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## Chapter 5

# Connecting Art Events: Large-Scale Perennial Events as Platforms for Translocal Contact

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The community survived and flourished not because it was an autonomous “space” outside of the state, but more because its multiple scales cut across and interacted with the multifaceted bureaucracy.<sup>653</sup>

In his multi-scalar approach to migration in and from China, Biao Xiang highlights the conscious recourse to multiple scales of reach and activity as a critical strategy for survival and success.<sup>654</sup> Large-scale perennial art events are unique avenues for artists to demonstrate, strengthen, and expand their transcultural multi-scalar connections. These art events aim at bringing together people under the central motive of contemporary art or photography, they sustain group identity as contemporary practitioners, and strengthen this practice by generating audiences and consumers. Large-scale events are also settings for education about art; organizers offer accompanying workshops, guided tours for school-classes, and so on. Events like *Chobi Mela (CM)* or *Photo Kathmandu (PKTM)* help fulfil socio-cultural or political agendas, reaching from overcoming human or economic crises to branding localities for tourism. Moreover, art festivals are spaces for experimentative practices aside from the art market; economic revenue is part of the agenda, yet social and cultural reasons (creative expression, entertainment, socializing, or generating a buzz) often take precedence. Art events are complex situations that involve long-term planning, an elaborate logistical management, and the coordination of diverse actors.

Anthropology's actor-centered approach and its methodology based on long-term engagement allow access to this complexity. Through my repeated fieldwork in Dhaka and Kathmandu, I was able to observe the localities before, during, and after the large-scale perennial events. This

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653 Xiang, “Multi-Scalar Ethnography,” 288–289.

654 Xiang, “Multi-Scalar Ethnography.”

span allowed me to examine how events are planned, executed, and how they influence organizers and localities over time. I participated in festivals initiated by artist collectives (*CM* and *PKTM*) and by art foundations (*Dhaka Art Summit [DAS]* and *Kathmandu Triennale*). In the artistic field, both types of actors often complement each other, but events can also make potential power struggles visible. Which strategies do the different actors employ to reach wider (local and international) publics and consumers? How do they broker their localities, and in what ways do they transgress normative socio-cultural or disciplinary boundaries? Further, which new practices and actors are emerging alongside and through the events? The transcultural perspective allows me to look at the different qualities and scales of connections in-between the local and the global, and the center and the periphery. It directs my interest to the way events, motifs, aims, forms, and meanings are interconnected. Practically, it permits me to follow artists, ideas, and objects from Dhaka to Kathmandu and vice versa, and to discuss how they are experienced and reflected in the different localities.

This type of transcultural ethnography offers a compelling alternative to the totalizing framework of the "global contemporary," in which the large-scale exhibition is considered a flagship event.<sup>655</sup> Academic texts on large-scale perennial events written within this frame almost exclusively take a birds-eye perspective: the idea of a globally shared contemporary "without borders and without history" is made tangible and durable by the proliferation of large-scale art events as "global forms."<sup>656</sup> Newly emerging events are classified within the global "canon of exhibitions,"<sup>657</sup> wherein certain events are perceived as more important, more avant-garde, or more contemporary, while recently established or upcoming exhibitions need to first prove their ability to tie in with the global contemporary discourse.<sup>658</sup> Individual events in distinct places are often perceived as connected on a "global map"<sup>659</sup> or within a "global art calendar."<sup>660</sup> The "map" or "calendar" imagery highlights the dominance of the top-down perspective. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey argues that the perspective map,

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655 Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation," 70–73; Bydler, *Global Art World*, 244–245; O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 242–243; Belting, "Was bitte heißt ‚contemporary?'"

656 See Ratnam, "Art and Globalisation"; Bydler, *Global Art World*, especially chapter two "International Exhibitions: The Art of Global Competition"; Thomas Fillitz, "Worldmaking: The Cosmopolitanization of Dak'Art, the Biennial of Dakar," in Belting and Binter, *Global Studies*; Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016); and all the articles compiled in Elena Filipovic, Solveig Øvstebø, and Marieke van Hal, ed., *The Biennial Reader* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010).

657 Biggs, "Art, Money, Parties' and Liverpool Biennial," 42.

658 Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions," 438; O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 258; Thomas Fillitz, "Spatialising the Field: Conceptualising Fields and Interconnections in the Context of Contemporary Art of Africa," *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo* 15, no. 2 (2013): 22.

659 Bydler, *Global Art World*, 244–245.

660 Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed.

which was developed during the Renaissance period, represents the standpoint of a “seeing eye” of the individual.<sup>661</sup> Because this seeing eye looks at spatial representation from the outside/the top, the map brought a new quality of “objectivity”;<sup>662</sup> it allowed the world population to be “located within a single spatial frame.”<sup>663</sup> This “totalizing vision of the globe”—much like the frame of the “global contemporary”—admitted, appreciated, and analyzed “otherness” by inscribing it into its proper “place.”<sup>664</sup> The global art map celebrates the diversity of the artistic field while also prescribing order to it. The map orders art events in space and ties them into a territorial network. The metaphor of the “global art calendar” creates a structure for time: existing local rhythms and practices are substituted for a “linear, homogeneous, continuous time.”<sup>665</sup> Socio-cultural and economic asymmetries between center and periphery are flattened. At the same time, the center-periphery model is inscribed onto territory: in the center of the map are Europe and America represented by Venice and Kassel as the vantage point for “biennialisation,” and the periphery covers the rest.<sup>666</sup>

The asymmetry between center and periphery is in fact less to do with space than with motility. Looking at art events from the perspective of the organizers, the center is not a biennial in Italy, it is a mobile swarm of “stars and starlets from the regional and global art scene,”<sup>667</sup> an “art jet set,”<sup>668</sup> a “cosmopolitan travelling audience”<sup>669</sup> that flocks to the events inscribed on the calendar/map. Many researchers and curators I quote above belong to this center of “usual suspects.”<sup>670</sup> Due to their mobility, the “VIPs of the international pack of art tourists, critics, curators, artists, and media” become the “seeing eye” able to behold in its totality the map of the global contemporary.<sup>671</sup> And since they are the ones controlling most of the art discourse, their perspective dominates the field. Canclini distinguishes not only between a mobile center and immobile periphery, but adds a middle ground: “the proletariat jet set.”<sup>672</sup> In contrast to the private jet set, who

661 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2004 [1989]), 246.

662 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 246.

663 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 253.

664 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 253.

665 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 253; Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1977]), 97; van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing,” 651.

666 Oliver Marchart, “Hegemonic Shifts and the Politics of Biennialization: The Case of documenta,” in Filipovic, Øvstebø, and van Hal, *The Biennial Reader*.

667 Christiane Brosius, “‘Catching up’ to the World: Positioning the India Art Fair,” *Critical Collective* (2015), accessed August 19, 2022, <https://criticalcollective.in/CuratorInner2.aspx?Aid=246>.

668 Robert E. D’Souza, “The Indian Biennale Effect: The Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2012,” *Cultural Politics* 9, no. 3 (2013): 308.

669 Belting, “Was bitte heißt ‘contemporary?’”

670 D’Souza, “The Indian Biennale Effect,” 308.

671 D’Souza, “The Indian Biennale Effect,” 308; Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 246.

672 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*; based on Cuauhtémoc Medina, “Inundaciones, Las Artes Como Parte De La Cultra Visual Globalizada,” Paper presented at the

cater to upper classes, leading institutions, and sustain the market, the proletariat jet set, to which I and most of my research partners belong, travel tourist-class, often depending on travel grants. The periphery that forms the counterpart of this mobile center, then, is not a geographical periphery. Rather, it is qualified by its fixedness in space and time. From the perspective of this mobile center, it is possible to conceive of the global art world as a “transcending of place”:<sup>673</sup> the same formula, from the white cube to the festival map, in fact, the entire biennial structure, is seen replicated globally. The localities in which this formula is consumed, negotiated, and incorporated are perceived exclusively through its connections with the center—thus positioned at the receiving end. Moreover, their existence is intrinsically tied to the perennial rhythm of the festival. Dhaka is on the calendar of the global art world for a few days every two years when the *DAS* takes place. Events, whether the *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* or the *Yinchuan Biennale* in China, are encased as “temporary” and “locally organized” events that connect to global “networks.”<sup>674</sup>

To the less motile audiences, who dwell in or near the exhibition localities, and whose only experience with large-scale art events is the one taking place in their locality, the diffusionist argument of the globally replicated format does not make sense. They are not able to compare the exhibition design in Kassel to that in Adelaide, as they have not seen either one. Similarly, for the organizers, their event forms part of a continuous daily, monthly, and annual program, even though they are usually part of the art jet set. Events are formed on the basis of and generate connections to multiple scales beyond the mobile center. These connections do not form ad-hoc when the mobile center arrives for the opening, and they do not vanish suddenly when it leaves even before the closing ceremony. The transcultural and actor-centered approach I take to my case studies shows that the social and cultural capital that makes such events possible needs to be nurtured over time; connections to local authorities, donors, and communities are rekindled or broken, discussions among artists, organizers, and supporters go on, are re-thought, or endlessly repeated. Further, the physical and socio-cultural transformations triggered by events are not limited to the duration of the event; they have short-term as well as long-term effects on the locality and its inhabitants.<sup>675</sup> In order to fully grasp the alternative contemporaneity emerging in (between) Nepal and Bangladesh, it is imperative to analyze these different qualities.

The anthropological literature on festivals complements my transcultural perspective on art events. It offers a nuanced approach to large-scale events, able to capture the diverse rhythms and asymmetries in their respective localities. Ute Hüsken and Axel Michaels argue that festivals can

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workshop *Conflictos Interculturales*, Centro Cultural des España, Mexico City, 2007.

673 Tsing, “Conclusion: The Global Situation,” 464.

674 O’Neill, “The Curatorial Turn,” 244.

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

have diverse aims such as to “display and celebrate culturally valued goods and performances,” to implement political agendas, or to bring people together under a central motive.<sup>676</sup> They also have diverse outcomes and produce (not necessarily intended) meanings. Festivals create and sustain group identity, but also visualize socio-cultural and political frictions; they are “instances of communication and community-building” and thus constitute part of the cultural public sphere.<sup>677</sup> They are spaces for “communal learning,” while often also entailing the extraordinary consumption of food or alcohol.<sup>678</sup> Financial and material transactions are only one of many possible meanings that festivals engage.<sup>679</sup> The research on urban festivals, rooted in the framework of the “culture” or “creative industry” often reduces cultural events to their economic rationality or utility, and unilaterally focuses on their “branding strategies.”<sup>680</sup> This focus is certainly related to the fact that many of the Euro-American festivals in focus in that literature are acting as part of a city council or government.<sup>681</sup> The organizers behind my first case study are not; they are themselves artists. Access to economic capital and locality branding are a part of the two events they initiated, but they are not the organizers’ main objectives.

The first two Interludes introduce two large-scale perennial events: *CM* in Bangladesh and *PKTM* in Nepal. The two events are connected through a set of photographs from the Nepal Picture Library (NPL, est. 2011) which travelled from the 2015 edition of *CM* to the first edition of *PKTM* 2015 in Nepal (and in 2017 to *Unseen Amsterdam*). *CM* (*chobi*: the picture or painting; *mela*: crowd or assemblage) is a regular biennale for photography in Dhaka. It was initiated, as I have mentioned before, by photographer Shahidul Alam as part of a multi-layered project, today comprising the Pathshala South Asia Media Institute and Majority World. Since its inaugural

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676 Ute Hüsken and Axel Michaels, “Introduction: The Dynamics and Transculturality of South Asian Festivals,” in *South Asian Festivals on the Move*, ed. Ute Hüsken and Axel Michaels (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013), 13.

677 Liana Giorgi and Monica Sassatelli, “Introduction,” in Giorgi, Sassatelli, and Delanty, *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, 1.

678 Giorgi and Sassatelli, “Introduction,” 9–10, 15.

679 Hüsken and Michaels, “Introduction,” 13.

680 See Papastergiadis and Martin, “Art Biennales and Cities,” 45; Comunian, “Rethinking the Creative City,” 1158; Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*; Florida, “Cities and the Creative Class”; Bernadette Quinn, “Arts Festivals and the City,” *Urban Studies* 42, no. 5 (May 2005); Richards and Wilson, “Impact of Cultural Events on City Image.”

681 The “propagation narrative” that traces large-scale art events back to the *Venice Biennale*, the *documenta*, or the *European Capital of Culture* event assumes a mobility of formats and, in many cases, a similarity of underlying structures. The initiative for the creation of the *Venice Biennale* in 1893, for instance, came from the then mayor, Riccardo Selvatico, and was supported by the Venetian City Council. The *Biennale* has run through several forms of management since, the last being the restructuring of the *Biennale* as a Foundation in 2004. Nevertheless, Paolo Baratta, the current president of the *Biennale*, is a former minister. The *documenta* was initiated by artist Arnold Bode and is run by a non-profit corporation, but the city officials of Kassel and the government of Germany are firmly integrated in the structure.

edition in 2000, the festival has run regularly every two years, with its latest edition in February and March 2019.<sup>682</sup> Photographer NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati and graphic designer Bhushan Shilpakar have been frequent guests of *CM*. Through their platform photo.circle (PC, est. 2007) they have collaborated with the festival on several occasions and the idea of starting their own festival as a means of bringing together photography-related people in Nepal grew with those experiences. Following the 7.8 magnitude earthquake, which hit Nepal on April 25, 2015, they felt the need to finally realize their plan; the inaugural edition of *PKTM* took place that same year.

Using the NPL and the photographs that travelled from Dhaka to Kathmandu, I am able to discuss the multi-scalar, translocal connections that artist collectives form through the medium of photography between Nepal and Bangladesh. Both *PKTM* and *CM* are extraordinary platforms to build and sustain alliances with like-minded actors, as well as to promote the valorization of vernacular (hi)stories through the medium of photography. They are however also grounded in more ordinary day-to-day activities in the city and complement the work of established local institutions. In a sense, neither Drik nor PC are “collectives” in their current form: since its establishment in 1989, Drik has grown into a multi-layered organization. PC maintains a permanent office, paid staff, and takes on remunerative assignments—structures that resemble an institution more than a collective. Yet, both initiatives started from a need for collaborative action, and their role as cultural brokers, especially in dealing with their localities, is very distinct. This brokerage becomes visible in the way that the perennial art events are grounded in the localities in which they emerged; the choice of exhibition sites and the engagement of neighborhood communities for instance are intrinsic parts of the curation. Like many of the other case studies I have discussed, the festivals are part of a broader collective agenda to create alternative visualities to hegemonic urban and national visual discourses. This engagement of the local scale (notably the locality of the city) also separates the festivals from my third example.

The *DAS* was initiated in 2012 by the Samdani Art Foundation. Both co-founders, Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani are part of the upper-class jet set and have managed to establish themselves as socially and economically powerful actors in the art field in Bangladesh. Their position influences the way they conceptualize the *DAS*; it affects their branding and localizing strategies. Here, the anthropological literature on festivals comes to its limits. I return to Thomas Fillitz’s explorations on the global art market to discuss how the organizers establish the *DAS* as a “luxury commodity” and a “privileged zone of communication” for the influential art jet set.<sup>683</sup> Although the *Summit’s* organizers clearly distance themselves from the

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682 The Drik team attempted to set up a festival in 1995, but due to a *hartal* (general strike) called by the then oppositional Awami League, they had to cancel the first edition.

683 Thomas Fillitz, “Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art,” *Focaal* 69 (2014).

format of the “fair,” as rooted in purely commercial “trade fairs,”<sup>684</sup> they operate under a “logic of glamour”; they cater to an upper class clientele by establishing contemporary art from Bangladesh and the region as a “luxury good.”<sup>685</sup> This strategy allows them to broker cultural and social capital to Bangladeshi artists, as well as to foster disciplinary and spatial mobilities. The third *Interlude* focuses on Tayeba Begum Lipi’s solo exhibition at DAS 2014. By zooming in on her work, and by extension the collaboration between Britto Arts Trust (Britto) and the DAS, I develop a more nuanced approach to the alliances between collectives and other actors. While these alliances can be mutually beneficial, they also bear a potential for friction, notably in relation to distinct claims to locality, power, and legitimacy in the field of art production.

### Interlude: *Retelling Histories*

*Early in the morning, we meet in front of the Drik offices in Dhanmondi. Another hartal has been announced for the day and the minivans will not be allowed on the streets of Dhaka, so the organizers of Chobi Mela VIII have arranged for an alternative. At the meeting point, a parade of cycle-rickshaws awaits us. After friendly greetings, several cups of tea, cigarettes, and last-minute toilet runs, people break up into pairs and take their seats on one of the rickshaws. The mood among the guests and participants of the festival is light. The fresh air and the empty streets quickly turn this makeshift solution into a fun adventure. People start taking photographs and filming with their phone cameras. People on the street in turn wave at us, wondering what we are up to. The joyous mood carries on into the first exhibition venue, Beauty Boarding, where many more guests have accumulated.*

*From here, we move on the Northbrook Hall Library in Old Dhaka (Fig. 10).<sup>686</sup> I know the building’s outside from the 1 mile<sup>2</sup> festival that Britto organized in this area less than a month ago, but I have never been inside. It is the third day of the Chobi Mela “gallery visits”—a term that seems unapt to describe a large amount of people trying to squeeze into a tiny space filled with bookcases, chairs, and a large wooden table. Northbrook Hall Library, unlike the other Chobi Mela venues that we visited in the past two days—Shilpakala Academy or the Alliance Française—does not have bare, white walls. In fact, because of the heavy wooden bookcases that line the room, there are no walls to speak off. We are told the public library, which forms part of the Northbrook Hall*

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684 Bydler, *Global Art World*, 84.

685 Bydler, *Global Art World*, 86.

686 Ahmed, *Discover the Monuments of Bangladesh*. Northbrook Hall, locally known as Lalkuti (red house) for its red brick facade, was built in honor of Lord Northbrook’s visit to Dhaka. He was the viceroy of India between 1872 and 1876. The building was initially conceived as a town hall, but its auditorium is used as a theater. The public library was added on the southeast side a few years later. Its impressive and rare book collection dates back to its foundation in 1882.



Figure 10: NPL and photo.circle, *Retelling Histories*, 2015. Chobi Mela, Northbrook Hall Library, Old Dhaka. Photo: author.



Figure 11: NPL and photo.circle, *Retelling Histories*, 2015. Chobi Mela, Northbrook Hall Library, Old Dhaka. Photo: author.



complex, is still used daily by the local communities who come here to read the newspaper. Today however the space is crowded with us strangers; most of the people to join the gallery visits organized by the Chobi Mela team are either international festival guests or locals from other parts of town. They keep streaming in, trying to get a look at the photographs which are displayed on the wooden table in the middle of the room. From the photos, faces are returning their gaze (Fig. 11).

Retelling Histories comprises photographs from private family albums as well as from formal studio portraiture, as I learn from the little blue pamphlet that is handed out to the visitors. The photos evoke the history of Nepal, its people, and their daily lives. They also reveal information about the development of photography. Many of the early photos show stiff poses that remind me of the close relationship between photography and portraiture painting in service of Nepal's Rana elite. Perhaps to establish if not social then visual equation? Or was it not simply a requirement of the technique? In its early stages, photography, like painting, did demand sitting still for a long time. Across the table and through time the poses become more dynamic as props such as guitars, flowers, and bikes enter the frame. Nepal's rising urban middle classes seem to have had fun experimenting with double exposures and poses taken from Bollywood movies.

#### CONVEYING A "VISUAL HISTORY IN THE MAKING"<sup>687</sup>

Neither *CM* nor *PKTM* refer to any of the prevalent formats (biennale, fair, festival, blockbuster, or mega exhibition) by name. *CM* introduces the notion of the *mela*, which in Bengali refers to a "crowd" or "assemblage." It can be translated as "fair" or "exhibition," but is done so more commonly as "celebration" or "festival."<sup>688</sup> *Mela* is combined with *chobi*, the "picture" or "painting." *CM* thus refers to the medium of photography and the locality of the event through the conscious use of the vernacular. The name that the organizers chose for the festival is a direct extension of its central goal—to strengthen the material and symbolic production of photography. Rather than forming an autonomous event, both the festival's *raison d'être* and its meaning are firmly rooted in a set of local institutions. Each of these institutions, starting with *Drik* (vision) founded in 1989 by Alam, plays a specific role within the field. At the same time, they are bound by a broader objective: to inspire social change within Bangladesh and to overcome Bangladesh's position as "the other"—as an "elsewhere" to a modernized, developed "West."<sup>689</sup>

687 Alam, "Our Visual History in the Making," 4–5.

688 See for instance Silke Bechler, "Kumbha Mela: Millions of Pilgrims on the Move for Immortality and Identity," in Hüsken and Michaels, *South Asian Festivals on the Move*.

689 Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.

Drik was set up as a movement. It still is. The idea of photography just happened to be the tool that we decided to use. Because it was such a powerful tool. Because it is such a powerful tool. But I knew that one person alone couldn't do it, you need warriors.<sup>690</sup>

The term "warrior" embodies the weight and significance of Alam's objective to inspire social change, as well as his commitment to fulfill it. While Drik serves as a platform to rally such warriors, and the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute as a way to nurture more, *CM* is the instrument to reach wider audiences, to educate, and to establish contact with like-minded people across geographical, cultural, and social boundaries. Although Alam introduces photography as an arbitrary tool, the medium's own entangled history makes it an intrinsic part of the movement in which the warriors are engaged.

While pursuing his education in Biochemistry and Genetics at the Universities of Liverpool and London, Alam became interested in photography. Over the years he built up a large network in the field, allowing him among other things to travel to and work in more than fifty-five different countries.<sup>691</sup> In our interview he explains that during these travels he realized that as a Bangladeshi he was being perceived as an "icon of poverty."<sup>692</sup> He traces this ascription back to the visual portrayal of Bangladesh in general. Dominated by white Western photographers, the image of Bangladesh was and remains rooted in a development discourse propagated by INGOs, NGOs, and Euro-American media alike. The desire to counteract this hegemonic gaze denotes the root from which Drik, and subsequently *CM*, were born. In the catalog for the first edition of the festival Alam situates the asymmetrical representation of Bangladesh in a wider postcolonial discourse and denounces the entanglement between the history of photography and the history of colonization.<sup>693</sup> He equates photography to "colonial propaganda" and points out that most early photographs of and in the region remain within colonial archives, i.e., under the control of the former colonizer. This assessment emulates other writings on the "voyeuristic colonial gaze."<sup>694</sup> In the introduction to *Photography's Other Histories*, Christopher Pinney alerts his readers to the "extraordinary circumstances of inequality (encompassing the range from cultural, political, and economic hierarchy to systematic genocide) that gave rise to the vast majority of the images inhabiting the

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690 AR, SA, September 2015.

691 For more biographical information on Alam, refer to his homepage: Shahidul Alam, "About Me," Shahidul News, accessed May 13, 2021, <https://shahidulnews.com/who-am-i/>.

692 AR, SA, September 2015.

693 Alam, "Our Visual History in the Making," 4–5.

694 Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*; Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

colonial archive.”<sup>695</sup> Pinney describes the world in which Euro-American photography operated as “available to a detached gaze” and “amenable to mathematical regulation.”<sup>696</sup> Emulating the role of the map and the calendar that I discussed above, the camera allowed the colonial power to organize, plan, and mold the environment and its subjects.

