

Situating Connections: International Workshops, Performance Art, and the Translocal Network(s) of Contemporary Art

One of the biggest strengths of the concept of translocality is its understanding of localities as more than a local site of negotiation of global flows.⁹⁰⁶ Translocality directs attention to the ways in which different social actors proactively shape different visions of locality. In order to avoid the pitfalls of overemphasizing one scale of locality over another (methodological nationalism) or prioritizing unilateral center-periphery connections (the global cities or global contemporaneity discourse), my research is guided by a methodological “situationalizing” of flows and an awareness of the “interconnectedness of all interactions.”⁹⁰⁷ In the first five chapters of this book, I focused on specific localities, fields, and events in which flows of knowledge, objects, capital, and people become temporarily situated. I discussed how my research partners broker values about locality, from socio-culturally inclusive circumscriptions of nationality to the values of cultural heritage in the architecture of Old Dhaka; how they mediate interdisciplinary approaches and new mediums into the nationally circumscribed visual discourses; and how they use events to generate momentum for a broader movement of vernacular storytelling against a Western monopoly of representation. This analysis fulfills my aim to recognize the interconnectedness of situations. To accomplish the second part of my aim, I now turn my attention to the connections themselves. I am interested in the content that is brokered, the qualities associated with the connections, and the vehicles by which they are transported. I introduce two settings, first the workshop, and in the next chapter, the hanging-out situation. Both

906 Brickell and Datta, “Introduction,” 5.

907 Mueller, “Beyond Ethnographic Scriptocentrism,” 110; see also Hepp, “Translocal Media Cultures,” 40.

are crucial for the formation and mediation of flows, and both are often overlooked as research sites, because they often happen on the sidelines of high-profile art events, away from the pressures of the art market, and outside established spaces of representation, such as galleries or museums. Translocal ethnography based on participant observation allows me to follow my research partners into these less established spaces and to investigate them as important nodes of connection.⁹⁰⁸ How do artists and other actors meet, hang out, collaborate, and communicate? What are the modalities and qualities of the connections they establish? Which underlying values and conventions of transcultural brokerage become apparent?

The theoretical discussion on networks informs my aim to recognize the “equal weight” of local situations and of circulation in the transcultural analysis of the complexity of social, material, and geographical connections related to contemporary art.⁹⁰⁹ Social Network Analysis (SNL) sensitized my attention for the intensity, frequency, distribution, and localization of connections, whereas Actor–Network Theory (ANT) directed my focus to the mediators of flows. In contrast to the field, which connects actors and existing socio-economic structures through practices of negotiating artistic value, I comprehend the network as an artificial construct resulting from the different claims, rhetorics, motivations, and strategies of my research partners.⁹¹⁰ This construct aids me in structuring my findings and in shifting my focus from the nodes of connection to the relations and their conduits.

My examination of large-scale events revealed my research partners’ interest in long-term relations, in enabling collaboration and exchange beyond the timescale of a single project or festival. These alliances require care and upkeep—a process often facilitated by a shared agenda and similar mindset: Drik and PC for instance share a common interest in strengthening the practice of contemporary photography as a tool for social change. For over ten years, this goal has been the basis of a continued and mutually beneficial collaboration between the two organizations. As an established member of South Asian Network for the Arts (SANA, 2000–2011), the Britto Arts Trust (Britto) contributed to the facilitation of creative and physical exchange between countless artists across South Asia. So far, I have only paid marginal attention to the effect of these alliances on the contemporary art practice. I briefly discussed the development of Tayeba Begum Lipi’s use of stainless-steel razor blades in and through the SANA network as well as the influence of Shimul Saha’s studies in Pakistan on his work $E=mc^2$. In the last two chapters, my main focus is the concrete situations in which artists encounter new input and the conduits of this input. This analysis contributes to strengthening my argument on the affinities that durably unite collectives.

908 Siegenthaler, “Towards an Ethnographic Turn.”

909 Mueller, “Beyond Ethnographic Scriptocentrism.”

910 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 131.

Christian Kravagna discusses transcultural “contact” in opposition to “impact,” and in relation to terms such as *Begegnung* (encounter), *Austausch* (exchange), and *Allianz* (alliance).⁹¹¹ He emphasizes the transgression of colonial and cultural boundaries, as well as the de-centered, multilateral, and intentional nature of this artistic contact. His notion expands on Mary Louise Pratt’s definition of the “contact zone” as “the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”⁹¹² While Pratt emphasizes the frictious, asymmetrical, and chaotic nature of the contact situation, Kravagna stresses the collaborative, reciprocal factor. Both play a constitutive role in the brokerage of knowledge and the forging of transcultural connections, and both can be temporarily situated in the workshop.

For my research partners, the workshop is one of the most important spaces for expanding their knowledge, often by way of meeting new people and further developing their art practice. As a place of collective engagement, the workshop stands in contrast to the more individualized artist studio. Although several artists I met during my research regularly defer to professional craftsmen, apprentices, assistants, or volunteers to realize their projects, the majority reserve a separate space (a studio) for their individual artistic production. Some can afford a supplementary apartment, while others occupy a designated room in their family home, and again others share a space with fellow artists. While the studio is understood as a place of focused individual work, the workshop represents an opportunity to meet like-minded people for the purpose of sharing, discussing, and producing knowledge, expertise, and practical work in the wider field of artistic production. The emphasis is on shared experience detached from the daily routine. Workshops are marked by a certain liminality—as removed from the time and space of day-to-day dwelling and artistic practice. They offer instances for creativity outside the socio-cultural, disciplinary, and geographical limits of the everyday. Moreover, they serve as important spaces to establish and maintain contact with colleagues. Due to their role in cultivating social and cultural capital in a more liberated environment, they have become a popular format offered by actors from inside and outside the art field, but I limit myself to the international workshop. This specific type of workshop brings together artists working in different mediums from various localities around the world for several days or weeks. Its format is closely entangled with the SANA and is a crucial factor in the emergence of an alternative contemporaneity.

As a more concrete example of a flow or connection explored by artists in the workshop, I focus on new mediums, more specifically on performance art. New mediums describe an artistic practice that cuts across the

911 Kravagna, *Transmoderne*, 50.

912 Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 5–6.

boundaries of the classic fine arts mediums, such as painting, sculpture, and printmaking. The term serves as an umbrella for a variety of artistic practices, from installation to performance and new media art—an art form that deals specifically with digital electronic devices. It can also refer to projects or works that transcend the discipline of visual arts in a broader sense, such as those engaging music, theater, or dance. New mediums have become a salient part of the art field, but they are also cause for friction, especially between an older generation of artists and art educators who fear that new mediums entail a loss of “skill” (e.g., manual command of color, composition, perspective, shade, and so on). Moreover, galleries in Nepal and Bangladesh continue to focus on the classical and commercially viable mediums of painting and occasionally sculpture. Artist collectives such as Britto, Sutra, and Bindu—A Space for Artists (Bindu) have been instrumental in offering training opportunities and spaces to experiment with new mediums. The workshop is one of them.

Through Britto member Yasmin Jahan Nupur’s performance *Sat on a Chair* at the 2014 *Dhaka Art Summit (DAS)*, I retrace the artist’s development within the medium of performance. Performance art is commonly understood as a mental and physical construction that an artist (or performer) creates in a specific time and space. Unlike theater, it does not require a script, but rather emphasizes the ephemeral, emerging nature of the act. The body of the performer is conceived as the main medium to convey an idea or a concept.⁹¹³ The direct presence of an audience can become a constitutive part of the art piece, but the composition and degree of participation of this audience are subject to variation depending on the setting and agenda of the artist.⁹¹⁴ My research partners often emphasize the newness of the medium: in the catalog introduction to the performance art program at the *DAS*, curator Mahbubur Rahman for instance writes about performance art as “a relatively new art form” that “entered” Bangladesh at the beginning of the 1990s.⁹¹⁵ In a similar vein, KHOJ director Pooja Sood refers to performance art as an “emerging” practice in India.⁹¹⁶ While the emphasis on newness here is meant to demarcate emerging mediums from institutionally established ones—as the definition of new mediums that I provide above suggests—there is a danger of evoking tropes of innovation and authenticity. These tropes are often a consequence of the application of eurocentric art history, which commonly locates the beginning of performance in the early twentieth century to other localities, with avant-garde movements such as Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism. The Euro-American art field becomes the site of “innovativeness”—the “origin” of the flow—while the practice of artists in other fields, such as India or Bangladesh, is reduced to appropriation

913 Serafini, “Subversion through Performance,” 321.

914 See, for instance, Bishop, *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*.

915 Rahman, “Performance Programme,” 87.

916 Pooja Sood, “Mapping Khoj: Idea, Place, Network,” in Sood, *SANA*, 55.

or copy. This denies their creativity and agency and marks performance art as yet another example of a deterritorialized “global flow” in a territorialized locality; “no less viral and global” than the “spectacular” international biennials and triennials.⁹¹⁷ Moreover, the diffusionist rhetoric risks transporting presumed meanings and values in relation to the art practice, rather than examining its multilateral entanglements. The emphasis within the research on “happenings” in the late 1950s,⁹¹⁸ or movements such as Fluxus in the 1970s, is often on the subversive nature of the medium.⁹¹⁹ Notably the unsalability and ephemerality of performance art are highlighted as counter-movements to the conventions of the art establishment, such as key exhibition institutions and the art market.⁹²⁰ To avoid such presumed meanings and hierarchical notions of innovativeness, I recur to the construct of the network. It allows me to conceive of the flow of performance art as a relation between diverse nodes of connection. Nodes and relations are thereby (solely, for the purpose of my analysis) situated in a multi-scalar network without clear origin or destination. Rather than following a flow from a presumed global visual culture (nevertheless centered in the West), the tool of the network allows me to approach performance art as an example of new mediums through the artistic development of one particular artist.

