
Chapter 4

The Field of Contemporary Art Production: National Academies, Art Foundations, Collectives

The understanding of contemporary art that emerges from my research partners' practice and their contestation of the existing education institutions is no longer confined to a specific medium, it cannot be reduced to manual skill, and discursive practices are considered an integral part of it. The medium is not a given but subordinated to an artistic (and a socio-political, in the case of *Kolor Kathmandu [KK]*) concept; it is chosen according to how the concept could best be mediated. Moreover, contemporary artists are interested in vernacular visual histories and historically meaningful places, especially in making them relevant for a contemporary practice. For this reason, artists actively engage with archeological heritage and seek contact with senior artists in their countries. At the same time, they use platforms like the *Venice Biennale* or the *Dhaka Art Summit (DAS)* to showcase their artwork to affluent curators, collectors, art writers, and wider audiences. They participate in transregional workshop networks to experiment with new techniques and meet fellow practitioners from diverse localities. They are influenced by formats related to street art or site-specific art established in Europe and America. This vertical multi-positionality serves the purpose to broaden the artists' agency beyond the nationally available art infrastructure. Britto Arts Trust (Britto), Sattya Media Arts Collective (Sattya), and photo.circle (PC), however, do not only operate on different scales of art fields, but also in different types of infrastructure in the same field and in other fields on the same scale. This includes less formal art training opportunities (e.g., outdoor-drawing or photography classes), galleries, and foundations, but also collaborations with musicians, researchers, activists, or specific NGOs/INGOs. One of the reasons to connect to these institutions is to broaden the contact with audiences, to access potential buyers, or to broaden the reach of a specific socio-political message. In the last chapter, I stated that with the vanishing of former socio-cultural elites there has emerged a vacuum in art patronage. The middle classes are not (yet) the audiences that artists hope for. Artists have tried to connect to them by taking art to public spaces, but also

by connecting with mediating institutions. I introduced art institutions as a “framing apparatus”⁵⁸⁰ that both enables and restricts the socio-cultural and political scopes of the action of individuals.⁵⁸¹ While education institutions shape the field by transmitting art-related knowledge (art history, aesthetic and formal values, visual norms, etc.) through their canons and curricula, the institutions in focus in this subchapter frame art by mediating art and its related knowledge to a range of consumers (visitors, readers, followers, supporters, buyers). Thereby they contribute to a consolidation of values, norms, and canons.

The search for audiences is related to a set of ideological questions that I have mentioned earlier: my research partners are concerned with the position of art in a larger set of fields. They ask questions about the purpose of art in and for society and devise strategies to test this purpose through their programs: Sattya, for instance, sees art as a medium to envision alternative urbanizations. PC, my case study in the next chapter, uses contemporary and archival photography to stimulate a re-fabrication of urban social life after the 2015 earthquake. Mediating institutions can be crucial allies in realizing such programs. They can offer support through funding and provide knowledge resources or platforms to connect to audiences. Within the field of art production in Nepal and Bangladesh these institutions are far from abundant and researching them proved to be rather challenging: there is little to no available academic or vernacular literature on mediating institutions in these countries. I was able to draw information from interviews and participant observation within the respective institutions (National Academies, galleries, foundations, and art writers), yet the information I received was often antagonistic; artists used my interviews to voice their critique and frustration over the institutions’ mismanagement and lacking support. The representatives of these institutions in contrast presented their activities and achievements in a very positive light. Further, despite the rather small number of institutions, the entanglements especially in terms of personnel are complex, as many actors hold multiple positions over the course of their careers. To acknowledge this complexity, I open this chapter with four personal assessments of the situation of mediating institutions in the fields of art. The quotes are taken from interviews with actors who have had practical training in different artistic mediums and who are working with private mediating institutions. They illustrate the relation between nationally organized public institutions and private initiatives from within the field.

Sharon Zukin writes about the idea of public spaces as democratic spaces, as spaces that are “regulated and controlled,” but that are commonly identified as open, as not “defined by a single use or specific or

580 Deutsche, *Evictions*, 152.

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

preferred set of users.”⁵⁸² Although public art institutions, such as galleries, academies, or museums serve a specific use and attract audiences interested in consuming art, they are conceived as more accessible than the private realm. Nonetheless, there is a discrepancy between how this access is perceived and how it is actually shaped. Kirsten Hackenbroch identifies religious, gender, and class discrimination as issues that influence access to and movement in public space in Dhaka.⁵⁸³ Similar rules pertain to many public institutions in Dhaka and in Kathmandu. The frequency of guards and security checks for instance is if not physically at least visually deterring. Further, access to art spaces often presupposes knowledge—about what a specific institution does, how it operates and what it offers. Not knowing—or, in Bourdieu’s terms, not having the right cultural capital at your disposal, can be an incommensurable barrier.⁵⁸⁴—But the discrepancy between private and public art infrastructure is not only about accessibility. For my discussion, I grouped the institutions according to the way they were founded, which allows me to analyze the scale on which they operate: Were they initiated by the state or from within the art field? Are they running on public or private funding? Are they part of a government structure or are they privately organized? Depending on their affiliation and targeted scale of operation, they cater to different audiences, have access to different networks, pursue different missions, and represent different values. Their relationship with the artist collectives is contingent on these positionings.

Within the nationally circumscribed field, the most notable public institutions are the national academies. The Bangladesh National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts (commonly known as Shilpakala) or the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) act as intermediators between the government and the countries’ art scene. They represent government policy in the nationally framed art field and foster bilateral international exchange. In Dhaka and Kathmandu they are mostly known for their ample exhibition and function spaces. In 1965, crown prince Birendra founded the Nepal Association of Fine Arts, which was later replaced by NAFA and divided into six departments: painting, traditional arts, sculpture, folk art, handicrafts, and architecture and other creative arts. It operates through several chapters throughout the country and its most salient activity is the annual *National Exhibition*. Shilpakala in Bangladesh was established by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1974. Like NAFA, it has several chapters throughout the country and is administratively divided into six departments: drama and film; fine arts and photography; training; research and publication; production;

582 Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 282.

583 Kirsten Hackenbroch, *The Spatiality of Livelihoods: Negotiations of Access to Public Space in Dhaka, Bangladesh* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2013).

584 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, xxiv–xxvi.

and music, dance, and recitation. It also organizes a yearly *National Exhibition*.⁵⁸⁵ Since 1981, its flagship project is the *Asian Art Biennale*.⁵⁸⁶

The private initiatives often follow one *modus operandi*: they are characterized by their multi-functionality, offering exhibition spaces, training opportunities, and discursive programs, such as artist talks. This diversification is a direct result of the way they came into being. They are almost exclusively initiatives of one (socio-politically or economically affluent) individual based on a need identified from within the field (e.g., a lack of exhibition spaces). By working in the field, these individuals gradually identify more needs and based on available funding add building blocks to their initiatives. Today, institutions like the Siddhartha Art Foundation (and gallery) and the Bengal Art Foundation (and galleries) foster the development of the arts by organizing or supporting festivals, offering exhibition space, facilitating workshops, and establishing contact to collectors and buyers worldwide. Especially the translocal mobility and networking of their personnel keeps them updated on developments, trends, and needs on the local and global scales of the art field, and allows them to tailor their activities in response to these needs. While the foundations react in a top-down approach, the artist collectives proactively instigate experimental formats and debates. Therefore, they often act as a kind of spurring factor for the more established infrastructure.

585 In the amendment to the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy Act (1989), "photography" is named as a separate department within the Academy. In the catalog of the 2014 *Asian Art Biennale*, Shilpakala Director Liaquat Ali Lucky mentions the addition of a "photography" section to the "fine art" department. Nevertheless, photography is not mentioned as a medium in the artworks for the *Biennale*. Based on my observations, photography has (if at all) only received marginal attention within the overall activities of the academy. 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.htm>; Liaquat Lucky Ali, "Message," in *Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh 2014*, ed. National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts (Dhaka: National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts 2014).

