, and I cried. I always felt that those are the things—we never thought like this. I really don't want to behave like this with my students.⁵¹⁴

After his intermediate level at Lalitkala in Kathmandu, Chitrakar went to India for his BFA at the Benares Hindu University and his MFA at the College of Art, Delhi University. In this interview excerpt, the artist explains that at the time of his studies in Varanasi art was understood as a skill. This skill could be acquired in one medium only; a painter paints and a sculptor sculpts. He elaborates that this medium-oriented education did not allow for the freedom of expression or experimentation that he wished for. The fact that I experienced the same frustration about medium-specific and skill-oriented education among students today as Chitrakar did twenty years ago shows that the organization of the discipline and the respective curricula have largely remained unchanged.

From the available curriculums and through my conversations with teachers and students, I learned that when applying to Lalitkala Campus of Fine Arts, the Central Department of Fine Arts at TU, and Sirjana College of Fine Arts, students are asked to choose between different sections such as painting or sculpture. The main curriculum in these institutions involves a combination of drawing, life study, perspective, composition, and art theory with special topics like printmaking, design, or modeling, depending on their chosen specialization. Moreover, I am told, these subjects are

514 AR, SC, December 2015.

largely introduced through Western masters. Although “Nepali traditional painting” and “Indian art” form part of the curriculum, from my observations, the extent of their treatment in class depends entirely upon the individual teacher’s will and expertise. Because most teachers graduated from India, their knowledge about Nepali art is contingent on their own position in the art field and their willingness to do research. Further, when I asked a former Lalitkala teacher about the emphasis on European masters, he explained that subjects such as composition and color study can only be taught through these masters; the techniques of “Eastern Art” are much too different, he assured me.⁵¹⁵ This causes a disconnect between the students and what they consider to be their own art ancestry. Throughout my research, many young artists complained that it was easier for them to find information on Western masters than on the previous generation of artists in Nepal.

Since the establishment of the institutions, the teaching of fine art has been tied to the canon of European art history. This education inherently reproduces the tropes of modernity and development that it inherited from colonial India. When it was established as a discipline, fine art exclusively pertained to Western artists, whereas applied arts was for the colonized.⁵¹⁶ This dichotomy is reminiscent of Hans Belting’s description of the “double exclusion” of modern art: Belting argues that first, art was only considered “art” if it adhered to a modernist philosophy and second, modern art was only considered “art” if it was produced in the West.⁵¹⁷ A similar constriction applies to the notion of fine art: art was only considered “fine” if it was not applied or traditional, and only Western artists created non-applied art. Moreover, from the late nineteenth century onwards, non-Western art production was framed by an evolutionist argument: the special characteristics of race were believed to be imbibed within art products. The more aesthetically “pure” works were considered to be, the more successful they were on the international market. It was thus in the interest of this market to keep the education and production of local crafts for the colonized separate from the fine arts of the colonizer.⁵¹⁸

Furthermore, the marginal position of Nepali art in the curriculum results from limited research and writing on the topic. Over the past fifteen years, Madan Chitrakar, Mukesh Malla, and Saroj Bajracharya have compiled important findings about traditional art, postmodern art, and sculpture in Nepal.⁵¹⁹ These publications originate from the authors’ personal

515 AR, A, January 2016.

516 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 143; Svašek, *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production*, 154.

517 Belting and Buddensieg, *Global Art World*, 12–13.

518 Svašek, *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production*, 16–18; Phoebe Scott, “Imagining ‘Asian’ Aesthetics in Colonial Hanoi: The École des Beaux-Arts de L’Indochine (1925–1945),” in Nakamura, Perkins, and Kirscher, *Asia through Art and Anthropology*, 49, 51.

519 Malla, *Uttaradhunik Nepali kala ko abhilekh*; Chitrakar, *Tej Bahadur Chitrakar*; Chitrakar, *Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany*; Chitrakar, *Nepali Painting*; Saroj Bajracharya

interests. To my knowledge, there has not been any education institution-based effort to engage in art-historical research. Guha-Thakurta traces back a more wide-reaching dichotomy between practice and art history on the subcontinent to the *Swadeshi* movement of the Bengal school.⁵²⁰ She explains that Government School of Art vice-principal Abanindranath Tagore, as well as Ernest Binfield Havell and Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy before him, promoted an Indian (*Swadeshi*) art that “was instinctive, natural, and deep-rooted.”⁵²¹ In contrast to Western art, which “had to be acquired and cultivated,” the knowledge about Indian art, Tagore believed, did not have to be mediated.⁵²² This division between instinctively comprehensible *Swadeshi* and laboriously acquired Western art values, she argues, led to a separation of institutions; the art school became a place of skill and manual practice, whereas the “Western disciplines” of art history and archeology became anchored within the museums. Indian institutions started to reduce this gap in the 1950s with the establishment of a handful of art history departments. Nevertheless, scholars Deeptha Achar and Shivaji K. Panikkar speak of a “logic that saw theory and practice ... as sharply divided and hierarchically ordered,” which has prevailed in the Indian art field until recently.⁵²³ In Nepal and in Bangladesh the focus on practice and skill (on the execution and repetition of predefined exercises) continues. In fact, any type of discursive approach to art, be it theory, history, philosophy, oral presentations, or written research papers, even concept notes, plays a minimal role in the curriculum. The emphasis is on training the hand.

Above, I traced the socio-political transitions that influenced the current make-up of the art field in Nepal. Art making has shifted from an almost exclusively caste-based structure to a small, urban, and elite-controlled field. It now comprises a wider—but still vastly urban—middle-class driven, higher-educated group of people. Although the middle class has become the main consumer of (art) education, this power-shift seems not to be reflected in the consumption of art. The dissolution of older patronage and clientele relationships has created a vacuum in the local market. Within the past twenty years, new translocal relations within the region and beyond have allowed for new positions. Many of the alternative avenues for artists have thereby been established by artists themselves. The residencies and workshops spearheaded by SANA under the framework of the Triangle Arts Trust and large-scale perennial events, such as the *DAS* or the *Photo Kathmandu (PKTM)* festival, constitute such avenues.

and Mukesh Malla, *A Concise Introduction to Nepali Modern Sculpture* (Kathmandu: Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, 2014).

520 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*.

521 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 161.

522 Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 161.

