
Chapter 7

Hanging Out in the Translocal Artist Community: New Media and English as Tools of Cultural Brokerage

My research partners use the notion of community to describe people connected to the arts. This relatedness at times circumscribes all actors engaged in the art field in a defined locality, including art mediators and other professionals. Most often, however, it is an invocation of affinity, of like-mindedness, of mutual understanding and respect between art practitioners. It can be based on a shared struggle to overcome society's expectations and choose an unconventional professional path. It can be based on a common effort to find one's own creative style of color, composition, or medium, or be related to the challenge of finding balance between family life and work, especially for women. Affinity among artists can arise from the challenge of finding a job or sustaining oneself financially. It can also be based on a common interest in social activism, in advocating for a more inclusive society, or in resisting Western (visual) hegemony. Because of this focus on shared values and the qualities of connections, the term community can be made to refer to any scale of locality. Depending on the context, it may circumscribe artists working in the same city, the same country, or contemporary artists across the world. Tayeba Begum Lipi, for instance, comprises a loose group of contemporary artists practicing in Bangladesh when she states that "Being part of a network was a way for Britto to answer the needs of our local community of artists."¹⁰⁰⁰ Nayan-Tara Gurung Kakshapati uses the phrase "photo community in Nepal" to refer to a similarly loose group of photographers based in the country.¹⁰⁰¹ Sujan Dangol in contrast demarcates a finite group of artists by referring to the participants of *Kolor Kathmandu (KK)* as "a very nice community."¹⁰⁰²

1000 Begum Lipi, "Extending and Expanding the Idea and Space," 172.

1001 AR, NGK, December 2015.

1002 AR, SD, January 2016.

In my research community is an emic category, not an analytical one. When I use the term outside of direct quotes from my research partners, I mean a group of people who, based on the way they speak and act, consider themselves to be connected in a distinct way. I do not mean a territorially bound group with a shared system of cultural traits and values,¹⁰⁰³ nor do I invoke a utopian, egalitarian community without asymmetries.¹⁰⁰⁴ The communities my research partners imagine include ethnic, national, class, religion, caste, and gender related asymmetries. Because of its volatile but often essentialist meaning, the notion of community has faced ample critique in the academic discourse over the past decades, which has cemented its difficulty as an analytical category. In the discipline of anthropology, the concept has most famously been criticized for being “invoked to fill the vacuum of location once filled (literally) by place.”¹⁰⁰⁵ This critique resonates already in Eric Wolfs’ 1956 text on cultural brokerage. In it, he concludes (in tune with the then prevalent structure-factionalist approach) that the communities that anthropologists have hitherto studied as self-contained units need to be conceived as parts of larger systems. He comprises communities as “local termini” that fulfill special functions in a multi-scalar network, extending from the scale of the community to that of the nation. He shifts focus from the content of communities (the beliefs or practices that were/are considered to bind them) to their relations with other scales of the network. The role of brokers, then, is to mediate between the interests of the community and the national scale. Despite Wolfs’ decisive shift in perspective, his approach does not tell us anything about the concrete situations in which this brokerage happens, nor through which channels of communication. This is the focus of my last chapter. I am not proposing a new definition of community, but I aim to examine the kind of behavior that the emic category points to. In this regard, I disagree with Postill and Postill and Pink who argue against the use of community as an empirical and scientific category, claiming that the mere invocation of community does not actually shape people’s practices of exchange and togetherness.¹⁰⁰⁶ It does not—but it does tell us to where to look.

I look at the artists’ use of community through the lens of Fischer-Lichte’s “emotional community.”¹⁰⁰⁷ This community does not “abolish or blur differences.” Rather than being based on a “feeling of oneness,” it celebrates a “state of in-between, in which different identities are possible side by side.”¹⁰⁰⁸ The imaginary of a translocal artist community that I discuss in

1003 See Amit and Rapport, “Prologue: The Book’s Questions,” 3; Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction*, 15.

1004 Harris, “In and Out of Place,” 33–34.

1005 Amit and Rapport, “Prologue: The Book’s Questions,” 3.

1006 Postill, “Localizing the Internet,” 416; John Postill and Sarah Pink, “Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web,” *Media International Australia* 145, no. 1 (November 2012).