586 Interestingly the organization of the first Biennale also goes back to the private initiative of an artist, Syed Jahangir. In her essay for *post*, an online resource of The Museum of Modern Art, DAS curator Diana Campbell Betancourt retraces how Jahangir made use of his worldwide network of artists (including Lain Singh Bangdel from Nepal) to establish Asia's first biennale in Dhaka. Diana Campbell Betancourt, "Entry Points: Reconsidering the Asian Art Biennale with Syed Jahangir," *post*, May 25, 2017, accessed June 19, 2021, http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/992-entry-points-reconsidering-the-asian-art-biennale-with-syed-jahangir.

Interlude:

"We have artists, but we don't have the other factors"

INTERLOCUTOR I⁵⁸⁷

We have artists, but we don't have the other factors that play a role. ... We try to do a lot of programs here with our own resources. It is time to be more engaged in that kind of activities. ... A supporting system for that kind of engagement. If you look at what is happening around, it is not just artists, there are curators, as a profession. There are other [roles], managers, art managers, art writers ... many different components have evolved: exhibitors, galleries, curators, managers, promoters, dealers, collectors, art historians, art educators. ... this is the Western system Does Nepal need that kind of a system? I don't know. If it were not necessary, then why did the galleries come into existence? Why is the art education there? So, with the art education there, the art student comes in, when the art student come in, they need to place an exhibit, and when you exhibit you need an audience, and when the audience is there. Maybe that is an organic kind of a—nobody is making the system, it just evolves, probably in the West also. Artists are there, then artists need to—it is probably a system that comes in a very organic way.⁵⁸⁸

INTERLOCUTOR II

They try to change the scenario of the Nepali art. And now they are driving Nepali art into another world. These are the artists, they are talented. They are not only good painters, they are talented. They can organize a program. They write. They have formed very good groups. They go frequently outside of Kathmandu also. Academy has to think seriously and realize that fact. ... they are doing nothing for this generation. The Academy ... should give good opportunity to these artists.⁵⁸⁹

INTERLOCUTOR III

Art has always been isolated. Only artists talk about art and those who are talking are also very few in number. I think, more than about performance, contemporary or modern, it is more about how art in Nepal should be exposed to the public. It is more about that. ... When I say public, I don't mean to pull a pedestrian out there and explain to him what I am doing. I am not saying

587 The quotes stem from interviews with four different actors working in or with mediating institutions in Kathmandu and Dhaka. I do not specify their position in these institutions because, firstly, it would compromise their anonymity, and secondly, like most actors I worked with, they have occupied more than one position. They are (or were at one point or another) artists, gallery managers, art writers, promoters, and educators.

588 AR, A, 2014.

589 AR, A, 2014.

*that. What I am saying is, art is isolated and that is the only reason why we are having this kind of argument we are having.*⁵⁹⁰

INTERLOCUTOR IV

*[W]e thought we wanted to step in to create a certain kind of conventional gallery scenario, where there is a right environment for showing. ... That's how the gallery was set up. The focus was on the space and lighting, which until then no one had given much importance. ... And then how to document the work that we were doing. Because there wasn't the tradition of art writing or documenting exhibitions very well. ... And also gradually, something we felt in the early days, was that it was really underpriced in Bangladesh. Compared to what was happening in India and in the region, whereas the artists may have had started off from the same education institution, from the same studios, training under the same teachers, but their careers had very different trajectories because of forty-seven and then seventy-one and all of that.*⁵⁹¹

CONCEPTUALIZING THE FIELD OF CONTEMPORARY ART PRODUCTION

The quotes from this Interlude serve as the main frame of reference for my discussion of the mediating institutions. Although they contain information about whether they pertain to the specific context of Bangladesh or Nepal, I discuss them as a set. This emphasizes the interconnectedness and commonalities of the key issues these quotes raise.

First, all the quotes contain a conscious idea of a field of art that encompasses elements considered supportive to the artistic practice, such as related professions, spaces, and institutions.

Second, there is at the same time a conception of this field as “isolated”—as autonomously centered on artists. Interlocutor III sees the reason for this in the fact that the majority of people involved in the artistic field are themselves practicing artists. Because there is little exchange with the public, the ongoing discourses in relation to the features, aims, and boundaries of contemporary art risk being repetitive and redundant.

Third, this sense of isolation also pertains to the institutional landscape: the most supportive activities in the art field, as Interlocutor I comments, are based on the resources and efforts of individual artists or groups. On the one hand, this indicates an absence of patrons, mediators, and supporters, and thus inherently also finds fault with the infrastructure that does exist—particularly the national academies; they do not do what my research partners expect them to do. On the other hand, it points to the fact that the talent of contemporary artists is no longer believed to solely reside in the skilled mastery of a specific medium (i.e., being a painter). It is also located in the artists' mobility, their skill to organize programs, and

590 AR, A, 2014.

591 AR, A, 2015.

to write —that is, to connect to audiences beyond the field. This is specifically tied to the contemporary situation ("it is time," "change," "now").

Fourth, one artistic field is often seen in relation to other artistic fields. The interlocutors compare Kathmandu and Dhaka to the West and to India. In comparison, their fields are conceived as falling short; Nepal and Bangladesh do not have a differentiated system comprising mediators, promoters, managers, dealers, writers, and educators to support the artists. The establishment of education institutions entailed, however, as Interlocutor I believes, a chain of such infrastructural needs. Education generates artists. These artists need a place to exhibit, and exhibitions need to be organized and mediated to audiences, buyers, dealers, and collectors. The system described by my interview partners is both labored and organic; it is determined by fields on other scales. Thereby especially India (on a regional scale) and the West (on a global scale) are perceived as dominating. Yet, at the same time the field is imagined as natural (and thus inevitable) as the result of growing interconnections. My interlocutors' comparative approach further indicates that the national governments continue to be seen as bearing the responsibility for infrastructural development. Education and mediation institutions are in turn subject to political and economic developments. Interlocutor IV uses the specific example of Zainul Abedin's Kolkata group to argue that artists' paths largely depend on reliable infrastructure. At the same time, the artists are recognized as important actors in providing infrastructural services. Next to individual endeavors, the format of the collective is directly mentioned in the second quote. It is positively connoted as a sign of the artists' growing agency and outreach. In the following, I unfold the collectives' multi-positionality in this field. I argue that they take on the role of connecting agents, as platforms for like-minded artists. Moreover, their activities provoke reflections about disciplinary and social boundaries that cause energizing frictions in the artistic field. This is the reason I comprehend them as a spurring factor.

In his writings on the "field of cultural production," Bourdieu elaborates that the production of artworks includes both a material and a symbolic production, and that the reality of the artwork is contingent upon the beholder or consumer's knowledge to recognize its value as such.⁵⁹² The production of "consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the works of art" is realized by a set of agents involved in the symbolic production of artworks, and here Bourdieu explicitly mentions critics and gallery directors.⁵⁹³ He then differentiates three types of consumers: fellow art producers, the elite or dominant class, and the "popular" or ordinary consumers.⁵⁹⁴ I began my analysis of the nationally circumscribed fields of art in South Asia at the center of a gradual shift that started during the

592 Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 35.

593 Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 37.

594 Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 50–51.

British colonial rule and continues until today. This shift pertains to the circumscription of art practice from an enclosed, private field, preserved through family legacy and elite patronage to a more broadly accessible field, located almost exclusively within public institutions until the 1990s. The early art field was firmly controlled by the existing socio-cultural structures and the financial flows ran along the power hierarchies, through the patronage of religious and political elites (often in close relation to the British) to the artists in their service. The elites were the main consumers of art, and they became the main providers of access to education. The public education institutions that existed, such as Juddhakala Pathshala in Kathmandu or the Government School of Art in Kolkata, reflected this investment.⁵⁹⁵ With the abolition of the Ranas in Nepal and the Partition of India in 1947, the control of the infrastructure was taken over by the new national governments. In terms of art consumption, however, a vacuum arose. The popular masses have not been recognized as consumers of art by many of its contemporary producers. The absence of art in public education in Nepal, the century-old almost exclusive relation between art and religion, as well as the association of art production with lower castes are possible reasons for the ordinary consumers' reluctance to recognize the value of (secular) art. In Bangladesh, my interlocutors suggested the emphasis of non-figurative art within the majorly Muslim population, as well as the outmigration of the educated and affluent strata (to India or Pakistan in 1947 and 1971, and after that, to the US, the UK, Singapore, or Bangkok) as possible explanations. The only type of consumer that remains, as the third quote from the Interlude suggests, are the producers of art themselves: "We have artists, but we don't have the other factors." The economic boom in Bangladesh and rising spending power of the urban middle classes in Nepal (notably driven by the large share of remittances in Nepal's GDP),⁵⁹⁶ have brought new consumers to the forefront.⁵⁹⁷ Many artists hope that the increased spending power of the middle classes will go hand in hand with a growing interest in secular art. These shifts could have a great impact on the artistic field. So far, there is little to no qualitative research on the economic power of the middle classes in Nepal and Bangladesh that would allow me to form a stronger argument here. Instead, I focus on the artists' proactive attempts to connect to potential consumers of their artworks by working with the existing

595 Both schools were established by the socio-political elites and literally bore the name of their patrons. Juddhakala Pathshala was established by Prime Minister Juddha Shumsher at the beginning of the 1940s. The Government School of Art was renamed after the government took over control of the hitherto private industrial school in 1864. Chitrakar, *Tej Bahadur Chitrakar*, 40; Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 143.