It follows that the predominantly eurocentric literature on performance art was not very helpful in my approach. I found more productive reflections in texts situated at the crossroads of anthropology, art history, performance studies, and transcultural studies. Based on Victor Turner, Erica Fischer-Lichte argues that “performances epitomize the state of in-betweenness [what Turner conceives as ‘betwixt and between’].”⁹²¹ She elaborates that “a performance comes into being only during its course. It arises from the interaction of performers and spectators.”⁹²² Further, the experience of this liminality that happens in all kinds of performances (in the arts, in rituals, sports competitions, festivals, games, or political events), she suggests, can lead to specific aims but “cannot transmit given meanings.”⁹²³ Rather, performances comprised as “aesthetic experiences” emphasize the very process of transition.⁹²⁴ Drawing on the notion of *communitas*—which Turner distinguishes from brotherhood and sibling

917 Tan, “Festivalizing Performance,” 120.

918 Serafini, “Subversion through Performance,” 321.

919 For an interesting discussion of Fluxus from a transcultural perspective, see Franziska Koch, “Nam June Paik: Catching Up with the West? Institutionelle Bedingungen und Grenzen transkulturell konstituierter Autorschaft,” in Dätsch, *Kulturelle Übersetzer*.

920 Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 7.

921 Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Interweaving Cultures in Performance: Different States of Being In-Between,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (November 2009): 391–392; Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

922 Fischer-Lichte, “Interweaving Cultures in Performance,” 391–392.

923 Fischer-Lichte, “Interweaving Cultures in Performance,” 391–392.

924 Fischer-Lichte, “Interweaving Cultures in Performance,” 394.

relationship, because it “transcends distinctions of rank, age, kinship position, and, in some kinds of cultic group, even of sex”⁹²⁵—Fischer-Lichte conceives the notion of an “emotional community.”⁹²⁶ This community is created during the performance, comprises members of very different cultures, and allows different identities side by side to constitute new transcultural realities. Fischer-Lichte’s explanations pertain to the specific situation of the theater, but her transcultural perspective on performance and human relatedness is equally interesting for my research context. First, it emphasizes the collective and transgressive powers of performance, and second, it directs the focus away from specific origins to experiences and effects. Hüsken and Michaels highlight a similar point, not for specific performances, but for festivals as a setting in which performative practices happen.⁹²⁷ Relying on Victor Turner, they emphasize that cultural performances (in the form of festivals) are “commentaries on (be it critique or celebration of) different dimensions of human relatedness.”⁹²⁸ As such, they are “characterized by liminality, which implies that all kinds of things may happen.”⁹²⁹ The political element of performances as well as the energy of possibility and probability that Hüsken and Michaels expose are important not only within individual performances but also in the setting in which performances are often conceived and carried out: the workshop.

In this chapter, I follow Nupur through a set of performances since her beginnings in the medium in 2004. Her artistic development in the medium notably took place within a network of international workshops in South Asia. I discuss these workshops as liminal spaces that allow for transcultural encounters and exchange between contemporary artists. They are marked by collaboration, friction, and liminality, and due to these characteristics, constitute key space for artists to develop their artistic practice. Knowledge about visual discourses and practices is mediated through willful, reciprocal, and multilateral exchange. While the workshop is temporally and spatially demarcated, the complicity formed between individual artists can lead to long-term alliances and support. The workshop emphasizes the importance of interaction, collaboration, and discourse in the emerging practice of contemporary art. By organizing workshops, collectives like Britto, Sutra, and Bindu have played a leading role as conveyors of flows of knowledge, practices, ideas, and people in relation to this contemporaneity.

925 Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 100.

926 Fischer-Lichte, “Interweaving Cultures in Performance,” 400–401.

927 Hüsken and Michaels, “Introduction,” 11.

928 Hüsken and Michaels, “Introduction,” 11.

929 Hüsken and Michaels, “Introduction,” 11.

Interlude: *Sat on a Chair*

Yasmin Jahan Nupur's performance is about to start. She slowly climbs up the long wooden ladder. I hold my breath and avert my eyes. I do not dare to look at the ladder or the screen of my small camera. When my eyes return to the pillar, she has already settled onto the chair. Two volunteers remove the ladder. Yasmin Jahan Nupur stares straight forward, fixing on an invisible point on the wall. Held in place only by tree metal cables, wrapped around a big, white pillar, her chair lingers about four meters above the floor. She holds on to the chair firmly, with both hands wrapped around the sides of the seat, her legs dangling freely (Fig. 18).

Over the next three hours, I try to resume my work, to visit some of the other shows at the Dhaka Art Summit 2014 and to attend a panel discussion on collecting South Asian art, but I feel a constant pull towards the big hall. Whether it is out of curiosity (Is she still sitting there? Did she change her position?) or out of fear (Is the chair still safely attached? Has an accident happened?), I cannot tell. Every time I walk past her, down in the hall or up on the balcony, she sits still, staring at the wall. She has not moved. She is clenching the chair, her feet loose.

Only when the three hours are over does she slowly climb down the ladder that the volunteers have brought back. She is welcomed by her husband Manir Mrittik and fellow performance artist Reetu Sattar. People applaud. Tayeba Begum Lipi and Kushi Kabir, both founding members of the Britto Arts Trust, come to hug her firmly.

*More than a year after the performance, I sit in Jahan's studio in Narayanganj, a city approximately twenty-five kilometers south of Dhaka. She explains that *Sat on a Chair* marked a turning point in her art practice. It shifted her focus within the medium of performance art to long duration performances. Only one month after the Summit, during a workshop ("No Man's Land") at the borderlands of India and Bangladesh, co-organized by Britto and Shelter Promotion Council (India), Nupur planned a six-hour long performance.⁹³⁰ When Mahbubur Rahman, the curator for the project, asked what she was going to do during that time, she replied: "Nothing, I just wanted to stand."⁹³¹ Rather than working on or with the national border and its intractable meaning, the artist decided to expose her body to the effects of the land: the sun and the wind. Unlike humans, these natural phenomena do not discriminate between one or the other side of the border. The result was entitled *Flying the White Flag* and showed the artist standing still while holding on to a white*

930 The project (March 21–27, 2014) comprised artists from India and Bangladesh, meeting and creating artworks at either side of the border between the two countries. The project has its own Facebook group, through which participants and other members continue to share news, memories, and other materials. "No Man's Land Project, International Border, Bangladesh and India," Facebook, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1397347313873094>.

931 AR, YJN, August 2015.



Figure 18: Yasmin Jahan Nupur, *Sat on a Chair*, 2014. Three-hour art performance at the Dhaka Art Summit, Shilpakala Academy. Photo: author.

flag, as a protective sign of truce or ceasefire. The Britto workshop marks the second step on the artist's journey to engage more intensely with time and space. Another international Britto workshop held in Bogra (Bangladesh) in 2008 shaped her approach to contemporary art practice on a much larger scale:

It changed my life, because so many artists, famous artists came and their concept—every day we had presentations, long conversations, the artists were staying together—the environment also.⁹³²

THE "INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP" IN SOUTH ASIA

In the quote above, Nupur emphasizes the face-to-face contact with other notably famous artists from abroad as one of the main advantages of the international workshop. The international workshop that Britto facilitated in Bogra in 2008—and that according to Nupur "changed her life"—comprised eight artists from Bangladesh and nine participants from the UK, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Jordan, the Maldives, Mauritius, and Nepal. It was Kolkata-born Susanta Mandal, today mostly known for his conceptual installations, whom Nupur felt most connected to. They have kept

932 AR, YJN, August 2015.

in contact over the years and are “good friends” today.⁹³³ She elaborates that it was not merely meeting Mandal and other artists that changed her understanding of contemporary art but learning about their concepts and practice. The workshop intended for artists to share their conceptualizations, the challenges they encountered, and their work process on a regular basis. “Everyday we had presentations, long conversations,” Nupur describes.⁹³⁴ The workshop not only encouraged exchange on a creative, professional level, but also in an ordinary way; artists lived, cooked, and spent their leisure time together. Despite their differing geographical origins, their daily responsibilities back home, their socio-cultural and diverse training backgrounds, they came together for a two-week period to focus on the thing they have in common: their art practice.