523 Deeptha Achar and Shivaji K. Panikkar, “Introduction,” in *Articulating Resistance: Art and Activism*, ed. Deeptha Achar and Shivaji K. Panikkar (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012), xiv.

Discourse-based mediation of art has become an important part of these new avenues. This is manifest in the growing role of curators, as creative mediators who conceptualize exhibitions and situate individual artworks within larger discourses,⁵²⁴ and the emphasis on discursive events (panel discussions, lectures, and conferences). Talking and writing about art often requires artists and art professionals to demonstrate proficiency in, or at least an awareness of, contemporary issues and theories. Further, they need to present themselves and their work through artist statements, catalog texts, proposals, application forms, panels, and meetings with curators, critics, and collectors. New media such as the internet and social media platforms facilitate access to the discursive field, both as sources and conveyors of information, but their use requires a specific know-how. Throughout my research, I have observed that artists of all generations struggle with these new opportunities, but also expectations. I have been asked to proofread artists' statements and proposals and I sat across from interview partners who struggled to find the words to describe their artworks.

Another significant disparity between the shifted social setting, the emerging avenues, and the art education is how the art institutions on the one side and the young generation of artists on the other engage with new mediums (including a variety of practices from mixed media, installation, performance, and new media art).⁵²⁵ During my interview with a teacher at TU's Central Department of Fine Arts, I learned that new mediums have recently been introduced in the curriculum of both the MFA level at TU and the BFA level at Lalitkala. When I ask why these have been introduced, they reply that performance, installation, or digital art are everywhere nowadays.⁵²⁶ I do not receive an explanation beyond the fact that new mediums have become a salient part of the artistic field. The struggle to explain the department's reasoning is indicative of the difficulties involved in integrating new mediums into the existing curriculum delimited along classic mediums like painting, sculpture, and printmaking. Through students and other teachers, I learn that the newly introduced course is entitled "New

524 Hans Belting, "Was bitte heißt 'contemporary'?" *Zeit Online*, May 20, 2010, accessed August 25, 2018, <http://www.zeit.de/2010/21/Global-Art>; O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 241; Michael Brenson, "The Curator's Moment," *Art Journal* 57, no. 4 (1998).

525 I use the plural form mediums to refer exclusively to artistic materials. In contrast, I use the plural form "media" to describe means of communication such as television, radio, or newspapers. "New mediums" are artistic practices that crosscut the boundaries of the classic fine art mediums such as painting, sculpture, and printmaking. The notion is an umbrella term for a variety of practices such as mixed media, installation, performance, and new media art. It can also refer to projects or works that transcend the discipline of visual arts in a broader sense such as those engaging music, theater, or dance. In contrast, the term new media refers to a variety of media that can be created and displayed through digital electronic devices (digital images, digital video, e-books, and so on).

526 AR, A, 2015.

Media” and allows students to choose between different mediums, such as film, video, installation, or performance.⁵²⁷ Apart from the introduction of this course however, the existing curriculum remains unchanged.

I am curious as to how the new subject is introduced and ask one of the teachers for permission to join a session of his class. When I enter the classroom a few weeks later, I first notice two computers in the back. Due to the load shedding, which regularly happens when the classes take place, they remain unused.⁵²⁸ The class consists of oral interactions between the teacher and his students: the latter take turns in presenting the artwork they are currently conceptualizing—ranging from mixed-media installations to video works—while the teacher offers his feedback. After the class, I inquire about how, with which tools, and where the students will work on their projects, and the teacher explains that the university generally only offers basic supplies such as clay, color, and canvases. Other materials, equipment, and workspaces need to be organized by the students themselves. This fact confirms my suspicion that the subject of new media has been introduced without much consideration to necessary preconditions and possible ramifications for the students.

The most evident consequence is the reemphasis of the education system’s focus on economic capital. Students from more affluent backgrounds can afford qualitatively better and more diverse materials. With the introduction of new mediums, this gap has widened. In order to work with digital media, access to a reliable supply of electricity (through generators for instance) and technical equipment, such as laptops, digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras, processing software, and storing hardware is indispensable. Students who do not have access to the necessary economic resources and cannot rely on the university to facilitate access to materials are not only at a disadvantage, they simply cannot fulfill their assignments. Moreover, manual and technical skills are highly emphasized in the learning of classical mediums, but, as I have explained before, the same does not apply to new media. Working with new mediums requires learning how to use them. Like repeatedly exercising the hand with composition, perspective, and life drawing, the use of new mediums—be they computers in new media, or one’s own body in performance art—needs to be trained. This comment by an MFA student highlights the knowledge gap between students, as well as the correlation between socio-economic background and working knowledge of the internet and different software programs:

527 Note that New Media—the name given to the course—here conforms to my use of the term new mediums.

528 During my research, all areas in Kathmandu, including the campus of TU, were subject to a daily power cut of up to fourteen hours per day, especially during dry season. A load shedding schedule informed people about when the power would be off in their area. The load shedding has substantially decreased since the Tihar festival in 2017.

[There are] lots of students from Lalitkala, who are really good in painting. But from Lalitkala, they don't know the multi-media. They don't know e-mail properly, or internet, or Photoshop, or photography. Adobe Premiere is very big software. How will they do, I don't know.⁵²⁹

The student's assessment also contains a critique of the asymmetry between the existing fine arts schools. Lalitkala and TU are government institutions. Their low tuition fees and limited, government-controlled budget stand in contrast especially to the Center of Arts and Design at KU, which is a private institution.⁵³⁰ This center, on which I will elaborate in the next section, is one of the most visible signs of the contestation of the education through an emerging generation of artists.

So far, I have addressed two major issues of contestation: the meaning of the fine art degree (and, by extension, the cultural and economic value of art in society) and the shifting notions of what constitutes art including new mediums and discursive practices. In the negotiation of both issues, artists working with collectives have come to play an important role.

ARTISTS AS CULTURAL BROKERS OF CHANGE

In our interview, Chitrakar explains that when he returned to Nepal from India in 2002, he soon became frustrated with the situation of the artistic field.⁵³¹ This was mostly because the lack of exchange between different mediums (such as between painting and sculpture) that he had struggled with during his studies in India also prevailed in Kathmandu. He therefore joined hands with recent returnees Ashmina Ranjit (University of Tasmania, Australia) and Manish Lal Shrestha (Sir J.J. School of Art, India), and other like-minded young artists such as Sarita Dangol, Salil Subedi, Dandapani Upadhyay, and Gopal Kalapremi. Allies in their shared dissatisfaction with the field, they founded the artist collective Sutra. The form of the collective allowed them to take on the boundaries set by the education institutions. During a weeklong workshop at the Osho Tapoban retreat center outside Kathmandu (2001), Sutra's members encouraged the fifteen participants to work with found objects and materials, as one of the participants recalls in a conversation.⁵³² Many created works in new mediums such as installation and performance.