596 Silesh Tiwari, *Moving Up the Ladder: Poverty Reduction and Social Mobility in Nepal: Overview* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, 2016), 14, accessed September 17, 2018, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/171641467117954924/>.

597 Liechty, *Out Here in Kathmandu*.

mediating infrastructure and, increasingly, by themselves initiating formats that allow for this connection.

While the education institutions, similar to the family legacies and elites in earlier times, provide artists with the necessary knowledge to recognize the value of art, artists largely perceive the agents that could generate a symbolic production of art within the wider public today (galleries, curators, art writers) to be lacking or absent. This is evident from the quotes in the Interlude: "We have artists, but we don't have the other factors"; while my interlocutors affirm the ongoing material production of art by the artists, they refer to the agents or infrastructure involved in the symbolic production of art in India and in the "West" as absent or inadequate in their own field. The last quote mentions the absence of the market and a proper gallery system explicitly. The first quote emphasizes that there are practicing artists, but the "other factors that play a role" are missing. The second interviewee focuses on the insufficiency of the existing institutions, and the third deplors the lack of mediation to bring art to the wider public.

Early signs of contemporary artists venturing into mediation are visible in the initiatives of the artists who returned from studies abroad in the 1960s and 1970s. The artists' engagement with mediation became more prominent in the twenty years that followed, with the establishment of the national academies and the first galleries. While artists played a big role in establishing and shaping the national academies, the initiative and the conditions often came from the state. The galleries on the other hand were mostly initiatives by individual artists from within the field attempting to connect it to the outside, either by growing audiences or by establishing connections to buyers and collectors abroad. The artist collectives that formed in the 1990s are the driving force behind the current infrastructural renegotiations in the field. Sutra, Britto, Drik, and PC emphasize the symbolic production of art and actively focus on overcoming the boundaries that have dominated the field. They draw socio-cultural and political issues into the field by making them the topic of their work. Moreover, they proactively seek to change these fields through their activities. In Bourdieu's terms, they actively challenge what they perceive as the autonomous position of the field of art.⁵⁹⁸

Mediation and thus also the circumscription of what contemporary art is grows from a tension between these different actors active in the field: public, private, collective, and artist-led. This is a tension more than a clear-cut distinctness, as the field is modest and thus dependent on dynamic

598 This is based on Bourdieu's argument of the field of cultural production as the site of a double hierarchy. In this argument, the field's existence hinges on the balance between a heteronomous (as completely subject to external laws of economic and political profit) and an autonomous (as completely autonomous from these laws) principle of hierarchization. In my case, the quotes from the Interlude, in particular "We have artists, but we don't have the other factors," suggest that the field of art in Nepal and Bangladesh is considered disproportionately autonomous, i.e., disconnected from other fields. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 38.

positionings. The majority of actors are involved with multiple institutions over the course of their career, often simultaneously. Further, as I stated above, the difference between public and private is often not clear-cut. In relation to access, public institutions suggest an openness to diverse users.⁵⁹⁹ But access to public space, especially in Dhaka, is shaped by religious, gender, and class belonging as well as being contingent on cultural and social capital.⁶⁰⁰ Ownership, control, funding, and censorship are other important factors in the private–public dichotomy. However, neither the financial substructure, nor the rules of access, allow me to fully circumscribe the institutions I encountered. Consider for instance the Siddhartha Art Gallery, which is located at Babar Mahal Revisited in Kathmandu. The former private Rana residence was converted into a high-end shopping complex. Technically, the locality corresponds to a public space, accessible to all those interested in spending money. Yet the security guards at the entrance, as well as the expensive-looking stores and restaurants, emit a rather distinct message about the type of consumers that are (un)welcome. Furthermore, the Siddhartha Art Gallery itself was established from a private initiative. It is run by its founder Sangeeta Thapa, but is located in a rented space. Because the private–public distinction does not offer additional analytical value, I propose to look at the institutions through their (intended) scope of action. Which connections do they establish for themselves and for other actors in the field? Are they reacting to needs from within or outside the artistic field?

INDIVIDUAL EFFORTS FROM WITHIN THE FIELD OF ART

J.J. School of Art graduate Rama Nanda Joshi established Park Gallery in the 1970s as a way to break with both the then current abstract painting and the static understanding of art promoted at Juddhakala Pathshala. Rather than the practice of still lifes and the copying of old masters common in the classrooms, Joshi advocated for watercolor painting *en plein air*. His son Navin Joshi explains that Joshi started to develop his own curriculum, “but that did not get implemented from the art institutions and the government.”⁶⁰¹ As a result, Joshi began by teaching art students from his private room at New Road in central Kathmandu. From there, his initiative slowly expanded; “finally he ended up initiating the Park Gallery. He probably realized it is not just the education, there is a need for an exhibition space as well.”⁶⁰² Joshi’s strategy is reminiscent of many origin stories I listened to during my research. In the majority of these stories, two elements recur: first, the initiators are driven by a specific need that they discovered through their own presence in the field. Often, this need arises because

599 Zukin, *Naked City*, 282.

600 Hackenbroch, *Spatiality of Livelihoods*.

601 AR, NJP/NJ, May 2014.

602 AR, NJP/NJ, May 2014.

the institutions that the initiators believe are necessary for the development of the art field are either absent or lacking. Second, the establishment follows a slow-paced process, based on the subsequent addition of separate building blocks. My research partners often mention these blocks in direct relation to the availability of economic resources, knowledge, and manpower.

Shahidul Alam started Drik by setting up a darkroom and a studio. To this, he gradually added other elements: first a gallery and a library, then the Pathshala South Asia Media Institute, the Majority World agency, and *Chobi Mela (CM)*. Every single component grew from a need within the field and was based on the availability of the necessary capital. The Drik gallery grew from the fact that both private and state-owned art galleries in Dhaka did not provide exhibition space for photography. When denying photographers their space, they argued that "photography is not art" (i.e., photography is not part of the Charukala's curriculum) or that the political nature of documentary photography often causes censorship issues that they do not want to trouble themselves with.⁶⁰³ Both Park Gallery and Drik Gallery grew from their private initiator's objective to transgress existing boundaries of technique (such as Joshi's focus on still-life painting) or of medium (such as Alam's wish to create a space for photography) and directly targeted the artists practicing in the field.

In our interview, Sangeeta Thapa, the founder of Siddhartha Art Gallery, explains that she discontinued her studies in art, mass communication, and anthropology to return to Nepal to follow her family responsibilities. After getting married and settling in Kathmandu, she wanted to be involved in the art field. Together with artist Shashikala Tiwari, she opened a small gallery in Kantipath (1987). Her main incentive stemmed from the observation of what she calls an "*afno manche* culture" in Nepal. "That means 'my person,' 'my group,' 'my coach.'" ⁶⁰⁴ She elaborates that this culture causes artists to be selected for exhibitions as a result of favoritism and sycophancy, rather than because of the quality of their works. In contrast to this culture, Thapa wanted to open a gallery that shows "the best," a gallery that could give opportunities to artists based on their creative, not their social, merit, she explains.⁶⁰⁵ Like the previous examples, her initiative did not conclude with the establishment of the gallery. Over the past two decades, Thapa's initiative has grown into the Siddhartha Art Foundation which operates on many scales, from organizing the *Kathmandu Triennale* (formerly *Kathmandu International Art Festival*) to managing an education initiative for young artists.