Based on Nupur’s experiences, I retain three main incentives for artists to participate in workshops: to be exposed to new things (concepts, ideas, mediums, techniques), to enjoy creative freedom, and to expand one’s social capital. These elements—education, relative autonomy, mediation, and connection—are usually part of the realm of mediating art institutions. However, the dearth of institutional support which I discussed in chapter four has led artist collectives to continuously expand their activities to serve the demands of the field in this regard. The workshop format thereby has proven to be a crucial instrument: it can be organized almost anywhere and does not require a specific art-related space; it does not call for its organizers’ long-term economic or social commitment. Instead, the format lasts only for a few days or weeks, in which the participants need to be lodged and fed. Since the focus is on experimentation, the art supplies are often found, repurposed, or recycled materials. Due to this comparatively economical and adaptable character, the workshop has become deeply entangled with the format of the collective. Especially in the beginning, when the collectives started out and did not yet have any fixed structures to rely on, the format offered a platform to broaden their scope. Additionally, the workshop offers time off and away from professional and everyday responsibilities. It frees up space for creative deliberations. Despite its detachment from regular art practice, the workshop and its popularity are embedded in a network of connections, as the case of Britto exemplifies.

In our interview, Britto founder Lipi recalls how she applied for her first residency at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin in the late 1990s. Through an Irish friend, an artist working in the NGO sector in Bangladesh, she heard about the residency and gained access to the application forms. “We filled out the form together,” she explains, “... in handwriting. There was no computer at that time. And there was no e-mail also. So it was all like, sending the letters and waiting for the replies.”⁹³⁵

933 AR, YJN, August 2015.

934 AR, YJN, August 2015.

935 AR, TBL, March 2017.

Application processes like this were lengthy; they could take up to several months and were dependent on word-of-mouth promotion. Face-to-face connections with people who had access to the international art field (for instance through the NGO sector) were a prerequisite to learn about and apply for residencies or workshops outside one's own country. At the time, Britto did not have an internet connection that would have allowed its members to gain access to these formats. Outside the hegemonic channels of national institutions, mobility and face-to-face connections were the only avenue for new input. In the course of the interview, Lipi describes that it took a lot of work to gain access to a network of art exchange, and how the experiences she and her husband Rahman had through it shaped their imagination of new opportunities for artists in Bangladesh:

Those friends are still our friends. Since then, we are still in contact with each other. This is actually where something gives you new ideas. So when we came back, we talked about, why don't we, for example, ten of us get together and share the expense to run an art space. That was the thing we were already planning and thinking about.⁹³⁶

After their residency in Dublin, the couple travelled to Germany, where they stayed at an artist-run gallery. This experience, apart from initiating an ongoing friendship, made them realize the potential of collective investment. The Germany-based artists had pooled their money together to establish their own exhibition space. This model offered Lipi and Rahman an alternative to the gallery system in Dhaka and its constraints. If local galleries were unable or unwilling to exhibit and sell the multi-media, experimental, and contemporary work they created, they would nevertheless have their own space. The idea for Britto, and later Britto Space, took root.

During that time, Triangle Arts Trust, Pooja [Sood] and Robert Loder, they eventually came to know about us. ... So it was very easy for them to communicate with us. Because what they were thinking, we had a kind of similar thought. But we did not think that we're going for a network or a permanent venture to take so much responsibility for the artists' community. We rather thought loosely just for our small surroundings, ten to twenty artists, we will be together and create a new platform.⁹³⁷

Lipi explains that their Europe-inspired deliberations were met by Sood, director of SANA's first collective KHOJ, and Loder, co-founder of the Triangle

936 AR, TBL, March 2017.

937 AR, TBL, March 2017.

Arts Trust (Triangle).⁹³⁸ They were able to offer a structured frame to the couple's loosely shaped ideas about collaborative action. KHOJ had already started organizing international workshops in 1997, and in 2000, Sood undertook a research visit to Dhaka to recruit potential participants. Soon after, Lipi was invited to participate in the KHOJ International Workshop in Modinagar (ca. forty-five kilometers northeast of Delhi). Britto was established in 2002, and much like its predecessors KHOJ and Triangle they started their own International Workshop series in 2003.

Driven by Sood and Loder, these workshops became a unique feature of SANA and the collectives that came out of it. In the introduction to the SANA publication, cultural theorist and curator Nancy Adajania emphasizes the international workshop as a unique feature, setting KHOJ apart from other artist groups and collectives active in India between the 1950s and the 1990s.

All of these groupings were born from an ideological impulse or responded to an immediate practical need. But Khoj is an exception to this rule. It is the Indian manifestation of a portable model for transcultural artistic conviviality; a model that was originally developed by the New York based Triangle Arts Workshop in 1982, founded by the British sculptor Anthony Caro and businessman Robert Loder.⁹³⁹

While other artist initiatives, Adajania contends, responded to the immediate needs of one group or one locale—and much like Ziemer's accomplices disbanded once the initial impulse was satisfied⁹⁴⁰—KHOJ focused on wider possibilities and thus managed to sustain itself over the course of 20 years. Since its beginnings in 1997, KHOJ has run through a variety of avatars. Today it is a firmly established cultural institution with a permanent space in Khirki village (South Delhi) offering exhibition spaces, artist studios, and resident accommodation.⁹⁴¹ Its first avatar however was a very fluid form of yearly workshops aiming at connecting artists from India internationally. The word international, which also appears in the label

938 Before establishing KHOJ, Sood was the director of the Eicher Gallery in New Delhi (1994–1998). She received an MA in art history (Punjab University, Chandigarh) and management (Symbiosis Institute of Business Management, Pune). For more information on Sood's biography, see "Pooja Sood," KHOJ, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://khojstudios.org/person/pooja-sood/>. Robert Loder (1934–2017) was a British businessperson, philanthropist, and art collector. Before he co-founded the Triangle and established Gasworks (Triangle's main hub in London), he held the position of treasurer and later chairperson at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. See "Robert Loder (1934–2017)," *Artforum*, July 24, 2017, accessed June 19, 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/news/robert-loder-1934-2017-69961>.

939 Nancy Adajania, "Probing the Khojness of Khoj," in Sood, *SANA*, 3.

940 Ziemer, *Komplizenschaft*.

941 See "Our Studios," KHOJ, accessed June 28, 2022, <https://khojstudios.org/our-studios/>.

“international workshop,” first refers to the diverse origins of the workshop participants from all over the world. Yet it also emulates Adajania’s reference to a “transcultural conviviality” and alludes to the situatedness of the workshop within a wider, geographically transgressive contemporary frame. In the introduction to *The Khoj Book*, Sood explains that the idea of using workshops as a means of international exchange and networking was “offered” by Loder, the “visionary” founder of the Triangle.⁹⁴² Triangle is a non-profit art institution founded in New York City in 1982. The artists’ workshop—initially conceptualized as a two-week, one-off experiment—was Triangle’s first program and brought together twenty-five artists from the US, the United Kingdom, and Canada (hence the name triangle). These workshops have happened on a regular basis over the last thirty-five years. According to their self-conception, they support artists by giving them “space and time” for communication to “exchange ideas, knowledge and skills with each other.”⁹⁴³ The focus is not on the creation of a final product, but on the “process of making.”⁹⁴⁴

This processual nature is one of the main markers of the workshop and the reason for its important role in contemporary art. It also separates the workshop from the artist studio, which is conceived as a place for regular continued production in my interviews. The workshop, in contrast, is described as time off, a time-out from this daily routine, a space for experimentation and testing. The emphasis is on the contact with other people as opposed to an individual practice. This contact is here already very specifically qualified: as international, or “transcultural conviviality,” as Adajania calls it.

The first Triangle workshops only included artists from the initial US–UK–Canada triangle, but then

Became increasingly international, as artists from all over the world applied Invigorated and inspired by their experiences at the workshop, many of the artists returned to their home countries and started their own workshops and art spaces while maintaining contact with one another.⁹⁴⁵

In this description, international is not only connoted with cross-border contact and conviviality. It implies notions of exportability that is also present in Sood and Adajania’s accounts. The vocabulary is reminiscent of the diffusionist rhetoric employed in the global contemporary frame, in which institutions and artists in the West form a deterritorialized, global visual culture, and the rest of the world is divided in distinct, localized cultures

942 Pooja Sood, “Mapping Khoj: Idea/Place/Network,” in *The Khoj Book, 1997–2007: Contemporary Art Practice in India*, ed. Pooja Sood (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2010), 5.

943 “Mission and History,” Triangle Arts Association.

944 “Mission and History,” Triangle Arts Association.

945 “Mission and History,” Triangle Arts Association.

of which artists, even if they are mobile, become spokespeople. Therefore, the question should not be where the format originated and where it was “adapted,” but why it became so popular. Why did it speak to artists all over the world?