This totalizing, othering, or exoticizing gaze, which fixes the periphery in its place, has many parallels in the global media’s manipulation of the “non-Euro-American world,” as for instance Cathrine Lutz and Jane Collins show.<sup>697</sup> Starting from the example of *National Geographic*, they analyze the mechanism through which the “people of the third and fourth worlds” have been represented as exotic, idealized, naturalized, and sexualized.<sup>698</sup> The people of Bangladesh were seen through the lens of poverty and national catastrophes by white Western photographers who, due to their own mobility, established themselves as “primary spokespeople” of the immutable periphery.<sup>699</sup> For Alam, the only way to counter this top-down ascription is for Bangladeshis to become their own storytellers. The need for such storytelling warriors to fight against the hegemonic gaze led to the establishment of the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute in 1998.<sup>700</sup>

Photography remains excluded from the national field of contemporary art in Bangladesh; the medium is neither taught in fine arts departments nor represented by the Shilpakala Academy, despite it being named as a separate department in the 1989 amendment to the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy Act.<sup>701</sup> This exclusion represents another bias against which Alam’s activism is directed. In our interview, he explains that the need to establish Drik gallery as an autonomous space for the display of photography was caused by the existing private or state-owned art galleries’ refusal to exhibit the medium. Their reasoning was based either on the assumption that “photography is not art” or a fear of censorship issues.<sup>702</sup> This comment bespeaks the political values of democracy and of freedom of speech that drive Alam’s activism. On his homepage, he traces back his self-understanding as a documentary photographer to his political engagement in the 1980s, and in several talks during CM VIII he alludes to his experience of numerous censorship attempts by government authorities over the years.<sup>703</sup> In every one of these talks he emphasizes

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695 Christopher Pinney, “Introduction: ‘How the other half...’” in *Photography’s Other Histories*, ed. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 8.

696 Pinney, “Introduction: ‘How the other half...’” 12.

697 Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

698 Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, 89.

699 AR, SA, September 2015.

700 AR, SA, September 2015.

701 Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, “Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy Act XXII.”

702 AR, SA, September 2015.

703 In the 2014 DAS panel on “Firsthand Perspectives on Developing Infrastructure for Contemporary Art in South Asia and its Challenges and Breakthroughs,”

that partners and sponsors of *CM*, including Brac Bank, Beximco, or Berger Paints are strictly forbidden to interfere with the selection of content and the organization of the event.<sup>704</sup> Alam's motivation to unveil socio-cultural and political inequalities and to inspire change have continued to guide his practice. His statement about the need for warriors also addresses the specific nature of photography that Alam circumscribes. He elaborates on this point in an article about the beginnings of his practice and initiatives in *World Literature Today*:

The resistance came from many fronts. Painters felt we were an uncultured lot trespassing into their territory. Press photographers felt we were fuddy-duddy academics mired in theory. Salon photographers dismissed our work as our horizons weren't horizontal and our composition wasn't "perfect." But that never dented our enthusiasm.<sup>705</sup>

Alam's assessment of the situation of documentary photography addresses the boundaries between his own photojournalistic and documentary practice and other uses of the medium of photography. Initially, his practice was neither accepted as a part of the field of art production, because it was not subject to established aesthetic standards (as the fine artists and the salon photographers), nor was it taken seriously as a conveyor of news stories (as journalists or press-photographers), because it was too concerned with the politics of representation. *Drik* and *Pathshala* were set up as platforms to strengthen and promote a type of documentary photography situated between such aesthetic and theoretical concerns.

The establishment of *CM* was a way to further transgress the circumscription of both the field of art and the field of media production. Alam explains that he wanted to convey what was happening in photography around the world to the growing number of *Pathshala* students: "I knew I couldn't take the whole load of them in my suitcase to Europe. The way to be able to do it was to bring the festival to them."<sup>706</sup> Since its first edition

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Alam explained that during the first edition of *CM* the organizers were forced by the government to take down an exhibition in the National Museum. The exhibition entitled *The War We Forgot* about the 1971 war in Bangladesh had to be relocated to the premises of *Drik*.

704 Berger is a paint company based in India, with a wide presence also in Nepal and Bangladesh. BEXIMCO Group is the largest private sector group in Bangladesh; its ventures include pharmaceuticals, textiles, and energy. Brac Bank describes itself as a "profitable and socially responsible financial institution." It assists Brac, Bangladesh's largest non-governmental development organization, with projects all over Bangladesh and other countries in Asia and Africa. "Company Profile," Berger Paints, accessed May 13, 2021, <https://www.bergerpaints.com/about-us/company-profile.html>; "About Us," BEXIMCO, accessed May 13, 2021, <https://www.beximco.com/#about>; "About Us," Brac Bank, accessed April 25, 2022, <https://www.bracbank.com/en/about-us/>.

705 Shahidul Alam, "With Photography as My Guide," *World Literature Today* 87, no. 2 (March/April 2013): 136.

706 AR, SA, September 2015.

in 2000, the festival has been organized biennially. Every edition is framed by an overreaching theme, which guides the selection of works. The topics are instrumental to Drik's wider political and cultural activism; they are always narrow enough to speak to current socio-political issues and broad enough to relate to many different socio-cultural and political contexts. The first edition for instance was entitled "Differences Unframed" and put a large emphasis on the visual coverage of the war of liberation in 1971. This was particularly important because the majority of existing photographs on the war were published in foreign media, but were never shown in Bangladesh.<sup>707</sup> "Fragility" (2009) was dedicated to the frailty of things—the in-between spaces and the fleeting moments often unseen by the camera. The 2015 edition, which I discuss in more detail below, deals with the topic of intimacy. Through these themes, *CM* offers a platform for the connection of diverse localities and practices while staying relevant to the Bangladeshi context. According to its organizers, *CM* is a space where a wedding photographer from India, a war photographer from Australia working in Nepal, and a fine art student from Dhaka can come together, because their photographic works speak—in very different ways—about intimacy.

*Chobi Mela* is an attempt not only to create an understanding of the present state of photography in the region, but also to deconstruct current photographic practices on the basis of wider influences, particularly that of globalization.<sup>708</sup>

This quote captures the diverse scales on which the festival operates. *CM* is set in the urban context of Dhaka, yet it implicates the photographic practice in Bangladesh, in the South Asian region, and engages with visual and socio-political discourses worldwide. The quote also alludes to the fact that, although initially focused on documentary and photojournalistic practices, the festival's potential to transgress medium boundaries has been inscribed in its objective from the beginning: on its homepage, *CM* is presented as the "biggest" and "first" "regular biennale" for photography in Asia. By using this vocabulary, Alam and his team situate the festival and its specific focus on photography in the sub-continent and the wider Asian context in Dhaka.<sup>709</sup> They challenge the hegemony of the "Western construct of the history of photography" in the field, by demonstrating that the "majority world" is not merely a subject in the work of Western photographers, but actively engaged in photography's symbolic and material

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707 Shahidul Alam, "The War We Forgot," in *Chobi Mela: Differences Unframed (Exhibition Catalogue)*, ed. Chobi Mela (Dhaka: Drik, 2000).

708 Alam, "Our Visual History in the Making," 4–5.

709 The first edition of *CM* in 2000 included bodies of work from Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and France.

production.<sup>710</sup> “Majority world” is a term coined by Alam in opposition to the notion “third world.” It highlights the fact that, although perceived as “in third place,” this world comprises the majority of the world’s population.<sup>711</sup> It is an attempt to define this world through its cultural, intellectual, and social wealth, rather than through what it is lacking.<sup>712</sup>

The organizers repeatedly stress the importance of socio-cultural diversity, not only by being geographically inclusive, but also by showing works from “absolutely the biggest names in the world as well as upcoming students.”<sup>713</sup> This policy offers a counter-position to the belief that quality hinges on seniority and international recognition, as is often the case in the art field. It allows *CM* to foster young talent and pay tribute to established artists. Moreover, and this is an issue that I will come back to more extensively in the section on forays, *CM* has fostered an opening up of creative rooms to wider audiences, thus overcoming possible socio-economic boundaries. Artists and consumers of art in Dhaka are primarily from educated, middle-class backgrounds. Most art institutions (galleries, education institutions, art centers) are located in the middle-class neighborhoods of New Dhaka. Although technically open to the public, deterring mechanisms (such as guards and security checks) limit access for the lower classes. In an attempt to break with this status quo, a mobile exhibition format has become the trademark of *CM*: in addition to the main venues, the works are displayed on the sides of rickshaw vans, accompanied by short explanations in Bengali script, that travel all over the city (see Fig. 12). First realized during the third edition, these vans aim to democratize access by engaging more people, especially those excluded by the often exclusive gallery system.<sup>714</sup> Another mechanism to facilitate access across both social and geographical boundaries is the free live broadcast of all lectures and artist talks through the *CM* homepage and its subsequent upload to social media platforms, such as YouTube.<sup>715</sup>

Moreover, due to their active engagement with the boundaries of the photography field over the past fifteen years, the *CM* organizers have managed to minimize the gap between photography and the mediums recognized as part of the fine art canon. The most visible effect of this development is that all major art spaces around New Dhaka have made their spaces available for *CM* exhibitions, from the Bengal Gallery and the

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710 Alam, “Our Visual History in the Making,” 4–5.

711 Shahidul Alam, “Majority World: Challenging the West’s Rhetoric of Democracy,” *Amerasia Journal* 34, no. 1 (January 2008): 88–98.

712 “Majority world” is also the name of a photography agency co-founded by Alam in 2004 that works with photographers from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. “Home,” Majority World, accessed May 13, 2021, <https://majorityworld.com/index.php>.

713 AR, SA, September 2015.

714 Shahidul Alam, “The Gallery Versus the Street,” *South Asian Popular Culture* 5, no. 1 (2007).

715 *CM* has its own YouTube channel: Chobi Mela, YouTube Channel, accessed May 13, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCq1U9B3TxOYvFYik\\_L3sXwQ](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCq1U9B3TxOYvFYik_L3sXwQ).



Figure 12: Jannatul Mawa, *Close Distance*, 2015. Mobile exhibition on rickshaw vans, Chobi Mela, Dhaka. Photo: author.

National Museum, to the Dhaka Art Center and the Institute of Fine Arts at Dhaka University. On a more subtle level, the practice of photography in focus at Drik and Pathshala has changed. Alam explains that there is a complementary relationship between *CM* and the institute since the festival's initiation; on the one hand, the students and graduates of Pathshala are the skilled people needed to organize the festival. On the other hand, the diverse genres, techniques, aesthetics, and styles of photography exhibited during *CM* inform the curriculum and the practice of the students. This interdependency has pushed photography beyond the borders of the initially prevalent documentary practice. The young generation of photographers experiments with more conceptual and abstract approaches to storytelling; students employ new aesthetics, such as overexposure or blurriness, or incorporate other materials and surfaces in their work. Moreover, the topics are changing. The display during *CM* 2015 shows that visual storytelling is no longer limited to political issues, in the strict sense of the word. Contemporary works engage with a broad spectrum of motives, from mental health and suicide ("Fatalistic Tendency" by Tushikur Rahman) to the connection between humans and animals ("A Pause to Breathe..." by Tapash Paul) and middle class women and their housemaids ("Close Distance" by Jannatul Mawa). The invitation to Britto member Shimul Saha to teach methods from the fine arts education at Pathshala that I discussed in chapter three is a further expression of this rapprochement.

On its homepage, *CM* claims to have "become one of the highlights of the Asian calendar." On the surface, this self-portrayal conforms with

Enwezor and Bydler's argument about large-scale group-exhibitions from the periphery wanting or needing to connect to a global network:<sup>716</sup> *CM* establishes its value within the canon of international festivals and marks its presence on the calendar. However, this branding is more than a claim for legitimacy or a will to globality. The event marks itself as a platform to create and sustain a shared identity as photographers from the majority world. From this platform, photographers can build a counter-narrative to the twofold bias against photography: its marginalization by the white Western gaze and by the local fine art institutions. Through *CM*, and in extension all of its related institutions, photographers are able to broker their stories and their ideas and perspectives on socio-cultural and political issues to diverse audiences, from visitors of the arts centers in New Dhaka to the inhabitants of the mobile vans' destinations. *CM* thus represents a space for communication and the building of a community around the medium of photography.<sup>717</sup> The festival carries the political message that Drik embodies; it counters hegemonic practices of representation by giving photographers from the majority world the opportunity to create and share their own stories. The festival is a platform for contact between like-minded contemporary practitioners and consumers interested in vernacular visualities across socio-cultural and geographical boundaries. *CM* conveys "a visual history in the making" while also shaping a community of photographers.<sup>718</sup>

#### FORAYS INTO THE CITY

In the frame of *CM VIII*, the works of forty-one artists from Bangladesh and abroad are exhibited in eleven venues in New and Old Dhaka. The venues in New Dhaka include more classical, white-walled gallery spaces (such as the Daily Star–Bengal Arts Precinct, the Drik Gallery, and Britto Space) as well as outdoor spaces (such as Bokultala, a section of the Charukola campus). It also includes the nationally framed spaces of the National Academy of Fine and Performing Arts (Shilpakala), the Bangladesh National Museum, and the Gallery of the Alliance Française (the French cultural center). The Shilpakala Academy, which hosts most of Dhaka's larger-scale art programs (such as the *Dhaka Arts Summit* and the *Asian Art Biennale*), is the biggest venue with the works of twenty-eight artists on display. Most of these New Dhaka venues have been used in earlier *CM* editions, with two exceptions: the Daily Star–Bengal Arts Precinct (Bengal Foundation's third gallery space in the city), which was only established a year prior to the 2015 edition, and Britto Space. The decision to include the latter was a direct result of Britto co-founder Mahbubur Rahman's appointment as a guest curator for the eighth edition of the festival. Rahman's first curatorial collaboration with

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716 Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions"; Bydler, *Global Art World*.

717 Giorgi and Sassatelli, "Introduction," 1.

718 Alam, "Our Visual History in the Making," 4–5



Drik and Pathshala goes back to an exhibition organized on the occasion of the one year anniversary of the Rana Plaza factory collapse (April 22–26, 2014).<sup>719</sup> Pathshala graduate and faculty member Munem Wasif explains that Rahman demonstrated his organizational and curatorial skills during this collaboration, prompting the Drik team to invite him as a guest curator for CM 2015.<sup>720</sup> Next to long-term Drik employee ASM Rezaur Rahman and Pathshala graduates Tanzim Wahab and Wasif, the 2015 curatorial team thus included guest curators from other mediums for the first time: architect Salahuddin Ahmed and mixed-media artist Mahbubur Rahman. The decision to include curators working outside the medium of photography is part of Britto and Drik's strategies to transgress the circumscribed fields of art and photography. The collaboration significantly affected the outline of the festival, notably the interplay between the exhibition venues and the curation.

The academic discourse on exhibition spaces is shaped by two concepts that are often used in a mutually exclusive way: On the one hand, there is the "white cube," defined by art critic Brian O'Doherty as an autonomous, locally and temporally neutral and undefined space, which physically and mentally separates art from a broader non-art space.<sup>721</sup> Like the format of the biennale, the white cube is often accompanied by a diffusionist argument. Elena Filipovic for instance contends that the "timeless, hermetic, and always the same" white cube is "globally replicated" in the world of contemporary art biennials.<sup>722</sup> This is exemplified by the fact that "the main exhibition format" in the Dakar Biennial, she claims, is the same as the one used in Taipei and Venice. On the other hand, there is public space as non-art space per se. In opposition to the white cube, Filipovic refers to the artistic expansions into this space (in the frame of biennials) as "forays beyond the box."<sup>723</sup> These "forays" are part of biennials' localization strategies, she argues, and in contrast to the "white cube" (which isolates art-as-art), they aim to inscribe artistic practice into a wider socio-cultural locality.<sup>724</sup> The exhibition space is thus treated as yet another mechanism

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719 The collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory happened on April 24, 2013, and caused the death of more than 1100 people. At the time of the collapse I had just started my doctoral research and was contacting artists from Bangladesh through Facebook. While sitting in the library in Heidelberg, my Facebook wall was suddenly flooded with calls by the same artists to join the relief work, to donate blood, and to collect blankets and other first aid utensils. It was the first time that I realized just how socially engaged the group of artists that I was about to meet in my subsequent fieldwork were. The way the catastrophe affected not only the artists, but many parts of the Bangladeshi society, was illustrated in the exhibition entitled *1134 Lives Not Numbers* at the Pathshala Media Institute. Shahidul Alam, "1134 – Lives Not Numbers," *Shahidul News*, April 23, 2014, <https://shahidulnews.com/1134-lives-not-numbers/>.

720 AR, MW, September 2015.

721 O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 13–15.

722 Elena Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," in Filipovic, Øvstebø, and van Hal, *The Biennial Reader*, 328.

723 Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," 328.

724 Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," 328.

to localize (and fix in place) “the local,” while the global contemporary and its formats (unilaterally originating from the center and its established institutions) are “transcending place.”<sup>725</sup>

Comprehending these two spaces as antagonistic is neither compatible with a transcultural nor an actor-centered approach. Moreover, the hypothesis fails when looking at festivals like *CM* (or *PKTM*), because the delimitation between private and public, between interior and exterior, art and non-art, is never as clear-cut as analytical models make it out to be. There are no autonomous or locally and temporally neutral spaces. The Shilpakala Academy, for instance, despite its huge white-walled and maze-like structure, promotes a national frame that casts meaning onto the exhibited artworks. As a public (i.e., state-funded and state-organized) institution, it needs to comply with specific rules and norms, such as respecting public decency. These rules take effect on the exhibition, even if the space is rented out as a venue to private actors; exhibited works are subject to censorship. Further, the Academy's status as a national institution—in terms of control and reach—likely raises particular expectations among visitors from within and outside the art field.

The way the artists make use of their venues illustrates the need to look at every venue as a space of engagement between art and space, rather than discussing the different venues according to whether their conditions meet the concept of public space (as some place) or the white cube (as non-place). This approach has been suggested by Nina Möntmann, who advocates for looking at how specific *Teilöffentlichkeiten* (sectorial publics) are addressed by different exhibition spaces.<sup>726</sup> This approach allows me to understand *CM*'s use of multiple venues as “forays ... into the city.”<sup>727</sup> Put differently, it is not the fact that *CM* makes use of these diverse spaces, but the fact that that it makes use of all these spaces at the same time that allows for the inscription of artistic practices into a wider socio-cultural locality.<sup>728</sup>

According to co-curator Wasif, the main advantage of utilizing diverse venues is the range of audiences that can be addressed.<sup>729</sup> Promoting the medium of photography as a tool for social change across socio-cultural boundaries has been an important part of the agenda since the festival's initiation. The National Museum and the Shilpakala Academy are important institutions for a nationally framed symbolic production of art. They attract a large and heterogeneous sectorial public beyond the art field, and thus allow the festival a wide reach of audiences from city dwellers to domestic tourists, and foreign visitors. At the same time, they are often susceptible to political agendas and censorship. The organizers were for instance forced to take down *The War We Forgot*, an exhibition about the 1971 war in Bangladesh in the National Museum, and relocate it to the

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725 Tsing, “Conclusion: The Global Situation,” 464.

726 Möntmann, *Kunst als sozialer Raum*.

727 Filipovic, “The Global White Cube,” 328.

728 Filipovic, “The Global White Cube,” 328.

729 AR, MW, September 2015.

Drik premises (see fn. 703). Drik Gallery and Britto Space attract a more limited sectorial public, mostly members of the art field. Due to its concealed location on the second floor of a mixed commercial and residential building, especially Britto Space presupposes an informed viewership. Drik and Britto are also alternative spaces allowing for more experimental and cutting-edge works to be exhibited. For example, during one of the gallery visits (January 25, 2015), Alam explained that the decision to exhibit photographer Cristina Nuñez's work at the Drik Gallery was based on the fact that the exhibition included nude images and could have caused problems in other venues. The combination of both types of spaces (state-funded and alternative artist-led), and thus the inclusion of different sectorial publics, is critical for the festival's socially inclusive objective and its local reach. The organizers are able to bring into play a variety of differently framed space in order to generate a more nuanced and inclusive representation of the urban locality in which the festival takes place.

Until the 2015 edition of *CM*, this reach was limited to the predominantly Muslim, middle-class neighborhoods of New Dhaka and the cultural spaces located there. The only exception were the mobile rickshaw vans. Through the inclusion of three main venues in Old Dhaka—the Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA), Beauty Boarding, and the Northbrook Auditorium and Library—the organizers of *CM VIII* overcame this limitation. The expansion was driven notably by two members of the curatorial team, Rahman and Wasif. One month prior to *CM VIII*, both artists were part of *1mile*<sup>2</sup>. From December 2014 until January 2015, they engaged intensely with the spaces in the area with the purpose of creating site-specific artworks. But even before *1mile*<sup>2</sup>, both artists had a long-term relation with Old Dhaka. Rahman grew up in the area and started his career as an artist from BAFA and Wasif spent more than a decade working on the technique of the box camera. Their familiarity with the place is a great incentive and asset for *CM*.

In general, the festival's expansion into Old Dhaka is a continuation of the organizers' objective to reach heterogeneous audiences, beyond the art field and the upper / middle-class cultural elite, centered predominantly on New Dhaka. It invites New Dhaka dwellers (and international guests) to explore spaces hitherto unknown to them. As I mentioned in the second chapter, many inhabitants of New and North Dhaka refrain from going to Old Dhaka, often as a result of persisting stereotypes against its inhabitants. Moreover, the inhabitants of Old Dhaka, who are geographically and socio-culturally excluded from the field of contemporary art, are invited to discover the medium of photography in their dwelled-in spaces. Lastly, and especially in relation to the example of *1mile*<sup>2</sup>, the engagement with Old Dhaka is part of the creative field's larger claim to actively participate in the shaping of localities (neighborhoods, cities, nations), i.e., to act as spatial brokers.<sup>730</sup>

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730 Baumgärtner, *Lokalität und kulturelle Heterogenität*.

All three venues in Old Dhaka are important spaces of cultural production and heritage. The first venue, Beauty Boarding, played a significant role as a cultural hub for writers and other intellectuals in the first half of the century. The second, Lalkuti library, is still in use by the local inhabitants. Despite being one of the few registered heritage sites in Old Dhaka listed by the Department of Archaeology of Bangladesh,<sup>731</sup> the library's important book collection and the Lalkuthi auditorium are in a bad state. The third venue, the BAFA, was founded in 1955 by the widow of dancer Bulbul Chowdhury who promoted dance and music throughout his life. The Academy is an important space for the celebration of *Pahela Baishakh* and the anniversaries of cultural personas such as renowned poet Rabindranath Tagore and master painter Zainul Abedin.<sup>732</sup> The cultural importance of these institutions is recognized and remembered by the inhabitants of Old Dhaka, who continue to use these spaces. In my observations, the institutions are largely unknown to the wider urban population, especially in the North of Dhaka. The city authorities focus on more economically affluent parts of the city. My research partners consider their lack of interest in preserving Old Dhaka's architectural heritage and the rise of fundamentalist forces which I discussed as part of *1mile*<sup>2</sup> as threats to the continuation of these cultural institutions. Consequently, their collective engagement in reevaluating Old Dhaka as a place of contemporary cultural production can be read as a recognition of Bangladesh's cultural and religious plurality against hegemonic discourses of Bengali homogeneity propagated by national historiography, or by a growing fundamentalism. This claim resonates with Alam and Drik's overall objective to use visual history as a tool to inspire social change in the future. The festival draws attention to the venues' cultural value and urges urban and national audiences to remember and support its heritage.<sup>733</sup>

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731 "Archaeology, Bangladesh," Department of Archaeology, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, accessed September 15, 2016, <http://www.archaeology.gov.bd/>.