Private initiatives like Sangeeta Thapa's from within the art field are not limited to spaces for exhibition and advanced training. They also include art writing. In the broadest sense, art writing includes any kind of writing

603 AR, SA, September 2015.

604 AR, ST, August 2013.

605 AR, ST, August 2013.

about art, most notably art or exhibition critiques, but also catalog texts, artist statements, curatorial notes, biographical accounts, and research into the local and regional art history. Together, these written formats contribute to the discursive or symbolic production of art. I briefly mentioned the personal endeavors of artists Madan Chitrakar, Mukesh Malla, and Saroj Bajracharya in compiling information about the art field in Nepal. In his book on *Nepali Art*, Chitrakar explains that in his opinion, only people possessing the knowledge of the “workings” and “basic fundamentals” of art (i.e., the necessary cultural capital) are able to “interpret” and “demystify” it; as an artist, he feels he possesses this knowledge.⁶⁰⁶ From personal conversations with Chitrakar, I know that this assertion contains a critique of the current writing on art. His point is that the short articles and exhibition reviews in the daily newspapers often exhibit a rather superficial knowledge of cultural production. They describe works by quoting artist statements, but do not offer commentary, critique, or interpretation. Despite their wide readership, they do not make the values and norms of art accessible to outsiders of the field. In our interview Chitrakar concludes that “in Nepal, forget about writing in English. There is even a lack of good writers in Nepali.”⁶⁰⁷ When he travelled to Bangladesh for the *Asian Art Biennale*, he was fascinated by the amount of art writing in Bangladesh: “When I saw that—as a writer I was shocked to see that so many books, publications about art. ... You can see writers over writers over there.”⁶⁰⁸

The Bangladeshi art field has been comparatively well researched and documented. However, to a large extent, the available Bengali and English publications pertain to the modern masters, who like Zainul Abedin or Quamrul Hassan were born in the first half of the twentieth century.⁶⁰⁹ The only available written sources about artists working after the 1990s are exhibition catalogs. Two important exceptions are *Jamini*, the first international arts quarterly in Bangladesh, in print since 2003–2004 (less regularly

606 Chitrakar, *Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany*, vii.

607 AR, MC, September 2013.

608 After his studies at the Sir J.J. Institute of Applied Art (Mumbai), Madan Chitrakar pursued a masters of ancient history and culture at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu. He then worked for several ministries, including the Ministry of Tourism in Nepal (1974–1999). This capacity, as well as his post as chairman of the Artists Society of Nepal (1992–1998), allowed him to travel internationally. He elaborated for instance that during his visit to the *Asian Art Biennale* in Bangladesh in 1995, he met Lipi and Rahman and invited them to Nepal to take part in an exhibition at the Ministry of Tourism. AR, MC, September 2013.

609 Shilpakala Academy has published sixty-seven books (listed up to 2009) on the topic of art, including an “Art of Bangladesh Series” on the Bengali masters, a “Contemporary Art Series” on artists born in the first half of the twentieth century, and the catalogs of the *Asian Art Biennale*. Shilpakala’s publications can be found in the comprehensive inventory list of its library: “List of Books Collected at Library,” Shilpakala Academy, updated March 3, 2020, accessed June 26, 2022, <http://shilpakala.gov.bd/site/publications/8ae56f24-018b-44ec-a9a6-bd2530b6fa42/>-. The Bengal Foundation also produced several books on the “Great Masters of Bangladesh,” however their overall publishing focus is on poetry and history. “Home,” Bengal Publications, accessed February 15, 2021, <http://www.bengalpublications.com/>.

after 2009) by the Bengal Foundation, and *Depart*, a biannual magazine on contemporary art, in print since 2009.⁶¹⁰ When I meet Mustafa Zaman, a graduate of Charukola and the editor of *Depart*, his assessment emulates and at the same time contradicts Chitrakar's perspective:

The reason I turned to art writing was because of the dearth of art writers in Dhaka. So I started out as a Bangla writer at first and then I realized that no, we need to broaden the horizon. Because people from outside need to acknowledge what is going on in Dhaka art scene.⁶¹¹

Both writers share a critical view of their fields and of written engagement with art. While Chitrakar admires the amount of publications in Bangladesh, Zaman perceives a "dearth" of writers in his country. The perception of this "lack" of art writing pushed both artists to venture from the production of art, the "artmaking" as David Carrier calls it,⁶¹² to contribute to the symbolic production through writing.

These initiatives are primarily driven by the pressing lacks that individuals have identified while working in the field: Rama Nanda Joshi called for a dynamic and immediate engagement with nature through watercolor and outdoor painting; Alam intended to create a space for contemporary photography in the field of art production in Bangladesh; and Sangeeta Thapa aimed to raise the value of cultural capital above that of social capital. Underlying these strategies is the will to connect to audiences, to open the artistic field to outsiders, and thus broaden the reach of the artists and their work. The initial focus is often rather small (art students, photographers), but gradually grows from there. Both Alam and Thapa started from a small studio/exhibition space and now host international art festivals: *CM* and the *Kathmandu Triennale*. This tendency to expand, to change their positions within the field, and to create platforms for others to change also pertains to the art writers. As Zaman explains, while writing in Bengali allowed him to critically mediate between contemporary art and the public in Bangladesh, writing in English allowed him to reach a broader readership, outside the regional frame. This scope of action is furthered by the online publication of the articles in the magazine. Media or vehicles of information transmission, such as the English language and digital media, play an important role in mediating art to larger publics. I will discuss these in detail in the last chapter.

610 Both English-speaking magazines have ceased regular publication at the time of the publication of this book. *Jamini* used to be accessible online, but the site is no longer active. The Bengal Foundation still lists it among its publications: "Jamini," Bengal Foundation, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://bengal.foundation.org/jamini/>. Although *Depart* is no longer published, old issues can be accessed through the homepage: "Home," *Depart*, accessed April 25, 2022, <http://www.departmag.com/index.php/en>.

611 AR, MZ, September 2015.

612 Carrier, *Artwriting*, 79.

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS AND THE (INTER)NATIONAL SCALE

On the surface, the public art infrastructure in Nepal and Bangladesh is not very sizeable. Moreover, it is not able to fulfill my research partners' expectations of economic and cultural support: it does not establish access to the art market or provide research on local art history, for instance. In fact, there are quite a few public institutions: During my research in Nepal, I visited the National Museum in Chhauni,⁶¹³ the Patan Museum, the National Art Gallery in Bhaktapur, and the Hanuman Dhoka Palace Museum. In Bangladesh, I visited the National Museum in Dhaka and the Varendra Research Museum in Rajshahi. While these institutions attract a large number of visitors, they play only a marginal role in the contemporary artists' creative practices. There is a general acknowledgement of their existence, but to my observation, artists do not further engage with them, presumably because they are perceived as passive repositories of culture rather than as potential actors in the field. A recent exception is the Patan Museum, which became a partner for PC during the 2015 *Photo Kathmandu (PKTM)* festival. This collaboration will be subject to a closer analysis in chapter five.

The public institutions that the contemporary artists engage with on a regular basis are the national academies. The national academies serve as an interesting case study, as their operating structure is unique to South Asia. In the European context, academies have been associated with the purpose of teaching since the sixteenth century.⁶¹⁴ Neither NAFA nor Shilpakala ever included a teaching component. Instead, the academy's role in South Asia is honorific, administrative, and mediative, as the chancellor of NAFA explains.⁶¹⁵ In 2013, the main body of NAFA was located in Naxal (Kathmandu). It was housed at Sita Mahal, one of the few remaining Rana palaces in the Kathmandu valley, and built under Bhim Shumshere Jung Bahadur Rana, Prime Minister of Nepal from 1929–1932. In 1965, then Crown Prince Birendra, himself an artist, donated one part of the former palace to the artists of Nepal and set the foundation stone of the Nepal Association of Fine Arts with artist Lain Singh Bangdel as its first treasurer. The association's main agenda was to organize a yearly, national art exhibition. When Birendra became king in 1972 "problems started," as one of my interviewees noted.⁶¹⁶ They allude to the fact that the art association was subordinated to the literature wing of the Royal Nepal Academy

613 On the National Museum in Chhauni, see fn. 469.

614 The first *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* was founded in Paris in 1648 and the format has subsequently spread through many countries around the globe. The institution lost its importance over time, especially since the establishment of alternative art education institutions in the mid-twentieth century. Nevertheless, its teaching methods, canons, and curricula often remain valid until today. Humphrey Wine, "Academy," in *The Dictionary of Art*, vol. 1, ed. Jane Turner (New York: Grove, 1996).