The members of Britto and the other SANA collectives (Vasl, Sutra, and Theerta) were only beginning to realize the potential of collaborative action, exchange, and mobility, when Loder and later Sood had already established themselves as highly mobile members of an international art field; they could afford to undertake research visits. For artists in Bangladesh and Nepal, this kind of mobility was still only an option for a handful of privileged artists, such as Lipi and Rahman, who were able to access larger scopes of action through their social network. Most artists did not possess the necessary economic and social capital to travel or participate in international programs. The format of the international workshop promised mobility—the opportunity to overcome the constraint of the local gallery system, the prevailing institutional and disciplinary boundaries—and to create platforms for experimentation and exchange between a wider number of artists.

When Sood explains her reasons to initiate KHOJ and thereafter SANA, her words not only resonate with the description of the Triangle workshops, but also with countless testimonies and descriptions that I have collected in the course of my research.

At a time when Indian artists felt isolated and unsupported, it provided the possibility for young practitioners to create an open-ended, experimental space for themselves on their own terms; a space where they could make art independent of formal academic and cultural institutions and outside the constraints of the commercial gallery. It offered the chance to establish international networks without institutional support. Artist-led, it was an initiative for artists by artists. It provided the liberating potential of creatively intervening in the prevailing status quo.⁹⁴⁶

The obvious reason for this resonance is the fact that along with the format of the workshop a related language is transmitted. Words such as “experimental space,” “independent,” “artist-led,” “initiative,” “potential,” “creatively intervening,” and even “network” have become part of contemporary art writing. They are used in proposals for supranationally operating funding agencies, such as the Ford Foundation or the Prince Claus Fund, and in applications for residencies and workshops. They are propagated by art-related magazines, homepages, and social media. The fact that English has become one of the main languages for art writing increases this proliferation. I return to the English language as an important connector in the network in the next chapter. The second, less obvious reason

946 Sood, “Mapping Khoj: Idea/Place/Network,” 5.

is that many contemporary artists, no matter the locality in which they live and work, face similar challenges. In the introductory quote, Adajania claims that KHOJ was sustainable because it was not conceived as a direct response to local needs and instead adopted a wider scope. In fact, KHOJ is based on the same desire to invigorate a local community of artists and the urgency to connect with a wider network—a tension between autonomy and transgression—more than each of the collectives I discuss. KHOJ responds to needs emerging from the locality, such as the constraints and disciplinary boundaries set by galleries or art education institutions. It also reacts to the artists' desire to transgress the local field(s) they emerged from. In the above quote, Sood emphasizes the wish to feel connected to other creative practitioners across socio-cultural and national boundaries. Moreover, she addresses the requirement of space (temporal and physical) for unobstructed development and experimentation. Lipi similarly stresses the urgency for a space in which experimentation with new mediums is accepted as a valid form of cultural production. The international workshop became a tool for building this space. But despite its flexible and comparatively economical nature, the mobility of artists across South Asia and from everywhere in the world required logistical support: access to funding for travel grants, visas, and communication equipment (e.g., phones, computers, internet connections), as well as a workforce to organize the application process and coordinate accommodation, working spaces, and provisions. Through the six-year Ford Foundation funding, SANA was able to offer this support to the collectives and organize regular network meetings.

In the *DAS* 2014 "Pioneer Panel," Sood describes the challenge of finding artists from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh to participate in the first workshops in India. Over the years, using the annual international workshops as nodes of connection, she slowly started to establish a South Asian network. Within the timespan of three years, four collectives in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan began holding regular workshops and drawing in more and more artists. Theertha International Artists' Collective (Sri Lanka) and Vasl Artists' Collective (Pakistan) both held their first international workshops in 2001. Britto started in 2003, and Sutra followed with its first International Workshop in Patan, Nepal in 2004.⁹⁴⁷ It is important to notice that despite the common origin in the fluid format of the workshop, these collectives took very different paths when the funding from the Ford Foundation ran out. In Nepal, Sutra stopped organizing activities by the end of the 2000s, partially as a result of frictions over financial decisions. Theertha and Britto struggled to maintain a regular program. In fact, Britto only organized one more international workshop in 2013, after the Ford Foundation funding, and thus SANA, ended in November 2011.⁹⁴⁸ Yet, Theertha, Vasl, KHOJ, and Britto remain active. Despite the

947 Sood, "Mapping Khoj: Idea, Place, Network," 58.

948 Pooja Sood, "Preface," in Sood, *SANA*, x-xi.

formal closure of the network, the established connections, formats, and platforms did not dissolve. During the SANA book launch at the DAS 2014, Sood explains that the collectives have grown stronger in their individual ways: Britto established its own space in March 2011 and continues its activities; Theerta, after a few setbacks, reopened its gallery in 2014 and continues with a biennial residency program; Vasl consciously decided to keep its fluid form, offering a broad variety of programs; and although Sutra has dispersed, I have shown that its energy lives on in spaces like Bindu, the Kathmandu University (KU) Center for Art and Design, and newer avatars like ArTree or Artudio.

Irrespective of their development and form, the workshop remains one of the most prevalent formats of collaborative action within and outside the former Triangle-SANA network. In fact, every artist-run initiative I worked with, including the Sattya Media Arts Collective (Sattya), Bindu, Drik, and PC, organize regular workshops that include participants beyond the national fields. This highlights the far-reaching commonality of contemporary artistic demands and the flexibility of the format. The workshop is adaptable in content, degree of difficulty, timeframe, and location to current circumstances and demands. Founding director of PC, NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati, for instance, describes the main requirement for PC's activities as contingent upon the people who could benefit from them. Since the immediate network of PC is predominantly regional, with mostly friends from Bangladesh and India coming to Nepal to give workshops, she has come to realize that despite the geographical proximity, the realities in the neighboring artistic fields are very different. She gives the example of a photobook-making workshop that *Chobi Mela (CM)* curator Tanzim Wahab and India-based photographer Shourab Hura had suggested for the first *Photo Kathmandu (PKTM)* festival in 2015. Kakshapati immediately knew that it would not make sense to organize this workshop during the festival because all advanced Nepali photographers were too busy with the organization of the festival. Instead, a "Photo Book 101" workshop took place in early 2017 and brought together ten advanced storytellers from Nepal and India. Workshops can offer great opportunities if they take into account the potential participants' interests, needs, and capacities.

THE WORKINGS OF THE WORKSHOP

The total freedom of making art without any ideological pressure or intra-artistic group rivalry—and, more crucially, without the anxiety of performing to a market—emancipated the artist to a considerable degree.⁹⁴⁹

In this quote, Adajania describes the effect that the KHOJ workshops have on the art scene in India. Rather than demanding the creation of polished

949 Adajania, "Probing the Khojness of Khoj," 24.

end products, they allow artists to work outside the pressures of the art market. Above, I noted creative freedom, exposure to new things, and socializing as the three main incentives for artists to participate in workshops. Adajania's comment refers to the first: the work created during the workshop is only seen by a limited audience, very often fellow participants who are aware of its processual nature. There are hardly any rules about the size, the medium, or the need for salability. Even the objective to impress curators, collectors, or buyers is sidelined. The artist's emancipation from the market, however, is only one part of the freedom artists experience in the workshop. The example of Nupur shows that the format also stimulates creative and mental liberation from institutionally established notions of art. It renounces conventions of display and fosters a renegotiation of the artist-beholder relationship.

Jahan conceived her first performance in a 2004 workshop that was co-organized by Rahman and took place in Bangladesh's second largest city, Chittagong. It was led by French artist Awena Cozannet:

That time, Britto arranged a workshop in Chittagong. Some from Chittagong, some from Dhaka, and one artist was a French performance artist, Awena Cozannet. It was also mess in my head because what she said I did not understand. But I can catch up, what is the performance. She told that performance is like a sculpture is moving. This is the main concept.⁹⁵⁰

The workshop catalog states that the idea was to approach sculpture through other mediums such as installation, performance, and photography, thus reflecting Cozannet's own interest in scenography, sculpture, installation, and the human body.⁹⁵¹ The workshop was divided into two parts: one in Dhaka, comprising eight participants, and one at the Jagatpur Ashram orphanage near Chittagong, comprising twelve artists including Nupur. At the time, Nupur was in the final year of her painting and drawing studies at the Chittagong Fine Arts Department and it was difficult for her to follow Cozannet's explanations: "It was also mess in my head, because what she said I did not understand."⁹⁵² She had not encountered performance art before, and unlike today, she did not have access to the internet to do research on the medium. She was dependent on what she learned at the university and old art catalogs she could find at the local book market. Over the course of the workshop however she slowly started to connect to the idea of "performance art" as a moving sculpture. Although she was enrolled in the painting department, the

950 AR, YJN, August 2015.

951 Awena Cozannet, "Aborder la sculpture. To approach the sculpture," in *Movement Will Become Sculpture*, ed. Britto Arts Trust and Pousses Rouges (Dhaka: Britto Arts Trust, 2004).

952 AR, YJN, August 2015.

medium of sculpture was familiar to her; performance was not part of the conventional curriculum.⁹⁵³

Jahan's first performance was inspired by the voice of a boy she had encountered during a walk in the area of the Ashram where the workshop took place; the voice moved her to tears. She explains that she did not know whether he was singing or praying, but she decided she wanted to include him and the nearby Hindu temple into her work.