The format of the collective offered the Sutra's members a platform to share their artistic needs and aspirations with other artists, and to experiment

529 AR, A, December 2016.

530 AR, A, December 2016. Tuition fees for the BFA at Lalitkala amount to 13,000 NPR (approximately 110 euros in 2015) per semester. At MFA level, the fee varies with the semester and divides into 20,000 and three times 14,000 NPR (approximately 520 euros in total). There are no scholarships available.

531 AR, SC, December 2015.

532 FDE, A, 2016.

with hitherto unknown techniques and mediums. In an attempt to overcome the boundaries set by established art institutions, the collective enabled a broad reach of activities from workshops to residencies and public art events. The participating artists shared their economic and social resources and divided the organizational responsibilities and duties, rather than trying to change persisting constrictions individually. Further, Sutra actively aimed at expanding the understanding of art beyond the conventional limits of fine/traditional art, Western/non-Western, and practice/concept that were reproduced by the curricula, not only within the artist community, but also beyond. Especially the public interventions such as the “exhibition of performance art” in Patan, which Thomas Bell recalls in his compilation on Kathmandu, earned the collective and its members attention.⁵³³

Chitrakar was interested in breaking open the status quo of art practice as only including fine art. He also actively started to engage with art education. Together with Aidan Warlow, an educator and schoolbook editor from the UK who had been active in Nepal since the late 1990s, he laid the foundation stone for the Kuart Center in Bhaktapur. In the first few years, this center offered a low-key, one-year diploma course with six students. From there the initiative grew into the Center for Art and Design, which was affiliated with the private KU in 2003. In order to circumvent the problems resulting from outdated curriculums, which Chitrakar experienced firsthand during his studies in India, he aimed at keeping the curriculum as flexible and adaptable as possible. The reason why this is still possible lies mainly in the fact that the KU is a not-for-profit institution registered with, but not under the direct control of, the government. Chitrakar elaborates that the tuition fees, which the center controls, fund the running cost. A committee comprised of both students and members of the art world, such as Sangeeta Thapa (Siddartha Art Gallery), NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati (founding director of PC), and art writer Madan Chitrakar, set the curriculum. Since its initiation, the center has been experimenting with different specializations, gradually moving away from the classic divisions of sculpture, painting, and graphic design, Chitrakar explains. This is also made possible through the connection with former Sutra colleagues, who over time have acted as teachers and mentors to the students. At the time of my research in 2015, the studies at the KU Center for Art and Design included photography, filmmaking, illustration, art management, and others. Rather than selecting a main medium, the students register for a BFA in “studio art” and subsequently choose between a variety of mediums.

The higher tuition fees allow the center to provide students with access to resources and tools such as a comparably well-equipped library and a generator to circumvent load shedding. This allows teachers to prepare PowerPoint presentations or access the internet during classes in order to demonstrate the use of specific techniques and mediums. Yet, Chitrakar is aware that the higher fees also reaffirm social asymmetries between

533 Bell, *Kathmandu*, 26.

students; he explains that he has been trying to minimize these asymmetries, for instance by offering scholarships.⁵³⁴

As a teacher, Chitrakar encourages his students to transgress the boundaries that Sutra aimed to overcome. To this end, he offers the students as much input as possible by inviting guest lecturers, by communicating his own experiences, and by fostering exchange between the students and the wider art field. In the class I attended, Chitrakar encouraged the students to discuss and present their ideas for projects. He also encouraged them to experiment with different mediums to find the way that could best express their idea. As homework, he assigns each student a senior artist from the Nepali art field. Students then arrange an interview, and give a presentation in class. Moreover, he motivates his students to volunteer for large-scale events such as the *PKTM* festival or the *Kathmandu International Art Festival*.⁵³⁵

Chitrakar's efforts as a founding member of Sutra and as an educator are expressions of his personal investment in the arts. Yet, they are also symptomatic of an emerging comprehension of art that is pioneered by a young generation of practitioners and returnees like him. New developments in other art fields such as the transgression of classic mediums and the growing importance of discursive practices are brokered by mobile artists. They question and increasingly delegitimize their "home" discourses and thus also the education institutions that transfer and shape the relating knowledge. The disciplinary and social boundaries of these institutions do not only pertain to the disjuncture between different artistic mediums, but also to the dissociation between (manual) practice and discourse, and the gap between former and current members of the Nepali art field. The latter friction in particular is caused by a focus on European masters, the marginalization of traditional artists, and the localization of research almost exclusively within private endeavors. The existing education institutions face the challenge to react to these shifts. Disciplinary boundaries cannot be overcome by merely introducing unfamiliar topics into the already existing curriculum, as my observations from TU show. A focus on new mediums requires access to resources, such as books, technical equipment, and skilled teachers. More importantly, it requires a rethinking beyond the medium-specific practice promoted by fine art.

Rama Nanda Joshi's focus on outdoor painting, as well as the collective initiative of SKIB-71 represent early signs of this rethinking. Sutra, which started operating at the end of the 1990s, marks the beginning of a collaborative and more systematic reflection on the history and present constitution of the art field in Nepal. Especially Chitrakar's initiative and the establishment of the Center for Art and Design at KU with its flexible

534 AR, SC, December 2015.

535 The festival has had two editions and was then "reborn" as the *Kathmandu Triennale* in 2017. The 2012 edition was organized by the newly founded Siddhartha Art Foundation, and the 2017 edition in partnership with the Museum of Modern Art in Ghent.

curriculum design will have lasting effects on the understanding of art for the next generation. By becoming an educator, Chitrakar relocates his brokerage from a modest circle of like-minded artists to a broader and more formal scale. Art education institutions transmit knowledge to students, and the way that educators design this transmission shapes the practice and understanding of art for future generations. The institutions thus actively produce the values and rules that determine the practices of their graduates. My next case study, a multi-media art installation by Saha, leads me to a discussion of similar developments in Bangladesh, notably the relation between the young generation of artists engaged with collectives and their involvement as teachers in art education in Bangladesh.