732 *Pahela Baishakh* (the first of *Baishakh*) refers to the first day of the month of *Baishakh* (mid-April to mid-May) in the Bengali lunar calendar. It marks the Bengali New Year and is celebrated with dance, processions, and fairs. Bipul K. Debnath, "Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts," *The Independent*, November 17, 2017, accessed June 19, 2021, <http://www.theindependentbd.com/magazine/details/123957/Bulbul-Academy-of-Fine-Arts>.

733 This engagement with history and heritage in the field of art is part of a wider movement within the public sphere. Another example is the event *Illuminating Puran Dhaka—Heritage in Limelight* organized in October 2015 by the Alliance Française, the Goethe-Institute Bangladesh, and the Urban Study Group. The latter is a voluntary organization that has been actively promoting the conservation of heritage in urban Bangladesh. One of their most prominent projects is the organization of heritage tours through Old Dhaka. For more information on the work of the Urban Study Group, see Urban Study Group, Facebook Page, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/TaimurIslamUSG/>. For a description of the event, refer to the event description at the homepage of the Goethe Institute Bangladesh or the YouTube video posted by the Alliance Française in Dhaka: "Illuminated Puran Dhaka—Heritage in Limelight," Goethe-Institut Bangladesh, accessed February 21, 2021, [https://www.goethe.de/ins/bd/en/ver.cfm?fuseaction=events.detail&event\\_id=20611850](https://www.goethe.de/ins/bd/en/ver.cfm?fuseaction=events.detail&event_id=20611850); "Illuminated Puran Dhaka—Heritage in

On a more practical level, Drik's engagement with Old Dhaka is also the expression of a novel interest in site-specific curation, i.e., conscious engagement with the exhibition space as more than just a space to exhibit art. Co-curator Wasif explains that one of the reasons for expanding *CM* to Old Dhaka was his interest in the different qualities of the locality; it "gives a different feeling of the city, it works differently, it has more alternative venues."<sup>734</sup> This assessment alludes to the socio-cultural make-up of the area's population and the physical shape of its narrow streets and old houses, which stand in contrast to the Muslim middle-class areas of Dhanmondi populated by concrete high-rise buildings. Wasif also refers to the "alternative" exhibition spaces available here but does not further elaborate on what this alternative quality is. Rahman's comments allow a possible interpretation. In a conversation he explains that unlike the New Dhaka spaces such as the Daily Star-Bengal Arts Precinct or the Gallery of the Alliance Française, the spaces in Old Dhaka are not typically used as exhibition spaces.<sup>735</sup> They fulfill other cultural functions: they serve as a library, theater, boarding house, and a school. Therefore, the artworks first need to be merged with the space. Rahman describes trying to put himself in the skin of the audience—to see it how they would—while also maintaining respect for the architecture of the spaces and considering the content of the work to be installed. I elaborate on this relation between exhibition space, curation, and content through specific examples in the next section. Before I do, I briefly want to mention another, often forgotten and yet significant aspect of the use of space during perennial events: the effect of the unplanned. No matter how well-structured perennial art events are, and how deliberately chosen their spaces, unexpected happenstances can have a crucial effect on their perception and the meaning they gain within the overall festival. This is a point that the academic literature especially from the field of art history does not account for, because it often unilaterally focuses on the effect of events rather than on their coming into being. Here again, the singularity of the anthropological approach becomes clear. *CM VIII* takes place in the first half of a continuous six-month *hartal* (general strike) called for by the oppositional Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).<sup>736</sup> As a result, the mobility of motorized vehicles is severely limited and the use of minivans to transport guests unfamiliar with Dhaka to distant venues becomes

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Limelight," Alliance Française de Dhaka, uploaded October 27, 2015, YouTube video, 3:22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVnt3fqUzAs>.

734 AR, MW, September 2015.

735 FDE, MR, January 2015.

736 In January 2014, the BNP boycotted the parliamentary elections, resulting in the Awami League declaring an electoral victory. The situation remained calm until January 2015, when the BNP did not receive permission from the government to hold a protest on the one-year anniversary of the election. Several months of continuous general strikes called by the BNP followed. The use of petrol bombs against motorized vehicles operating despite the blockade caused the traffic in the city to halt. Sarah Tasnim Shehabuddin, "Bangladesh Politics Since Independence," in Riaz and Rahman, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*, 24.

impossible. While many of the gallery visits around the area of New Dhaka are manageable on foot, the distance to Old Dhaka is too long. On the day of the scheduled gallery visit, the Drik team therefore organized forty–fifty cycle rickshaws. In contrast to the vans whose air-conditioned interior creates a physical barrier to the urban environment, from blocking sensory inputs (such as heat, smell, and sound) to speeding up its perception, the walking and cycling allows for a more intense and slow engagement with the city. Because many guests, locals and foreigners, rarely travel to Old Dhaka, even less so on a rickshaw, the day is marked by an enthusiastic and adventurous mood that transmits into the perception of the exhibitions.

### CURATING INTIMACY

In Bangladesh and Nepal, “curation” has become an important tool for conveying contemporary visualities. My research partners consider a well-chosen venue and a clever interaction between content and space to add value to the exhibited works. A good design is acknowledged as a marker for the quality of an exhibition. In a *Depart* article, writer Seema Nusrat Amin for instance compares the *Asian Art Biennale* to *CM*, which she describes as “one of the most sought after photography biennales in Asia,” distinguished especially because of its consistency in hosting curated shows.<sup>737</sup> The growing importance of curation is an expression of my research partners’ interest in connecting with wider audiences. It also points to an increased diversification of roles within the art field, from artists to different types of mediators. Authors like Hans Belting, Paul O’Neill, and especially Thomas Brenson view the rise of the curator as yet another effect of the proliferation of the large-scale exhibition.<sup>738</sup> This highly motile and mobile curator conceptualizes exhibitions and contextualizes individual artworks within larger discourses. The authors agree that the “curatorial turn,” i.e., the development of the curator as a creative profession, has fundamentally changed the relationships between the organizer/curator, the artist, the audience, and the art institution.<sup>739</sup> While this literature understands curation mostly as mental work, my research partners’ working context often demands them to be more hands-on.

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737 Seema Nusrat Amin, “The Polemic of Postmodernism in Search for Language and Continuity: 15th Asian Art Biennale, Dhaka,” *Depart* 4, no. 12–13 (2013): 40–49, 41.

738 Belting, “Was bitte heißt ‘contemporary’?”; O’Neill, “The Curatorial Turn,” 241; Brenson, “The Curator’s Moment.”

739 See also Andrew Hunt, “Curator, Curation, Curationism: Andrew Hunt on the A to Z of Curating,” *Art Monthly* 390 (2015): 13–16; David Balzer, *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else* (London: Pluto Press, 2015); Iftikhar Dadi, “Curating South Asia,” Guggenheim, October 1, 2012, accessed April 4, 2013, <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/map/curating-south-asia/>; Mosquera, “Some Problems in Transcultural Curating”; Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Curating but Were Afraid to Ask* (New York: Sternberg, 2011); Judith Rugg and Michele Sedgwick, ed., *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007).

In the “Curators Talk,” organized as part of *CM VIII* (January 30, 2015, Goethe-Institute Dhaka), Rahman explains that he is an artist rather than a curator. He thereby alludes to the fact that there are no trained curators in Bangladesh and everybody on the team, including *CM*’s curatorial director ASM Rezaur Rahman, is self-taught. Rahman elaborates that in other fields of art, the curator’s task is to select artists, to coordinate work and money, and to create a flow. In Bangladesh, curators need to be organizers and (manual) workers at the same time. Wasif adds that the curatorial process includes the physical installation of the shows; his tasks during the set-up ranged from painting the wall to putting the nail in and cleaning the floor. In our interview, festival director Alam stresses an overall change of the curation process:

In the beginning, it was simply hanging pictures. And then we started to think about how to hang pictures, how to create that interaction. Then in was a question of trying to incorporate what the artists wanted. How that work could ideally be rendered. Later the interaction with the audience. All of those things were bits that grew. So the last *Chobi Mela*, in my assessment, was easily the best we’ve had.<sup>740</sup>

This quote shows that in the early *CM* editions, the role of the curator was not distinguishable from that of the festival organizer. Now curation means going beyond the general programming of the festival, beyond coordinating the participants, and beyond simply hanging pictures. It is about creating an ideal rendering of the work. This ideal brings together concerns for the artists’ interpretation as well as the audience’s potential perspective and reception. It also includes an engagement with the space in which the work is to be displayed. In Rahman and Wasif’s comments, Old Dhaka and its spaces are marked by difference; the area gives a different feeling of the city, it comprises alternative venues, which, in contrast to the art spaces and galleries in New Dhaka, serve various socio-cultural purposes on a daily basis. For the curators, this alterity is positively connoted; it poses a welcome challenge that forces them to shift their own approach to space in general. As with cultural brokerage, the influence of unfamiliar visual elements can challenge stagnant opinions and practices and inspire new creative approaches. Curating in these spaces is neither just about hanging images, nor about dealing with them technically (putting in the nails, painting the walls). It is about how the work could relate to the meaning of the space, especially for the local audiences who are aware of this meaning more than outsiders. This meaning includes a respect for the architecture of the spaces, but also for the cultural practices and beliefs of people who dwell in them.

In the 2015 festival description, Alam introduces that year’s theme, intimacy, through adjectives such as tender, quiet, wistful, and personal,

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740 AR, SA, September 2015.

and through concepts like belonging, ownership, bonding, and togetherness.<sup>741</sup> While these terms are related to more abstract emotional states and responses, the introductory text also raises questions about the commercialization of emotions, exemplified in the branding of Valentine's Day merchandise. Further, Alam discusses the question of intimacy as a global feeling. This broad spectrum of possible readings and applications is deliberate, as co-curator Wahab explains to me: Intimacy was not a guiding theme for the curation. Rather, it was an open-ended point for consideration in each individual work.<sup>742</sup> Throughout my participant observation of the festival, I discern three different ways in which intimacy finds expression. First, in the selection of bodies of work that contain very strong connotations to physicality, love, sex, or romance. This applies for instance to the work of Max Pinkers (venue: Drik Gallery), a Brussels-based photographer who follows the paradoxes and frictions in love and romance between "tradition and contemporary mores" in the city of Mumbai.<sup>743</sup> His photograph of two lovers kissing on a beach, their heads wrapped in a scarf—a shield between the public eye and the intimate gesture—prominently figures as the cover photo of *CM VIII*. The second expression is in the artists' approach to their subject matter. In my interview with Wasif, he uses the word "intimacy" to describe a working pattern in documentary photography, which consists in establishing an intimate relation with the subject one tries to capture.<sup>744</sup> This approach is probably most tangible in Philip Blenkinsop's work (venue: Pathshala South Asian Media Institute). The Bangkok-based co-founder of Noor photo agency has been documenting armed conflicts such as Nepal's Civil War (1996–2006) since he arrived in Asia at the end of the 1980s. He spends weeks and months in war zones living together with the people whose stories he aims to tell. This approach allows him to capture intimate portraits of their daily routines, their fears and hopes, the violence and comradeship they experience.<sup>745</sup> The third and most abstract expression of intimacy is the curatorial approach to the venues and the arrangement of the display. This is particularly visible in the exhibition design of documentary photographer Paolo Patrizi's work on Nigerian sex workers in Italy. The provisional and illegal character of the sex camps he enters as a photographer, and the precarious life-situations in which their occupants remain, are mirrored in the segmented exhibition set, subdivided with white, sheer, full-length curtains. This set-up allows the visitors of the Shilpakala—usually marked by ample rooms—to intimately engage with the work.

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741 Shahidul Alam, "Intimacy," in *Chobi Mela VIII: International Festival of Photography Bangladesh 2015*, ed. Drik (Dhaka: Drik, 2015), 1–2.

742 AR, TW, November 2015.

743 Drik, ed., *Chobi Mela VIII: International Festival of Photography Bangladesh 2015* (Dhaka: Drik Picture Library, 2015).

744 AR, MW, September 2015.

745 AR, MW, September 2015.



## RETELLING HISTORIES AND INTIMACY

The three different curatorial approaches to the festival theme intimacy, via content, photographic work process, and exhibition design, converge in *Retelling Histories*, the exhibition of the NPL, which concluded the Interlude to this section.

With regards to content, the exhibition does not explicitly connote love, sex, or romance (as Max Pinkers' work on couples in Mumbai does), yet it reveals intimate knowledge about the people of Nepal. The popular representation of the South Asian country is still dominated by unilateral imageries as a "development laboratory" promoted by INGOs, NGOs, and global media on the one side,<sup>746</sup> and as a place of pristine beauty, spirituality, and humble hill people, pushed by the tourist industry on the other.<sup>747</sup> *Retelling Histories* offers a counter-visibility; it allows a qualitative insight into vernacular histories in and of Nepal. It brings together photographs, taken from private family albums and closed-down photo studios, allowing audiences in Dhaka access to ideologies of family in Nepal,<sup>748</sup> to codes of gender, class, and power,<sup>749</sup> consumer culture, leisure, identity, and everyday life. The personal images permit questions about what was, at a certain period, considered photo-worthy.<sup>750</sup> They give insight into inter-human (family demographics, friendships, social conventions) and human-object (consumerism, personal effects of neoliberalism) relationships. The photographs from the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa collection, for instance, contain visual records of private and public ceremonies, such as *jatras* (religious festivals or processions, specifically in the Newar community), weddings, funerals, family outings, and political rallies.<sup>751</sup> Their "narrative power"<sup>752</sup> harks the Dhakhwa family's rising economic status as much as Kathmandu's changing socio-political public sphere under the Panchayat system. Moreover, the photographs evoke a less tangible

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746 Bell, *Kathmandu*, 332–333.

747 Pratyoush Onta, "A Suggestive History of the First Century of Photographic Consumption in Kathmandu," *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 3, no. 1 (1998): 181.

748 Sonja Vivienne and Jean Burgess, "The Remediation of the Personal Photograph and the Politics of Self-Representation in Digital Storytelling," *Journal of Material Culture* 18, no. 3 (2013): 279–298, 279–281.

749 Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

750 Nancy A. van House, "Personal Photography, Digital Technologies and the Uses of the Visual," *Visual Studies* 26, no. 2 (2011): 125–134, 125–127, 130–131.

751 photo.circle and Nepal Picture Library, *Juju Bhai Dhakhwa: Keeper of Memories* (Kathmandu: Nepal Picture Library, 2016). Juju Bhai Dhakhwa (b. 1940) hailed from a Newar family in Naghbahal, one of the largest open spaces in Patan. During the 1960s–1980s he documented the life of his family and the close-knit Newar neighborhood. After his death his son Prakash Dhakwa, who still lives in the ancestral home in Naghbahal, donated the collection to the Nepal Picture Library. The next Interlude (*Retelling Histories*) centers on PKTM, where Juju Bhai Dhakhwa's ancestral home was one of the main venues. I will elaborate on his photography in that context.

752 Vivienne and Burgess, "The Remediation of the Personal Photograph," 279–281.

world of imagination. Reminiscent of Appadurai's argument on "mass media" as a facilitator of endless "possible lives,"<sup>753</sup> the camera offers "a space of exploration,"<sup>754</sup> a space for people to present a self that they cannot as easily present elsewhere.<sup>755</sup> Props (such as bikes and radios) and backgrounds (of pristine villages or urban scapes) used in the 1970s and 1980s by personal and studio photographers allowed people to embody their aspirations. By adopting gestures and fashion items made known by Bollywood movies, they brought forth their ideal vision of themselves.<sup>756</sup> The intimacy of *Retelling Stories* emerges from this unique, almost voyeuristic gaze into the private lives of strangers.

In relation to the work-process, the broad sample of images exhibited at *CM*, reaching from the early twentieth century to the 1980s, and from formal studio photography to spontaneous snapshots, sheds light on the history of photographic techniques in Nepal. While the stiff poses of the earliest images indicate a common ancestry of photography and portraiture painting,<sup>757</sup> this mannerism also alludes to the technical requirements of early photographic technology.<sup>758</sup> It presumed a prolonged relation between photographer and photographed, which became obsolete after the availability of small hand cameras, and even more recently, digital cameras and camera-phones. The technique allows for the interaction between photographer and photographed to be reduced to a split-second. Yet, the nature of the scenes on display at Old Dhaka's Northbrook hall—a crying bride, a spontaneous pose, a puff on a cigarette—indicates the gradual advance of the medium into intimate situations of daily lives. In other words, the technical advancement shortens the photographic moment (and thus makes it less intimate), while it also allows the camera to capture more intimate subjects.

Lastly, for the exhibition design of *Retelling Histories*, the *CM* team took into account the photographer's—or in this case the custodian, PC's—interpretation, the space, and the audiences that would interact with the exhibits. PC's motivation "to create a broad and inclusive visual archive of Nepali social and cultural history,"<sup>759</sup> to which I will return in more detail in the next section, overlaps in many ways with Alam's motivation to establish *Drik* and *CM*. *Drik* continuously challenges the Euro-American hegemony by visually documenting and thus inscribing localities/people in a fixed

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753 Arjun Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991), 191–210, 197.

754 Christopher Pinney, "Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Post-colonialism, and Vernacular Modernism," in Pinney and Peterson, *Photography's Other Histories*, 211–214.

755 Pinney, *Coming of Photography in India*, 142.

756 Pinney, "Notes from the Surface of the Image," 211–214.

757 Pinney, *Coming of Photography in India*, 134.

758 Arjun Appadurai, "The Colonial Backdrop," *Afterimage* 24, no. 5 (1997).

759 "About," Nepal Picture Library, photo.circle, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://www.nepalpicturelibrary.org/about/>.

periphery. The organization uses the festival to strengthen the position of the majority world and to foster exchange between its visual storytellers. The NPL was born out of the idea to create an alternative, inclusive visual repository for young contemporary photographers that allowed them to connect with the visual history of Nepal beyond the hegemonic visualities of the state and the tourism and development industry. Due to their similar missions, the *CM* curators were well-aware of *PC*'s motivation and took that into account. The decision to arrange the exhibits on the large wooden table was a direct consequence of the absence of bare walls. Instead of making use of the shelves or building panels, however, they engaged with the space's day-to-day function as a library; people come in, sit down at the table, read one of the available newspapers, or take a book from the shelf. The photographs on the table, like the books and newspapers, tell stories about distant places and its people. Moreover, audiences—whether from Old Dhaka or international guests of the festival—have their own experiences with photographs as memorabilia. They likely have their own collection of family albums or photographs of ancestors displayed on their walls. Even though the medium of photography as a form of contemporary art production might be new to them, they can make their own connections to these images, and create a visuality of Nepal.

On a more general note, the exhibition illustrates *Drik* and *PC*'s strategy to use photography as a tool and driving force to transgress the boundaries of the fields of art and photography. The two organizations aim at democratizing access to cultural production and at transgressing institutionally prescribed boundaries between mediums, especially between photography and what is still considered fine art in the nationally circumscribed field. By choosing important architectural and cultural landmarks in Old Dhaka as venues, the organizers of *CM* draw a connection between the visual heritage in family photographs and the architectural heritage of the region. For *Drik* as well as *PC* this is not about preserving things in a suspended state, but about making visual history a value for contemporary practices and contestations. Similar to *Drik*, *NPL* promotes a ground-up perspective to history, locality, and identity. In their individuality, the collections in the archive feature private, ordinary lives, memories, and aspirations. In their entirety, they allow the conception of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual, and multi-political nation. This complex socio-cultural composition has been flattened by historical narratives, spun to serve national claims, such as the Panchayat's (1962–1990) use of the “one language, one style of dress, one country” slogan. Hegemonic notions of national identity like these made *PC*'s founding director Kakshapati realize that *Retelling Histories* needed to be shown in Nepal. Within eight months, the photographs travelled from Old Dhaka in Bangladesh to Patan in Nepal, where they were displayed in a new constellation during the first edition of the *Photo Kathmandu* festival.

## Interlude: Facing the Camera

*It is the first quiet morning since Photo Kathmandu (November 3–9, 2015) started; there are no talks, meetings, or interviews on my schedule, so I decide to finally have a look at the exhibitions. Although I no longer need the tear-shaped, bright pink Photo Kathmandu signs to guide me through the gullies (alleyways) of Patan, they flash up everywhere. One marks the entrance to the home of the Dhakhwa family, where the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa collection is exhibited. I have seen parts of the collection eight months ago at the Chobi Mela in Dhaka, yet I am excited to discover them newly assembled, and what is more, in the place where many of them were taken. Through intricate corridors, small rooms, and tiny courtyards, I follow the Dhakhwa family through gatherings, wedding ceremonies, and a trip to Fewa Lake in Pokhara, until I suddenly find myself in Naghbahal, Patan's biggest open courtyard. Here the private opens into the semi-public, also with regards to the content of the exhibition. While the photos inside the house focus on Juju Bhai and his relatives, the photos exhibited around Naghbahal center on the neighborhood, religious festivals, friends, and political rallies. Most of the images are fixed on large panels; some however sneak up on me from the most unexpected places: dangling from the branches of a tree, or randomly fixed on the facade of a house (see Fig. 13).*

*Only a few steps away from Naghbahal, I find Frederic Lecloux's contemporary work. The photographs are so perfectly integrated into its surroundings that the exhibition almost seems to vanish between the parked bikes, sleeping*



Figure 13: NPL and photo. circle, *Juju Bhai Dhakhwa: A Keeper of Memories*, 2015. Photo Kathmandu, Naghbahal, Lalitpur. Photo: author.



Figure 14: NPL and photo. circle, *Facing the Camera: A history of Nepali Studio Photography*, 2015. Photo Kathmandu, Patan Museum, Lalitpur. Photos: author.