He was praying and his voice was so amazing. I felt like crying. I was crying for a while. And I thought, let's do it like this. And all through, I did not know what was the performance. What is the installation.⁹⁵⁴

She felt like she still had not fully comprehended what the medium of performance art was. Nevertheless, she decided to try and let herself be guided by her emotions. In her account of the performance *Music of the Horizon*, she especially emphasizes the relationship with her own body and the audience. She remembers people taking photographs of her, while she walked up the stairs to the temple where the boy was singing. "I felt I am someone else. I am maybe someone who is clicking [taking a photo of] me."⁹⁵⁵ She mentally switches roles with the onlooker, taking photos of her own performance. This out-of-body feeling was contrasted by a simultaneous sense of extreme imminence; while walking past the gathered audience, she became very aware of the presence of her own body, which was subjected to this gaze. The constant "clicking" of their cameras irritated her, she explains, but also made her feel like a "star." Being the center of attention while experimenting with an unfamiliar medium caused insecurities to surface; she explains that she was especially scared of boring people with her work.⁹⁵⁶

This first performance presents an experimental, unstudied, and almost naive approach to the medium. Yet, it contains all the elements that distinguish Nupur's performance practice today, notably her ambiguous relationship with the audience and her conscious engagement with the concepts of time and space. The constitutive moment of the 2004 performance becomes clearer when put in relation to her performance at the DAS ten years later. Nupur remembers that people from the audience tried to engage with her several times during *Sat on a Chair*. They wanted to divert her attention or to provoke a response, but Nupur consciously refuses to interact with the audience: "I didn't want to talk with the audience. ... For me it felt interesting, ... just sitting, without moving."⁹⁵⁷ Her explanations indicate the integral and simultaneously disruptive relationship she sustains with her beholders since the performance in Chittagong

953 AR, YJN, August 2015.

954 AR, YJN, August 2015.

955 AR, YJN, August 2015.

956 AR, YJN, August 2015.

957 AR, YJN, August 2015.

in 2004. Rather than communicating a preconceived meaning, Nupur's approach emphasizes her imminent experience of the situation. She emulates Fischer-Lichte's understanding of performance as arising "from the interaction of performers and spectators with unforeseen reactions and responses constantly changing the planned course."⁹⁵⁸ Although Nupur consciously defies the connection with individual beholders, her performance engages the audience by eliciting imminent emotions. At the *DAS*, Nupur's actions, her ascent to the tied-up chair, her idleness and immobility, her surrender to the height, evoke the creation of an "emotional community."⁹⁵⁹ As onlookers, we are united in our experience of horror, vertigo, and curiosity. I am constantly drawn to the room where the performance is taking place, unable to focus on my other work. Nupur's husband, Manir Mrittik, and fellow Britto members rush to welcome her after the performance, marking their engagement in the performance and their investment in her well-being.

Jahan's performance also embodies a liminal, "betwixt and between" state.⁹⁶⁰ Regarding *Sat on a Chair*, the artist describes how, on the one hand, her mind felt conscious about what her body should not do: "don't move, don't eat, don't go."⁹⁶¹ This gave a very imminent feeling to her body, a very conscious being in space. On the other hand, she mentions feeling out-of-space, absent—as she was observing herself from above.⁹⁶² This dual experience of being "out-of-space" and very much "in-space"—of time flying by and standing still—exemplifies the artist's deliberate questioning of the very concepts of time and space; both can be manipulated by the body. What interests her is how these concepts change meaning when the body moves or does not move. How does changing one's position in time and space shape new perspectives? "I should have been down the pillar, but no, I was up."⁹⁶³ The world she creates in her performance is upside-down, reversed, abnormal. As a beholder, this is easy to comprehend: the white dress lets her fade into the background. Yet, the unexpected position within the building (on top of a pillar) simultaneously conceals her within the architecture and foregrounds her (in)action (see Fig. 18).

The international workshop was an important space for the artist. By way of the workshop, Nupur connected to Cozannet and her conception of performance art. On the other hand, the format allowed her the space to experiment and thus develop her voice through the medium. Over the course of ten years, she came to her own conception of what performance art is. In her artist statement for *Our Own Private Anthology*—an ongoing performance project on traditional family structures and food

958 Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance," 391–392.

959 Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance," 398.

960 Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*.

961 AR, YJN, August 2015.

962 AR, YJN, August 2015.

963 AR, YJN, August 2015.

preparation—Jahan elaborates on this conception.⁹⁶⁴ She explains that she uses her “body as a means of expression” while also aiming to “generate new possibilities” through the immediacy of the audience. Further, she understands the performance as an art form in which “the Self is made open to confrontation” yet is empowered at the same time.⁹⁶⁵ This statement re-emphasizes the liminal betwixt and between state Nupur experiences during her performances; especially her wish to consciously be in space while also feeling out-of-space. It takes up the ambiguous relationship with the audience that is already visible in her description of the 2004 performance. The audience is a constitutive part of the performance; impulses for new possibilities come from this interaction. At the same time, this confrontation also makes the self vulnerable—exposes it like a magnifier.

In previous chapters, I discussed how the transmission of knowledge about art in Nepal and Bangladesh is still largely organized by state-controlled institutions, such as art schools and the academies. These are increasingly contested as sources of knowledge as their curriculums are considered outdated. Their focus on traditional mediums, manual skill, and Western masters no longer fits the requirements of the young generation of contemporary artists. The artist collectives are emerging as important actors in art education, either as educators in the newly established private schools or by organizing alternative training formats. The workshop has thereby become an important space to explore, learn, and circulate news techniques and new mediums. Especially the international workshop offers a platform for multilateral and reciprocal exchange of knowledge, rather than a top-down transmission. In this regard, the format also differs from newer platforms, such as the *DAS*. Its organizers aim to establish the *Summit* as a platform for the generation and transmission of knowledge about art practice in South Asia. Yet, this transmission is as unilaterally structured as in the state-controlled institutions, the expertise is merely shifted from the national to the global scale. The international workshop in contrast focuses on a multi-scalar transmission and collective development of knowledge.

In our interview, Lipi describes how, when she came back to Bangladesh after her first residencies, both Rahman and she started thinking about what was absent in Bangladesh: “Is there a medium we are missing? Maybe we can go to neighboring countries to learn the medium and

964 The artist statement is available online on the homepage of the HH Art Spaces Foundation, an artist-run residency space in Goa since 2014. In December 2016, HH Art Spaces curated a performance program in collaboration with the *Serendipity Art Festival* in Goa. On the occasion of this festival, Nupur performed the third part of *Our Own Private Anthology*. The performance lasted for four days (nine hours per day) and highlighted the artist’s extensive engagement with the concept of time and space. “Yasmin Jahan Nupur (BN),” HH Art Spaces Foundation, accessed June 28, 2022, <http://www.hhartspacesfoundation.org/2015/1p0129kojk4jx55iispi98v4jz60xp>.

965 “Yasmin Jahan Nupur (BN),” HH Art Spaces Foundation.

come back and do by ourselves.”⁹⁶⁶ Besides the idea of a collective exhibition space that I discussed above, she was thinking about how to enable and foster flows of knowledge into the Bangladeshi art field. In the early 2000s, performance art was not part of the fine arts curriculum and only a handful of artists had been exposed to the medium, with fewer still who practiced it. Those who did, did so on their own, seemingly without much effect on the wider field. Theater and Performance Studies scholar Shahman Moishan claims Kalidas Karmakar to be the first Bangladeshi artist to do a performance in Paris in the 1980s.⁹⁶⁷ Travelling certainly represents an important way of accessing knowledge. In the 1980s however this mobility was limited to a small group of privileged artists. From the 1990s onwards, a small group of artists in the Chittagong area started to collectively work on performance art. From one of the Charukola teachers, I learn that Polish-German artist Christian Rothmann conducted a workshop in Chittagong in 1992.⁹⁶⁸ In this workshop, he introduced the medium of performance art to the early generation of contemporary artists in Bangladesh including Niloofar Chapman, Dhali Al Mamoon, and his wife Dilara Begum Jolly (the latter two were members of the Shomoy Group).⁹⁶⁹ A little later, Rahman started to experiment with the medium. Starting from his first performance in Lama, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1994, he has repeatedly used his own body as a medium to evoke, most notably, socio-political issues of the Bangladeshi nation.⁹⁷⁰ His appointment as the curator of the performance art program of the *DAS 2014*, which I discussed

966 AR, TBL, March 2017.

967 Shahman Moishan, “Socio-Aesthetic Genesis of Performance Art,” *Depart* 14/15, 2013, accessed June 20, 2021, <http://www.departmag.com/index.php/en/detail/262/Socio-aesthetic-genesis-of-performance-art>.