615 AR, RU, December 2015.

616 AR, A, 2016.

resulting in economic disadvantages and land ownership disputes. Only in 2010 did the government grant a long-running demand by the Nepali artists for an independent Academy; the Nepal Association of Fine Arts was replaced by NAFA, housed on the disputed land of Sita Bhawan.⁶¹⁷ As mentioned in the introduction, its most popular activity is the *National Exhibition*, which accepts entries from all over the country along the categories represented by the different departments: Folk Art, Handicraft, Painting (which includes the categories contemporary and traditional painting), Sculpture (which includes the categories contemporary and traditional sculpture), and finally, Architecture, and Other Creative Arts (which includes the categories installation, performance art, and photography).⁶¹⁸ Unfortunately, the building was severely damaged in the earthquake in April 2015 and deemed unsafe to enter. The administrative body of NAFA continues to exist without a permanent building, but the government organization did not restart its cultural programming in Kathmandu until the end of my fieldwork period. My observations thus largely refer to the time prior to the earthquake. The Shilpakala Academy is NAFA's counterpart and, by a Memorandum of Understanding signed on June 21, 2016, also its government-level partner-institution in Bangladesh.⁶¹⁹ Shilpakala is Bangladesh's official, state-sponsored cultural center, established by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and run under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. It is currently located in a vast multi-building complex (including a theater hall, art gallery, conference rooms, and auditoriums) at Segunbagicha in central Dhaka. Like NAFA, it organizes a yearly *National Exhibition*, and since 1981 it also organizes the *Asian Art Biennale*.⁶²⁰

In my interviews, assessments of the academies, such as that of Interlocutor II, most often point to a disconnect between the needs and values of the emerging contemporary artists and the programs organized by the academies: "they are doing nothing for this generation."⁶²¹ On a general level, the academies' activities and outcome are perceived as too limited, inflexible, and static. This is primarily a reflection of their physical constancy, i.e., the monumental buildings they have occupied consistently, and their bureaucratic and administrative political structure, which often

617 AR, A, 2015.

618 Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, ed., *4th National Exhibition of Fine Arts 2014* (Kathmandu: Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, 2014).

619 "Nepal, Bangladesh Sign MoU on Cooperation in Fields of Arts and Culture," *The Kathmandu Post*, June 21, 2016, accessed June 21, 2021, <http://kathmandu.post.ekantipur.com/news/2016-06-21/nepal-bangladesh-sign-mou-on-cooperation-in-fields-of-arts-and-culture.html>.

620 Interestingly the organization of the first Biennale also goes back to the private initiative of an artist, Syed Jahangir. In her essay for *post*, an online resource of The Museum of Modern Art, *Dhaka Art Summit* curator Diana Campbell Betancourt retraces how Syed Jahangir made use of his worldwide network of artists (including Lain Sigh Bangdel from Nepal) to establish Asia's first Biennale in Dhaka. Betancourt, "Entry Points."

621 AR, A, 2014.

causes protracted negotiations running through several hierarchically organized levels.

It is like this, the people who are actually in the government sector, representing from the art, they are not updated. They don't know how art is functioning. And how art should function.⁶²²

Within Bangladesh, opportunities for experimentation and innovation are rather limited. We do not have enough information about international contemporary art practices. While our Government Academy is doing its best to provide a forum for the artists, it is limited in its resources and ideas and is unable to cater to the more experimental demands of younger generation artists.⁶²³

These statements—the latter taken from a catalog of the first Britto International Artists' Workshop in 2003—emulate the general critique of the academies as being too limited and too static. But they also introduce more concrete issues. First, they ascertain the academies' lack of knowledge about, or their failure to accurately deal with, changes in the art field on scales other than the national; that is, they are not updated. My research partners often use the example of new mediums to make this point. Within the organizational structure of NAFA and during the national exhibitions for instance, new mediums are shuffled together and subsumed under the header "Architecture and Other Creative Arts."⁶²⁴ Similar to the situation in the fine arts institutes, this inclusion shows that new mediums have been recognized as part of the contemporary art practice, but in comparison to painting and sculpture—which warrant their own contemporary and traditional departments—they are marginalized within the overall program. Another issue is insecurity over the circumscriptions of new mediums. One artist for instance recounts a comment by one of the judges at the national competition: This judge did not consider their submitted installation a "proper" installation, because it incorporated readymade parts. In the end, the work was exhibited, but its status as an installation remained in question.⁶²⁵ Another artist explains that when submitting photography-based works to the *Asian Art Biennale*, one needs to "bypass the

622 AR, A, 2014.

623 Tayeba Begum Lipi, "Preface," in *Britto International Artist's Workshop 2003*, ed. Britto Arts Trust (Dhaka: Britto Arts Trust, 2004), 3.

624 During the 2014 national exhibition at NAFA, the display was composed of folk art, traditional art, and handicrafts (together 133 works, 206 in 2015) on the second floor, contemporary painting (216 works), contemporary sculpture (twenty-five works, forty-two in 2015), traditional sculpture (eleven works, thirty in 2015), architecture (eight works, two in 2015), and other creative art, including installations, photography, short videos, and performance art (thirty-nine works, thirty-eight in 2015) on the third floor. Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, *4th National Exhibition of Fine Arts 2014*.

625 AR, A, 2016.

system." Despite Shilpakala's claim to have a photography department, "photography" is not among the mediums available for selection on the submission form; artists working in the medium need to get creative and "check other boxes."⁶²⁶

Another issue that often warrants criticism is the low quality of Shilpakala's display designs, especially during the national exhibitions and the *Asian Art Biennale*. Artists comment on the lack of proper curation—often as a result of alleged sycophancy—reflected both in a poor selection of artworks and in the absence of a coherent presentation concept. This also sets the Academy's exhibitions apart from privately initiated events, such as the *DAS* and the *CM*, which happen in the same premises. The political affiliation of the institutions and their personnel are considered another reason for the current situation: several of my research partners made allegations of favoritism, sycophancy, and the misappropriation of public funds.

Underlying many of these points is an asymmetry between cultural and social capital: My research partners have gained cultural and social capital by engaging in the art field—studying, graduating, continuously working on their art, and going to art events. Many of them observe that the positions within government institutions, however, are filled based on social capital alone; not only do the representatives of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and the Shilpakala Academy lack the cultural capital, knowledge, and values that the artists consider central to the field of contemporary art production, but they also were appointed based on their economic or political affiliations, rather than their connections to the artistic field. According to the artists, this explains why many of the state-based policies and programs do not reflect the actual needs in the field of art. Intertwined with this is the question of authority: Who gets to define (by setting the curriculums, by determining canons through control of research and publications), judge (in national exhibitions), and propagate (through programming) what contemporary art is? And which scale is targeted by these strategies?

The national academies, by name, consider and thus operate on a specifically national scale. The foundation of the art academies is rooted in the consolidation of the national governments of Nepal and Bangladesh; it represents their attempt to structure and leave their mark on the field of art. In Nepal, NAFA's predecessor, the Association of Fine Arts, was founded in 1965, only three years after the establishment of the Panchayat system, which affirmed the monarchy's absolute control. The idea of an association that circumscribes all practicing artists in Nepal matches the nationalist ideology of "one country—one culture" promoted by the Panchayat.⁶²⁷

626 AR, A, 2015.

627 The Panchayat promoted a homogenous collective national identity, based on the Hindu religion, the Hindu monarchy, and the Nepali language under the motto *Ek bhāsā, ek bhes, ek des* (one language, one form of dress, one country).

Further, it indicates the benevolent but regulating power of the monarchy: Crown Prince Birendra was the chairman of the organization and an avid supporter of the arts. In 1977, the association was brought under the direct administration of the Royal Nepal Academy. NAFA is present in various districts of Nepal and the *National Exhibition* includes artists from all over the country. At the same time, the academy's controlling organs (the council and assembly) reflect the prevailing socio-cultural and political dominance of urban high-caste and Newar actors.

The Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy was established three years after the country's independence by Mujibur Rahman. Rahman is often referred to as "father of the nation"—a narrative popularly promoted by the Awami League party, the current leader of which is none other than his daughter, Sheikh Hasina—thus marking his role in bringing about the independence from Pakistan. Shilpakala's primary aim remains "effectuating the uplift, growth and circulation of national culture and practice in accordance with national aspirations, and creating favorable conditions for their uplift."⁶²⁸ The Shilpakala Academy Act exposes how the national aspirations take precedence over cultural production. Although it maintains that Shilpakala's scope of action should go beyond the national—the institution is supposed to "present the country's art to the people" as well as to send "cultural/artistic groups to foreign countries"—it reemphasizes the controlling power of the state: artists may represent the country outside its national borders "with the prior approval of the Government."⁶²⁹ Lotte Hoek situates the governments' exercise of control through the institution of the Shilpakala in a "modernist enterprise" that promotes fast-growing development through innovation and novelty.⁶³⁰ Shilpakala, as part of a larger set of institutions, is "a site set apart for the expression of, and indulgence in, progressive and modernist aesthetics" promoted shortly after Bangladesh's independence.⁶³¹

The National Academy in Nepal promotes a similar rhetoric of modernization:

We are all Nepalese, and we are the artists searching the Nepali identity in our artworks working in the Nepali soil. We had a group to create authentic arts and culture of this country. We are attached to this country, this soil and Nepali art. Thus, let's rise from our own area and let's be united to colour our motherland with arts. Let's

628 Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, "Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy Act XXII," trans. The Heidelberg Bangladesh Law Translation Project, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/workgroups/bdlaw/1989-a22.htm>.

629 Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, "Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy Act XXII."

630 Hoek, "Mofussil Metropolis," 28–30.

631 Hoek, "Mofussil Metropolis," 28–30.

begin from today to make our nation cultured through the light of Nepali art.⁶³²

In this quote from the 2014 *National Exhibition* catalog, the head of the contemporary painting department Shanta Kumar Rai naturalizes the common ancestry and identity of the diverse Nepali people through a set of values expressed in the terms "soil," "authentic," and "motherland." These are combined with words such as "cultured" and "light" emulating ideas of enlightenment and modernity. In addition, he focuses on the artists' shared mission to "color" the nation through art fostered and supported by NAFA. Color is used as a metaphor for recovery and revitalization, and stands in for the rich, diverse, and beautiful culture of Nepal. On the one hand, the intent "to make our nation cultured" bespeaks Nepal's image as "elsewhere."⁶³³ NAFA is aware of this image bolstered by the development industry, scientific lineages, and international media and turns to the national art and culture as a tool to produce a counter-narrative to this image. In order to do so, NAFA reverts to a primordial definition of identity: a nation built by a united superethnos that shares one common and authentic culture. This position becomes even more prominent in the painting department's mission statement, which reflects the Academy's acclaimed scope of action "from Mechi in the east to Mahakali in the West."⁶³⁴ This phrase, as I mentioned before, is the first line from Nepal's new national anthem (2007). It comprises the national territory in a poignant but easily imaginable way. The complexity of the lingual, ethnic, religious, or cultural background of the Nepali population is transferred onto a geographical unity. Under the header of one authentic culture contained within a territorial unity, the idea of artistic diversity becomes a positive, valued characteristic.

Even when the National Academies of Nepal and Bangladesh engage in international exchange, for instance through the organization of SAARC Artist Camps or by handling the selection and transference of works to government-organized events, their operating frame is international, not translocal.⁶³⁵ The operating mode of the *Asian Art Biennale* in Bangladesh offers an example for this:

When other biennales evolved, we failed, our *Asian Art Biennale* failed to evolve in the direction of curation and the other entanglement that come with staging, planning this kind of international

632 Shanta Kumar Rai, "Creation of Historical Artworks in the Nation," in *4th National Exhibition of Fine Arts 2014*, ed. Nepal Academy of Fine Arts (Kathmandu: Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, 2014), 1.

633 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.

634 Kumar Rai, "Creation of Historical Artworks in the Nation," 1.

635 SAARC Artist Camp is an annually held program for artists from the SAARC member countries that has been organized in alternating member countries since 2011 by the SAARC Cultural Center in Colombo, Sri Lanka. "Home," SAARC Cultural Center Sri Lanka, accessed May 5, 2021, <http://saarcculture.org/>.

biennale. We are sort of lagging behind. Now you have biennales in, I mean even in India, you have curators curating those shows. At least a big chunk of it is curated. So here ... it is yet to be introduced. Curation and all the other entanglements that comes along with curation. You need to have gallerist with proper training in displaying the art.⁶³⁶

This quote focuses specifically on Shilpakala's flagship event, the *Asian Art Biennale*. When it was established in 1981, the interviewee elaborates, it offered a unique opportunity for young artists from Bangladesh to exhibit and experience experimental artworks from the region. Rather than building on this momentum however, the *Biennale* slowly began to lag behind subsequently established perennial events. Especially the biennales established in Gwangju (1995), Sharjah (1993), Shanghai (1996), Queensland (*Asia Pacific Triennial*, 1993), and most recently Kochi and Muziris (2012) were and remain important for the South Asian region. In Bangladesh, both the *DAS* and the *CM* have increasingly challenged the relevance of the *Asian Art Biennale*. The development of a system of professional mediators, proper planning, the focus on curation and display are seen as the main reasons for the discrepancy in the events' contemporary relevance by my interlocutors. Their assessment thus mirrors the quotes from the Interlude: "We have artists, but we don't have the other factors," where Interlocutors I and IV observe the development of diversified art worlds in other fields of art, and Interlocutor I uses the Western system as a reference. Interlocutor IV notably compares Bangladesh to its neighbor India, where artists can rely on a well-developed infrastructure. The asymmetry between the two countries goes back to the interconnected history of the art institutions and the political border demarcations in South Asia: Most modern masters in Bangladesh and India trained at the Government School of Art in Kolkata. Therefore, Interlocutor IV contends, they started from the same base. However, their careers took different paths when they decided or were forced to leave India during the Partition in 1947. Pakistan, and especially its eastern wing, as I have shown in the historical overview, did not inherit an art infrastructure that could support its artists. Zainul Abedin and his contemporaries successfully established Charukola, but the institute remained isolated, within and outside the art field.

This issue of isolation resonates with the contemporary generation's assessment of the existing infrastructure: in comparison to other fields of art, Nepal and Bangladesh are not connected, or better yet, not connecting. The symbolic production in which their main public art institutions engage is bound by the national border. At the same time, it very broadly encompasses categories of contemporary, fine, modern, traditional, and folk art, within a primordial narrative pertaining to a monolithic territory-culture entity. Inwardly, the national exhibitions lump together diverse

636 AR, A, 2015.

practices, which, on an administrative level, are kept apart by different departments. Outwardly, exchange happens exclusively on a bilateral level and takes a top-down approach: the national frame is transferred onto the artwork and the artist. Artists are exposed to wider audiences while being clearly marked as Nepali or Bangladeshi. The academies reach a vast public outside the field of art. Additionally, they generate ample media coverage in the country's main newspapers, thus having a powerful impact on the symbolic production of contemporary art. Yet, this mediation is subject to the terms of the cultural work of the state. That includes the risks of tokenization, practices of censorship and exclusion, as well as political endorsement and sycophancy. Exchange only happens within state-sanctioned programs, where the political agenda risks taking precedence over cultural matters. The reason why contemporary artists envision a more professionalized and diversified field is because they believe it would support their activities in breaking with this static, monolithic, and introspective (national) system of symbolic construction. A professionalized system would support their efforts to build translocal relations with other art fields. It would strengthen their agency rather than reducing it to representing a nation's "authentic" culture.

ART FOUNDATIONS AS EMERGING TRANSLOCAL ACTORS

Two types of actors have been trying to offer infrastructural support and opportunities beyond the government scale. The first are the art foundations, which developed from individual energy in the broader field of cultural production, often paired with personal wealth and the will to support artists by catering to their needs. I already introduced the Siddhartha Art Foundation, which grew from Sangeeta Thapa's initiative. In the following, I will focus on the Siddhartha Art Foundation and the Bengal Foundation as two important players in the field. The Samdani Foundation constitutes a separate case study in the next chapter. Therefore, I only mention it briefly before moving on to the second type of actor increasingly engaged in mediation: the artist collective.