*dogs, and small teashops that create an important community space for the people of the neighborhood. But then, I guess, that is exactly what Everyday Epiphanies is; Lecloux's work deals with the banal and the exceptional, the random and the particular. Life has also grown around Kishor Sharma's Living in the Mist: The Last Nomads of Nepal at Twilaka Tol. Men sell oranges and other fruits in preparation of Tihar, Nepal's second biggest Hindu festival. Bikes, boxes, and empty baskets are stacked in front of the wall, sometimes even partially covering Sharma's photos.*

*On my way back to Patan Durbar Square, the former palace of the Malla kings of Patan, I run into fellow festival visitors; like me, they wear the festival design tote bags, and carry the iconic pink maps that have developed a life of their own in the neighborhood. Yesterday, I saw a woman using one to funnel hot tea into a mug. I walk by several empty spaces, which like tooth gaps now mark the neighborhood. These spaces and piles of carefully stacked bricks are all that is left of the houses destroyed by the April 25 earthquake.*

*I enter the main gate of the Patan Museum, where the exhibition entitled Facing the Camera: A History of Nepali Studio Photography is located. I recognize some of the NPL photos from the Northbrook Hall Library in Old Dhaka. The organizers have used different exhibition surfaces, from constructed grey panels to metal boxes (see Fig. 14). Especially these boxes, used throughout South-Asia to keep valuables and memorabilia safe and dry, create*

*an interesting connection between the intimate content of the photos and the valorization of memorabilia in general. Some of the photos simply lie on the elevation surrounding the courtyard, others are fixed on the red brick walls of the museum.*

*Were it not for the fact that these photos show ordinary people, one could think they were part of the museum collection.*

#### EXPLORING MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND HISTORY THROUGH IMAGES<sup>760</sup>

In her study on the effects of the digital revolution on personal photography in America, Nancy van House argues that images of deceased family members, past events, and places of significance are used to teach children about “history” and “membership in family.”<sup>761</sup> I observed a similar practice in PC’s use of the archival photographs from the Jju Bhai Dhakwa collection, as well as in its initiative at the NPL and the photography festival as a whole. *PKTM* is a place for “community-building” and “communal learning.”<sup>762</sup> The exhibitions resulting from the archival material of the NPL transmit knowledge about the history of photography and the visual history of people in Nepal. In contrast to the history taught by public institutions (the National Museum in Chhauni, the Patan Museum, or schoolbooks) which focus on extraordinary events, objects, and personages, the history transmitted through the NPL is the history of ordinary people. The photographs contain the personal histories of friends, colleagues, and neighbors. Together, they teach audiences and aspiring and established photographers about a pluralistic, everyday Nepali society.<sup>763</sup> With a specific focus on the earthquake, these images and their display around the neighborhoods of Patan aimed at rebuilding social life in a community disrupted by crisis. They became a reminder of the rituals and everyday practices that structure life. In order to highlight important connections between the initiatives of Drik and PC, while also emphasizing the individual qualities of *PKTM*, my focus remains on aims, spaces, and curation. In my discussion of these issues, I pay specific attention to the creation of community around photography and the way space is structured through instruments such as maps, signs, and info panels.

PC is an association of photographers, designers, and people interested in social change and exploring “issues of memory, identity, and history through images.”<sup>764</sup> Since its foundation in 2007, PC has regularly organized photography-related workshops, lectures, and exhibitions. It is supported by private and public donations, but manages to be at least

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760 “Memory, identity, and history through images” is part of PC’s mission statement for the Nepal Picture Library, see “About,” photo.circle, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://www.photocircle.com.np/about/>.

761 Van House, “Personal Photography,” 125–127, 130–131.

762 Giorgi and Sassatelli, “Introduction.”

763 Van House, “Personal Photography,” 131.

764 “About,” photo.circle.

partially self-sufficient by taking on photo-related assignments.<sup>765</sup> Its individual members, especially co-founders Kakshapati and Shilpakar, strongly engage with social change in Nepal, which manifests in PC's collective activities and events. PC's overall mission was and remains the connection of people through the medium of photography, and collectively working at enhancing the quality of photojournalism and storytelling in Nepal. Its flagship project, the NPL, grew from the observation that the visual references available to young practitioners in the country are very limited; there are no visual archives and the existing culture of representation is dominated by the country's main income sources: the development and tourism industries. In order to generate a more multifaceted and inclusive visual repository for photographers to use, PC called out for people to donate their family albums and private collections. In this way, the team has digitized more than 60,000 photographs. After digitization, the physical photographs or negatives are returned to the individual contributors and only the digitized files and according metadata are stored in the archive. The metadata largely stems from oral history interviews with the contributors (where this is still possible), time-consuming work which so far only covers a small amount of the photographs in the archive (as of 2016). In addition to contributor interviews, PC generates information about the archival material by organizing exhibitions using the NPL collections. These exhibitions are always grouped under a broader research term that serves as a way to approach the photographs: *Photographs of Friendship* (2012, 2013) for instance allowed PC to research friendships between women outside marriage. The chosen theme contributes to a larger discourse on the socio-cultural ramifications of patrilocal residence practiced in Nepal. In this social system, women become part of the husband's household after marriage, often leading to them being cut off from their families, friends, and familiar surroundings. Further, their new responsibilities often confine them to the private realm of the household, leaving them no time and opportunity for friendships outside the family. Yet, the photographs PC curated showed women that defied social conventions and maintained relationships beyond the boundaries of gender and family.<sup>766</sup> Another example for the generation of research through the organization of exhibitions is *Postcards and Beyond* (2012). In this case, PC collaborated with Alban von Stockhausen (University of Vienna) to engage with Mukunda

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765 PC has been successful in securing funding from globally operating institutions, such as the Prince Claus Fund and the Danish Centre for Culture and Development. The collective organizes fundraisers, sells prints from the NPL and various merchandise (such as tote bags, mugs, etc.) through its homepage. Further, it offers its services in digitalization, design, creative consultancy, and organization of events and workshops. For a full list of activities and events see "Home," photo.circle, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://www.photocircle.com.np/>.

766 "Retelling Histories: Photographs of Friendships," photo.circle, accessed September 6, 2022, <https://www.photocircle.com.np/exhibitions/retelling-histories-photographs-of-friendship/>.

Bahadur Shrestha's work. With the expected boom in the tourism industry after the country's opening in the 1950s, Shrestha, who worked for the Department of Information and later at the Tourism Department of Nepal, was commissioned by the government to travel around and document the country. His photographs were actively sent out as posters and postcards to promote tourism to and within Nepal. To this day they largely shape the way Nepal is perceived from the outside. Nevertheless, Shrestha's personal collection also includes images that go beyond this conventional representation. One photograph, for instance, depicts his sister-in-law and her friends posing in a Willys Jeep during a picnic near Bhaktapur (one of the three cities in the Kathmandu valley). Like the photos about women's friendships, this shot defies social norms; women rarely went on outings with their friends, especially in the 1960s when it was taken.

*Photographs of Friendships and Postcards and Beyond* entailed a regrouping of NPL photographs under a specific heading and provided an opportunity for PC to research traditions of visual representation, socio-cultural norms and values, and the influence of political developments. Both examples foretell the strategy that *PKTM* implements on a larger scale; the photos that travelled to *CM* in February 2015, with the main aim of introducing NPL (as a whole) to international audiences, are regrouped under new headings for the festival in Kathmandu, thus inspiring more extensive and detailed research into the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa family and the history of studio photography. This research in turn allows the photographs to be imbued with additional and new meaning and contribute to the reshaping of representational visual politics. PC's wider engagement with social change through history is exemplified in their use of the photographs as a way to raise issues of gender politics, social institutions (family, marriage, residency rules), and cultural norms. The exhibitions are instantiations of a ground-up, inclusive national history that comprises the life of diverse ordinary people.

Promotesh Das Pulak, in his use of archival photography, also questions the status quo of existing visualities. In his case, the digital manipulation of the images is the source of this contestation; his own face inserted into the images comes to represent the ordinary citizen—the hero, the victim, the child, the mother, the collaborator, and the bystander, all at once. Similarly, PC makes use of archival photography to educate local and international festival visitors about Nepal's multiple, ordinary histories. But the artist-led initiative's method is different. Appadurai and Kopytoff suggest that objects accumulate versatile biographies during their lives.<sup>767</sup> Examining these biographies allows access to wider political, historical, and aesthetic norms and values. PC puts this theory into effect by repeatedly and purposefully introducing photographs into new life situations. The

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767 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*; Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things," 67.



rearrangement into novel constellations allows the photographs in the archive to interact with each other, to enter different spaces, to address different audiences, and thereby be imbued with new meaning. It is not only the content or the materiality of the photograph, but its inscription into different localities that creates dynamic values able to delegitimize history as written by the socio-political elites. Like Drik, PC aims to transgress the field of art and photography: the team consciously pulls archival material into the field of contemporary art production by exhibiting it alongside contemporary works under the header of one festival. At the same time, its use of the archival material transgresses the fields of art and photography, and reaches into the fields of media, sociology, politics, and history.

Due to the close parallels between Drik and PC, it is not surprising that the two actors have been in close contact from the beginning. Over the years, both organizations have shared skillsets by organizing joint workshops, presentations, and lectures. In 2008–2009 for instance, six travel grants were given to emerging Nepali photographers to travel to *CM V*. In return, twelve exhibitions from the same *CM* edition travelled to Kathmandu. Fittingly, this exchange was named “Project Freedom” and designed to promote “freedom through photographic and cultural exchange.”<sup>768</sup> In conversations, especially the young generation of photographers in Nepal repeatedly note the benefits of the exchange with Drik and Pathshala; several of them have been awarded scholarships to join Pathshala’s six-month “International Course,” while others have attended workshops. The list of collaboration suggests an asymmetry between the artist initiative in Bangladesh, which has grown into a set of well-established institutions, and the one in Nepal, which in most cases is at the receiving end. None of my research partners understand this situation as a form of dependency, however. Rather, they see it as an incentive, a motivation, and a source of confidence. In our interview, PC co-founder Kakshapati explains:

We have been thinking about the idea of a festival for a while. Primarily because we have been going to *Chobi Mela* and to *Delhi Photo Festival*, and to *Angkor [Photo Festival]*. And realizing that a festival can create a lot of opportunities when it comes to networking, when it comes to bolstering the ongoing activities of an organization and creating this slightly higher international profile.<sup>769</sup>

Kakshapati’s explanation highlights how important the contact with other festivals in the region, such as the *Delhi Photo Festival*, the *Angkor Photo Festival & Workshops*, and the *CM* is for initiatives like PC.<sup>770</sup> She emphasizes

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768 For a description of the project, see “Traveling Chobi Mela V,” photo.circle, accessed May 16, 2021, [www.photocircle.com.np/exhibitions/traveling-chobi-mela-v/](http://www.photocircle.com.np/exhibitions/traveling-chobi-mela-v/).

769 AR, NGK, December 2015.

770 The *Delhi Photo Festival* was established in 2011 through an initiative of the Nazar Foundation. The *Angkor Photo Festival & Workshops* have been running

that PC's network is primarily based on such regional ties. Especially after the NPL showcase at the 2015 edition of *CM* (and the attendance of three other editions before), PC finally had the courage to say: "Ok, we sort of know enough about how something like this would work."<sup>771</sup> Yet, once the decision was taken, the main challenge was to find enough qualified people to help organize and to exhibit in the festival. Unlike Drik, PC cannot draw warriors from education institutions such as the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute. There is no school dedicated to the study of photography in Nepal and out of the private and public higher education institutions only Kathmandu University (KU) has recently started to offer photography classes as part of its BFA curriculum. PC has been organizing regular introductory and advanced story-telling workshops for over a decade. Additionally, Artudio, a collective led by Kathmandu-based artist Kailash K Shrestha,<sup>772</sup> held its 65th Photography Workshop in May 2017. Yet people producing qualitative documentary stories are still scarce. Kakshapati explains that it is challenging to find enough photographers in Nepal to apply for the festival slide shows. In this regard, the relationship with Drik, and the connections made from attending other festivals, prove valuable. Especially for the *PKTM* 2015 print exhibitions, PC taps into *CM*'s existing network. They invite senior photographers Philip Blenkinsop, focusing exclusively on his work on the Maoist Guerilla in Nepal, and Kevin Bubrisky, who has been documenting Nepal since his first arrival as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1975. Both exhibited at *CM* in the same year. Moreover, PC is supported by a group of regional photographers, who come in to assist with the set up and documentation of the festival.

For the members of this network—organizers, curators, visiting photographers, collectors, and other members of the field of photography—the repetitive character of the exhibitions, the formats and the familiar faces, is cause for the occasional weariness. As part of the mobile jet set—though mostly travelling tourist class<sup>773</sup>—they are familiar with the festival pace of lectures and workshops in the mornings, exhibition visits during the day, slideshows and social gatherings in the evening. The *CM VIII* team, most of which travelled to Kathmandu for the inaugural festival, have already seen Philip Blenkinsop and Kevin Bubrisky's works. Most probably,

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since 2006. For more information on the respective festivals, see "Home," Nazar Foundation, accessed May 16, 2021, <https://www.nazarfoundation.org/>; "About," Angkor Photo, accessed May 16, 2021, <https://angkor-photo.com/about/>.

771 AR, NGK, December 2015. PC has collaborated with *CM* once in 2009 through a presentation at *CM V* on "Building Community and Tracking Change in Nepal" and in the same year through a project called "Project Freedom in Nepal." Further, in 2011 *CM* exhibitions toured in Nepal through PC. Finally, in 2013 PC co-founder Kakshapati was a participant of the *CM VII* discussion session.

772 Artudio offers a wide range of activities from photography and children's art classes to community-based art programs. Its founder, Kailash K Shrestha, very early on initiated street art projects to open the art practice and connect to a general public. See "About," Artudio.

773 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*; based on Medina, "Inundaciones."

they have also come across most of the other exhibited contemporary bodies of work in workshops or residencies. To them, the festival does not offer much visual input in terms of photography. Several of my interview partners mention that they consider taking a break from the festival calendar, yet they also greatly enjoy the company of friends and colleagues, the food, and the opportunity to travel.

For the general festival visitor however, especially those from Kathmandu and its surroundings, *PKTM* is an opportunity to experience archival and contemporary photography in their locality, to meet eminent photographers, listen to artist talks and lectures, and see works from and about their country that they have never seen before. Despite their long-term engagement with the country, neither Kevin Bubrisky's photographs nor Philip Blenkinsop's work on the Civil War have ever been shown in Nepal.<sup>774</sup> In our interview, Kakshapati explains that the upkeep of the network and the contact with established colleagues in the field by means of the festival is crucial. Nevertheless, the ordinary inhabitants and potential future storytellers are its intended audience. The tension in the festival's situatedness, i.e., the organizers' ambition to rally the local community and their urgency to connect with a larger network of like-minded creators, marks its position within the emerging multi-scalar field of contemporaneity. Moreover, *PKTM* is but one of the collective's mediums to reach this audience: "for us, the in-between is actually the most important stuff. And the festival is just something that creates momentum, that creates this platform and opportunity."<sup>775</sup> The PC director explains that the objective to motivate people—other photographers, but especially local communities, businesses, audiences, clubs, and so on—to engage with the medium of photography on a long-term basis is deeply engrained into the PC day-to-day work ethic. Through programs organized by its team, PC aims to "bring together photographers and other visual storytellers to nurture unique voices that document and engage with social change in Nepal."<sup>776</sup> One part of this mission is to find people who, due to their particular skills, can inspire and guide a new generation of photographers in Nepal. The other part is to use the medium of photography to inspire people to engage in current socio-cultural and political processes. The festival is a momentous way to bring both these aims together. In contrast to monographic exhibitions, whether thematic (*Photographs of Friendship*) or artist-centered (*Postcards and Beyond*), the format of the festival allows the exposition of different styles, techniques, and applications of photography next to each

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774 Philip Blenkinsop's work remains unique in its perspective and depth. In my observation, the civil war period has largely been absent in visual representations by the artists in Nepal, although *Nepali Times* editor Kunda Dixit has published two major photography collections on the topic: Kunda Dixit, *A People War: Images of the Nepal Conflict, 1996–2006* (Kathmandu: Publication Nepa-Laya, 2006) and Dixit, *People After War: Nepal's Live with the Legacy of Conflict* (Kathmandu: Publication Nepa-Laya, 2009).

775 AR, NGK, December 2015.

776 "About," photo.circle.

other.<sup>777</sup> Similar to Drik, PC therefore consciously decides to invite a team of curators hailing from different backgrounds to strengthen its medium and field-transgressing approach. The choice to include Sujan Chitrakar, the co-founder and academic program coordinator of KU's Center for Art and Design, for instance, is part of the goal "to actively try to reach out to the existing art community."<sup>778</sup> The versatility of perspectives on photography not only enlarges the local practitioners' frame of reference, but also grants audiences access to a broader spectrum of the medium's possibilities. Therefore archival, contemporary, and "whatever in-between" styles of photography are exhibited next to each other, as Kakshapati explains.<sup>779</sup>

As I mentioned above, the organization of a festival as a means to concentrate outreach both locally and internationally had been part of PC's deliberations for a while. The participation in *CM VIII* provided the necessary incentive by boosting the team's confidence in organizing an event on their own, as well as by making them realize how important it was to show the NPL collections in Nepal. However, another event became the galvanizing factor: Two and a half months after *CM*, on April 25, 2015, Nepal was hit by a 7.8 magnitude earthquake that killed nearly 9000 people. Next to Sindhupalchowk and Nuwakot, Kathmandu was among the most affected districts.<sup>780</sup> In Patan, where PC has its office, the area in and around the Durbar Square (since 2006 part of the UNESCO World Heritage) was most affected. Both the Charnarayana temple and the Harishankara temple, dating back to the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries respectively, completely collapsed.<sup>781</sup> In the narrow *gallis* around the square, private homes were severely damaged. Especially the absence of open spaces for people to take refuge caused fear and panic. After the earthquake, wooden stilts were quickly installed to prevent affected buildings from giving in during the aftershocks. Warning signs were put up to divert people and traffic.

By the time the festival started, most of the rubble was cleared away, but house-sized empty spaces, carefully stacked piles of bricks, makeshift shelters, warning signs, and wooden beams remained as daily reminders of the catastrophe. Psychological effects seemed to be lingering—my research partners and acquaintances described being terrified of the constant aftershocks, scared to move through their neighborhoods, and even more afraid to enter their own houses. One photographer explains that, in the weeks after the earthquake, many people hurried through the *gallis* in

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777 O'Neill uses the term monographic presentation in opposition to the format of the group exhibition, which brings together multiple artists in one single event. O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 242–243.

778 AR, NGK, December 2015.

779 AR, NGK, December 2015.

780 Ministry of Home Affairs Nepal, "Nepal Earthquake 2072: Situation Update as of 11th May," *Ministry of Home Affairs Nepal*, May 11, 2015, accessed June 20, 2021, <http://drrportal.gov.np/document/documentdetail/14>.

781 Katharina Weiler, "Authenticity and the Re-evaluation of Cultural Heritage: The Revival of Patan Darbar Square's Sacred Sites," *Material Religion* 13, no. 3 (2017): 382.

fear of being crushed by the remaining buildings.<sup>782</sup> Similar observations led Christiane Brosius to conclude that in the aftermath of an earthquake, such as the one in Nepal, “the city, one’s home, and safe harbor, can turn into a ‘minefield.’”<sup>783</sup>

PC was quick to respond to the earthquake, not least because its members themselves were in the center of Patan, participating in a workshop on oral history when the earthquake hit. They rallied together a large network of friends and colleagues, coordinated basic relief, and set up a fundraiser for earthquake-affected areas and people.<sup>784</sup> More than that, PC wanted to change people’s feelings toward their city, to allow them to feel safe and enjoy their homes again. This became an important goal of the festival and a big part of the reason why the festival was located in Patan.

## ENGAGING THE FABRICS OF LOCALITY

*PKTM* 2015 comprises seven contemporary visual stories (including Kishor Sharma’s work on the Raute, and Frederic Lecloux’s *Everyday Epiphanies*) and five archival exhibitions from the NPL. Moreover, *PKTM* includes eight interdisciplinary projects, such as the “Photobook Library” by the Mumbai-based Bind Collective (est. 2015), and a project on *patis* (arcaded public platforms) which comprises photographs, oral histories, and a curated walk around Patan. More than half of the eighteen *PKTM* venues are located in the streets and squares around Patan. Alongside these open-air displays, eight exhibitions take place in private homes (such as the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa exhibition), existing galleries (New Chen Gallery, Image Ark), public buildings (the Old Court House), and the Patan Museum. As there are only a limited number of places in Patan and Kathmandu big enough to meet, hang out, and provide space for talks and seminars, the Yala Maya Kendra, a socio-cultural center and high-end restaurant near Patan Dhoka (Patan Gate) was chosen as the main festival hub. A second info-point with a small office-cum-storage surrounded by *bhattis* (small local eateries) and *pasals* (shops) is installed at Swotha, one hundred meters away from the main Patan Durbar Square (see Fig. 15).

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782 FDE, A, 2015.

783 Christiane Brosius, “Art in the Aftermath of a Catastrophe: Gazing, Walking, Participating in the City,” in *Breaking Views: Engaging Art in Post-Earthquake Nepal*, ed. Christiane Brosius and Sanjeev Maharjan (Kathmandu: Himal Books, 2017), 120–121.

784 The relief activities were mostly organized out of the Yellow House, a guest-house and cafe popular with expats, belonging to Kakshapati’s family. Much of the coordination happened through social networks, such as Facebook. The Nepal Photo Project was also instrumental. Initiated by six Nepal-based photographers, the Instagram account offered a platform to share critical information and document what was happening around them in the aftermath of the earthquake. A part of this project was exhibited during *PKTM* 2015, at Patan Dhoka. NepalPhotoProject, Instagram Page, accessed May 16, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/nepalphotoproject/>.

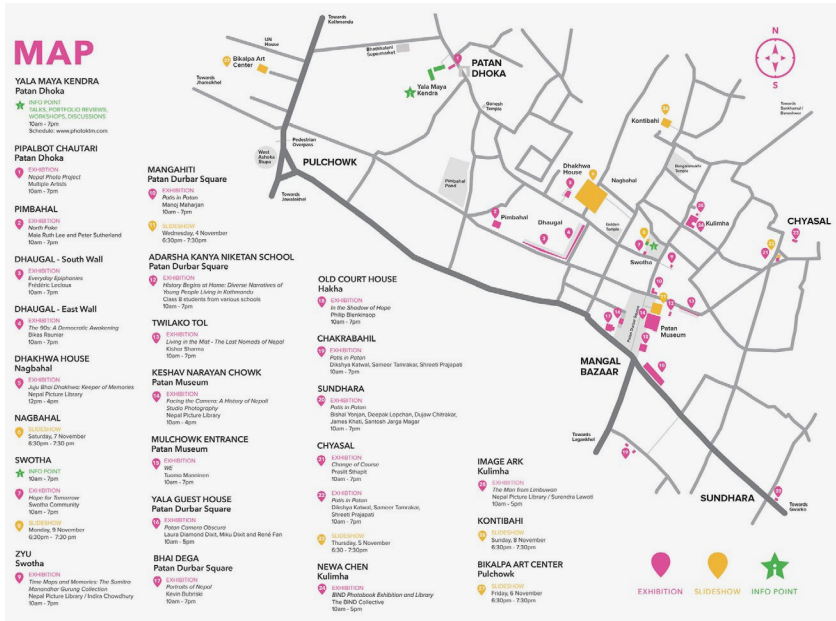


Figure 15: photo.circle, Photo Kathmandu Map, 2015. Courtesy of photo.circle.