Interlude: $E=mc^2$

From afar, the box looks both inconspicuous and intriguing. There is no indication, no sign nor sound, pointing to its contents. During an evening get-together Britto founder Mahbubur Rahman foretold that Shimul Saha's work would be fantastic, but he refused to give away any details. I had to see for myself, he insisted. Now, I am standing at the National Art Gallery of the Shilpakala Academy, where the eighth edition of the photography festival Chobi Mela is currently taking place. As part of the festival program, Rahman led a three-month interdisciplinary workshop with 12 Bangladesh-based participants. The works realized in its course, among them $E=mc^2$ by Britto member Shimul Saha, are exhibited at the vast, white-walled Academy (Fig. 8).

I know this must be Saha's work. I consciously keep myself from reading the small concept note next to the entrance for fear of spoiling the surprise Rahman has promised. I slowly pass the threshold, bracing myself. As soon as



Figure 8: Shimul Saha, $E=mc^2$, 2015. Chobi Mela, Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

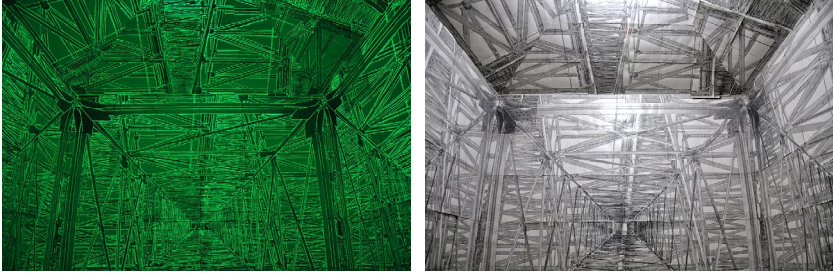


Figure 9: Shimul Saha, *E=mc² (inside)*, 2015. Chobi Mela, Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka. Photos: courtesy of the artist.

I enter the box, some sort of mechanism is triggered, and the room turns pitch black. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust, but then the walls around me start to reveal a maze of neon green lines. Slowly patterns emerge and my mind pieces together a construction site—or is it a steel bridge? Only moments after my eyes become accustomed to the darkness, the light turns back on, the color vanishes, and the meticulous pencil work necessary to create all these lines jumps into view. Rahman did not exaggerate; the work is both whimsical and painstakingly executed (Fig. 9).

A HISTORY OF FINE ART EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

Saha's development as an artist, very similar to that of Dangol, started with a detour: after a secondary education in a private college, he enrolled in a bachelor of business administration (BBA) program at the request of his parents. Two of his closest friends then pushed him to take the admission test for the Faculty of Fine Arts at Dhaka University, commonly referred to as Charukola (*charu*: charming, beautiful fine; *kola*: art). As the oldest and most popular (in terms of applications) art school in the country, Charukola has educated generations of artists and nurtured the way they produce, perceive, and understand art. The majority of artists I interviewed have graduated from this institution. Its modernist architecture, especially the characteristic use of red brick and the incorporation of natural elements, such as ponds and vegetation, further serves as an architectural symbol of the newly established and thriving art field in East Pakistan.⁵³⁶

Saha explains that it was very difficult to communicate his choice to take the entry test to his family. He had never spoken against his parents' wishes before, but this matter was different, he admits. Initially, they were upset, especially because they had paid for his private education, and because they were unsure about the prospects of a fine art degree. His father eventually agreed and allowed him to continue his studies. Saha's story mirrors others, which served as an entry to the discussion in this chapter. One

536 Hoek, "Mofussil Metropolis," 34–35.

artist explains that they kept their studies at Charukola a secret during the first months and their parents were not happy when they finally found out.⁵³⁷ Another research partner attributes the conflict with their parents to the family's middle-class status: "I told you we are a lower-middle-class family—so my father's dream was [for me] to be a doctor."⁵³⁸ This last comment bespeaks Liechty's observations on the middle-class focus on management, medicine, and business as a way to nourish their dream of modern futures in Nepal.⁵³⁹

Saha enrolled in the department of painting. Soon, however, he started to struggle with the classwork. He explains that his choice to study painting did not reflect his actual inclination. He had based his decision on the prevalent understanding that painting is the most prestigious medium in art. Sculpture, which had a much lower standing, actually appealed more to him because of the haptic element involved. He applied to shift from the department of painting to that of sculpture after six months and was thankfully able to make his case to the faculty. Students, especially those with no prior experiences in the art field, often find it difficult to commit to one medium. In addition, institutes do not make it easy for students to gain information about the curricula they offer. At the time of my visit, neither Charukola nor the fine arts institutes of Chittagong and Rajshahi University made their course descriptions and curriculums available online. I was only able to obtain them from helpful teachers. Personal, face-to-face contact with teachers or students appears to be a prerequisite for an informed application. This might also explain why both Saha and Dangol learned about fine art education through friends and acquaintances who had already established this contact. Shifts between departments, such as the one Saha made, have been made more difficult since Charukola became a separate Faculty of the University of Dhaka in 2008. From the current dean, Nisar Hossain, I learn that students currently apply to and receive admission directly from the various medium-based departments. Each of the departments has its own administration, office, and curriculum, and there are no interactions or combined subjects, except for history of art and aesthetics. The organization of these departments can be traced back to their "colonial inheritance," the dean proceeds to explain, calling Charukola an "offshoot of the Government Art College in India."⁵⁴⁰

Prior to colonial rule, general education in the Bengal region, similarly to Nepal, was organized in Hindu *pathshalas* (Sanskrit, sometimes Bengali) and *madradas* (Arabic).⁵⁴¹ The focus of the colonial power was on Kolkata, which served as the capital of British-India until 1911, when it was moved to Delhi. As I mentioned in the first chapter, the Bengal region received

537 AR, A, 2017.

538 AR, A, 2015.

539 Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 216.