In the Bangladeshi art field, the Bengal Foundation has emerged as a powerful player in the past two decades. Initiated by Bangladeshi industrialist and entrepreneur Abul Khair in 1986, it aims to grow, proliferate, and conserve the art and culture of Bangladesh. Since then, the foundation has become an important actor boosting culture through diverse programs, such as the *Bengal Classic Music Festival* (since 2012), the Bengal Cinema Development Forum, or the Aranya Crafts unit, which promotes a revival of natural dyes. Due to Khair's own art collection, the foundation's visual art program, as well as its first gallery (est. 2000, Dhanmondi) centered on modern art from the region. In comparison to the nationally circumscribed state-sponsored institutions, the Bengal Foundation refers to the scale of the region by name. This name is no less deliberate; it evokes notions of the new-old Bengalee identity that pertains both to

a thousand-year-old ethnic identity, unifying people across the region of Bengal, as well as to the tool of middle-class nationalist aspirations under Pakistani rule.⁶³⁷ Over the last fifteen years, the foundation has recognized a need to widen its focus beyond modern art and engage with the emerging contemporary practices. Bengal Foundation's acting director Luva Nahid Choudhury explains that she repeatedly visited the *Venice Biennale* and other art events and realized that "a little bit of guidance was necessary." In her opinion, there was not "enough knowledge about things" due to the lack of critical thought and writing in the field of contemporary art in Bangladesh.⁶³⁸ One attempt to change this situation came through Bengal Foundation's own publication department, which launched the aforementioned *Jamini* magazine. It also supported Britto in producing the catalog for the Bangladesh pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* (2011). Further, there was a realization that "just running a commercial art gallery wasn't going to get you there at all."⁶³⁹ Even the form of the gallery was questioned and a new type of space, "able to cope with the needs [of] contemporary practitioners as opposed to just paintings hanging on the walls," was established in the form of the Bengal Art Lounge in Gulshan, North Dhaka (2011).⁶⁴⁰ From here, other needs arose: "we needed to go out and look for young artists, teach them how to do exhibitions, how to talk about their work, how to articulate their artistic concerns."⁶⁴¹

This history emulates the building-block style of development of private initiatives like Drik or the Park Gallery. Yet, in contrast to these initiatives, the Bengal Foundation reacts to developments and needs in the field of art. It does not proactively initiate new perspectives in the way that artist collectives do. In comparison to the national institutions, however, the foundation has at its disposal private funding, which gives it enough flexibility to react to changes in the field of art more rapidly, be it through the creation of issue or genre related events, or by funding artists' endeavors. Moreover, acting director Luva Nahid Chowdhury and Bengal Art Lounge manager Hadrian Diez proactively gather knowledge, travelling to art events around the world and establishing connections with institutions inside and outside Bangladesh.⁶⁴²

It is especially this network encompassing locally, regionally, and internationally active artists, collectors, buyers, and other influential people that artists value in the Siddhartha Art Gallery's founder Sangeeta Thapa. Like the Bengal Foundation, over time Thapa realized that to be engaged in contemporary art requires more extensive infrastructure than a gallery

637 Rahman, "Shahbagh"; Tripura, "Identity Grabbing."

638 AR, LC, September 2015.

639 AR, LC, September 2015.

640 AR, LC, September 2015. Bengal Foundation opened a third exhibition space, the Daily Star-Bengal Arts Precinct in May 2014. It is located in central Dhaka, at the Daily Star Centre, the seat of the largest English-speaking newspaper in Bangladesh (see chapter five).

641 AR, LC, September 2015.

642 AR, HD, August 2015; AR, LC, September 2015.

alone can offer. She has expanded her activities in order to support the work started through the gallery: In 2007, she and artist Celia Washington co-founded the Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Centre (KCAC), which offers bursaries, residency space, and a reference library to emerging Nepali and foreign artists. In 2009, she organized the first *Kathmandu International Art Festival* and, in order to safeguard its triennial reoccurrence, established the Siddhartha Arts Foundation (SAF) in 2011. Like Bengal Foundation director Choudhury, Thapa saw that contemporary artists needed support beyond the mere availability of exhibition space, and that to expand her support, she needed motivated and skilled people to assist her. In partnership with the Danish Center for Culture and Development (CKU), she started the SAF Education Initiative (SAFEI). This program brings in art professionals from around the world to train future curators and art managers in Kathmandu. Through this type of building-block expansion, both the Bengal Foundation and Siddhartha Foundation have established themselves as crucial actors, not only within, but also in-between the field of arts of Nepal and Bangladesh. While Sangeeta Thapa for instance facilitated the presence of Sunil Sigdel, Hit Man Gurung, and Nhooja Tuladhar at the *DAS* in 2014, the Bengal Foundation organized the exhibition *Upheavals* featuring seven artists from Bangladesh during the *Kathmandu Triennale 2017* in Nepal.

Although the foundations have established themselves as close allies to the contemporary artists, able to cater to their needs much more effectively than the inert national academies, they are not devoid of contestation from the artists. Especially the centralization of very diverse types and roles of infrastructure under the head of one organization (or even a single person) warrants caution against the risk of monopolization: economically, socially, and in terms of symbolic production. One of my interview partners for instance suggested that due to Bengal's monopoly, other galleries could be discouraged from becoming or staying involved in Dhaka's art field.⁶⁴³ Several interviewees explained that running a commercial gallery and simultaneously doing not-for-profit activities does not mix well; it not only confuses consumers as to the motives of the organization, but also hinders the establishment of sustainable artist-gallery-client relations. Further, economic profitability and support are often mutually exclusive. How the foundations deal with new mediums is a good example for this. One artist explains that they did not organize an exhibition for a long time because they "did not find any gallery supporting" their work.⁶⁴⁴ Contemporary mixed-media pieces require substantial funds to produce. At the same time, they are difficult, sometimes impossible, to sell. Therefore, many galleries continue to focus on the classical and commercially viable mediums of painting and, occasionally, sculpture. These mediums are easy to install and do not require any special technical resources (such as projectors, storage space, and running electricity) or maintenance. While the

643 AR, A, 2015.

644 AR, A, 2017.

Bengal and Siddhartha foundations see themselves as close supporters of the contemporary art field, they also need to consider their own economic survival. Of the eleven exhibitions I visited at the Siddhartha Art Gallery during my research, eight were drawing- or painting-based, one focused on sculpture, and only two included installations.⁶⁴⁵ Bengal Art Lounge was established to specifically cater to new artistic formats, like installations, video works or even performances, but Bengal Foundation closed the gallery in 2016, allegedly to concentrate on its non-profit wing. One possible alternative for both foundations and artists is to focus on art events. The artists' reaction to the galleries' limitations vary; some concede to the laws of the market and produce two-dimensional works to earn a living and others focus entirely on project- or event-based work. This also creates new asymmetries between artists who can and those who cannot afford to work only on projects and events. While both Siddhartha Art Foundation and the Bengal Gallery continue to explore diverse formats, even newer actors have entered the contemporary art field. The Samdani Foundation has successfully directed most of its attention to the *DAS*.

COLLECTIVE TRANSCULTURAL BROKERAGE AS A SPURRING FACTOR

The mobility in the art field of the 1960s and 1970s was contingent upon a rather small number of individual artists who possessed the necessary social, cultural, and economic capital to study, exhibit, or participate in programs abroad. The second interlocutor from the Interlude: "We have artists, but we don't have the other factors" explains that the young generation of artists active today go "frequently outside of Kathmandu" and "have formed very good groups."⁶⁴⁶ While the interlocutor does not directly link these two characteristics, I see a correlation between an increasing mobility in the art field and the format of the collective. This mobility does not only pertain to movement in physical space, but also to the transgression of social and cultural boundaries, as well as to the transference of knowledge and expertise. The format of the collective allows artists to build alliances with like-minded artists. These alliances strengthen the agency of the individual artists: together, they can apply for travel or project grants, share economic resources to rent spaces or equipment, mediate access to scholarships, and share knowledge about developments in other art fields. At the same time, the collectives offer space to focus on individual development and practice.