Unlike CM in Dhaka, I do not observe different “sectional publics”<sup>785</sup> for the different venues; each location attracts a similarly heterogeneous viewership (tourists, residents, festival guests). This is surely also due to the comparatively close proximity of the venues to each other, making them easily accessible on foot. I do however notice distinct forms of engagement at and with each venue. While many visitors at the Patan Museum, especially foreign tourists, seem to stumble upon the photo studio exhibition by chance during their regular museum visit, beholders of the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa collection are much more deliberate; they consciously (yet sometimes hesitantly) enter the Dhakhwa family home to see the work on display. The exhibition of Kevin Bubriski’s *Portraits of Nepal*, located in the middle of the Patan Durbar Square, certainly attracts the biggest, most diverse audience of locals and tourists, accidental and deliberate visitors alike. The prominent location, the noise from the nearby main road, the surrounding shops, and the continuously changing audiences create a high-paced atmosphere, while other open-air exhibitions, such as those of Frédéric Lecloux, Kishor Sharma, or Prasiit Stapit are exposed to a slower day-to-day rhythm. In contrast to Bubriski’s work, they are located in the neighborhood’s hanging out spaces in the smaller alleys and squares around Patan Durbar Square. Life continues and grows around them unhampered: children play catch, senior citizens enjoy the sun, women go about their

785 Möntmann, *Kunst als sozialer Raum*.

daily chores drying crop or lentils, dogs curl up and fall asleep, vendors sell goods from their carts. In comparison to the Patan Durbar Square, these spaces are less frequented by non-residents and domestic or foreign tourists. In the days leading up to the festival, several volunteers and festival participants note that, although they have lived in Kathmandu all their life, they have never been to places such as Chyasal or Twilako Tol (see Fig. 15). The slower rhythm of these dwelled-in spaces affects the viewing process; to me, the process seems intimate and distant at the same time. The immediacy of the inhabitants and dwellers, their ongoing daily routines, stand in contrast to my own status as an outsider to this community.

The organizers of *PKTM* master the challenge of bringing together the diverse qualities and rhythms of each exhibition space and making participants, residents, and visitors feel welcome within the overall frame of the festival. They address different sectorial publics, while at the same time being respectful of the locality and its inhabitants. The success of this balancing act is based on the multi-scalar connections that the organizers cultivate. They make sure not to intrude into spaces. Over the years, PC's engagement in the art field and civil society (through the NPL, but also in the aftermath of the earthquake) has enabled its members to establish contact with administrative and community authorities, local business owners, clubs, and residents. This, in turn, allows them to procure the necessary permissions for using community spaces like Chyasal and Swotha, but also established institutions, such as the Patan Museum. Moreover, PC stresses that the residents and shop owners are given ownership of the exhibitions: they are involved in the decision-making processes and given responsibility for the safety of the displays. During my fieldwork, the many local and foreign participants and I repeatedly observed the team's compassionate and respectful engagement with the local communities. The slideshows in the predominantly Newari neighborhoods, for instance, are moderated not only in English and Nepali, but also in Newari, the language spoken by the Newari community. Evening get-togethers are organized in various places, ranging from prominent tourist hangouts such as the Café de Patan to a local *bhatti* in Chyasal. This offers a varied experience to visitors, but it also expands the economic profit from the festival into more vulnerable communities. This inclusive approach inspires volunteers, exhibitors, and guests to engage with the locality in a more open way. Rather than frequenting high-end restaurants and cafes, as many tourists do, they hang out at smaller eateries, local food stores and shops, thus boosting local businesses.<sup>786</sup>

Further, PC offers a set of guiding tools for different audiences, thus making sure that incoming visitors as well as residents are able to make

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786 For a beautiful description of such an eatery, see festival staff member (editorial team and research) Jebin Gautam's blog post about Honacha, a *bhatti* in Swotha: Jebin Gautam, "Honacha," Photo Kathmandu, September 27, 2015, <https://photoktm.com/honacha/>.

their way to the different exhibitions. Next to the bright pink, tear-shaped signs, bilingual (English and Nepali) info panels, and regular homepage updates (blog feeds about the exhibitions, podcast interviews with the visiting artists, schedule updates), the most important tool is the festival map (see Fig. 15). Like the intangible global art map, these typically A3-sized paper maps have been a constant companion throughout my fieldwork. The *Biennale* map guided me through Venice to the pavilion of Bangladesh, Sattya Media Arts Collective's (Sattya) online *Kolor Kathmandu (KK)* map navigated me through Kathmandu for the first time, and the *1mile<sup>2</sup>* map (see Fig. 6) was my orientation in the neighborhoods of Old Dhaka. Like the large-scale perennial event, the concept of the white cube, and the figure of the curator, the program-map is at risk of being reduced to a globally circulated standardized format. Much like the Renaissance perspective map, this map represents the standpoint of a "seeing eye," looking at spatial representation from the outside/the top. As a structuring device, it inscribes things into their proper "place,"<sup>787</sup> in this case, the frame of *PKTM*. A distinct sign of this structuring is the stripping away of any information not of direct interest or consequence to the festival visitor; the map exclusively marks exhibition and slideshow venues, information points and important landmarks for orientation, such as temples and ponds.

However, on closer examination, the *PKTM* map reveals interesting characteristics about spatial mobility in the city. Like in Old Dhaka, buildings in Kathmandu do not have addresses based on street names and building numbers. Streets and buildings, if they do have names, are often not known beyond the vernacular. Locals instead use *bahahs* (courtyards), *to/s* (neighborhoods), and *gallis* (alleyways) to orient themselves.<sup>788</sup> These places find a way onto the *PKTM* map, thereby educating non-locals about vernacular spatial references. Moreover, the festival map is also a place where other important information is retained. In addition to exhibitions by multiple artists, the festival comprises a multitude of activities for participants (portfolio reviews and workshops for instance) and audiences (slideshows, artist talks, and collateral events). The map thus assumes the function of a calendar—organizing not only space but time. Through it, festival coordinators provide suggestions on how and where visitors should spend their time.

While formats such as the map, the schedule, and the signboard represent a top-down management, the daily life encountered on the way to, in-between, or even in the middle of program points contrasts the effect of this totalizing structure. The festival demands visitors to undertake "forays into the city";<sup>789</sup> participating in its program necessarily includes experiencing the life around. The practice of photography (and of looking at photography), whether archival or contemporary, is inscribed into a wider

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787 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 253.

788 Toffin, *Imagination and Realities*, 96.

789 Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," 328.



socio-cultural fabric of the locality.<sup>790</sup> Images displayed in coffee shops or on construction sites momentarily pull away the gaze from the day-to-day reality of going to work, getting groceries, or visiting family. They break with the habitual visuality by introducing something unexpected to a dwelled-in locality. In a way, the photographs become the (trans)cultural brokers that introduce new visual elements and thus challenge existing visual discourses.

In reference to the earthquake, PC consciously aims to transform the predominant visuality of destruction followed by loss. In her discussion on artist Sanjeev Maharjan's creative engagement with the earthquake in Nepal, Brosius suggests that "photographs slow down the flow of movement through space, and of the flow of the passage of time."<sup>791</sup> To outsiders, the organizer's choice of venue reveals the full extent of the earthquake's destruction; it directs the view from the central traffic axes of Kathmandu to the neighborhoods of Patan and its semi-public community spaces and *gallis* where the destruction is greatest. Simultaneously, the exhibitions distract the gaze from the empty spaces and the stacked bricks. For the people dwelling in Patan, looking at the photographs offers a similar distraction, but adds an element of recognition. Hüsken and Michaels argue that festivals sustain individual and group identity especially in moments of rapid change and crisis.<sup>792</sup> Through *PKTM*, PC allows inhabitants to "take stock of changes as much as of continuities" by giving them a reason to physically walk in the streets that six months before were conceived of as "minefields."<sup>793</sup> Especially the archival exhibitions address rapid change and crisis while pointing to continuity. Through the display of works by Juju Bhai Dhakhwa, Frédéric Lecloux, Kishor Sharma, and other contributors, life in Patan calmed down; locals and foreigners alike strolled the streets leisurely and took their time to see exhibitions that spoke to memories, experiences, and emotions beyond the photographers' individual perception.

## CURATING VISUAL ARCHIVES

In his 1991 monograph *Entangled Objects*, Nicholas Thomas poignantly argues that things change context and that every such change entails an alternation in their perception, their meaning, or their value.<sup>794</sup> What is interesting to me is when, where, and why such new meanings come into being. The exhibitions in Dhaka and Kathmandu are linked through the photographs from the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa and the Studio Photography NPL collections. Despite originating from the same archive, the meanings and values they engender in each composition do not necessarily overlap. With

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790 Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," 328.

791 Brosius, "Art in the Aftermath of a Catastrophe," 114.

792 Hüsken and Michaels, "Introduction," 9–10.

793 Brosius, "Art in the Aftermath of a Catastrophe," 114.

794 Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

each exhibition, they are (re)ascribed by diverse factors such as the locality, the curators, the organizers, and the audiences.

Above, I argued that the festival follows, on a larger scale, the same mechanism that PC uses for its monographic exhibitions, regrouping images under a new heading and consciously introducing them into new contexts, new spaces, and to new audiences. *Photographs of Friendship* (2012) was exhibited at the Pipalbot Chautari (an open-air rest stop named after the Pipal or Bodhi tree) near Patan Gate. In contrast, *Postcards and Beyond* was on display at the Siddhartha Art Gallery in Baber Mahal Revisited and comprised a series of lectures by Alban von Stockhausen and other scholars. PC consciously shifts between different scales of places and sectorial publics. Thereby, it allows the NPL to transgress long-established assumptions about the role and practices of archives, both as systems that allow and control the production of knowledge,<sup>795</sup> and as keepers, organizers, and preservers of documents or images in a permanent and stable form.

Van House argues that “the meanings of archived printed photographs are often constrained by annotations, juxtapositioning and sequencing ... which reduces the ambiguity and discontinuity of photographs.”<sup>796</sup> Because NPL is an exclusively digital archive its materializations in the form of specific exhibitions constantly engender a new assemblage, they become entangled in a mess of dynamic meanings. PC consciously drives forward this process, renouncing the attribution of fixed values and meanings to individual photographs or collections. The archive actively seeks to be more than a container for images frozen in time; it does not aim to fix images at a certain point in their life nor does it salvage content and fix it in a continued idle state. On the contrary, it allows and fosters an active renegotiation, reinterpretation, and recreation of meaning. It uses history to promote social engagement in the present and future. This aim is transferred to the festival, where the images are used to share a ground-up, inclusive history and to bring people together in its experience.

#### *JUJU BHAI DHAKHWA: KEEPER OF MEMORIES*<sup>797</sup>

The curatorial team for *PKTM* 2015 comprises PC co-directors Kakshapati and Shilpakar, Chitrakar, Brosius (“Patis in Patan” project), Philippe Van Cauteren (“Jazz and Photo” residency), and Indira Chowdhury (“Time Maps and Memories: The Sumitra Manandhar Gurung Collection”). They are supported by the core PC team. Artist and educator Chitrakar is the curator for the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa exhibition. Already during his time with Sutra, Chitrakar actively worked at breaking institutional boundaries in the art

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795 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 128–130.

796 Van House, “Personal Photography,” 128.

797 *Juju Bhai Dhakhwa: Keeper of Memories* is the title of a book that PC published on the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa collection. Photo.circle and Nepal Picture Library, *Juju Bhai Dhakhwa*.

field, especially by bringing art onto the streets in the form of public interventions and performances. During the *Kathmandu International Art Festival 2012* (now known as *Kathmandu Triennale*), he worked as a creative consultant together with Kakshapati and broadened his experiences in the organization and the curation of art events. Moreover, Chitrakar's personal background of growing up in *Asan Tol*, a close-nit Newari neighborhood in Central Kathmandu, and his command of Newari are both crucial to the exhibition's successful planning and installation.

To me, the most appealing part of the exhibition is its twofold design, which creates a synergy between the exhibition content and the venue. The display starts inside the family home of the Dhakhwas and then spills onto the open space of Naghbahal. Both parts not only diverge in physical shape, but also in content. The display inside the house is arranged like a studio or artist museum, reminiscent of the Rembrandt House Museum in Amsterdam or the Tagore House in Kolkata. Family photos are displayed next to related objects such as cameras, items of clothing, and family heirlooms. In this way, Chitrakar enables visitors to gain an intimate, personalized view into the "ideologies of family"<sup>798</sup> of the urban Newar population. Together, the photographs and other material remnants introduce Juju Bhai Dhakhwa (b. 1940) as the common citizen he was, rather than as a professional documentary photographer. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Juju Bhai spontaneously recorded what caught his eye. The collection's countless portraits and auto-portraits show that he also enjoyed being photographed. They indicate Dhakhwa's passion for Bollywood-inspired fashion, hairstyles, and iconic poses. Moreover, the exhibition offers an intimate glimpse into the daily lives of his family members, from women captured doing laundry in the inner courtyard to children in their school uniforms. These photographs also give access to the rapid economic changes of the Dhakhwa family and allow conclusions about codes of gender, class, and power.<sup>799</sup> Next to images of large celebrations, one photograph for instance shows the novel practice of cement plaster on the facade of the Dhakhwa house. Additionally, Juju Bhai's beloved bike is an indicator of the family's growing spending power. The photographs exemplify NPL's unique characteristic: in contrast to the contemporary festival contributions, the archival photos are not photos taken by professional photographers. They enable visitors to catch a glimpse of what ordinary people considered photo-worthy at the time in Nepal.<sup>800</sup>

The display around Naghbahal is more public in form and content. Most of the photos are fixed on larger panels on the northwestern side of the open space. Some are dangling from the branches of a tree and others are randomly fixed on the facade of neighboring houses. The photos chosen by Chitrakar still center on the Dhakhwa family, but the narrative

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798 Vivienne and Burgess, "The Remediation of the Personal Photograph," 279–281.

799 Bourdieu, *Photography*.

800 Van House, "Personal Photography," 125–127, 130–131.

opens to include the tight, predominantly Buddhist Newar community in Naghbahal as well as wider public events, such as religious festivals and political rallies. Dhakhwa for instance captured an assembly of the Nepali Congress party, which was forbidden in the party-less, monarchical system of the Panchayat (1962–1990) and were exiled in India until late in 1976. This shot offers insight into his personal political affiliation, as well as to the rapid political changes Nepal was facing. Dhakhwa's photographs foretell the slow demise of the Panchayat system and the democratic opening of the 1990s. Further, they show an urban middle class society amid socio-cultural shifts, concerned with Bollywood-inspired fashion (flared jeans, stylish suits, and sunglasses) and religious ceremonies alike. They constitute important testimonies of *Samyak Dan*, one of the most significant Newar-Buddhist festivals celebrated in all three cities of the valley.

Overall, Chitrakar's design allows festival visitors to gaze into an otherwise uncaptured, un-depicted life. Yet it also transgresses the individual lifeworld of Juju Bhai Dhakhwa; visitors from Kathmandu can connect not only to shared religious celebrations and political movements, but also to clothing styles, sought-after commodities such as radios or motorbikes, and daily chores. Even international visitors whose cultural norms and traditions differ more profoundly from those visible in the photographs can connect to the theme of personal photography and family albums. The ubiquity of the medium of photography in contemporary life allows people to connect and identify with the content of the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa exhibition irrespective of their socio-cultural background.

During the earthquake much of this daily life was disrupted and sometimes lost; houses and temples came down, loved ones and neighbors were hurt or killed, but also daily routines, rituals, and spaces for community life were disrupted. The physical experience of walking through the narrow corridors during the Photography festival, connecting the different parts and inner courtyards of the house to Naghbahal, in combination with the easily identifiable content, allows visitors and organizers to take stock of what was destroyed during the earthquake. Through the display of otherwise ephemeral, everyday gestures and interactions, the exhibition generates hope that maybe not all is lost; it speaks to a wider socio-cultural continuity. This realization allows for a slow re-fabrication of the social-cultural life of the urban neighborhoods. The curation of the exhibition, and on a larger scale the curation of the festival in its entirety, gives people the opportunity to hang out in the areas of Patan, to be distracted by photography, to share memories, experiences, and emotions that transgress the lifeworlds captured by individual photographers. It allows participants to "rebuild a sense of identity," to "heal" and "recover" in the aftermath of a natural catastrophe, and enjoy their neighborhoods and city again.<sup>801</sup>

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801 Dina Bangdel, "Post-Earthquake Art Initiatives," in Brosius and Maharjan, *Breaking Views*, 61. See also photo.circle, ed., *Photo.Kathmandu Catalog: Edition 1 (3–9 November 2015)* (Patan: photo.circle, 2016).

*FACING THE CAMERA: A HISTORY OF NEPALI STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY*<sup>802</sup>

The exhibition at Northbrook Hall Library in Old Dhaka, which combined photos from the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa and the Studio Photography collections, was intended as a teaser, an introduction to the work of PC and its NPL initiative. The exhibition *Facing the Camera* during *PKTM* 2015 takes on a much broader objective: it embodies PC's use of "history through photography" with the aim to counter hegemonic narratives about the locality of Kathmandu and Nepal. In Old Dhaka, the photos were displayed together on a single large table. The detailed research PC conducted in preparation for *PKTM* allows a much more informed and nuanced presentation of the history of studio photography during the festival. The team, led by Kakshapati, identified different development phases and used these to create thematic sections. The exhibition starts with early portrait photography, for instance by Krishna Bahadur Chitrakar who after finishing his service as Rana court painter went on to establish the first private photography studio in Nepal. The Ranas were the first supporters of the newly introduced medium, hiring photographers to document ceremonies and social events. The second part of the exhibition focuses on the early middle-class clients; in the first half of the twentieth century, photography was still an expensive, lengthy process, which people only returned to on special occasions. The photographs thus often depict large families or couples in rigid poses, reminiscent of early court paintings. In the 1960s, photographs became mandatory on official documents in Nepal, entailing a proliferation of photo studios in urban areas. Although these photographs generally were rather formal, the NPL collection contains numerous examples of clients breaking with the rigidity and symmetry. Some smile or stare into the distance rather than fixing on the camera. Others take on iconic film-poses or play with props.

These experiments, enabled by the technological advance of the medium, became more frequent and elaborate in the 1970s and 1980s. Photos from this period make up the last section of the exhibition. They include a variety of backdrops, from cityscapes to mountain villages and poses copied from Bollywood movies (handshakes between friends or hands pensively held next to the cheek). Photographers experimented with double exposures and offered a variety of props from guitars to radios and flower vases. In our interview, Kakshapati explains that the studio photography exhibition, even more than the Juju Bhai Dhakhwa display, is easily accessible because it evokes stories many visitors experienced themselves.

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802 *Facing the Camera: A History of Nepali Studio Photography* is the title of a PC publication on studio photography. photo.circle and Nepal Picture Library, *Facing the Camera: A History of Nepali Studio Photography* (Kathmandu: Nepal Picture Library, 2016).

The kinds of responses from that Studio Photo show in Patan Museum, I mean people were—there you know you realized that you transcend this whole lack of visual literacy issue—people connect to it like that [snapping her fingers], because they are not connecting to the visual. They are connecting to their own past. ... It is so immediate. It's the most familiar form of photography to them, like a little passport photo or a family photo, or whatever. It's what they are most familiar with. That kind of immediate response you don't get anywhere else.<sup>803</sup>

By bringing these photos—which mostly originated within the private realm of the family or the cramped space of a studio—into the public and into the frame of a contemporary photography festival, PC turns them into cultural brokers transgressing the circumscription of the art field. On the one side, it allows the archival photographs to enter into the wider socio-cultural domain; they become part of a continuous collective memory. On the other side, visitors hitherto unfamiliar with the art field are invited to connect to the medium of photography through their own experiences and day-to-day practices. They do not need to be familiar with the visual discourse and canon that constitute this field; they can access the medium through their physical experience of having been in front of a camera. PC and its application of photography as a means to social change continuously disrupts the relative autonomy of the field of art production. At the same time, the collective continues to broaden the visual discourse and the canon within this field. Its activities question the divide between aesthetic and political, sacred and mundane, high and low culture. This becomes clear when we take a look at the venue of the exhibition.

The Patan Museum was established in 1997 in the premises of the Patan Durbar as the first self-sustainable public museum in Nepal. It is managed autonomously by a board of directors, which, next to employees of Tribhuvan University, the Department of Archeology, and the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, also includes Siddhartha Art Gallery founder Sangeeta Thapa.<sup>804</sup> The curation of its collection is focused on aesthetics; the display, including the choice of lighting, the cleanliness and arrangement of the display cases, and the selection of a small number of extraordinary specimens emphasizes the formal elements of the objects. Mixed with the traditional Newari style architecture, the museum attracts more than 50,000 visitors every year.<sup>805</sup> Patricia Davison argues that the

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803 AR, NGK, December 2015.

804 "Home," Patan Museum, Government of Nepal, accessed May 18, 2021, <http://www.patanmuseum.gov.np/>.

805 The museum records a visible decrease in visitor numbers, especially among SAARC/Chinese Visitors and Foreigners in the year following the earthquake. While there were 72,670 visitors in 2015, there were only 46,583 in 2016. For 2017, the number climbed to 176,906, indicating a substantial increase in foreign visitors. Government of Nepal, "Home."

institution of the museum authorizes and institutionalizes “versions of the past” as public memory.<sup>806</sup> This process is always selective and exclusive, it “involves both remembering and forgetting.”<sup>807</sup> The Patan Museum, according to its mission statement, is dedicated to the preservation and exhibition of “Sacred Art, Culture and Iconography of Hinduism and Buddhism.”<sup>808</sup> It thus consciously reminds of the “Sacred” material culture of Nepal’s most prevalent belief systems, Hinduism and Buddhism. Especially their aesthetic qualities are inscribed into the visual discourse and canon of the field. The mundane, the common, the everyday, along with other systems of belief and worship, are excluded. The NPL transgresses this mechanism.

In its digital form, the NPL is a potentially infinite and thus dynamic and inclusive archive of Nepal’s visual culture. From this repository, PC introduces mundane lifeworlds, ordinary people and their day-to-day practices, into the Patan Museum. For the time of the festival, the museums’ collection policy is undercut and its mission to safeguard is extended from what is considered “high culture” to multiple ethnicities, religions, genders, and castes. *Facing the Camera* thus adds to PC’s overall objective to contest uniform and exclusive circumscriptions of Nepali history and identity using photography as its main tool. In the interview, Kakshapati explains that this objective has been welcome by the museum itself. Both parties are negotiating the possibilities of a long-term cooperation, including future NPL exhibitions.

Festivals like *PKTM* and *CM* are extraordinary events in the sense that they bring together people from different places and backgrounds under one theme—photography—for a short-term period. The two festivals take hold of spaces outside the realm of contemporary art production, spaces that usually serve other functions, such as a former boarding house in Old Dhaka or the streets in Patan, or that represent institutionalized exclusivist visual discourses, such as the Patan Museum. Thereby they cause “disruptions to the ‘business as usual’ condition of the city.”<sup>809</sup> They momentarily unsettle the lives of all participants, be it the foreign photographers travelling to Dhaka or Kathmandu for a week, the organizers suspending their work and family responsibilities (and often their sleep and eating habits) throughout the duration of the festival, the audiences who take the time to see the exhibitions, or the institutions that suspend their regular operation for the time being. These kinds of disruptions from the daily routine are associated with a joyous atmosphere, but they also create unique

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806 Patricia Davison, “Museums and the Re-shaping of Memory,” in *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Gerard Corsane (London: Routledge, 2005), 186.

807 Davison, “Museums and the Re-shaping of Memory,” 186.

808 “Mission,” Patan Museum, Government of Nepal, November 20, 2018, <http://www.patanmuseum.gov.np/content/3/2018/75251176/>.