968 AR, A, 2015.

969 The Shomoy Group was one of the first artist collectives in Bangladesh, founded in 1980 and active throughout the 1980s, promoting mixed-media, figurative, and political art that deviated from the styles taught at Charukola. In an interview with *Depart* editor Mustafa Zaman, Dilara Begum Jolly explains that it was through a series of workshops—the first organized by Porapara Artists’ Space (an artist collective based in Chittagong) in collaboration with eminent performance artist Seiji Shimoda from Japan—that she began to realize performance as a “language through which [she] could express [her]self.” She does not mention the workshop with Rothmann in Chittagong. Mustafa Zaman and Dilara Begum Jolly, “Performing the Self,” *Depart* 14/15, 2013, accessed September 17, 2018, <http://www.departmag.com/index.php/en/detail/268/Performing-the-self->.

970 In the catalog for Rahman’s solo exhibition at the Bengal Art Lounge in Dhaka (2015), curator and museum professional Amit Kumar Jain gives an overview of the artist’s performances since the late 1990s. Starting with *Nature Salutation* (1997), a comment on the rapid and unplanned urbanization in Dhaka, he moves to *Artificial Reality* (2002), which deals with the social structure of Bangladesh, and *Transformation* (2004), which focused on the stagnant economy of Bangladesh. Rahman reenacted this performance in front of the Parliament in Dhaka in 2014, thus highlighting his continued engagement with the political and social issues in Bangladesh. Amit Kumar Jain, “The Body as Dust: Performances by Mahbubur Rahman,” in *Mahbubur Rahman: Dust to Dust 2010–2015*, ed. Bengal Art Lounge (Dhaka: Bengal Art Lounge, 2015), 4–6.

in the last chapter, bears testimony to his consistent engagement with the medium. Among my research partners, he is frequently credited for establishing the medium in Bangladesh. Rahman himself emphasizes the importance of collective engagement; the recognition of performance art, he states, was driven by the younger generation of artists who rather than engaging with performance individually “started working on it collectively.”⁹⁷¹ Moishan retraces the history of performance art in Bangladesh and paraphrases Rahman’s view on the limitation of this medium, caused by “the members of this society [who] do not want to share their experiences with each other.”⁹⁷² Both statements emphasize the importance of collaborative engagement as a vital framework for learning about and experimenting with new mediums. The workshop, and the artist collective as its primary organizers, fosters this kind of engagement.

The importance of multilateral exchange in the transmission of knowledge is also highlighted by my research partners’ reflections on the *Asian Art Biennale*. Organized by the Shilpakala Academy in Dhaka since 1981, this biennale has been an important, regular opportunity for many artists in Bangladesh to acquire knowledge on what is going on in the art fields of their neighboring countries. Artist and *Depart* editor Mustafa Zaman for instance explains that the *Asian Art Biennale* was the first and most important event for artists to be exposed to contemporary art, especially new mediums.

Asian Art Biennale is the one particular site where we encountered installations, for example. The first installation probably was by Japanese artist. ... We were very very ambivalent, regarding whether these were art or not art. Still we admired the scale and the way they sort of staged their art. ... We interiorized a lot of things from artists who came from Japan, artists who came from Australia.⁹⁷³

Zaman illustrates that the artists of his generation were not exposed to new mediums through the university curriculum, but through the mobility of artworks between art fields. Due to the absence of installation from the fine art canon and the unavailability of other sources of information, especially art writing, the artists did not have the expertise to evaluate these works at first, and they were “ambivalent” about their status in the field. Zaman mentions especially Japan and Australia as mediators of new input, pointing to the *Asian Art Biennale*’s orientation towards the East, rather than the West.

Lipi’s assessment of the *Asian Art Biennale* is more critical. She emphasizes the difference in the quality of exchange offered by the state-organized biennial event and the programs facilitated by SANA.

971 Rahman, “Performance Programme,” 87.

972 Moishan, “Socio-Aesthetic Genesis of Performance Art.”

973 AR, MZ, September 2015.

This kind of connection was not very strong, but at the same time it was the only window to see. Just to learn what Pakistani, Indian, or Nepali art is. But still, you don't learn from the exhibition only. You need more to see. More exchange. Once we started with Britto ... that was the first time, I would say that we got real connection with South Asia through Triangle Network. We started doing some exchange programs, like Pakistan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka. ... We built SANA that time, as part from Triangle Network.⁹⁷⁴

Lipi compares the connections built by the government-run *Asian Art Biennale* to the relations made possible through SANA. Taking the South Asian region as an example, she explains that the mobility fostered by the *Biennale* was limited to the physical mobility of artworks based on direct government-to-government exchange. SANA in contrast allowed for a novel quality of contact. It ran on inter-personal relations, the exchange of ideas, techniques, and challenges, with artists as transcultural brokers of these flows of knowledge. Both Zaman and Lipi acknowledge that the *Biennale* allowed artists who, for economic, political, or social reasons could not travel (twenty years ago, this was the majority) to get a glimpse of the art practice in the neighboring countries. But these connections have been predominantly limited by government-sanctions (on the sending and receiving end) and bound by the materiality of the artworks. Even though mobile artworks can carry styles, contents, and other information about the visual practice in one field, they are not able to broker conceptualization, daily practice, inspiration, thought processes, and so on. The type of connections that Lipi describes as real allow for a face-to-face, extended exchange on both the individual working process and the personal history of fellow artists. The international workshops opened the possibility of multilateral and reciprocal communication, rather than unilateral, one-sided consumption. This evaluation resonates with one of the first conversations I had after arriving in Dhaka. In September 2013, I asked how Britto had managed to sustain itself for more than twelve years. Both Rahman and Lipi agreed that it was, above all, due to the format of the workshop. The workshop continues to be a space where artists come together and exchange knowledge in a non-hierarchical manner. It allows them to work autonomously and connect on equal grounds. This kind of translocal contact was made possible for the first time through the workshops organized among the SANA collectives.

In addition to the cultural capital gained from the specific type of exchange offered, international workshops foster the accumulation of social capital. Above, I quoted Sood explaining how she used the first KHOJ workshops as nodes of connection to establish a South Asian network for contemporary artists. These connections have had a critical and long-lasting effect on the national and regional fields of art. On a global

974 AR, TBL, March 2017.

scale, the participants of the first two KHOJ international workshops in Modinagar, such as Anita Dube, Subodh Gupta, Sudarshan Shetty, Bharti Kher, and Quddus Mirza are today India's most renowned contemporary artists. On a regional scale, the workshops allowed artistic contact across contested national borders, such as between Bangladesh and Pakistan. In the aftermath of 1971 there have been continuous rifts in the diplomatic relations between both countries, impeding the mobility of goods and people. SANA has allowed connections in the art field that would not have been possible and are still not possible in other fields. On a national and urban scale the international workshops have enabled artists to connect to like-minded peers in their own country. In my interviews, many Britto members describe how they came to know about and later joined the collective through the format of the workshop. Others have repeatedly collaborated with the collective. The workshop is a place where one-time random encounters can grow into decisive professional alliances. This is as important for the organizers as it is for the participants. Awena Cozannet, the facilitator of the 2004 performance workshop, for instance, had been a participant in the 2003 Britto international workshop. A year later, Britto invited her back to Bangladesh for an artist residency, in the framework of which, she organized two workshops in collaboration with Rahman under the header "movement will become sculpture."

The Britto workshops ... encourage artists to explore issues of site specificity. They will live and work in a specific place like [an] isolated haven perfect for enhancing creativity. They have begun to experiment with materials from their everyday surroundings. They will mainly work with new and less practiced art in this region including installation, site specific work, performance, etc.⁹⁷⁵

This description, taken from Britto's homepage, reemphasizes the value of the workshop as a mediator of new things, to cultivate the multilateral flow of knowledge, to foster social capital, and to allow for creative freedom away from the constraints of the field. For the workshop to have this intended effect, it needs to present a liminal character. For the duration of several days (or weeks), the workshop becomes an "isolated haven." The rules of the artistic field and especially the market are relegated to the background. Artists are expected to free themselves from both professional and family responsibilities in order to focus on their immediate environment, their creative practice, and the other participants. In a sense, the participants form a "liminal group" of comrades that transcends individual social, cultural, and economic backgrounds.⁹⁷⁶ Some organizers provide

975 "Britto International Artists' Workshop," Internet Archive, Britto Arts Trust, accessed January 31, 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20160204144949/http://www.brittoartstrust.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=85&Itemid=540.

976 Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 100.

input in the form of experts in a certain field or medium that share their experiences. Others merely predetermine a topic while the participants structure the content based on their experiences. Some workshops have a particular goal, an open studio or exhibition at the end of the given time-frame, while others consider experimentation to be the preferred form of “aesthetic experience.”⁹⁷⁷ Participants focus on the process of transition rather than the “transformation *into* something.”⁹⁷⁸ Regardless of the particularities, the common denominator of the international workshop is to offer time off and away—a liminal space between the autonomy of the individual practice and the connection with like-minded artists. The importance of this becomes clear when compared to other types of workshops.