1007 Fischer-Lichte, “Interweaving Cultures in Performance,” 394, 398.

1008 Fischer-Lichte, “Interweaving Cultures in Performance,” 398.

this chapter arises from a potential to establish contact based on a shared understanding of contemporary art among artists, irrespective of their locality. Transcultural brokerage plays an important part in the practice of this community: latent, as a byproduct of mobility, or manifest, as a tool for artists to seek out and mediate knowledge about visual discourses and practices. Actual physical contact among the members of this community happens during a variety of formats, but especially during workshops and hanging-out situations. New media, which refers to a variety of media that can be created and displayed through digital electronic devices such as digital images, digital video, or e-books,¹⁰⁰⁹ have enabled artists to imagine an artist community beyond this face-to-face contact. They have broadened the motility and the options for transcultural brokerage.

Marcus Michaelsen argues that the participatory and networked character of digital media as well as their ability to “make out like-minded people” and “perforate the boundaries between private and public domains” renders them capable of changing the social behavior and the way people communicate.¹⁰¹⁰ New media technologies have altered the artists’ lives, first, as communication tools—by easing cross-border communication, for instance between the South Asian Network for the Arts (SANA) members— or by facilitating and speeding up applications for workshops and residencies. They have increased the artists’ agency by allowing them to access opportunities (scholarships, travel grants, or calls for submission) outside the fields of art they dwell in. Online social networks like Facebook have enabled instant news exchange, crucial for instance during crises such as the earthquake in Nepal. New media also open up new artistic mediums, offering new ways for artists to express themselves in the form of new media art. According to Oliver Grau, media art “attains a key role in the reflection of our information societies.”¹⁰¹¹ Third, new media have become a “new force to the imagination in social life today.”¹⁰¹² They allow for the imagination of a new art setting, converging in the idea of a translocal artist community. In these three capacities, new media have allowed artists to transgress geographical, disciplinary, and socio-cultural boundaries, and thereby substantially increased their agency to act in or on their localities. Like new mediums, new media are often subjects to a diffusionist rhetoric of global flows. Despite allowing global networking, I want to emphasize that so-called global media are neither global in themselves, nor deterritorialized. On the one hand, the devices (cables, computers, servers, etc.)

1009 I use “new media” and “digital media” as synonyms. I also use the term “internet” to highlight its dominance in the displaying, sharing, and storing this media. “New media” and “digital media” differ from “mass media” in that the latter also include analog media such as print media.

1010 Marcus Michaelsen, “Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age: An Introduction,” in Schneider and Richter, *New Media Configurations*, 309.

1011 Oliver Grau, “Our Digital Culture Threatened by Loss,” in *Media Art: Towards a New Definition of Arts in the Age of Technology*, ed. Valentino Catricalà (Online Publication: Gli Ori, 2015), 39.

1012 Appadurai, “Global Ethnoscapes,” 197.

that materially make up the internet are physically localized. On the other hand, media cannot be separated from the people who make use of them. In the edited volume *New Media Configurations and Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Asia and the Arab World*, Richter and Schneider emphasize that “new media technologies are still appropriated according to the specific social needs of the protagonists as well as the political structures and cultural environments they are located in.”¹⁰¹³ It is thus important to focus on how new media are used and understood in the context of specific interactions. Within these situations they cannot be uncoupled from “classical” media such as language, particularly the English language.

Further, “digital media mobilizations cannot replace the tedious work of organization building, electoral politics, or legal and institutional change.”¹⁰¹⁴ The example of Lipi applying for her first residency in Europe shows that there were ways to access larger networks and enact agency on a broader scale before the advent of digital technologies and the internet. SANA emerged from the effort of a small group of people and a fluid format of yearly workshops, from where it snowballed into a large network without much access to novel communication technologies. Through the internet, the artists gained access to new scales of action (in speed and in convenience), yet the foundation of the network already physically existed. Word-of-mouth systems and face-to-face exchange based on the accumulation of social capital were (and still are) a legitimate and crucial form of social contact and communication. Therefore, I not only look at how new media have allowed an easier, faster, and more wide-reaching communication, but also at how the English language and the conventions of hanging out (of talking, of eating, of documenting) continue to constitute the art community.