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

opportunities to convey long-term objectives.<sup>810</sup> For both PC and Drik, the format of the festival is a valuable platform to build and sustain alliances on a multi-scalar level. But both festivals are grounded in a set of more durable projects, initiatives, and institutions. By connecting with neighborhood authorities, urban audiences, fellow field members, colleagues from the region, and photography enthusiasts worldwide, they extend their overall reach of action in the emerging field of contemporary art production. Both collectives consciously engage in brokering new visual elements into the discourses they have been socialized and educated in. The collectives contribute to their revitalization by consciously introducing archival material, stories of ordinary citizens, journalistic approaches, fine art techniques, and socio-political issues. They evoke counter-narratives to hegemonic, top-down constructions of identity and nationality: inward, against the state's cultural work of constructing a united national identity based on exclusive economic, cultural, and religious notions (high-caste hill Brahmins or Muslim Bengali middle class), and outward, as a majority world regaining control over its own representation. Both festivals create momentum—a widely visible platform to promote social change through the valorization of vernacular (hi)stories.

The qualities of both festivals are significantly shaped by the positioning of the artist-led initiatives that founded them. The artists involved are able to call upon different scales of connections that they have strenuously built over the years to reach their objectives. The branding and localization strategies employed in my next case study, the *DAS*, are equally dependent on the position of its organizers within the field. The Samdani Art Foundation and its co-founders Nadia and Rajeed Samdani are part of the economically and culturally powerful art jet set. Similar to the artist-led initiatives, they contest the existing art field dominated by nationally circumscribed *modi operandi*, values, and canons. They aim at instituting more dynamic connections between contemporary art actors especially within the South Asian region. They also aspire to establish the *DAS* as a, if not the, central node for contemporary art discourse and research within this regional network—a “meeting of the minds.”<sup>811</sup> Their position within the mobile center connects them to key players from the global art world (curators, collectors, art writers, museum managers, and so on), and allows them to broker cultural and social capital to Bangladeshi artists. What opportunities do these strategies yield for artist collectives and the involved artists? I zoom in on the artwork of Britto co-founder Lipi and examine the way she manages to create a room of her own within the *Summit* and in its frame.

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810 Hüsken and Michaels, “Introduction.”

811 Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed., 3.



## Interlude: Room of My Own

*On the morning before the opening of the Dhaka Art Summit 2014, I meet Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman at their home, a few minutes' walk from Britto Space. Together with Britto member Shimul Saha and Nepal-based Sunil Sigdel we cram into a tiny CNG (a motorized three-wheeler running on compressed natural gas) and head to the Shilpakala Academy. We enter the National Art Gallery and take the elevator straight to the fourth floor, where the solo projects will be on view. The atmosphere is both tense and convivial, as it often is on the days before the opening of a festival; a million things need to be done before the opening, and the whole building is buzzing with artists, workers, and volunteers. Britto members Promotesh Das Pulak, Yasmin Jahan Nupur, Kabir Ahmed Massum Chisty, and Ayesha Sultana are nominated for the Samdani Art Award and are setting up their artworks in their respective sections. Tayeba Begum Lipi needs to make a few changes to her solo display, entitled Room of My Own, and wants to check in with Istanbul- and London-based Pi Artworks, the gallery representing her work as part of the DAS gallery showcase (Fig. 16). She takes me on a tour through the section, making introductions and heartily greeting passing-by acquaintances and friends. We end up at the "Britto Booth," where the collective will be showcasing and hopefully selling artworks by its members. Then Pooja Sood, director of KHOJ and (former) coordinator of SANA drops in and is off to her next round, showing Sood around the exhibition grounds.*



Figure 16: Tayeba Begum Lipi, *Room of My Own*, 2014. Solo Project at the Dhaka Art Summit, Shilpakala Academy. Photo: author.

*When I enter Room of My Own on the following day, the intimate atmosphere in the dimly lit room immediately draws me in. The hustle and bustle of the opening has calmed and I have the room all to myself. The central piece is a glass dish displayed on top of a white wooden structure. It is filled with clear water and holds a set of eerie looking, severed transparent hands. Two medical clamps and several soaked tampons enhance the unsettling, clinical feeling emanating from the installation. This feeling is furthered by a series of ultrasound images on the right wall. More than the images themselves, the razor blades that serve as a frame are disconcerting. I know them to be a recurring motif in Tayeba Begum Lipi's work; I have seen them used in the brasseries on display at the Venice Biennale. For the first time, however, I am struck by the violence they give off—maybe in juxtaposition with the corporeal and vulnerable content of the ultrasound?*

*I take refuge in the close-up, black and white photographs in the back. They show the artist playing, almost flirting, with the camera. I catch myself imagining the situation in which they were taken and immediately feel a sense of shame; I have become an intruder. I move on to the golden corner piece, which by its shape could be either a womb or a vagina. It is formed out of safety pins that, on closer inspection, look like tiny sanitary napkins. The last piece, a glass box filled with children's clothes, constitutes a harsh contrast to the rest of the installation, especially to the delicate, golden shape in the corner. Otherwise absent from the room, the box is filled with colors: green shirts, red shoes, blue socks, and a bib that reads: "I love mommy."*

#### THE DHAKA ART SUMMIT AS A "PRIVILEGED ZONE OF COMMUNICATION"<sup>812</sup>

The Samdani Art Foundation is part of a group of foundations that have established themselves as important actors in the art field in Nepal and Bangladesh. The Siddhartha Art Foundation (2011) and the Bengal Foundation (1986) have been engaged in building a translocal network, opening new markets and channeling knowledge (about new mediums, curation, art writing) to the young generation of contemporary artists. The social, economic, and cultural capital that artists access through this network allows them to expand their scope of action by gaining for instance access to gallery representation abroad or receiving financial support for collaborative projects.

The Samdani Foundation is the most recent addition to this group of supportive actors. It was founded in Dhaka in 2011, the same year as the Siddhartha Art Foundation in Kathmandu. In comparison to Sangeeta Thapa, who had been working in the field for more than twenty years at the time of its founding, Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani were perceived as relative newcomers to the field of contemporary art by most of my research partners. Rajeeb Samdani is very conscious of his role as a newcomer and, in our interview, describes himself through the lens of the Bangladeshi art

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812 Fillitz, "Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art," 90–91.

field: in comparison to them, he only “came to the art scene like four–five years back.”<sup>813</sup> The couple belongs to a very small ultra-rich upper class that made its fortune primarily through Bangladesh’s most profitable sectors—ready-made garments, pharmaceuticals, and food—since the boom of the industrial and service sectors in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>814</sup> Nadia Samdani was born in Britain and inherited her interest in art from her family, as she states in various interviews and on the Samdani homepage.<sup>815</sup> She began collecting at age twenty-two and, after marrying Rajeeb Samdani in 2009, passed on her passion.<sup>816</sup> Rajeeb Samdani is the managing director of the Golden Harvest Group, a large business engaged in diverse ventures from food (notably frozen products) and information technology, to real estate and insurance.<sup>817</sup> Their economic resources and Nadia Samdani’s British passport allow the couple to be part of a globally mobile business elite. When in Dhaka, they reside in the north of the city where foreign embassies, expat clubs, restaurant chains, and supranational institutions and businesses are located.

Their interest in art and notably contemporary art from Bangladesh and the South Asian region is reflected in their art collection; from an initial interest in modern masters such as Picasso and Rabindranath Tagore, they widened their focus to contemporary art by acquiring works by artists such as Lipi and Naeem Mohaiemen. A large piece by Pakistan-born artist Rashid Rana was prominently displayed in Rajeeb Samdani’s office while I was taking his interview. The impressive and diverse collection has earned the couple a position among the biggest art collectors in Bangladesh and beyond.<sup>818</sup> The collection precipitated the initiative of a more supportive role, the first step of which was the founding of the Samdani Art Foundation.<sup>819</sup> One of the Foundation’s first activities was to facilitate the participation of two Bangladeshi artists in a collateral event to the *Venice Biennale* in 2011.<sup>820</sup> Since then, they have consolidated their role as art patrons: they

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813 AR, RS, September 2015.

814 Rashed A. M. Titumir, “Industrialization,” in Riaz and Rahman, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*, 169.

815 “Our Team,” Samdani Art Foundation, accessed September 24, 2018, <https://www.samdani.com.bd/our-team/>.

816 Brownell Mitic, “Putting Bangladeshi Art on the Map.”

817 See “About Golden Harvest,” Golden Harvest, accessed February 22, 2021, <https://www.goldenharvestbd.com/about>.

818 For example, in 2016, Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani were listed on the Artnet News Index of art collectors: “The Artnet News Index: The World’s Top 100 Art Collectors for 2016, Part Two,” *Artnet News*, June 15, 2016, accessed June 19, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/market/worlds-top-100-art-collectors-part-two-513953>.

819 “Our Story,” Samdani Art Foundation, accessed September 24, 2018, <https://www.samdani.com.bd/our-story/>.

820 Entitled OPEN, the International Exhibition of Sculptures and Installations, this event constitutes a collateral program to the *Venice Biennale*. Its fourteenth edition showcased thirty artists from all over the world, including Ebadur Rahman and Ronni Ahmmed, and took place in September 2011. Due to Samdani’s involvement in this collateral event, they are often mistakenly believed to have funded the first Bangladeshi pavilion in Venice in the same year. “Bangladeshi

are founding members of the Harvard South Asia Institute's Arts Advisory Council and members of the Tate South Asia Acquisitions Committee. Their flagship project, however, is the *DAS*.

The first edition of the *Summit* in 2012 exclusively centered on the art field in Dhaka. The organizers seem to aim at connecting with and rallying together the established institutions in this urban field.<sup>821</sup> The two main national art institutions, the Shilpakala Academy and the National Museum, are partners of the event. The Academy serves as a venue (as it does until today) and the Bangladesh Museum organizes an exhibition on the master painters.<sup>822</sup> According to a spokesperson of the Foundation, "all the major art galleries" in Dhaka are represented, and a total of thirty artworks are sold "in direct artist-to-buyer transactions."<sup>823</sup> Individual members of Britto, such as Sultana, Pulak, and Rahman are repeatedly mentioned as participants in the press coverage. In the year following the first summit, the connections between the Foundation and the collective expand: in 2013, Lipi and Sultana participate in the *India Art Fair* as part of the Samdani Art Foundation showcase. Moreover, Rahman's multi-media project "The Replacement," on property ownership under military rule in Bangladesh, is supported by the Foundation.<sup>824</sup> The installation, comprising a vintage ambassador car, a mass of discarded army boots, and a video projection, figures prominently at the entrance of the *India Art Fair*.<sup>825</sup> The growing alliance between the Foundation and Britto becomes even more obvious in the *Summit's* second edition, which is the focus of my discussion. For the 2014 event, the organizers also broaden their focus to the subcontinent: it includes fourteen solo art projects by established artists from the South Asian region, such as Beaconhouse

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Art Collectors Participating in Venice Exhibition," *The Daily Star*, August 19, 2011, accessed June 21, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-199172>.

821 The homepage of the *DAS* only offers information on the post-2014 editions and the press coverage represents a fraction of the later editions. Nevertheless, all major Indian English-language newspapers reported on the inaugural *DAS*. See for instance: "South Asia Becomes New Global Art Hub," *Hindustan Times*, April 25, 2012, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/art-and-culture/south-asia-becomes-new-global-art-hub/story-E7kdpSZd40V-BUbuw8qjQHM.html>; Paromita Chakrabarti, "Early Strokes," *The Indian Express*, April 22, 2012, accessed May 15, 2018, <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/early-strokes/939839/>; Gargi Gupta, "Collector's Corner," *Business Standard*, January 21, 2013, accessed June 20, 2021, [http://www.business-standard.com/article/beyond-business/collector-s-corner-112030300055\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/beyond-business/collector-s-corner-112030300055_1.html); Shailaja Tripathi, "Art Scaling Heights," *The Hindu*, April 11, 2012, accessed June 21, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/art-scaling-heights/article3304061.ece>.

822 Tripathi, "Art Scaling Heights."

823 *Hindustan Times*, "South Asia Becomes New Global Art Hub."

824 "Our Story," Samdani Art Foundation.

825 Natasha Ginwala, "The 5th India Art Fair and Parallel Events," *Art Agenda*, February 8, 2013, accessed June 20, 2021, <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/the-5th-india-art-fair-and-parallel-events>; Shreya Ray, "Preview, Eastern Promises: Bangladesh at the Centre Stage of This Year's India Art Fair Is a Sign That Collectors Globally are Looking East," *Livemint*, January 25, 2013, updated March 6, 2013, accessed May 17, 2018, <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/HWkxhNDVbK28n1PN57nnK/Preview--Eastern-promises.html>.

National University Dean Rashid Rana, India-based Shilpa Gupta, and Britto founders Rahman and Lipi. Similar to the first edition, *DAS* brings together fifteen Bangladeshi galleries, but also gives space to seventeen galleries focused on South Asia, such as Experimenter from Kolkata, the Siddhartha Art Gallery from Kathmandu, and the aforementioned Pi Art-works operating out of Istanbul and London. Additionally, there are five curated group exhibitions.<sup>826</sup> Moreover, the Samdanis have invited Los Angeles-born curator Diana Campbell Betancourt to organize the solo shows. Campbell Betancourt, who has since moved on to become the artistic director of the Samdani Art Foundation, is joined by a group of regionally active and experienced curators such as Deepak Ananth and Veeranganakumari Solanki to design the group exhibitions. The speakers' panels, also coordinated by Campbell Betancourt, include professionals from major European Institutions such as the Centre Pompidou and the British Museum.<sup>827</sup>

The selection of internationally established curators, panelists, and artists highlights the new connections that the Samdani Art Foundation has formed in the art field since the first edition of the *Summit*. It marks the Samdanis' growing reach, in terms of the social network they can call upon and the economic resources they can mobilize. At the same time, the attendance of these actors shows the organizers shifting agenda, from bringing together a local field focused on Dhaka to "increas[ing] artistic engagement between Bangladesh and the rest of the world."<sup>828</sup> In an interview printed in the French art magazine *L'Officiel Art*, Nadia Samdani elaborates that she aims for the *DAS* to be a research platform for people interested in South Asian art—a place to discover what is happening in Bangladesh. At the same time, the *Summit* should attract a local public wanting to experience art at the "highest standard."<sup>829</sup>

As I discussed earlier, its organizers consciously chose to name their event "summit" in order to distinguish it from more codified formats such as fairs or biennials, as well as to allow themselves a greater freedom in shaping its form. Initially, the event had a mixed commercial and non-commercial agenda, with both gallery representations and group exhibitions. From its 2014 edition onwards, the *DAS* has been branded as "the world's largest non-commercial art festival dedicated to South Asian art."<sup>830</sup> Due to the continued inclusion of gallery representations however there remains some confusion within the wider field about the *Summit's* nature. This is possibly also related to its Indian namesake, the *India Art Summit*,

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826 Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed.

827 Samdani Art Foundation, "Speakers Panel: Curated by Diana Campbell Betancourt," in Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed., 115–120.

828 Samdani Art Foundation, "Dhaka Art Summit 2014 Report," 2014, accessed June 9, 2016, <https://www.dhakaartsummit.org/s/DAS-2014-Report-rs.pdf>.

829 William Massey, "Coup d'Éclat à Dacca: Conversation entre Diana Campbell Betancourt et Nadia Samdani," *L'Officiel Art* 12 (2014–2015): 123.

830 Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed., 3.

which was inaugurated in 2008. In 2012 the Delhi-based event seemingly embraced its commercial nature and was rebranded as *India Art Fair*.<sup>831</sup> In our interview, Rajeeb Samdani makes it very clear that the *DAS* is not an art fair. He deplores that many people have mistaken the event for a commercial fair due to the gallery sections in 2012 and 2014.<sup>832</sup> His eagerness to clear this misunderstanding is emphasized in an e-mail that reaches me in February 2016; on behalf of the Samdani Art Foundation, I am kindly asked to “correct” a mistake in my initial research proposal, accessible on my university’s homepage. It reads: “*Dhaka Art Summit* is and was never an art fair ... the foundation never had any financial benefit on their [the galleries’] participation and if any art was sold, we never claimed any money from them. The *Summit* is a non-commercial platform to showcase South Asian art.”<sup>833</sup> Samdani seeks to establish the *Summit* as a “research platform for South Asia.”<sup>834</sup> The couple’s emphasis on research and quality points to a strategy that is more complex than establishing an exhibition space for contemporary art, or a hub from which Bangladeshi artists can bring their work “to the attention of curators and galleries worldwide.”<sup>835</sup> Nevertheless, I understand my research partners’ confusion about the organizer’s agenda. The actors’ position in the art field, as part of a highly mobile jet set with access to global flows of capital and leading institutions, takes effect on the localization of the *Summit*. Moreover, their double position as collectors and organizers of a non-commercial event makes it difficult for artists to assign clear-cut motivations and thus evaluate the nature of the Samdani’s intended relationship with the field; is their interest in a certain artist or artwork based on the accumulation of personal economic capital, or is their goal to increase the cultural capital of the field as a whole? In my discussion of the Bengal and Siddhartha art foundations, I already broached upon the potential pitfalls of combining multiple (and possibly conflicting) agendas under the head of one organization. Thomas Fillitz’s explorations on the global art market offer a starting point to explore this effect and the *Summit*’s complex *modus operandi* beyond narrow commercial or non-commercial distinctions before I move on to discuss the relationship between *DAS* and Britto.

Fillitz identifies three distinct circles in the “global art world”: auction houses, galleries, and art fairs.<sup>836</sup> Each of these circles follows its own rationale: auction houses are based on a logic of gambling, and establish artworks as investment assets; galleries largely operate according to a moral economy, assessing the artwork according to its cultural value; and art fairs follow a logic of glamour and cater to an “economically viable clientele that is ready to express its socioeconomic success in a lifestyle

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831 Brosius, “‘Catching up’ to the World.”

832 AR, RS, September 2015.

833 PE, SAF, February 2016.

834 AR, RS, September 2015.

835 Ray, “Preview, Eastern Promises.”

836 Fillitz, “Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art.”

that is largely demonstrated through art as a luxury good."<sup>837</sup> This glamour logic not only consists in realizing artworks as "luxury goods," but also in establishing whole events as "luxury commodities."<sup>838</sup> In order to accomplish this, art fairs, in opposition to art biennials, Fillitz argues, "aim at constituting themselves as privileged zones of communication and information," as spaces that generate new ideas and contacts.<sup>839</sup> Although the Samdanis reject any relation to art fairs, their emphasis on creating a "research platform" and their aim to show contemporary art at the "highest standard" in order to put Bangladesh on the map, shows Fillitz's logic of "glamour" at play. This becomes most visible in the *Summit's* talk program.

Nadia Samdani describes the 2014 talk program, comprised of three panel discussions, one book launch, and two conversations in the VIP section, as a "three-day meeting of the minds."<sup>840</sup> It brings together representatives of renowned institutions that have set the pace for the art field for decades: Richard Blurton (British Museum, London), Sandhini Poddar (Guggenheim, New York), Jessica Morgan (Tate Modern, London), and Aurélien Lemonier (Centre Pompidou, Paris). The motivation to bring these actors to Dhaka is to establish a direct connection between Bangladesh and the centers of the artistic field. This strategy aims to counterbalance the lack of art infrastructure in Bangladesh that would otherwise allow artists to connect to the wider field. Rajeeb Samdani explains that it was easier (and economically more viable) to "bring the world" to Dhaka than fostering the mobility of a small number of artists internationally.<sup>841</sup> Moreover, a direct connection to the center entails a renegotiation of Bangladesh's position in the region, especially in relation to India: "We used to see Pakistan use India as a platform," Samdani is quoted saying in an article published by Indian financial daily *Livemint*.<sup>842</sup> Bringing the mobile center to Dhaka allows artists in Bangladesh to be independent of India's infrastructure and access to the market. By fostering the discourse between central actors and audiences in Dhaka, the Samdanis also aim at shifting existing asymmetries: the "meeting of the minds" in Dhaka means highlighting the fact that Bangladesh is not merely a new participant, but a proactive player within the global contemporary discourse. Despite these efforts, however, the center quickly (re)claims the status quo of power relations. During the talk program, members of the audience ask questions about the possibilities to loosen the prevailing hegemony of European institutions in the art field. Several comments address the fear that contemporary artworks (like innumerable antiquities before) will leave the region and end up in museum collections in Europe and America, inaccessible to South Asian audiences. The panelists' answers reaffirm

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837 Fillitz, "Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art," 93.

838 Fillitz, "Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art," 86.

839 Fillitz, "Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art," 90–91.

840 Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed., 3.

841 AR, RS, September 2015.

842 Ray, "Preview, Eastern Promises."

existing power asymmetries and put Dhaka (and the rest of the periphery) in its rightful place at the “end of the global development spectrum.”<sup>843</sup> Richard Blurton and Sandhini Poddar, for instance, agree that there is no infrastructure ready to bear the responsibility of preserving valuable cultural artefacts anywhere outside the West. Therefore, this responsibility lies with the established and experienced institutions.

The Samdanis have become powerful actors in the field and are able to draw in considerable amounts of social and economic capital. They aim at establishing the *DAS* as a critical source of information on contemporary art practice and as a result shift existing center-periphery configurations; they contest the position of Europe and America as the default locations for discourse making, and India’s position as an intermediate platform for access to socio-economic capital. Despite their aim to unsettle these existing power asymmetries, they indeed attest to the West’s remaining hegemonic position: the Samdani Art Foundation spends a lot of resources promoting the *DAS* as a new entry in the global art calendar. In the 2014 edition, their strategy focuses almost unilaterally on connections to the mobile center, often at the detriment of connections on other scales. Their relationship with the locality of Dhaka and their desire to create spaces for the celebrity lifestyle are examples of their effort to appeal to the high-class art jet set by branding the *DAS* as a “luxury good.”<sup>844</sup>

The Exhibition Grounds are strategically located in the center of Dhaka and well connected with the International Airport and commercial zones like Mothijeel, Paltan, and Gulshan. With a range of high-end hotels, restaurants and markets within close proximity and easy accessibility by public transport, the Shilpakala Academy complex is the ideal venue to host *Dhaka Art Summit 2014*.<sup>845</sup>

This description paints the Shilpakala Academy as an “ideal venue,” not because of its cultural value as an established institution in the field of culture in the country, but because of its connectedness in terms of transport (airport, public transport) and economic capital (commercial zones, markets, high-end hotels). This information is not directed at a local, art-interested crowd, but at an internationally mobile and economically affluent audience. The text appeared on the *DAS* homepage, as well as in a twenty-page leaflet that came with a special VIP kit available upon registration with the foundation.<sup>846</sup> The VIP program follows the mechanism of a preview program that many big scale events offer for journalists as well as specialists and professional audiences. It guarantees entrance on the opening day (the general public is only allowed on the second day), access

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

844 Fillitz, “Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art,” 86.

845 Samdani Art Foundation, “Dhaka Art Summit VIP Booklet.” The text used to be available on the *DAS* website but has since been removed.