During a session of *Chakati Guff*, a talk-series organized by Mcube Gallery owner Manish Lal Shrestha, Kathmandu-based artist Ragini Upadhyay Grela urges her colleagues not to participate in workshops.⁹⁷⁹ Aware of SANA’s workshop-based success, Upadhyay’s position initially seems perplexing to me. Upadhyay, however, is talking about a very particular kind of workshop, namely the two or three day workshop that has recently become popular among non-governmental organizations (like Water Aid or UNESCO) and local businesses and institutions (from hotels to private schools). These actors have recognized the format as a convenient tool to promote their activities and to raise money for specific social or political causes (gender awareness, natural catastrophes, hygiene, and so on). They invite artists to work on a specific topic and ask them to donate at least one painting to the cause in return for materials and exposure. Upadhyay argues that artists are selling out their talent by giving away free (for charity purposes) artworks that, on top, are produced in a rush. The audience of the talk is divided. Many of the attending artists regularly participate in these kinds of workshops, because they see it as a way to showcase their work. Some are motivated to “give back to the community,” to escape the monotony of their studio, or to “socialize.” Others share Ragini Upadhyay’s skepticism. As a former member of Sutra, Shrestha is well acquainted with the workshop format and the way it was used in the SANA network. In a magazine produced for the tenth anniversary of Sirjana College of Fine Arts he utters a very similar critique to that of Upadhyay:

Why do many institutions arrange one day workshops for artists?
I admit not to be part of it because it ruins the mechanism of practice and at the same time it never fullfills the degree of emotional

977 Fischer-Lichte, “Interweaving Cultures in Performance,” 392.

978 Fischer-Lichte, “Interweaving Cultures in Performance,” 392.

979 The name is derived from the word *chakati*, a flat, small, round or square cushion that is used in Nepal to sit on the floor. During *Chakati Guffs* at Mcube, artists and other members of the creative community can take their own *chakati*, listen, and discuss a talk by a member of the artist community. Invitees have been among others Dina Bangdel, Lok Chitrakar, Madan Chitrakar, and Ragini Upadhyay Grela.

milieu. But it is good for socializing. We see the value of the painting created on such one-day events worth more than the per-day salary of Mr. President I suppose. Creation is impossible within an hour; it is like giving birth to a child.⁹⁸⁰

Shrestha here jokingly compares the value of artworks produced in one-day workshops to the presidential salary, highlighting the ridiculousness of the process. He explains that creativity and creation require time. Moreover, he elaborates that the value and quality of artworks is contingent upon the artist's determination, dedication, emotional attachment, and knowledge—qualities that cannot be achieved in short-term workshops.⁹⁸¹ Even though Shrestha focuses on an individual process of creation (for instance comparing it to giving birth), rather than the collective character of the workshop, his critique emphasizes the importance of the right timeframe.

In addition to the right duration (not too short, not too long), the spatial setting of the workshop is an important factor. This is emphasized in a comment by a Kathmandu-based photographer who I interviewed during a residency in which we both participated. They explain that in the medium of photography, workshops are either too expensive or too short to actually be able to commit to creating new work. In the course of the interview, they mention PC as one exception to this generalized critique. Their main point is that most workshops happen within the limits of the city and do not offer enough mental and geographical distance to everyday life and the responsibilities it holds.

Workshops, I prefer not to go. Especially when it is happening here. ... Residencies, yes, because they give us a time and space to be dedicated onto what you really feel like doing. If you are at home, even in the workshop, you don't have that much commitment because, if it is happening in Kathmandu, you'll have your family responsibility, you'll have your occupational responsibility, so you won't give as much time. So if, residencies, that is where you really get the time to think what you are doing.⁹⁸²

Apart from the time factor, being spatially removed from everyday obligations is an important part of art practice for many artists I talked to. To create art at home (in a dwelled-in place), for instance in the personal studio or in the course of a local workshop, is always linked to the potential for social and economic responsibilities getting in the way. This not only pertains to the close proximity of people who represent these obligations

980 Manish Lal Shrestha, "Nepali Art in a Verse of Transition," in Sirjana College of Fine Arts, *The Creation*, 58.

981 Shrestha, "Nepali Art in a Verse of Transition," 58.

982 AR, A, September 2013.

(family members, work colleagues, bosses), but also to the preoccupation of the mind with mundane things. Creative production, the quote implies, requires a certain mental space. This is only provided in long-term residencies or workshops that require relocation to a specific, collectively shared space. Residencies are in fact another format that has become popular, but in comparison to the international workshop, they emphasize individual creative development over the collective, multilateral exchange on which I focus.

I have discussed the importance of distance, temporally and physically, for transcultural brokerage. By being outside their originating visual discourse and encountering novel elements from other discourses, artists are able to create a third virtual space. From this space, they can question and contest the discourse shaped by their upbringing, media consumption, and formal education.⁹⁸³ For Nupur, the Britto workshops represent this third space. At the time of the International Britto workshop in 2008—which the artist describes as a “life-changing moment”—Nupur spends much of her time in the capital city, where she lives and works.⁹⁸⁴ Many artists have a love-hate relationship with Dhaka. Photographer and curator Wahab, for instance, juxtaposes Dhaka’s positive “intensity”—the “energy” of its people—with the negative agitation in the “harshest possible city.”⁹⁸⁵ Being in close proximity to millions of other people often implies a balancing act between the overabundance of socio-cultural opportunities (and obligations), and one’s individual art practice. In addition to the full social calendar (family and work responsibilities, exhibition openings, talks, and so on) the city environment with its traffic jams, its scarcity of open spaces, and its general humdrum keeps the mind occupied. Having the opportunity to leave for two weeks, to be in nature and have a clear mental space for reflection, contemplation, and new ideas, represents a welcome change for many artists I met.

Nupur explains that from her rooftop apartment in Dhaka she used to see her neighbor going about her daily chores—doing the laundry, hanging it out to dry. While executing these tasks, the women wore a type of burqa, “which is not really our tradition.”⁹⁸⁶ On the one hand, the claim that the majority of women in Bangladesh wear a *sari*, rather than a *shalwar kameez* (baggy trousers and long shirt) or a burqa, is commonly used as a way to distinguish Bangladesh from other Muslim majority countries. I often encountered this claim as part of a larger argument to establish one’s belonging to a Bengali culture. On the other hand, I have observed

983 Clark, “Asian Artists,” 21–22.

984 In comparison to the venue of the workshop, Bogra (68.63 km², 93,351 households, 400,983 population), and Nupur’s current (2017) home, Narayanganj (12.69 km², 66,045 households, 286,330 population), Dhaka is much bigger and more densely inhabited (316 km², 2,034,146 households, 8,906,039 population). Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, “Population & Housing Census 2011.”

985 AR, TW, November 2015.

986 AR, YJN, August 2015.

a rising number of women in Dhaka wearing the burqa over the last decade. In Nupur, the observation of the woman doing laundry in a burqa initiated a thought process. She was intrigued by the fact that she and her neighbor belonged to the same Muslim faith, but apparently had very different conceptions about the appropriate practice of said faith. This reflection caused Nupur to ponder about her own religious upbringing, especially about her mother, who also, she explains, covers her head. In her imagination, the three women came together. "I am from a Muslim family and she [the neighbor] is also from a Muslim family, but mentally this Islamic mentality is not similar. ... Even when she was drying her clothes on the roof, she wore the burqa."⁹⁸⁷ This difference-in-similarity continued to intrigue her. The workshop in Bogra offered her a way to address the topic:

Since it was hammering me and then, when I was in the workshop, I thought, let's do the one about her body. She [the neighbor] is like transforming the body in time also. How she felt inside the body. So, the performance was about forty minutes. I saw the burqa and also in my head I remembered the sculpture is movement. So, I kept these materials, it is like metal—the fabric was almost like metal—and then I am moving with that. So, when the sun shines on it is almost like a sculpture is moving.⁹⁸⁸

Nupur describes how the setting of the workshop offered a platform to inquire about her neighbor's body, its relation to faith, its movement in the city, and how it changes or is made to change in different settings. She refers to the 2004 workshop with Awena Cozannet in which she discovered performance as a medium to deal with issues of the body in time and space. In an extension of the "performance as moving sculpture" concept that she learned in the workshop, she hand-stitched a burqa out of shimmering fabric and made it move in the light through her own body. With the performance, Nupur not only initiates a discussion over what it can mean to be a Muslim woman, she also constitutes her own faith, Islam, as a discursive tradition, in which three women can have three seemingly incompatible positions about their body in relation to their faith.⁹⁸⁹

Hüsken and Michaels remind us that for Victor Turner cultural performances and the wider social arrangements in which they take place are commentaries on human relatedness.⁹⁹⁰ This commentary can take both the form of a critique and a celebration. What is significant is that the liminality of the situation allows for cultural elements to be disordered and

987 AR, YJN, August 2015.

988 AR, YJN, August 2015.

989 Nadja-Christina Schneider, "Applying the Lens of Mobility to Media and Gender Studies: An Introduction," in *New Media Configurations and Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Asia and the Arab World*, ed. Nadja-Christina Schneider and Carola Richter (Baden-Baden: Bloomsbury; Nomos, 2015), 235–236.