The media that facilitate contact are comparatively easy to fathom, as the vast emerging literature on topics like digital media communications or “global Englishes” shows.¹⁰¹⁵ Yet, the situations in which these mediums are used to negotiate cultural, political, and social commonalities, challenges, and successes—in short, the sort of affinities that allow the imagination of community—are often located at the margins betwixt public art projects, official meetings, and large-scale events. In contrast to the workshop, which I also characterized as a liminal space, these are moments that serve no pre-defined purpose. Workshops are liminal by design. In situations like lunches, dinners, lazy afternoons, or parties, however, people do not expect anything of relevance to the arts (and thus my topic) to

1013 Carola Richter and Nadja-Christina Schneider, “Introduction,” in Schneider and Richter, *New Media Configurations*, 19.

1014 Michaelsen, “Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age,” 309.

1015 See Alastair Pennycook, “Global Englishes, Rip Slyme, and Performativity,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7, no. 4 (November 2003): 513–533; Pennycook, *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows* (London: Routledge, 2007); Suresh Canagarajah, *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations* (London: Routledge, 2013); Hepp, “Translocal Media Cultures”; Michaelsen, “Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age”; Richter and Schneider, “Introduction.”

happen. They are people, sometimes friends, hanging out. And because neither I nor the artists were working in our official capacities as artist and anthropologist, these moments proved difficult to examine.

The notion of “hanging out” refers to an “established (if poorly explicated) method” in anthropology.¹⁰¹⁶ It was first mentioned by Renato Rosaldo (1994) in order to emphasize the distinctiveness and validity of ethnography in the absence of extended co-residence. The notion was taken up by James Clifford to describe the particularities of Karen McCarthy Brown’s urban fieldwork on Voodoo in Brooklyn.¹⁰¹⁷ Her method was not understood as “intensive dwelling,” but as “repeated visiting” and collaborative work.¹⁰¹⁸ Despite its vast application today, as Walmsley accurately observes, “there is very little literature available on deep hanging out.”¹⁰¹⁹ Further, in my case, the interest to focus on hanging out did not arise from the absence of long-term co-residence, but from the motivation to better grasp the values of contact.

I use hanging out in a double capacity: first, as a method which focuses on collaborative work, it is process oriented, more passive, less directed and systematic than the go-along.¹⁰²⁰ In practice, this meant that I actively participated in conversations, asked questions, but did not try to purposefully steer the conversation into a particular direction. I took notes only after the fact, from memory, or brought up interesting aspects in more formal situations. Second, I treat hanging out as a particular node in the network of contemporary art—as a situation in which connections are temporarily situated. These situations, much like the ethnographic method, are marked by a casual but process-oriented and collaborative practice. As such, they stand in contrast to concepts such as “timepass.”¹⁰²¹ Hanging out does not denote “surplus time.” It is not a directionless drifting, loitering, or expression of uselessness and idlenesslike hanging out at teashops or passing time in-between classes.¹⁰²² Rather, it is an essential part of collective and individual creativity; they are situations technically marginal to the production of art, but effectively crucial for the constitution of a collective contemporary art identity. The concepts of timepass and hanging out overlap in the fact that both are successful mechanisms to bind solidarities and promote group identity.¹⁰²³ Artists exchange information on other artists, mutual acquaintances, their current projects, and other events in the art field. These situations fulfill an important role in brokering cultural and social capital. The brain keeps working, despite (or because) of the influence of food, good conversations, and alcoholic beverages. I exemplify

1016 Walmsley, “Deep Hanging Out in the Arts,” 273.

1017 Clifford, *Routes*.

1018 Clifford, *Routes*, 56.

1019 Walmsley, “Deep Hanging Out in the Arts,” 276–277.

1020 Kusenbach, “Street Phenomenology,” 463; Clifford, *Routes*, 56.

1021 Jeffrey, “Timepass,” 471.

1022 Jeffrey, “Timepass,” 465.

1023 Jeffrey, “Timepass,” 465.

this through a set of situations that I frequently participated in during my research: the lunch, the dinner, and the party. The instances that I use as an Interlude to this chapter are derived from my fieldwork notes, pertaining to one specific event, yet they bring together a much wider set of observations.