846 Samdani Art Foundation, “Dhaka Art Summit VIP Booklet.”



to the “VIP Lounge” with its restaurant and exclusive talk program, and a special “off-site tour” to the Parliament Building, designed by renowned American architect Louis Khan, as well as a three-hour “Dhaka City & Shopping Tour” to “landmarks” including the Supreme Court, Curzon Hall, and some of Dhaka’s “best boutiques.”<sup>847</sup> It lists local institutions as “Corollary Exhibitions” (among others Britto Space and the Alliance Française) and gives information on a public art project by Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective.<sup>848</sup>

The choice of the Shilpakala Academy premises as the single venue (beyond these exclusive forays into the city), according to Rajeeb Samdani, represents the organizers’ aspiration to allow as many people as possible to see the exhibition in its entirety. Samdani however also stresses that many people visited the different galleries listed in the program; “seventy people visited the Parliament building,” and they were taken to “Jatra, Aarong, all those handicraft places.”<sup>849</sup> During his elaborations, it becomes clear that while imagining a large, diverse audience, his actual focus is on a small elite that shares his *habitus*. This elite wants to see art in a hassle-free environment, with opportunities to shop and visit corollary events in select galleries.

We also do not want the people to sit in the crazy traffic. This time, if you see the review of *Istanbul Biennale*, some of the reviews are really bad because of heat. The exhibition was scattered all over the city. We had to walk like crazy. Traffic jam was bad. So, a lot of reviews actually came also quite negative. You also have to think about the comfort of the people.<sup>850</sup>

This quote, especially the comparison to the *Istanbul Biennale*, clarifies that Samdani and the audience he has in mind belong to the high-class art jet set made up of collectors, curators, gallerists, and art writers. Due to their high rate of mobility, they are pressed for time and expect to see art from a certain locality (Dhaka, Bangladesh, or South Asia) “in a nutshell”—as one of the India-based curators put it during a taxi ride.<sup>851</sup> The localities, the cities of Istanbul or Dhaka, in Samdani’s eyes, are obstructions to this objective, rather than creative assets. They are marked by time-consuming

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847 Ahmed, *Discover the Monuments of Bangladesh*, 213–214. Curzon Hall was founded by Viceroy of India Lord Curzon upon his visit to Dhaka in 1904. It forms part of a group of buildings combining Mughal and European trends created in the wake of the Partition of Bengal in 1906. It was initially intended as a town hall but is today used by the Faculty of Science of Dhaka University.

848 The citywide public art project by the Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective was entitled *Meanwhile I Elsewhere*. It included 160 billboards and road signs transformed by the collective to display clock-faces and word pairs relating to or opposing each other. Raqs Media Art Collective, “Public Art Project,” in Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed., 80.

849 AR, RS, September 2015.

850 AR, RS, September 2015.

851 FDE, A, February 2014

traffic and uncomfortable heat that need to be overcome. The Shilpakala Academy is introduced as a resort: it is located in a well-connected, central area and provides enough space to host the entire *DAS* program. The VIP format is an additional tool to sustain a celebrity lifestyle in this (or any) locality. But what about the “local public” that Nadia Samdani mentions in her *L’Officiel Art* interview?<sup>852</sup>

The Shilpakala Academy is a public, national institution, which allows free admission to all visitors. The 2014 *DAS* edition attracts 70,000 visitors in three days. For *DAS* 2016, which lasts one day longer, the number doubles to 138,000 visitors.<sup>853</sup> The art fair and the lifestyle it sustains, Fillitz argues, “is organized in such a way that it invites a wider audience to join in.”<sup>854</sup> The *DAS* organizers are very deliberate in the *Summit’s* educative mission. All local press outlets are invited and cover the event in English and in Bengali. Due to an extensive outreach program, 2500 students from over thirty schools receive tours.<sup>855</sup> Yet there are also “subtly erected barriers for VIP lounges and exclusive events” that keep these wider audiences from fully taking part in the “privileged zone of communication and information.”<sup>856</sup> Visitors are welcome to explore the artworks and engage in the public panel discussions, but they are kept separate from the VIP lounge and its exclusive food and talk program. They are denied access to the hassle-free, glamorous lifestyle celebrated during invite-only evening dinners and exclusive shopping tours. The *Summit* thus operates on two different scales: one is a broad local scale that draws in a wider urban audience by taking place at a large, nationally established venue with free admission, through an outreach and education program, and a citywide public art project by the Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective.<sup>857</sup> The other is a very limited global scale that is tailored to the high-class art jet set. Both scales follow their own value system and are purposefully kept apart with no transgressions in between. What Fillitz fails to emphasize is that the global replication of this mechanism in art fairs is in fact the expression of a deeply ingrained asymmetry between what is perceived as center and periphery. Due to their own position in the field, the Samdanis know the mechanisms operative in the global contemporary frame. They are aware of the markets’ craving for newness and cater to it. They are also aware of the time constraints and need for comfort expected by the mobile art jet set. By complying with the *habitus*, they manage to bring in large amounts of capital, which they can pass on to the artists. But what about the artists and the contemporary art on display at the *DAS*? Here too Fillitz’s logic can be seen at play.

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852 Massey, “Coup d’Éclat à Dacca,” 123.

853 “Frequently Asked Questions,” Dhaka Art Summit, Samdani Art Foundation, accessed June 09, 2016, <http://www.dhakaartsummit.org/faqs/>.

854 Fillitz, “Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art,” 90–91.

855 “Frequently Asked Questions,” Dhaka Art Summit.

856 Fillitz, “Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art,” 90–91.

857 Raqs Media Art Collective, “Public Art Project.”

The *Dhaka Art Summit* and the Samdani Foundation endeavor to transform the city of Dhaka into a hub for South Asian art and its excellence breaking conventional ideas about where the region's center lies.<sup>858</sup>

This quote from the 2014 catalog again raises the center-periphery discourse; it suggests that it is the *Summit's* excellence that allows it to circumvent, even surpass, Delhi's role as the region's leading platform to the global art market. Apart from logistics and organization, this "excellence" is foremost related to the exhibition content. In the above-mentioned interview, Nadia Samdani speaks of "art at the highest standard." Rajeeb Samdani asserts that the young generation of Bangladeshi artists are doing "contemporary cutting-edge art."<sup>859</sup> The 2014 catalog advertises fourteen solo shows "by internationally acclaimed and established artists," five of which were born in Bangladesh,<sup>860</sup> among them Britto co-founder Lipi.

### ROOM OF MY OWN

Lipi's solo project at the *DAS 2014*, which I describe in the Interlude: *Room of My Own*, denotes the crux of her journey as an artist. It is the result of her conscious decision to disclose the intimate background to a series of previous works, and at the same time to bring closure to a specific chapter of her life. The fact that it is part of the solo projects at *DAS* speaks to the significance of this event in the artist's career. But it allows insights into the type of contemporary artwork foregrounded by the event.

Lipi grew up in the north of Bangladesh as one of twelve children. In our interview during the *Kathmandu Triennale* in March 2017, I ask Lipi to elaborate on her use of materials. When she was growing up, she explains, whenever a child was about to be born, a new, shiny razor blade was bought to cut the umbilical cord. Thus, for her, the razor blade became intrinsically tied to both the pain and joy of childbirth.<sup>861</sup> When she started using the razor blades in 2008, the emphasis was solely on the pain: during a residency at RM Studio in Lahore (Pakistan), a program initiated by artist R. M. Naeem, she was searching for a sharp, violent object to express the delicate political situation between Bangladesh and Pakistan. She found the razor blade.<sup>862</sup> In time however, the blades underwent a physical change, from a dangerously sharp tool to a custom-built stainless-steel artistic element that could be manipulated and shaped in different ways.

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858 Diana Campbell Betancourt, "Then/Why Not," in Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed., 24.

859 AR, RS, September 2015.

860 Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit*, 2nd ed., 3.

861 AR, TBL, March 2017.

862 Alexandra Alexa, "Tayeba Begum Lipi Wields Razor Blades to Address Violence Against Women," *Artsy*, August 6, 2015, accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-tayeba-begum-lipi-wields-razor-blades-to-address>.

The blade also shifted in meaning, as her work for the 2011 *Venice Biennale* demonstrates. *Bizarre and Beautiful* includes 3000 stainless steel razor blades assimilated to form brassieres. Lipi moves from the national scale of South Asian politics to the intimate scale of matrimonial politics. She addresses the female body and its subjection to the patriarchal structures in Bangladesh. The combination of the blade and the bra emphasizes the dichotomous relation between desire and violence—between passion and abuse in intimate relations. It generates a “sense of foreboding,” while also eliciting arousal.<sup>863</sup> One year later, at the 2012 *DAS*, Lipi exhibits *Love Bed*, a life-size bed entirely made of razor blades. It takes up the dichotomy from *Bizarre and Beautiful*, but directly situates it in the “shared space of domesticity, affection, and bliss”;<sup>864</sup> the matrimonial bed witnesses the passion and violence in marriage, as well as the joy and pain of conception and childbirth. The razor blade alludes to the first only metaphorically, but constitutes the actual tool used in the latter.<sup>865</sup> After the *Summit*, *Love Bed* is acquired by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and exhibited as part of the exhibition *No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia* (February–May 2013). This exhibition, as curator June Yap poses, engages with transcultural “relationships of intermingling and mutual influence past and present” in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>866</sup> Through this exhibition, Lipi’s personal and creative engagement with femininity and gender inequalities in Bangladesh is reintroduced into a discourse about political realities on the subcontinent. The artist’s solo-exhibition in Istanbul and London, organized by her gallery Pi Artworks in the same year, brings together a set of works on the topic for the first time.<sup>867</sup> The show *Never Been Intimate* presents objects made from razor blades, such as a baby stroller entitled *The Stolen Dream*. It also exhibits *The Genitalia*, the golden structure made from safety pins included in *Room of My Own* (see Fig. 16).

In *Room of My Own* (2014), a title reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s claim that for a woman to be a writer she needs five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door, Lipi brings together the individual elements of her previous work to tell a complete story. In contrast to the earlier pieces which alluded to issues of gender, love, and sex in a general way, this installation deals with her personal experience with pregnancy, matrimonial life, violence, and her own body. She visually processes the emotional and physical pain of her miscarriage. Rather than forming a specific object, such as a bra or a bed, the razor blades are used as frames, which figuratively

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863 Abul Mansur, “Tayeba Begum Lipi,” in Choudhury, *Parables*.

864 June Yap, “Tayeba Begum Lipi: Love Bed,” Guggenheim, 2012, accessed June 21, 2021, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/31321>.

865 Yap, “Tayeba Begum Lipi: Love Bed.”

866 Yap, “Tayeba Begum Lipi: Love Bed.”

867 Pi Artworks, “Pi Artworks London: Tayeba Begum Lipi ‘Never Been Intimate,’” 2013, accessed September 7, 2022, [https://www.piartworks.com/usr/documents/exhibitions/press\\_release\\_url/141/tayeba-begum-lipi-never-been-intimate-press-release\\_london.pdf](https://www.piartworks.com/usr/documents/exhibitions/press_release_url/141/tayeba-begum-lipi-never-been-intimate-press-release_london.pdf), exhibition catalog.

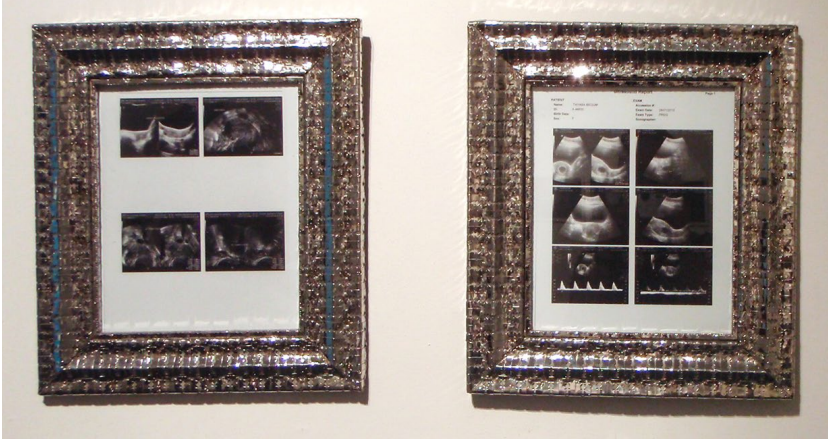


Figure 17: Tayeba Begum Lipi, *Room of My Own* (detail), 2014. Solo project at the Dhaka Art Summit, Shilpakala Academy. Photo: author.

complement her ultrasound images (Fig. 17); in Lipi's childhood memory, the razor blade announces an impending birth, as do ultrasounds for many women. In the context of this specific artwork, however, both come to mean violence, sharpness, and physical and emotional suffering over the loss of a child. The dichotomy between pain and joy established in earlier works finds parallels in the safety pin. It represents protection, as it is often carried by women for emergencies like torn hems and seams.<sup>868</sup> It can however just as easily cause pain when it pierces the skin rather than the cloth. In the shape of a sanitary napkin, as it appears in the installation, it evokes another feminine tool or product associated with both protection and pain. It is in the repetition of this motif, the dichotomy of pain and joy, that the absence of the color red becomes striking; blood is connected to every item in the room: the tampons, clams, safety pins, razor blades, and sanitary napkins. Lipi explains: "I knew that by this time, when I was showing it [the work], I was having menopause. So, it's all gone. And there is no blood."<sup>869</sup> This consideration adds another layer of meaning to the work. There is the joy of expecting a child and the shock of the miscarriage, but also the limitation of the female body, the end of her ability to bear children.

The black and white photographs in the back of the room represent the loving, passionate matrimonial life from which the child was conceived. They were taken by the artist's husband during the year she suffered the miscarriage. They represent intimate moments between the couple; she is playing with the camera, pretending to take off her clothes and acting like

868 Abigail R. Esmán, "No One Home: Tayeba Begum Lipi," in *No One Home: Tayeba Begum Lipi*, ed. Bengal Art Lounge (Dhaka: Bengal Art Lounge, 2015), 4–5.

869 AR, TBL, March 2017.

he is touching her. They are remnants of a very private situation involving the artist's own body and face.

Altogether, the work allows insight into a personal and corporeal process of dealing with womanhood, loss, and ageing. While the work highlights Lipi's very personal grief, the universal nature of the issues addressed also enables the transgression of her individual experiences; the artist is able to connect to women all over the world:

After making that long journey, four-five years, I was thinking that I should do something that will make me happy, because it was just inside me all the time, and I could not carry it for a long time. So I said, once I did it than I am free. ... And then I thought that it is not only my journey. There must be so many women who made a similar journey. They will understand what I am saying.<sup>870</sup>

In our interview Lipi mentions that she was hoping for the work to bring closure, but she found herself avoiding the room during the *DAS*. I ask if she would show it again at another exhibition and she affirms: "I would like to show it again, but I think people always find it too tough to take in." She elaborates that many people are very curious to hear the story behind the work, but when they do, they feel "a little bit out of it."<sup>871</sup> While the individual pieces, the brassieres, the matrimonial bed, and the baby stroller, connect to different parts of the artist's story, this specific installation ties diverse and often contrasting layers together. Due to the fragmentation in the prior works, they lend themselves to a more formal, aesthetic reading. In *Room of My Own*, the painfully personal back-story becomes imminent and thus possibly less easy to digest. The fine line between pain and joy is constantly repeated, and its intensity simultaneously elicits curiosity, voyeurism, shock, compassion, shame, love, and even arousal. Lipi brings these usually very private feelings to the public in the space of the Shilpakala Academy.

The *DAS*, unlike most platforms in Bangladesh, offers a space for the display of contemporary, large-scale multi-media art projects such as *Room of My Own*. As I have argued before, the majority of existing galleries continue to focus on the classical and (locally) commercially viable medium of painting, and occasionally sculpture, because these are easy to install and do not require any special technical resources (such as projectors, storage space, and running electricity) or maintenance. Mixed-media projects like Lipi's, in contrast, require substantial funds to produce, and are difficult, sometimes impossible, to sell. Moreover, many institutions are cautious about public sentiments and prefer to avoid delicate issues. Issues of femininity and womanhood in particular are often sidelined in Bangladesh's public sphere. While discussing Pulak's work on the 1971 war, I touched upon the fact that the Bengali identity does not leave much space for

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870 AR, TBL, March 2017.

871 AR, TBL, March 2017.

women. This applies especially to issues related to sex and sexuality, as for instance evidenced in the conscious marginalization of *birangonas*.<sup>872</sup> Ever since, the mobility of women has been one of the main issues of gender discrimination in Bangladesh; according to “the core cultural ethos of the nation ... the proper place of women is within their homes.”<sup>873</sup> Although the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal status to women in the public sphere, recognized religion-specific personal laws continue to regulate women’s rights in terms of property, marriage, divorce, and child custody.<sup>874</sup> In addition to the legal discrimination of women, social norms regulate everyday life. During a conversation, a female Britto member explains that it is nearly impossible for a woman in Dhaka to be unmarried and not have children, even as an artist; the social pressure, often especially from their own family, is very high, “And then, when you have children, people constantly criticize you for not spending enough time with them.”<sup>875</sup> Alongside the outside pressure, she is troubled by her own guilt, on the one hand, for focusing on her family rather than her art practice, and on the other, for neglecting her art practice.

It is exactly these inequities that Lipi addresses and breaks open in her work. Women are subject to many socio-cultural expectations, such as childbearing and caring. Not wanting, or in this case, not being able to fulfill them is often cause for additional psychological and physical pain. By pulling these issues out of the private realm and into the public sphere, Lipi breaks with social norms. The socio-cultural relevance of her work and its orientation in a wider social context, complement the *DAS*’s objective. Campbell Betancourt, the curator of these solo shows, elaborates that it is the artists’ claim of “the impossible” that marks the quality of their work. Their works defy the “constraints that are imposed on creativity” and they “fearlessly” tackle the artistic challenges despite political realities in South Asia.<sup>876</sup> This assessment of artistic value creates the basis for a mutually beneficial alliance: Lipi uses the platform of the *DAS* to showcase her boundary-transgressing contemporary practice and reach wider audiences. The organizers, in return, offer “fearless,” cutting-edge works that question and resist socio-political realities in South Asia. Moreover, this example alludes to the self-acclaimed and factual power the Samdanis exude in the art field in Bangladesh; they, in comparison to other institutions, support such works in the face of prevalent norms.

As a consequence of Lipi’s participation in the first edition of the *DAS* in 2012, she exhibited as part of the Samdani Art Foundation showcase at

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872 The term *birangona* or *birangana*, literally “heroic woman,” was bestowed upon women who were raped during the 1971 war. In spite of its wide use today, the term is problematic as it seemingly “normalizes” the suffering of rape victims. See Hossain, “Trauma of the Women, Trauma of the Nation,” 100–102.

873 Amena Mohsin, “The State of Gender,” in Riaz and Rahman, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*, 304.

874 Mohsin, “The State of Gender,” 295.

875 FDE, A, 2015.

876 Campbell Betancourt, “Then/Why Not,” 24.

the *India Art Fair* 2013, where, through the mediation of Rajeeb Samdani, she met Yesim Turanlı, the founder of Pi Artworks. Samdani is quick to credit the *DAS* for Lipi's international gallery representation, as well as the acquisition of her work by the Guggenheim Museum, which greatly enhanced her visibility in the art world.<sup>877</sup> It is fair to assume that the platform of the *DAS* contributed to Lipi's subsequent success in New York, as the *Summit* also substantially boosted the artistic careers of other participants. Mohaiemen, for instance, was selected as part of the central exhibition *All the World's Futures* curated by Okwui Enwezor for the *Venice Biennale* in 2015, and Samdani Art Award winner, Sultana (2014), secured a gallery representation with the renowned Experimenter in Kolkata. "You can actually see how Ayesha, just after the Samdani Art Award, how Ayesha went global," Samdani emphasizes in our interview.<sup>878</sup>

The position of the *DAS*, as a direct consequence of the Samdanis' "position-taking"<sup>879</sup> within the global field of art, can open career avenues to artists from Bangladesh and the region. Yet, to emphasize solely the connections between Dhaka and the centers of the art world disregards the artists' multi-positionality in the network. From the perspective of the collectives, the *DAS* is only one of the many scales upon which artists like Lipi operate. Britto's presence at the *Venice Biennale*, the network built through South Asian Network for the Arts (SANA), and the connections to institutions in Bangladesh (such as the *Asian Art Biennale*, the Bengal Foundation, and so on) play important roles in the artists' careers. The ability to operate on, broker between, and foster mobilities across these diverse scales is one of the crucial markers of the artists and collectives that this book had endeavored to foreground.

Lipi's first use of razor blades took place in an artist-initiated residency in Pakistan (RM Studio, Lahore). This context represents Lipi's position within the regional network of artist-run spaces and collectives to which Britto, Sutra, VASL, and others belong. This exchange is characterized by face-to-face, egalitarian contact between artists across contested political borders, such as those of Bangladesh and Pakistan. From here, the development of Lipi's artistic engagement with razor blades continued at the globally renowned perennial art event, the *Venice Biennale*. It was the relation with the Bangladeshi ambassador that allowed Lipi (and Britto) to access this scale. His brokerage, but also the eye-level contact with the curators (artist Paolo W. Tamburella and Sala 1 director Mary Angela Schroth) made the Bangladesh pavilion possible. The alliance with the Bengal Art Foundation, in relation to the pavilion, but also as a facilitator of Lipi's exhibitions in Bangladesh represents yet another scale accessed by the artist. Nevertheless, the solo show at the 2014 *DAS* constitutes a pivotal moment in her

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877 AR, RS, September 2015; see Brownell Mitic, "Putting Bangladeshi Art on the Map."

878 AR, RS, September 2015.

879 Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*.



development, as it enabled her to tell the full story of the inspiration for her work for the first time.

The Samdani's unique economic and socio-cultural position in Bangladesh allows them to provide a certain "logic of glamour"<sup>880</sup> by marketing the *DAS* as a luxury commodity with easy access to cutting edge works and an exclusive VIP program to the highly mobile center of the art world. Thereby they manage to attract potential buyers, collectors, art critics, and curators. Through the accumulation of social capital, they can offer unique opportunities for artists in Bangladesh and the region. Lipi takes this opportunity to create a room for herself and to advance her artistic practice. Yet their relation is not unilateral. The Samdanis also tap into the cultural and social capital that Britto has accumulated over the years. They market the type of cutting-edge, experimental, and boundary-transgressing art Lipi and others have developed through their fine art education and the participation and organization of workshops and residencies. They profit from Britto's long-term engagement with the urban, national, and regional art fields.

#### FRAGILE ALLIANCES

Both the Samdani Art Foundation and Britto have a common interest in promoting contemporary art and in generating opportunities for the young generation of artists in Bangladesh. This offers a fertile ground for cooperation, especially given the paucity of other infrastructural support. Emulating Rajeeb Samdani's self-perception as a newcomer to the field, Lipi explains that the Samdanis "came very late." She elaborates that she only met the couple in February 2012, when the first edition of the *DAS* (April 2012) was already in full preparation. They were very good at making connections and they had established relations to many people from the art field in Dhaka including the Charukola teachers, Lipi ascertains.<sup>881</sup> Although the introduction with the Britto co-founders was tardy, they established a close alliance leading up to the 2014 *DAS*. In the 2014 edition, both Rahman and Lipi have large-scale, multi-media solo art projects. Four out of the ten shortlisted artists for the Samdani Art Award are Britto members. Other members such as Munir Mrittik and Annizzuzaman Sohel are part of the curated shows or gallery representations. Moreover, the *Summit* offers a platform to promote Britto's collective work as part of the gallery showcases. Rahman's appointment as a curator for the experimental film and performance programs allows the artist to demonstrate his expertise as a curator and his knowledge on the practice of new mediums. He is further able to create opportunities for artists from his network in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, as I mentioned in my discussion of Sigdel's performance in the frame of this performance hub. Lastly, by cleverly timing collective exhibitions in congruence with the *Summit*, Britto

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880 Fillitz, "The Booming Global Market of Contemporary Art," 89.