990 Hüsken and Michaels, "Introduction," 11.

reordered. In other words, the performance (and the workshop as its setting) are prime situations for the process of cultural brokerage. The in-between state of being in the moment, with an audience of comrades, and at the same time outside the constraints of ordinary norms, allows Nupur to question the different visual expressions of religious belief in her country. She uses her body to inquire about the motivations of individuals to express their faith in the way they do. She does not pass judgement on either expression but surrenders to the different possibilities. She thus opens the discourse to herself and the audience. Beyond the single performance, Nupur develops her position as a contemporary artist, able to raise issues out of their daily, seemingly banal context and offer them as a comment or question upon the society in which she lives.

Like every format I have discussed so far, the workshop is not an isolated situation, it is embedded in a network of nodes and connections that represent the multiple scales of the field of contemporary art production. The international workshop offers an ideal setting for artists to be exposed to, to share knowledge about, and to experiment with new practices, but there are more long-term demands that the format is ill equipped to meet. Workshops are for instance not a place for proper education, as Shahidul Alam contends in our interview.⁹⁹¹ *CM* curator Munem Wasif similarly mentions the need for a more durable infrastructure for the education of photography when talking about Nepal-based PC from his perspective. He explains that whenever he collaborates on a workshop at PC, the organizers “find these people who come from nowhere and then there is no continuation.”⁹⁹² This shows that although the format of the workshop is intrinsically directed against more stable forms of infrastructure, it is at the same time always interconnected and co-dependent on a wider institutional framework, including supranational funding agencies such as the Ford Foundation and education institutions. Furthermore, KHOJ and Triangle have evolved into indispensable and stable institutions themselves.

AUTONOMY AND CONNECTEDNESS IN THE NETWORK

As organizers of workshops, the collectives must deal with infrastructural and logistical challenges. Despite the fact that workshops represent a time-out for participating artists and bring about connections in a rather organic way, organizers need to recruit facilitators, coordinate open calls, secure locations, and so on. Economic sustainability in general is an issue that preoccupies many of the collectives I researched. Initiatives such as PC and Drik have found commercial avenues to access economic resources, but they depend on securing additional funding. The majority of collectives rely on supranationally operating institutions such as the Prince Claus Fund (Netherlands), the Arts Collaboraty (Netherlands), or the Danish Centre

991 AR, SA, September 2018.

992 AR, MW, September 2015.

for Culture and Development (CKU, Denmark) in order to sustain regular activities (workshops, residency programs, exhibition projects). The alliance with such donors offers evident economic opportunities, yet it also creates dependencies, and, consequently, vulnerabilities. First, the incoming funding usually has a time limit; I already mentioned how the SANA collectives struggled when the Ford Foundation funding stopped. Second, even though these foundations are globally operating, they are nationally based and sometimes even affiliated with a specific ministry. They are thus subject to political decisions in the country in which they are registered. An example for the resulting effects is the sudden ending of the CKU funding to PC and the Siddhartha Foundation Education Initiative after the Danish Government decided to “phase out” its foreign assistance to Nepal and focus on other countries instead.⁹⁹³ Third, the recourse to foreign funding causes contestations towards and within the emerging alternative field of contemporary practice.

Several collectives deal with allegations that, alongside the funding from European or American organizations, they also embrace and disseminate related cultural forms. These allegations are fed by the tropes of origin and authenticity effective in the global contemporary frame and pinpoint potent asymmetries in the field of contemporary art.

I don't know very much about their official activities, but being an outsider, what we saw is that most of the time [collective's name] do the work as they were told by [funding agency's name].⁹⁹⁴ Because the funding is [coming] from there. Most of the time they don't think “is this project appropriate in my society, in my condition, in my perspective?” That is very—I think that causes a contradiction in today's practice.⁹⁹⁵

Similar to the criticism directed at Sattya for its alleged unilateral focus on the so called Western way during *Kolor Kathmandu (KK)*, this quote contains an accusation against the supranational funding agency and the respective collective. The first is believed to impose its conception of contemporary art, and the latter to adopt this conception unchallenged. The critique bespeaks a legitimate concern about the cost of relying on foreign

993 I learned of these developments from the initiatives themselves. There does not seem to be an official statement from the Government of Denmark as to why this funding stopped. An article in *The Copenhagen Post* (Denmark's only English-language newspaper) mentions the cuts to foreign development aid suggesting the funds will be relocated to the growing refugee crisis. “Denmark Will Cut a Further 1.5 Billion Kroner From Foreign Aid Budget,” *The Copenhagen Post*, November 20, 2015, accessed August 31, 2022, <https://cph.post.dk/?p=33944>.

994 I chose to omit the name of the artist-run initiative, as well as that of the funding agency, to prevent definite allocation, but also to emphasize the wider generality of this claim.

995 AR, A, 2015.

actors and institutions. Many art historians, art writers, and curators take positions in a highly mobile arts center, from which it is easy to conceive a global contemporary condition based on a shared global visual culture in which all contemporary practitioners are co-present. The less mobile actors or those travelling “tourist class”⁹⁹⁶ have their fields and experiences denigrated as localized and hierarchically subordinate. Institutions based in the centers of the art field (New York, Paris, London, Berlin, and of late Hong Kong) continue to control the discourse on contemporary art. They regulate access to funding and knowledge. On the one hand, the collectives rely on these institutions to organize programs, because those situated in the fields they emerged from do not have the resources, capacities, or motivations to fund mobilities. On the other hand, the collectives are aware of the dangers of dependance. How then do they position themselves in a contemporary field that grows bigger and more connected every day?

Underlying the above comment is a fear of being subsumed into a homogenized global visual culture or, alternatively, of becoming a marketable spokesperson for a specific art-culture-territory. The experience of this double threat is connected to a widely propagated trope in globalization studies. Whether in popular media, politics, or academic discourses, globalization is mostly discussed in terms of flows of economic capital and labor; culture plays a marginal role. Lydia Haustein argues that this rhetoric has led to subordination of cultural shifts to economic processes, meaning to the assumption that economic globalization constitutes a cause for change, whereas shifts in culture are merely consequential.⁹⁹⁷ On a similar note, Niru Ratman identifies an asymmetrical discussion of “economic” globalization as a cause and cultural globalization as a “series of effects.”⁹⁹⁸ The fear underlying the above comment shows this trope in effect: the assumption that, because the West dominates flows of capital, it necessarily controls flows of culture. The artists I encountered adopt different strategies in the face of this trope: Some attempt to disengage from influences considered foreign and focus on vernacular practices. This unilateral focus on the local (urban, national, or regional) scale may lead to conceptions of authentic and traditional practices originating in a specific culture-territory construct. The vast majority of my research partners however adopt a multi-scalar strategy of transcultural brokerage. This strategy is arduous, as it requires the upkeep of a constant tension between the autonomy and the connectedness of their collective field as well as their individual practice. They are concerned with what their practice means for their localities, and in sharing a contemporary practice with like-minded actors across geographical and cultural boundaries. In order for neither connection to become too unilateral, they need to engage in a continuous dynamic readjustment of said connections.

996 Canclini, *Art Beyond Itself*; based on Medina, “Inundaciones.”

997 Lydia Haustein, *Global Ions*, 145–146.

998 Ratnam, “Art and Globalisation,” 287.

The international workshop is a crucial example to discuss the mediation of connections. Inward, it represents a situation in which the flow of new mediums is temporarily situated. It emphasizes my research partners' preference for a decentered and multilateral exchange of ideas and practices over unilateral adaptations of global flows. This approach allows me to comprehend new mediums not as new because they come from outside, but because they arise from the contact between hitherto isolated actors and ideas. Like the performances by Nupur I used as a case study in this chapter, the workshop does not transmit given meanings. Its liminal character is constitutive for the emergence of novel visualities. As a collective situation, the workshop allows for the delegitimization of set discourses and the opening-up of artistic, socio-cultural, and political practices for discussion.⁹⁹⁹ Consequently, the flow of new mediums is not about the transmission of "meaning" (what new mediums mean in a Euro-American context, for instance), but about the transition—the liminal and collective negotiation of performance art created anew.

This transcultural perspective exposes the oversimplified and diffusionist rhetoric involved in the classification of specific formats (such as the workshop, the biennial, or the public art program) as foreign to a locality. This rhetoric does not reflect the experience of the actors involved. Research on alternative contemporaneities needs to examine the values that are being created and expose the asymmetries in transcultural connectedness, not retrace origins and adaptations of flows. The network is a helpful tool. It allows a conception of the workshop as one of numerous nodes in a temporary network, in and through which flows are brokered. The workshop and the creations it brings forth are liminal and momentary. Yet, they engender long-term connections in the forms of interpersonal friendships and alliances between collectives. Another important space for transcultural brokerage is the hanging-out situation along with mediators such as the English language and media technologies. The availability of e-mail, and later social media such as Facebook, plays a crucial role in the artists' realization of transcultural affinities.

999 Fischer-Lichte, "Interweaving Cultures in Performance," 391–392.