Even though hanging out proved to be a valuable tool, and the situation itself a crucial constituent of alternative contemporaneity, it entailed two problems: the first ethical, and the other the dearth of anthropological research on relationships beyond kinship. First, the situations I comprise as hanging out frequently involved illicit or at least socio-culturally ambiguous activities, such as the consumption of alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs. Furthermore, the way they were recorded, either by me or the other attendants (in photographs, Facebook posts, or my notebook) brought into question rights to personal space and privacy. I tried to solve this ethical problem by seeking individual permissions and anonymizing situations, but sometimes I consciously chose just to not write something down. Second, the terms my research partners use to refer to the contact in hanging-out situations, like friendship, family, and community have a complicated history in anthropology. While the notion of community has been mangled, the theoretical differentiation of friendship is still in its beginning.¹⁰²⁴ As emic categories, they offer a way to describe situations, but not to analyze the outcome. Barcellos Rezende's analysis of friendship as an "idiom of affinity and togetherness ... played against that which is seen to differentiate and potentially separate" is helpful as it points to the artists' understanding of community through their use of the label of "friends" (and "family").¹⁰²⁵ My research partners focus on affinities, such as their common struggle against institutional boundaries or their anchorage in a wider social idea, rather than their differences (religion, ethnicity, or nationality), thus enabling them to situate themselves in the "same social world" of contemporaneity.¹⁰²⁶

1024 The rather scarce literature on friendship has largely focused on demarcating boundaries with "kinship," rather than developing content for what the relationship labeled "friendship" entails. The two most crucial publications are *The Anthropology of Friendship*, edited by Sandra Bell and Simon Coleman, and Desai and Killick, *Ways of Friendship*. Miller writes that friendship is often understood as "an expression of choice," in opposition to kinship "as relationships based on obligation." As Carrier writes, it is regarded as "based on spontaneous and unconstrained sentiment or affection" in contrast to the constraints associated with bureaucratic, professional, or kinship relationships. Moreover, the anthropological research on "kindship" and "friendship" is undercut by tropes of modernity. Thereby, the first is still often seen as a "traditional" model of social organization (prevailing especially in the non-West), whereas the second marks a changing lifestyle, phrased in terms of modernization, urbanization, globalization, or increasingly individualized lives. Miller, "The Ideology of Friendship," 380; James G. Carrier, "People Who Can Be Friends: Selves and Social Relationships," in Bell and Coleman, *The Anthropology of Friendship*, 21.

1025 Rezende, "Building Affinity Through Friendship," 92–93.

1026 Rezende, "Building Affinity Through Friendship," 92–93.

Interlude: Lunch–Dinner–Party

LUNCH

We climb up to the fifth floor, where I find Saurganga Darshandhari's apartment. As I take off my shoes (a common practice in all private and semi-private places in Nepal), a man enters the balcony. Darshandhari addresses him as "Prithvi, the one I told you about in my e-mail." We go in, and the number of canvases and sketch papers lying around immediately takes me aback. This is not an apartment; it is a studio. I ask whether they live here, and they explain that sometimes they do. Prithvi Shrestha used to work on the upper floor and then this apartment became free, so they rented it. We sit down on the floor in the biggest room, and I start my first conversation with artists in South Asia. We talk about Bindu—A Space for Artists (Bindu) and how it was created to support the development of arts in Nepal. I am surprised to hear that the idea actually came from Mahbubur Rahman, whom I have not met yet, but whom they know from their college years. It had been several years since Rahman had been in Kathmandu and Darshandhari had received her MFA from the University of Development Alternative in Dhaka—"Now, we are family." After going through their recent works and talking about their respective art practices, we slowly drift off topic. We talk about the mountains and how you should go trekking with somebody before marrying them. They advise me on where to get the best dal bhat (a dish made from lentils, rice, and vegetables) and Newari khana (food). Dharshandhari then explains how people tried to force her to eat beef in Bangladesh. I mention that it is time for lunch and that I should probably leave now. Shrestha makes a phone call and twenty minutes later a man delivers aloo paratha (potato flatbread) and dal (lentil soup). While we eat, we talk some more about Bangladesh, and it quickly becomes clear that the Britto Arts Trust (Britto) has much more resources, and therefore is more globally visible. Tayeba Begum Lipi travels a lot, while Dharshandhari has never been to Europe. They give me tips about who to see and who to talk to when I go to Dhaka in September. I find it interesting how a part of my fieldwork that has not happened yet suddenly becomes the main topic of a conversation in the present. After lunch, we go to the rooftop, from where you can see the ocean of houses covering the Kathmandu valley. Shrestha remembers how the place looked like in his childhood, and Dharshandhari recounts the story of how Manjudeva sliced the mountains in the south with his sword to drain the lake that covered the valley.¹⁰²⁷