540 AR, NH, September 2015.

541 Mohammad Ehsan, *Higher Education Governance in Bangladesh: The Public Private Dilemma* (Dhaka: A H Development Publishing House, 2008), 50–51.

little support in developing its infrastructure after India's independence. At the time of Partition in 1947, there was only one university in the territory of East Pakistan—the 1921 established Dhaka University.⁵⁴² Like in Nepal, the production of art in Bangladesh has largely been organized in traditions—transmitted to following generations either through family lineage, or in workshops or ateliers from master to apprentice. In his extensive research in *Art and Life in Bangladesh* and *Living Traditions*, Henry Glassie traces many of these traditions, such as clay sculpting, woodwork, and metalwork, to the organization of Hindu castes.⁵⁴³

While West Pakistan possessed a well-developed infrastructure, including two schools for art instruction, the Mayo School of Art (now the National College of Art) and the Department of Fine Arts at Punjab University in Lahore, East Pakistan did not have a formal art school. The few artists that resided or moved to the eastern part in the wake of Pakistan's creation had been trained in Kolkata.⁵⁴⁴ Zainul Abedin, Bangladesh's most celebrated master artist, enrolled at the Government School of Art in Kolkata four years after the aforementioned artists Chandra Man Singh Maskey and Tej Bahadur Chitrakar had returned to Nepal. He studied and then remained in Kolkata as a teacher until 1947. When he returned to Dhaka after Partition, he wanted to establish an art school. Initially, he struggled to explain this need to the Muslim elite of the country.⁵⁴⁵ But only one year later the College of Arts and Crafts was established. The "Kolkata group"—Abedin's fellow graduates from the Government School of Art (and until today Bangladesh's most renowned modern artists) Anwarul Huq, Quamrul Hasan, Khawaja Shafique Ahmed, Safiuddin Ahmed, and Habibur Rahman—became its first teachers. The initial curriculum included pencil drawing, perspective, outdoor sketching, copy drawing, lettering, woodcut, and watercolors. Lala Rukh Selim maintains that although directly derived from Kolkata, the teaching had a different "flavor" in Dhaka.⁵⁴⁶ She cites Zainul Abedin's focus on life drawings, on local folk art, on observing and capturing the people and landscape of Bengal, and the resulting figurative

542 Ehsan, *Higher Education Governance in Bangladesh*, 56–57.

543 Glassie, *Art and Life in Bangladesh*; Henry Glassie and Firoz Mahmud, ed., *Living Traditions* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2007). Henry Glassie's compilation warrants two cautions. First, the author's research emphasizes lineages of Hindu artists, thus leaving the impression that the Muslim population—perhaps for religious reasons—does not engage in the production of art as extensively. Second, his account contains a strong, overgeneralized local–international dichotomy, especially in relation to his discussion of the art education institutions. He for instance claims that the stylistic precedents in traditional workshops are local. Whereas "in the college, they are international" with a "pretense to universal validity." He thus reproduces the fine art–applied arts dichotomy established with the first art institutions. Glassie, *Art and Life in Bangladesh*, 269.

544 Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 93–94.

545 Lala Rukh Selim, "50 Years of the Fine Art Institute," *Art: A Quarterly Journal* 4, no. 2 (1998).

546 Selim, "50 Years of the Fine Art Institute."

style (in direct contrast with the majorly Muslim society) as examples of this flavor.⁵⁴⁷

Under the Kolkata trained teachers, Charukola became a locus of progressive politics—as many students and teachers were involved in the language movement—and of romanticized notions of the Bengali lifestyle.⁵⁴⁸ Cultural and artistic characteristics believed to be at the core of the Bengali identity were brought to use for a new nationalist politics against West Pakistan. The school also inherited the division between fine art (Western style painting) and the applied, technical, or commercial arts. Next to fine art and applied arts, a third department, Oriental art, was introduced in 1955, following the example of Kolkata. Although this subject was limited to Persian and Indian traditions, the ramifications of Partition and the political break with India precluded the department from being called Indian art.

In the 1960s, Charukola faced several changes. It moved into its current building, specifically created by renowned architect Muzharul Islam. Three further departments, ceramics (1961), sculpture (1963), and crafts (1967) were introduced. The organization as a degree college under Dhaka University in 1963 required the introduction of theoretical papers. For this purpose, classes on the history of civilization, the history of art, and sociology were implemented, but it proved difficult to find suitable teachers.⁵⁴⁹ Art history, as a proper department, was only introduced in the 1990s.⁵⁵⁰ Moreover, the artistic field as a whole, which for the first fifteen years was dominated by the art school, was exposed to fresh impulses and ideas. Similar to the situation in Nepal, these were brokered by the artists returning from their studies abroad. While hitherto unfamiliar techniques and styles, especially abstract art, became part of the practice of this emerging generation, the school's curriculum remained almost unchanged.⁵⁵¹ The MFA was introduced in 1978, and five years later the Institute merged with Dhaka University.⁵⁵² Its subdivision into the gradually established departments continues at the time of my research. In 2015, students were able

547 Throughout his life, Zainul Abedin continued his efforts to develop the art field. His commitment to local traditions and folk art is for instance visible in the Sonargaon Folk Art Museum, which he established in 1975. In the same year, he also founded the Zainul Museum in Mymensingh, which holds his own collection. See Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 101.

548 The language movement comprises a series of protests in the late 1940s and early 1950s which erupted in East Pakistan after the West Pakistan-based government had established Urdu as the sole national language. The movement led to the establishment of Urdu and Bengali as recognized languages. With independence in 1971, Bengali became the state language of Bangladesh. Selim, "50 Years of the Fine Art Institute," 8; Raghavan, 1971, 7–8; Khademul Islam, "Life and Times of Literary Magazines: Bangladesh's English-Language Literature Over the Years," *Himal Southasian: The Bangladesh Paradox* 28, no. 3 (2015): 79.

549 Selim, "50 Years of the Fine Art Institute," 8.

550 AR, NH, September 2015.

551 Selim, "50 Years of the Art Institute: (Part 2)," 5.

552 Selim, "50 Years of the Art Institute: (Part 2)," 5.

to choose between painting, printmaking, graphic design, oriental art, ceramics, sculpture, crafts, and art history.