645 The exhibitions that included installations were outside the regular calendar of the gallery. The first was entitled *The Solace of Art* and resulted from a relief donation collected by a group of Bangladeshi artists (including Britto members) after the earthquake in April 2015. This donation allowed young Nepali artists affected by the earthquake to produce artworks, mentored by the Kathmandu Center for Contemporary Art (KCAC) and Bindu—A Space for Artists. The second exhibition was part of 2017 *Kathmandu Triennale*.

646 AR, A, 2014.

The collective is a platform to gather and share knowledge on art historical developments, as well as current trends. Many of the initiatives I have worked with, such as Britto, Sattya, Bindu—A Space for Artists (Bindu), PC, or Drik possess a reference library available to associated artists. Members feed into this repository by donating books they gathered during their travels. In the same line of thought, most collectives regularly organize presentations and talks by visiting artists or by members who participated in programs abroad, to share their experiences with the wider circle. During my summer 2015 fieldwork in Dhaka, Britto organized *Pixelation 4*, the fourth edition of a workshop series on new media art that started in 2012. The main aim of this workshop was to not only inform the local artists about new mediums, but also to share a specific know-how. During the workshop, Shariar Shaon shared his long-time expertise of working as a camera operator, editor, and projectionist. He assisted the participants in handling the multimedia equipment as well as the necessary editing software. I was asked to give a presentation on new media art and share my experiences from different art events in Nepal and Europe. Workshops like this bring together individually acquired knowledge from different perspectives and scales. They connect self-trained experts with amateurs and professionals. They focus on sharing, rather than on providing top-down training, as is generally done in art education institutions. Further, a large part of the workshops is dedicated to material practice and discussions of ideas, and experimentation with different concepts and materials. This dynamic design allows artists to remain informed about what is happening in other fields. In other words, it allows artists to develop their motility in the absence (or the company) of opportunities for physical mobility. Further, it allows them to experiment and thus find innovative, avant-garde ways beyond local medium restrictions.

Moreover, collectives actively draw on issues relevant to the political and socio-cultural field. They often situate their activities and practices within larger social movements, thereby engaging in a dynamic transgression of the artistic field's relatively autonomous structure. The participants of *1mile²* research the socio-economic conditions of inhabitants, the architectural neglect, and the environmental pollution in Old Dhaka. They not only reflect on these issues through their artworks, but proactively offer counter narratives to hegemonic discourses on heritage and preservation. As a whole, *1mile²* responds to the rising fundamentalism in Bangladesh and the monolithic compositions of Bengali identity. Projects such as *KK*, *1mile²*, or *PKTM* engage with socio-political issues relevant to a wider public beyond the art field. They broker these issues back into the art field by making topics like the preservation of heritage, religious persecution, property seizures, or the effects of rapid urbanization relevant for contemporary art production. At the same time, they hope that their artistic engagement will foster a rethinking of the way related policies are being made. They aim for a cross-pollination between different fields.

Inwardly, collectives foster a sense of artistic commonality that is at the same time smaller and bigger than the national frame. On the one hand,

they connect to a specific type of artist: the contemporary artist. This artist engages with new mediums and uncommon techniques. They are curious to learn from and collaborate with traditional and folk artists, but as a way of pushing forward contemporary art rather than as a means of preservation. They push into spaces not commonly perceived as spaces of artistic production, like the city's streets, public squares, or the tight-knit neighborhood, but also question and reflect on the symbolic production and hegemonic portrayal of these different localities. On the other hand, the collective builds on the idea that this type of contemporary artist exists anywhere in the world and that there is knowledge to be gained from fostering exchange. Especially the international workshops started within the framework of the Triangle Arts Trust (Triangle) and subsequently the South Asian Network for the Arts (SANA) actively connected like-minded artists from different socio-cultural and national backgrounds. They promoted the idea of art as a connective force, not on national, primordial grounds, but on shared creative needs, energies, and visions. Britto co-founder Tayeba Begum Lipi accurately sums up this sense of commonality when she describes SANA as a formation that allowed the collective "to do things independently without being alone."⁶⁴⁷ It allows enough freedom for the collectives to be autonomous, but enough connection to feel supported.

The spatial, socio-cultural, and disciplinary mobilities and the resulting transcultural brokerage fostered by artist collectives generate a symbolic production of art that breaks open the still Western-centric fine arts framework of the public education institutions, as well as the national framework promoted by the academies. In its place emerges an alternative reference frame of a multi-scalar contemporaneity. This frame increasingly delegitimizes the mono-scalar positionings of the national academies by opening spaces of encounter for experimentation, transgression, and transcultural, multilateral, and de-centered "contact."⁶⁴⁸

The state continues to use its administrative apparatus and its institutions to promote "national" values and its claim of sovereignty over a delimited territory. It also persists as an important regulator of movement, especially through visa and import/export regulations. The cultural work the state engages in to uphold the nation as a single object also extends to the national art institutions.⁶⁴⁹ The exchange facilitated by the academies exclusively happens on a government-to-government scale in state prescribed and nationally circumscribed formats. As a result their programs often reproduce tropes of modernity and development. Art is used as a metaphor for national recovery, revitalization, and the richness of culture. It becomes a tool for a counter-position to the perception of the countries as "elsewheres" and "objects of developmentalist intervention."⁶⁵⁰ Yet at the

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

648 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, 50.

649 Gupta and Sharma, "Globalization and Postcolonial States," 279.

650 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, 2.

same time, the conscription reifies the essentialist modalities upon which these perceptions rely. In a similar way, especially through the format of the national exhibitions, the academies portray themselves as a "contact zone" between diverse art practices, reaching from diverse mediums, such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance, to different genres, like folk crafts and so on.⁶⁵¹ However, they effectively keep these practices separate through their administrative compartmentalization. The artists' practice has to conform to one of these categories. Further, the national circumscription prevents academies from being vertically connected; they remain unperturbed by trends and developments (new mediums or curation for instance) in the global art field. Likely their inflexible administrative frame and their often senior personnel are among the main reasons for their inertness, which contributes to their image as outdated and unsupportive of the contemporary artist generation. Nevertheless, the vast majority of my research partners interact with the national academies on a regular basis and many continue to believe it to be the government's responsibility to provide infrastructure. This position on the surface might seem inconsistent, but it is part of the artists' strategy to expand their agency. There is no inherent contradiction between using the platform of the national academies to participate in exchange programs or national exhibitions that reach thousands of people each year and at the same time contesting the bounded notion of the nation they promote. This multi-positionality is one of the defining characteristics of the emerging contemporaneity. Another quality is the increased interest in arranging programs, such as workshops, artist talks, art events, or exhibitions. Artists do not merely create paintings (or any other medium), they create contemporary art to further their position in the field, and they collectively organize activities to further the position of the art field within a wider set of fields. Moreover, the collectives try to foster equitable and mutual exchange between different scales. The contact they establish particularly with other artists corresponds to the type of "de-centered," "multilateral," and "intentional" artistic contact that Christian Kravagna describes.⁶⁵² Especially through the Triangle and SANA formats, the collectives have allowed artists and art professionals to be spatially mobile. Britto's participation in the *Venice Biennale* or Sigdel's presence at the *DAS* are direct outcomes of the growing interconnectedness among artist collectives in South Asia. In the course of these activities, my research partners become incredibly skilled translocal brokers able to jump scale. Collectively, they give impulses to other actors, such as the art foundations, who have become valuable allies. The Siddhartha Foundation and the Bengal Foundation are important institutions which gradually adapt their supportive activities to the arising needs of the field. Especially the mobility and networking of their personnel allows them to remain on top of current developments. Nevertheless, the foundations also face

651 Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 5–6.

652 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, 50.

challenges, notably the pressure to counterbalance economic profitability and support. The economic resources necessary to support creative freedom, the transgression of mediums, the contestation of circumscriptions of locality and identity, and global mobility are often difficult to manage. The large-scale event has become one crucial avenue to deal with these challenges. Temporary but recurring formats allow organizers to punctually focus their energy and resources to generate momentum. If successful, these events are able to draw in large sums of money, generate large audiences for their localities and art fields, and give artists a platform to create more experimental works than those intended for the market.