881 AR, TBL, March 2017.

demonstrates its continued activity in the art field to the incoming *DAS* audience: from March 30 through April 15, 2012, Britto hosted *Space—An Inaugural Exhibition of Britto Space* in which the collective introduced its new multi-purpose premises at Green Road. Similarly, from February 1 through 9, 2014, Britto celebrated twelve years of collective activities with an exhibition entitled *CrossCasting*, curated by co-founder Rahman. This show deals with the meaning of gender, ranging from the physical condition of a human being to diverse expressions in the Bangladeshi society. Starting from “cross(gender) casting”—a theater tradition in which female characters are played by male actors—the participating artists call attention to the discrimination faced by the LGBTQ+ community. Both exhibitions are marked as “collateral events” in the program of the *DAS* and draw important actors in attendance of the *Summit* to Britto Space. Apart from highlighting the collective’s interest in engaging with socio-cultural issues and working at the fringes of wider civil society, these collateral exhibitions also showcase Britto’s standing as an established part of the field of contemporary art. The inauguration of Britto’s workshop and gallery space at Green Road is the culmination of more than ten years of organizing programs in Bangladesh and beyond. By gaining Britto as an ally, the Samdani Art Foundation taps into its members’ knowledge of continuous contemporary practice. The Foundation also draws from Britto’s regional network rooted in the SANA collaborations and the legacy this network has built in the region’s art field. For example, they host the launch of *SANA: South Asian Network for the Arts*, a publication that celebrates the ten-year existence of the network, during *DAS* 2014 (February 7, 2014). Britto’s multifarious role in the 2014 *DAS* is an expression of close cooperation based on mutual aims and hopes. Cooperation between the actors is high in intensity, aims at innovating the field of art production, and yet, like Ziemer’s characterization of the notion, is not planned long-term.<sup>882</sup> Alliances between heterogeneous actors like this can be very successful, but they are also fragile. This fragility becomes visible in the 2016 edition of the *Summit*.

In February 2016, neither Lipi and Rahman nor Britto are part of the *Summit*. The section reserved for Bangladeshi spaces includes eight “commercial galleries” (Drik, Gallery 21, Bengal Gallery of Fine Arts, and others) alongside three non-profit spaces. These are Jog, an alternative art space (est. 2012) based in Bangladesh’s second biggest city Chittagong, Longitude Latitude, a perennial art space that, since 2003, occupies changing venues across the city, and Santaran Art Organization, a non-profit artist initiative (est. 1999), also based in Chittagong. Aside from pointing to the expansion of the Samdani’s focus on localities other than Dhaka (such as Chittagong) this selection begs the question: where is Britto? Individual members Wasif and Sultana are present with solo projects. Further, Massum and Nupur are part of the “performance pavilion,” and Saha is

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882 Ziemer, *Komplizenschaft*.

nominated for the Samdani Award.<sup>883</sup> As a collective, however, Britto is neither physically present in the Shilpakala Academy nor is it mentioned in the 2016 program. As in the previous editions, Britto has organized a program at its space in Green Road: “ERROR” encompasses a one-month long collaboration between thirteen young artists, two of whom are shortlisted for the Samdani Art Award. And like during the previous editions, I meet many visitors of the *DAS* at Britto Space, although the exhibition is not an official collateral event. According to Rajeeb Samdani, Britto’s absence is mostly to do with the fact that the Samdani Foundation faced critique for awarding Britto a primary position in 2014: “Last time, we just had Britto and also that raised a question: why only Britto?”<sup>884</sup> He acknowledges that the foundation initially focused on Britto because of its avant-garde initiative, but faced with the critique, had rethought its approach, and was now actively inviting other organizations to join for the 2016 edition. Lipi and Rahman explain their absence with their heavy workload. During my fieldwork in summer 2015, they tell me that they are preparing for a retrospective show at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, which is set to open in early March 2016, and therefore were adjourning their participation at the *DAS*.<sup>885</sup>

In his elaborations on skilled brokers, Wolf explains that the broker’s position is an “exposed one.”<sup>886</sup> As mediators between the community and the nation, the brokers he writes about need to serve the interests of two sides. At the same time, they require the tension between these sides to persist, as their roles as brokers depend on it. Their mobility gives them flexibility and access to economic and socio-political capital. Yet, it also puts them in a position of competition with other actors, especially power-holders.<sup>887</sup> Britto’s working strategy is characterized by multi-positionality, allowing the collective to be flexible, to broaden its reach of actions, and to channel opportunities to its network. Many other actors in the field are bound by their positions on specific scales. The national academies for instance exclusively act on a national scale and are therefore often considered to be ignorant of local needs as well as lagging behind developments in the global art field. The Samdanis, not least due to their position as part

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883 Samdani Art Foundation, *Dhaka Art Summit 2016: Exhibition Guide* (Dhaka: Samdani Art Foundation, 2016).

884 AR, RS, September 2015.

885 This contemporary art museum opened in 2012. Award winning architect Zaha Hadid devised its design, and it was named after philanthropists and supporters of the Michigan State University Eli and Edythe Broad. See: “About,” MSU Broad Museum, Michigan State University, accessed May 27, 2021, <https://broadmuseum.msu.edu/about>. For more information on the exhibition, entitled *The Artist as Activist: Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman* (March 5–August 7, 2016), see “The Artist as Activist: Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman Mar. 5 – Aug. 7, 2016,” MSU Broad Museum, Michigan State University, accessed May 27, 2021, <https://broadmuseum.msu.edu/exhibition/the-artist-as-activist-tayeba-begum-lipi-and-mahbubur-rahman/>.

886 Wolf, “Aspects of Group Relations,” 1071–1072, 1076.

887 Wolf, “Aspects of Group Relations,” 1076.

of the high class jet set, operate primarily on the global scale; they spend their money and energy establishing exclusive relations to the center, often at the detriment of other connections. Britto, in contrast, can broker on and between the urban, national, regional, and global scales. By doing so, however, the collective becomes a competitor for actors who attempt to or already claim positions on these scales. The critique against the Samdani Art Foundation for focusing too unilaterally on Britto in 2014 is an expression of this competition; other artists and initiatives in Bangladesh and South Asia also desire a position at the *Summit*. Further, the Samdanis want their event to become the primary platform for art discourse on the country and the region; they aim at establishing themselves as cultural brokers between Bangladesh and the international art field. Consequently, the initial reasons for cooperation between the foundation and Britto become a basis for competition. Both Britto and Samdani claim positions as brokers of an avant-garde position in contemporary art. They aim at transgressing the limitations of the nationally circumscribed field and they want to create relations beyond the locality. In the following, I look at their respective strategies of brokerage along three foci: multi-scalar objectives, engagement with locality, and quality of collaboration.

The members of Britto were moulded by the nationally circumscribed art field. Out of twenty-four trustees and members (as of 2018), twenty-one graduated from Fine Arts Institutes in Bangladesh (primarily Dhaka and Chittagong). The majority belong to the middle class and live and work in Dhaka. They understand themselves as avant-garde, individually (in their practice) and collectively (in Britto's activities) pushing forward a contemporary art practice that transgresses institutional, social, and geographical boundaries. This happens through programs, such as *CrossCasting*, or in individual bodies of work, such as Lipi's engagement with gender norms in Bangladesh. Through international residencies and the connection with SANA, Britto gained access to regionally and later globally operating actors, such as the Triangle Arts Trust and the Ford Foundation. These connections in turn have yielded economic and social resources that then enabled the organization of programs and the documentation of activities, such as the catalogs used by the ambassador of Bangladesh to Italy to inform curator Schroth about the situation of contemporary art in his country. In building these translocal ties, my research partners maintain a tension between situatedness, i.e., the ambition to further the "local community" of contemporary artists, and their urgency to connect with a larger network of like-minded artists. Their brokerage both transgresses and maintains autonomy from scale-specific infrastructure (such as national academies) to assure their continued flexibility. They strive to engage in social change in their neighborhoods, their city, and their country, while at the same time connecting to wider artist networks, markets, and discourses. Their activities are based on a balancing act between sustaining concrete, face-to-face connections with local (in this case urban, national, and regional) audiences, institutions, and other practitioners, and fostering mobilities between those actors and beyond.

The *DAS* initially set out to bring together the local art field (2012) and to focus on the South Asian region and reposition Bangladesh within this region (2014). Nevertheless, it reflects a specific directionality towards high-end, Euro-American players. The Samdani Art Foundation's strategy to catch up with or even pull ahead of India and Pakistan's art markets is based on direct access to the Euro-American art field. Through the programming and the invited guests, notably curators and speakers, they establish a privileged zone for communication—this zone is marked by the presence of leading institutions, such as the Guggenheim New York or the Tate Modern. The emphasis on relations with Europe and America—especially visible in the reference made by the organizers in their opening speech to the “more than 500 foreigners” who attended the *Summit*—is one of the main critiques of the artists I talked to. While they highly appreciated the opportunity provided by the *DAS*, many feel that local audiences, actors, and institutions have been ousted. They question the necessity of a VIP program, as well as the absence of important institutions for the region such as the Fukuoka Museum or the Asia Pacific Triennial.

The second focus is related to one specific scale: the initiatives' distinct dealing with the city as locality. “The *Dhaka Art Summit* is extremely strategic and based on market,” one of the *CM* curators claims during a conversation. They imply that due to the Samdanis' aim to bring together a highly influential crowd, the event “needs to be compact.”<sup>888</sup> This finds expression in the choice to have one well-connected venue and a comparatively compressed timeframe for the invited guests.<sup>889</sup> The attempt to create a hassle-free environment in which to experience the Bangladeshi art scene in a nutshell requires cancelling out time-consuming traffic and uncomfortable heat. Dhaka, in this brokerage, is reduced to its high-end hotels, arts and crafts stores, and structured forays to the landmarks of the city. For arriving guests there is no incentive and no time to experience the city outside this event-frame, and that is also not the purpose of the event.

The initiatives created by Britto and other collectives, such as *1mile<sup>2</sup>*, *KK*, *CM*, or *PKTM* are characterized by a conscious engagement with the city. My research partners proactively aim at connecting with diverse socio-cultural publics. They are interested in the heritage and history of the locality they and these publics live in—not to preserve them, but to tap into their cultural value. In case that value is no longer recognized, they use their creativity to revitalize these localities for contemporary practice. During *1mile<sup>2</sup>* for instance, Britto fosters a rethinking of Old Dhaka

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888 AR, A, 2015.

889 The *DAS* lasted for only three days in 2014, a short duration for an intense program, especially in comparison to other perennial events like *CM* (up to one month) or the *Asian Art Biennale* (one month). Over the course of the subsequent editions, the duration of the *Summit* however has increased. The exhibition remained open for nine days, from February 2 through 10, in 2018. This increase can be seen in relation to the growing success of the event and possibly also a growing budget.

as a dynamic space of contemporary cultural production. The collectives' brokerage is not only about gaining better positions for itself and individual artists. Through it, artists proactively engage in changing people's (audiences and participants alike) perception of a specific locality, be it the city or the nation in which they live and work. This transcultural brokerage not only pertains to art but relates to other aspects of locality; it involves a wider visuality, crossing the borders to the economic, socio-cultural, and political fields. Visitors from the neighborhood, from other parts of the city, and from abroad are encouraged to engage with the city beyond the existing image of the elsewhere, the mega-city marked by overpopulation, heat, and traffic chaos. Rather than fixing Dhaka in space (as a "third world" prototype of the negative effects of urbanization, for instance) and in time (in February, every two years), my research partners rethink "the city in a state of constant flux."<sup>890</sup>

The Samdanis use the *DAS* to change the perspective of Bangladesh and shift its peripheral position within South Asia, especially in relation to India. Their focus however lies within a narrow set of important players already in the field: "to an extent America, but Europe is the platform we now need. Because it is where India and Pakistan have secured their position," Rajeeb Samdani explains in our interview.<sup>891</sup> Through the *DAS*, its organizers want to bring the discourse to Bangladesh, but they do not engage in contesting its validity. Their strategy is focused on making the global contemporary frame work in their favor, rather than to question or change the perceived status quo. Put differently, the transgressions they aim for are directed at a "vertical autonomy," rather than a horizontal one.<sup>892</sup> In order to overcome the limitations of the nationally circumscribed art field (i.e., medium-specificity, focus on modern art, and lacking professionalization, especially in terms of discourse and research) they establish a direct relation with the global artistic field centered on Europe. The collectives, on the other hand, also transgress the boundaries to other fields by engaging in wider socio-cultural and political issues, such as rapid urbanization, rising religious fundamentalism, and gender relations.

The specific quality of relationships that both actors (seek to) establish through their initiatives—the values their brokerage is based on—is my third focus. The actors that the Samdani Art Foundation connects with on a global scale represent an elite but diversified group of symbolic producers of art, including curators, collectors, managers, art writers, and museum directors. The actors in Bangladesh are primarily artists, who, in the absence of other art professionals, have ventured into symbolic production to connect to wider audiences. A large part of the existing infrastructure, from galleries, residencies, and workshop programs to the Faculty of

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890 Mehrotra, Vera, and Mayoral, *Ephemeral Urbanism*, 17; Valentine, "Art and Empire," 209.

891 AR, RS, September 2015.

892 Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field?"

Fine Arts at Dhaka University were initially conceived by artists for artists as a means to develop the field from the inside. The commonality of the artists' struggle, the effort and energy they have invested in transgressing the narrow confines of the national art fields against institutional, socio-cultural, and political boundaries, as well as the building-block system with which they set up their spaces evoke the idea of a ground-up, organically-grown system (see Interlocutor I, Interlude: "We have artists, but we don't have the other factors"). During a conversation, a *DAS* participant (2012, 2014, 2016) explains that the *Summit* represented a big change, especially in terms of opportunities for artists in Bangladesh. But these opportunities are exclusively contingent upon "international relations," meaning connections to key players in the Euro-American art world. "They are forced, in a way, to have these characters," the participant elaborates, "but I wish that it will happen more organically here."<sup>893</sup> This comment reemphasizes the structural asymmetries in the artistic field based on the assumption that connections to the global center are necessary to foster the artistic development of the localized periphery. Bangladesh, as a newcomer, is forced to prove its ability to tie in with the global contemporary discourse first,<sup>894</sup> and only those positioned in the center can award this seal of approval.

The Samdanis' acknowledgement and subsequent submission to this top-down perspective institutes a hierarchy into the relation of incoming professionals and the local artists. The shifting alliance between the *DAS* organizers and Britto is an expression of that. Rahman's appointment as the curator for the film and performance program in the 2014 event bears witness to the Samdanis' initial recognition of the collective's accomplishments in the field of contemporary art, especially in terms of new mediums. The collective is seen as an asset to the event and its aim. A year later, Rajeeb Samdani explains: "so then we thought, if we want to promote performance from Bangladesh, we'll have to teach them."<sup>895</sup> He elaborates that in preparation for the 2016 *Summit*, the foundation invited performance artist Nikhil Chopra from India to Dhaka for a workshop and appointed him as the curator for the following edition's performance hub. For many young artists, this workshop represented a great opportunity to develop their practice and engage with an expert in the field.<sup>896</sup> It also established the Samdani Art Foundation as an authority capable of deciding which artists are educated (Nikhil Chopra), however, and which are not (the artists based in Bangladesh). This position is contingent upon the

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893 AR, A, 2015.

894 O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn," 258; Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions," 438; Fillitz, "Spatialising the Field," 22.

895 AR, RS, September 2015.

896 The workshop was part of a series of "Samdani Seminars" and took place in early April 2015 within the premises of the Shilpakala Academy. Fifteen artists from Bangladesh were selected to participate. See "Performance workshop by Nikhil Chopra, Madhavi Gore and Jana Prepeluh," *Samdani Art Foundation*, accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.samdani.com.bd/performance-workshop-by-nikhil-chopra-madhavi-gore-and-jana-prepeluh/>.

Samdani's self-understanding as part of the mobile center and thus knowledgeable in matters of global contemporary art. The relation between mobility, cultural capital, and authority is made even clearer in Rajeeb Samdani's explanation of why the *DAS* has a gallery section: "We did it, the only simple reason is so we can educate them."<sup>897</sup>

By taking up the position of brokers of contemporary art, Rajeeb and Nadia Samdani enter into competition with the already established mediators in Bangladesh. Moreover, the center-periphery asymmetry they subscribe to takes effect on the quality of the relations they build; they are perceived as extrinsic, forced, asymmetrical, even patronizing. The Samdani's course of action emphasizes the artists' inexperience as newcomers to the global field and devalues the collective energy they have invested in their initiatives. Their reaction is one of suspicion and dissociation:

People will come and go. But we will be here. And we are also artist family, we feel like we are—maybe you don't like the artwork of one artist, but you cannot disrespect that person because that is not what you do. That is unfair. While they were treating the other artists in a bad manner, we didn't like it also. That was a hard thing, for our ego as well. I can talk about one of my family members, in many ways, but if someone else is talking about it, I don't like it.<sup>898</sup>

In this comment by one of my research partners, the Samdanis are identified as the neophytes. Their mobility, especially in relation to their economic status, is perceived in negative terms: they are part of a group of people who "come and go" and thus are of minor consequence to the artists' continuous practice. Their behavior towards the artists based in Bangladesh is conceived in negative terms, as "disrespect," "unfairness," and "bad manner." I encountered several exclamations based on a similar us-them rhetoric: "those people are maybe from business background. And they have a different kind of mindset. When they find one person, they ignore the other person."<sup>899</sup> Another interlocutor explained that they did not want to collaborate with the *DAS* because they suspected the organizers had an ulterior agenda: "they try to use our name for some donations." They also emphasized that "they are not strict on the honesty of the work."<sup>900</sup> The Samdanis' position as an economic and socio-cultural elite in the field determines this perception. It is contrasted with that of the "artist family." Based on the comments, the members of this family are less mobile and more connected to the locality of Dhaka (and Bangladesh), likely through their common art education, their struggle

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897 AR, RS, September 2015.

898 AR, A, 2017.

899 AR, A, 2017.

900 AR, A, 2015.



against institutional, socio-cultural, and political norms, and their situatedness in the urban middle class. This “family” is joined by a common artistic practice that surpasses potential conflicts and disagreements. While this certainly represents a romanticized version of the artist community, it is also an expression of the value of connections that my research partners aspire to build in opposition to those they assume the Samdanis facilitate. The contact they envisage is marked by mutual respect, loyalty, trust, and the belief that everybody, irrespective of their position, contributes to the furthering of contemporary practice. In my observation, this contact assumes exchange and collaboration at eye-level—from fellow member of the artistic field to fellow member. It is similar to the type of transcultural contact Kravagna describes in opposition to mere impact or unilateral appropriation.<sup>901</sup> My research partners are interested in mutual invitations, in founding associations and institutions for contemporary art, in reciprocal advancement, rather than one-sided educative processes.<sup>902</sup> Mobility for them is not a *fait accompli*, it becomes possible through continuous hard work, meticulously established and nurtured social and economic capital, as well as merit in terms of art production.

Large-scale perennial events like the *DAS*, *CM*, and *PKTM* are situated in ordinary processes and span dynamic and multifaceted networks that exceed the connections between a (highly mobile) center and a (localized) periphery. This tension between situatedness and connectedness has often been neglected in the research on biennials. The literature that subscribes to the global contemporary not only fails to examine the qualities of the events’ multi-scalar connections, it also perpetuates an asymmetry between a developed knowledgeable and experienced art center (Euro-America), whose contemporary practice draws from long lineages of knowledge production, and a periphery, whose art practitioners have just appeared on the mobile center’s radar and have yet to prove their ability to connect to these lineages. From the perspective of this mobile center, events are perceived as geographically fixed (situated on an imaginary map) and temporally limited (inscribed into a virtual calendar): Dhaka in February (*CM*), Delhi in October (*Photo Festival*), Kathmandu in November (*PKTM*), and Angkor in December (*Photo Festival & Workshops*).

The actors from whose perspective I am building my analysis of an alternative contemporaneity develop different strategies to deal with this asymmetry. Their approaches are affected by the position they hold within the field. Large-scale events can offer great opportunities to build alliances between actors whose motivations overlap, short-term collaboration as between Britto and the Samdani Art Foundation, or long-term partnerships as between PC and Drik. However, they also manifest competition over positions in the artistic field, for instance who holds the monopoly on brokerage of locality and contemporary art. The Samdanis form part

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901 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, 50.

902 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, 41.

of a new economic elite and aim to establish the *DAS* as a privileged zone for the exchange of knowledge on contemporary art from South Asia. They concentrate on transgressing the field's vertical autonomy by connecting the urban/national to the global artistic field and are thus creating new avenues for many artists based in Bangladesh. In the 2014 edition in focus here, they sustain the autonomy of the field within a small elite group. The direction the *DAS* has taken in the subsequent editions (2016, 2018), however, promises a shift to a more inclusive and interdisciplinary approach to establishing a platform for contemporary discourse.<sup>903</sup> The artists, in contrast, proactively choose multi-positionality. Often born out of a lack of other options, they spend a tedious amount of time on building and nourishing reciprocal contact with other artists and art professionals. They use large-scale events to build and strengthen group identity—as majority world or as vernacular storytellers—beyond the relatively autonomous art field.<sup>904</sup> They deal with crises and create alternative spaces for the material and symbolic production of contemporary art. These spaces are alternative in the sense that they allow for the transgression of established socio-cultural norms and disciplinary boundaries, and the testing of alternative visibility. The flexibility and dynamic recurrence to different scales secures their sustainability.<sup>905</sup> The art community they imagine emphasizes affective qualities and values of reciprocity, respect, and fairness over more formal, professional, and economically driven relations. It is inherently transcultural because it is based on a situatedness in place (a knowledge of the visual discourse from which the respective actors emerged, and programs targeted at invigorating this discourse) and the desire to join and learn from other discourses and actors in a multi-scalar field.

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903 The 2016 edition counted eighteen different talks, launches, and conversations. It included a writing ensemble to “share writing histories and knowledge” and “produce new critical impulses.” Nadia Samdani, “Welcome,” in *Dhaka Art Summit 2016: Exhibition Guide*, ed. Samdani Art Foundation (Dhaka: Samdani Art Foundation, 2016), i. The 2018 edition included 120 speakers in sixteen panel discussions, two symposiums, illustrated lectures, and a “Scholars’ Weekend.” The program booklet of the 2018 edition is available for download at the *DAS* website. “Programme 2018,” Dhaka Art Summit, Samdani Art Foundation, accessed April 25, 2022, <https://www.dhakaartsummit.org/das2018>.

904 Hüsken and Michaels, “Introduction,” 9–10.

905 Xiang, “Multi-Scalar Ethnography,” 288–289.