Iftikhar Dadi highlights the crucial influence of Zainul Abedin on the art field in East Pakistan as an “adviser and bureaucrat” frequently called upon by the Pakistani government.⁵⁵³ While Charukola and the national art field prospered under his guidance, the development of an overall education infrastructure in the eastern wing of the country was neglected. When Bangladesh became independent in 1971, there were only six public universities throughout the entire country. After independence, the new government took over and became the exclusive administrator of education policy. Its monopoly to provide higher education only changed with the Private University Act.⁵⁵⁴ Since then, ninety-five private universities have been established.⁵⁵⁵

Like in Nepal, the private universities that have mushroomed in Bangladesh cater to a market of economically affluent, urban clientele seeking jobs in the government or the vast INGO/NGO sector.⁵⁵⁶ The majority offer courses in business studies, computer engineering, English, and environment studies.⁵⁵⁷ Two private institutions, the University of Development Alternative (UODA), established in 2002, and the Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology, established in 2003, offer fine art (BFA and MFA) programs. Public fine arts departments have been established at Rajshahi, Chittagong, Khulna, and since 2012 also at Jahangirnagar University. Of the practicing artists I met, Chittagong and Dhaka were and still are the most prominent. Charukola Dean Nisar Hosain explains that the Dhaka University remains the most privileged university of the country; most prospective students try to get admission in his faculty first. For 135 seats, Charukola receives more than 13,000 applications per admission session, he explains.⁵⁵⁸

In relation to the leading position of the Dhaka institute, Lala Rukh Selim argues that the school has “overshadowed” the country’s art field, a fact notably due to the many artists who have held teaching positions at the faculty.⁵⁵⁹ The prominent role of Zainul Abedin, commonly referred to as *Shilpacharya* (art teacher/leader of a college or university), Charukola’s

553 Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 108–109.

554 Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, “The Private University Act XXXIV,” trans. The Heidelberg Bangladesh Law Translation Project, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/workgroups/bdlaw/1992-a34>.

555 Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), *Bangladesh Education Statistics 2016* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, 2017).

556 The NGO Affairs Bureau of Bangladesh counts a total of 2629 registered foreign and local NGOs up to July 2018. “List of all NGO,” NGO Affairs Bureau of Bangladesh, updated February 6, 2023, <http://www.ngoab.gov.bd/site/page/3de95510-5309-4400-97f5-0a362fd0f4e6/List-of-All-NGO>.

557 Ehsan, *Higher Education Governance in Bangladesh*, 62.

558 AR, NH, September 2015.

559 Selim, “50 Years of the Art Institute: (Part 2),” 11–12.

central location in the capital city, as well as its closeness to other important art institutions, such as the Shilpakala Academy, are other reasons.

COMMONALITY OF STRUGGLE

All the fine arts students in the first year, everybody dreams; “I will be Zainul Abedin, I will be Quamrul Hasan, SM Sultan.” Everybody thinks like that. But in the second year, third year, the percentage is getting less and most of the students get a job. When they are doing their job, they are getting away from the artist life.⁵⁶⁰

The first part of Saha’s statement highlights the key role of the national masters in the imagination of the Charukola students. Even though the curriculum focuses on European masters in Bangladesh too, the students refer to artists like Zainul Abedin and SM Sultan as their role models. Every year, Abedin’s birthday is commemorated in Bangladesh, with special celebrations at the institutions he founded. When I introduced myself and my research in Bangladesh, people immediately brought up his name; especially artists praised his dedication and commitment to the art movement in Bangladesh. The emphasis on his persona is also due to his political activism. The famine sketches—which he drew during the Bengal Famine (1943–1944) that killed over three million people—have become the visual representation of the region’s oppression under British colonial rule.⁵⁶¹ Further, his claim for the vital relation between art practice and the social and natural landscape of the region I discussed above,⁵⁶² and his use of art to support the Language Movement (1950s)⁵⁶³ and the Liberation Movement (1971) that led to the country’s independence in 1971, serve the idea of Bengali nationalism widely adhered to by the middle class.

The second part of Saha’s comment bespeaks a common struggle among students, similar to the one I discussed for Nepal. Saha claims that the students enrolled in fine arts dream of becoming professional artists. Like himself, however, they are often sidetracked by disagreeing parents, heavy course loads, shortage of money, family responsibilities, and the need to get a job. Saha is originally from Tangail, about one hundred kilometers north of Dhaka. To support himself during his studies in the capital, he took on an extra job. This job, he explains, became a diversion that disconnected him from his coursework, his practice, and his dream of making a living as an artist. It was the collaboration and exchange with already established artists that brought him back to art. He met Britto

560 AR, SSa, September 2015.

561 Two works from the *Famine Sketches* series were on display at the Neue Galerie in Kassel during *documenta 14*. They were part of an entire exhibition section dedicated to the Bengal Famine. “Zainul Abedin,” *documenta 14*, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/21944/zainul-abedin>.

562 Selim, “50 Years of the Art Institute: (Part 2),” 6.

563 See fn. 548.

co-founder Mahbubur Rahman at a time when he was struggling for orientation. Rahman “was fighting with life through art,” he explains, referring to the paramount role of art in Rahman’s life. The artist became Saha’s inspiration, and Britto acted as a support for his further development as an artist.⁵⁶⁴ Through the collective and its interconnectedness, Saha received the opportunity to participate in a Vasl (one of the five SANA member collectives) program in Pakistan. During the residency, he met renowned Pakistani artist Zarina Hashmi, who urged him to apply for one of the scholarships offered specifically to Bangladeshi artists at the BNU in Lahore. On the homepage, BNU is introduced as a “non-profit, apolitical, non-sectarian, and equal-opportunity institution.”⁵⁶⁵ It was established in 2003 and provides education through seven different schools, ranging from psychology, journalism, and education to business administration. Saha graduated from the master’s program in art and design studies, which offers a large field of courses on visual arts (painting, sculpture, photography, video, installation), design, curatorial studies, and art education. Saha emphasizes the focus on new mediums, and identifies the wider scope for experimentation that this diverse curriculum allowed:

What I learned here, from [the] sculpture department [during his BFA in Bangladesh], it made my hand flexible to work with any material. Over here, my skill was developed, my hand. And over there [during his MFA in Pakistan], they showed me something else: “In this way you can also think.” I made the object, that was the skill from here, when I made the photograph, that was a skill from there.⁵⁶⁶

Saha notes the strict focus on manual practice of many fine art institutions. While the emphasis on repetitive drawing exercises at Charukola made his hands flexible, the BNU classes introduced new mediums in which to test this acquired flexibility. Rather than juxtaposing these different approaches to art, Saha emphasizes their complementary nature. He directly refers to $E=mc^2$, the artwork I described in the Interlude to this section. On the one hand, his drawing skills were crucial in the conception and realization of the inside walls of the room. On the other hand, the idea to use photographs of steel bridges and extract the lines from these images to depict the “millions of connections being made around us” represents a skill learned from BNU.⁵⁶⁷ During our interview, Saha also mentions that working with light, which in the case of $E=mc^2$ is caused by phosphorescent pigment, is another element he picked up in Pakistan. The workshop entitled “Sculpting with Light,” facilitated by Rahman during the seventh edition of

564 AR, SSa, September 2015.

565 “BNU at a Glance,” Beaconhouse National University, accessed June 19, 2021, <http://www.bnu.edu.pk/bnu/About/BNUataGlance.aspx>.

566 AR, SSa, September 2015.

567 Shimul Saha, $E=mc^2$, 2015, art installation, Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka.

the *Chobi Mela (CM)* festival, offered Saha an opportunity to combine these different techniques in one work. The format of the three-month workshop was specifically aimed at fostering transdisciplinary approaches by removing photography from its more common contexts, such as documentary or storytelling, and mixing it with other artistic mediums. Like Sutra in Nepal, Britto has been working at overcoming boundaries between mediums and opening new room for experimentation. *CM's* organizers Drik and the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute have recently been engaged in a similar endeavor, hence the collaboration, which will be part of my case study in chapter five.

TEACHING EMERGING CONTEMPORANEITY

During my interview with Britto co-founder Tayeba Begum Lipi, I ask why she and her husband Rahman are not teaching at Charukola.⁵⁶⁸ I am curious to know if they ever tried to change the education system from within, rather than fostering initiatives for contemporary art practice outside of it. She explains that she wanted to be free in her art practice, and for that reason did not want to be tied down by a teaching job. Her husband, on the other hand, had always wanted to be a teacher. When positions became available at Charukola in 2009 Rahman convinced her to apply for the openings in the drawing and painting department. They both applied, but as Lipi explains, “they refused to take either of us.”⁵⁶⁹ She elaborates that the committee initially had reservations because the couple was travelling a lot and was “too international.” In the end, they were told they were “overqualified.” Lipi suggests that the real reason might have been the institution leaders’ fear of change.⁵⁷⁰ Her suspicion is an indication of the difference between Britto’s understanding of art and the values and rules mediated by Charukola.

The discrepancy between current contemporary practice and institutionally mediated knowledge is not a new condition but part of the cultural brokerage that results (manifest or latent) from the artists’ mobility. I repeatedly emphasized this for the case of Nepal and briefly hinted at a similar situation in Bangladesh. The modernist artists who returned to Bangladesh in the 1960s after their studies abroad brought new ideas and visualities, yet these had little effect on the curriculum of the national institutions. Artist and art writer Mustafa Zaman refers to the Shomoy group to emphasize this point. Shomoy was one of the first artist collectives in Bangladesh. The collaboration which brought together Shishir Bhattacharjee, Habibur Rahman, Selim Ahmed, Saidul Haque Juice, Dilara Begum Jolly, Ali Morshed Noton, Dhali-Al-Mamoon, and Aziz Sharafi started after an initial banner exhibition in 1980. The group remained active

568 AR, TBL, March 2017.

569 AR, TBL, March 2017.

570 AR, TBL, March 2017.

throughout the 1980s and promoted mixed-media, figurative, and political art that deviated from the styles taught at Charukola. Zaman himself experimented with collages and color graphs: "But you could never submit those works as part of your master[']s degree submission. You could never do that back then," he explains to me in our interview.⁵⁷¹ Teaching was marked by naturalistic painting and nudes and artists were "copying one-another and trying to give their own kind of twist."⁵⁷²

Like Lipi, Zaman attributes this stagnation to a fear of change: "Actually the senior artists of the country ... they have this fear that everything could be lost." In his opinion, this fear lies in the belief that modern techniques (such as abstract or conceptual art) and new mediums (like collages, installations, or photographs) entail a loss of skill. Since their establishment, the art institutions have promoted a notion of "skill" that is reduced to the manual command of color, composition, perspective, shade, and so on. New mediums are considered not to require, and most importantly, not to value this kind of manual expertise and skill. Zaman contends that this fear is unnecessary because the artists that push forward artistic border transgressions "are wonderful draftsmen."⁵⁷³ $E=mc^2$, which served as my entry to this section, exemplifies Zaman's point. The installation highlights Saha's creative engagement with new mediums, as well as his meticulous drawing skills. It represents a strong argument for the importance of both. Moreover, this example points to the fact that contemporary artists also increasingly contest the notion of skill as understood by the education institutions; skill involves more than draftsmanship and composition. It includes the command of diverse mediums, techniques, technologies, ideas, and concepts.

After his participation in the "Sculpting with Light" workshop, taught by Mahbubur Rahman as part of the CM 2015 program, Saha was offered a teaching position at the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute, a private institution for the study of photography. In line with his own practice, Saha tries to incorporate manual skill and conceptual experimentation in his teaching. He explains that he teaches perspective and composition through the medium of drawing. He feels that these manual skills are very important in composing not only paintings but also photographs. He thus demonstrates that the adoption of unfamiliar techniques and styles and the transgression of boundaries between mediums and between what is perceived as fine and applied arts is not, as feared by the older generation, a renouncement of artistic values, draftsmanship, and other skills. In contrast, both complement each other in a contemporary practice promoted by the young generation.

Charukola's organization is contingent upon a multi-level bureaucratic apparatus, comprising the separate departments at the bottom, then the faculty committee, the dean's committee, and on top the academic council

571 AR, MZ, September 2015.

572 AR, MZ, September 2015.

573 AR, MZ, September 2015.

of the university and the syndicate. This multilayered organization limits the flexibility of the institution.⁵⁷⁴ Changes to the curriculum are much more difficult to implement. Several efforts to establish photography as a new medium at Charukola—including the dean’s himself—have for instance failed due to other faculty members’ opposition.⁵⁷⁵ Private institutions, such as Pathshala or the Center for Art and Design in Kathmandu, are not subject to the same bureaucratic rigidity as government institutions. They can put changes into effect much faster. Further, they have at their disposal a higher budget, notably through higher tuition fees, as I showed for Nepal. This last point also places them closer to the market—they answer to the middle and upper classes that consume the education they provide. They cater to a smaller and more targeted audience, allowing them to incorporate its shifting needs.⁵⁷⁶

Moreover, these private institutions were founded by passionate individual actors with the aim to offer valid alternatives to the already existing arts infrastructure. While the foundation of Charukola also goes back to the initiative of artist Zainul Abedin, the institution quickly became consolidated in the colonial legacy it took over from the Government College of Arts in Kolkata as well as the new nationalist “Bengali” agenda. Both Shahidul Alam and Chitrakar however actively promote multi-scalar positionings that actively lead to the transgressions of older hierarchies and disciplinary boundaries. Pathshala founder Alam developed the school as a means to complement the multimedia organization Drik, established in 1989. Drik consists of several gradually developed building blocks (a dark room, a studio, a gallery, and so on) and acts as a junction space for photography in Bangladesh.⁵⁷⁷ The Pathshala South Asian Media Institute,

574 AR, NH, September 2015.

575 AR, NH, September 2015.

576 This however also makes them vulnerable to attacks and allegations of malpractice: On August 6, 2016 *bdnews24* published an article that denounced, among other things, Pathshala’s lack of affiliation with an established university and its “illegal” issuing of certificates. It accuses founder Shahidul Alam of not searching for any accreditation out of fear of losing his political freedom and flexibility, and it alleges illegal money transfer from European countries. While the Academic Council of Pathshala issued an answer to the paper (Pathshala South Asian Media Institute 2016, widely shared through Facebook) and clarified the points raised by the article (notably that it is in the process of getting recognized by the government but has not been granted permission yet), it also confirms the latent influence and control the government has over affiliated institutions. In February 2018, Pathshala held a press conference announcing its affiliation with Dhaka University and the start of a bachelor program. Faisal Atik, “Shahidul Alam’s Pathshala Operates Without Affiliation,” *bdnews24.com*, August 6, 2016, accessed June 19, 2021. <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2016/08/06/shahidul-alam-s-pathshala-operates-without-affiliation>; *The Daily Star*, “Pathshala Starts Bachelor, Post Graduation With Affiliation of DU,” *The Daily Star*, February 15, 2018, accessed June 21, 2021, <http://www.thedailystar.net/city/pathshala-south-asian-media-institute-starts-bachelor-and-post-graduation-diploma-programmes-photography-film-television-affiliation-dhaka-university-1535254>.

577 AR, SA, September 2015.

which became operational in 1998, was the first education institution for photography in the country. It aimed at offering a more focused and durable training platform than the temporary workshops offered by Drik. Alam explains that he contacted other institutions around the world, seeking to borrow from their curriculums. Finally, he decided to base it on his own documentary practice and the specific needs of working in Bangladesh. Gradually, the education moved from a primary focus on documentary photography to a more critical and open approach to the medium. This was realized among other respects by consciously bringing in people with different, sometimes “diametrically opposite” ideas and practices to challenge the perspectives of the students:

We very deliberately brought in people with very diverse approaches to the medium. So the students recognized that there was no one way of looking at photography. And there were people who very sometimes diametrically opposite, who questioned one another. So, there were value systems of established people being challenged internally. And I think it was that questioning environment which really was the main stay of the school we founded. It’s a base that allows a lot more freedom than other places traditionally do.⁵⁷⁸

The incentive to question medium limitations, to transgress aesthetic and formal boundaries, to engage with different perspectives and discourses from around the world was, as this quote shows, built into Pathshala from the start. Over the course of its twenty years of teaching, Pathshala connected with the fine art field from which it had remained separated through the exclusion of photography from the fine art education. Thereby it overcame its own initial focus on documentary photography.⁵⁷⁹ Saha’s appointment as a teacher is an expression of this connective and transgressive agenda and the alliance between Britto and Drik, on which I will elaborate in chapter five.

The contestation of the status quo, of hegemonic visual discourses and of disciplinary boundaries is not solely the characteristic of an emerging contemporaneity. The historic approach of this chapter reveals that artists have repeatedly transgressed hegemonic circumscriptions of art: from Abanindranath Tagore, who challenged fine art as a colonialist category of exclusion, to Saha and Dangol, who question the validity of institutional knowledge transmission, including curriculums, canons, and the

578 AR, SA, September 2015.

579 AR, SA, September 2015. Alam uses the term fine artists to circumscribe the practicing artists who graduated from fine arts institutes and faculties in Bangladesh. The differentiation between photography and fine art continuing in Bangladesh (and in Nepal) is based on the dual bias that photography commonly equals documentary photography (as it was long practiced at Pathshala), and that this type of photography is perceived as an applied art (in contrast to painting, sculpture, and so on).

art education's emphasis on manual skill. This contestation is part of the cultural brokerage that results from the artists' mobility—the engagement with new people, ideas, and discourses. What then is “emerging” about it? Artists make use of collaborative action in a systematic way; there were collective attempts in the 1980s, such as SKIB-71 in Nepal and Shomoy in Bangladesh. However, the collectives established since the 1990s that I am focusing on deliberately form multi-scalar connections and thus are no longer dependent on the national fields for their mobility and motility. They access supranational funding and collaborate with internationally established galleries, curators, and organizations. By establishing spaces for experimental practice, Britto, Bindu—A Space for Artists (Bindu), Sattya, PC, and Drik create a milieu for the (re)negotiation of what a valid art practice and education consist of. Prior to their initiatives, there were mobile artists like Chandra Man Singh Maskey and Tej Bahadur Chitrakar who also brokered new ideas into the established fields. However, these were mostly individual endeavors under the patronage of the urban or national elites. The graduates who returned to Nepal and Bangladesh in the 1960s and 1970s also carried fresh ideas and techniques. They fostered the development of an alternative art infrastructure (academies, galleries, and artist collectives), but had little effect on the curriculum of the national institutions. The artists that became active in the 1990s benefitted from the growing power of the middle classes and the resulting rise of private education. This establishment of alternative, private education facilities crosscuts older socio-cultural hierarchies, but in the process creates new economic asymmetries. My research partners deliberately position themselves on multiple scales of the art field to broaden their scope of action. Thereby they not only contest the status quo of art production in relation to artistic fields on other scales, but also in relation to other fields on the national scale (politics, religion, or economics, for instance). In other words, they question the position of art within a wider set of fields: What does art do? Who should it reach? Should it have socio-political effects? I will take a closer look at these negotiations in the next two chapters.