DINNER

I am invited to Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman's Green Road apartment for dinner. We talk about Nepal, people we both know. About how one of their friends has now started a space for young artists. It is important to have

1027 There are many such accounts of the origin of the Kathmandu valley, but this is the one that I encountered most through conversation. See Bell, *Kathmandu*, xxiii–xxiv.

a space for artists after they finish their education, Rahman explains. They need to develop further, to conceptualize, and to be supported on the way to establish themselves as professional artists. But it is not good to take students out of their network, he cautions. They become outsiders at school. They already have exchange there. The conversation moves over to the living conditions and prices of food in Nepal. Despite the difference in scale, the traffic in Nepal is worse than in Dhaka; it is impossible to catch a ride after eight pm. That is a shame, because Nepal has very nice family-style restaurants. You cannot eat outside in Dhaka: the food is bad, too expensive, the atmosphere is not nice, and they do not serve alcohol anyway, Rahman adds jokingly. Then our food arrives. It is the physical representation of a South Asian network of artists—the fish was made by Sayantan Maitra Boka, an architect and scenographer from Kolkata, who has been collaborating with Britto on the “No Man’s Land” Project. The fish is so spicy I can hardly eat it. Tayeba Begum Lipi took charge of the vegetables. And Nilofar Akmut, a London-based Pakistani artist currently working on a project in Dhaka, serves a mild curry. Over dinner, the conversation continues, in a fast mix of Bengali, Urdu / Hindi, and English.

PARTY

Together with the “Nepali gang”—the Nepali photographers who came to Dhaka for Chobi Mela VIII—we take over the dancefloor. Pathshala has been transformed into a party-hub; lights flicker from the huge mango tree and a band covers all-time favorite rock and pop songs. At the sound of Bon Jovi, the senior photographers become the center of attention. Cameras point and shoot. A fellow participant enthuses about how friendly and nice everybody is. How the festival has created friendships and bonding over similar interests in a short time. At 11:30 the music is over, but the party continues. I leave. I wonder how many of the images taken tonight will end up on Facebook tomorrow?

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

Facebook possesses no power but is tremendously powerful. As long as there is electricity and as long as the internet is working, Facebook enables people in different places to form new units of consciousness and actions—to achieve new emergent scales.¹⁰²⁸

Biao Xiang’s notion of the emergent scale refers to the “scope of coordination and mobilization” that results from collaborative effort.¹⁰²⁹ It brings about new skills and competencies for the actors. Emergent scales do not have definite shapes; they are actor-centric and activity-specific. In the quote above, Xiang explains that Facebook is an effective tool to spawn coordination, mobilization, and in turn generate new scopes of action for

1028 Xiang, “Multi-Scalar Ethnography,” 285.

1029 Xiang, “Multi-Scalar Ethnography,” 284–285.

users. In other words, it allows actors to access different scales of exchange and contact. A large number of people today—including me—take the fact that digital media are border-crossing communication tools as a matter of course.¹⁰³⁰ I exchanged e-mails with Sauganga Darshandhari even before I set out for my first fieldwork in Nepal. Through her and the Facebook pages, blogs, and the other internet presences of Britto, Sattya Media Arts Collective (Sattya), and Bindu, I gained my first insight into the art scenes of Nepal and Bangladesh without being physically present. This was valuable information, not only in formulating possible research questions and hypotheses, but also in easing the transition into a completely new situation—my field.¹⁰³¹

The borders crossed by digital media are not necessarily geographical; new communication technologies affect almost every part of our daily life, from personal social interactions to huge political mobilizations.¹⁰³² They often blur the lines between private and public. Private actions, such as a home video or a status update, can become political statements; news is “propelled” into private homes at incredible speed, and contributions to public communication can be made from any point with internet access.¹⁰³³ Just a few minutes after the earthquake in Nepal on April 25, 2015, the news broke on Facebook—the internet, especially mobile data, being one of the only communication tools not affected by the fall-out. From my laptop screen in Germany, I witnessed the almost instant sharing of images about the damages caused. I received messages from friends, acquaintances, and research partners who did not know I had returned a week earlier asking if I was ok; if somebody I knew was hurt, and if I had heard from this and that person.

Moreover, new media “make out like-minded people.”¹⁰³⁴ *Chobi Mela* (CM) VIII for instance, did not only manage to physically bring together people interested in photography in the lecture theater of the Goethe-Institute in Dhaka, but—by streaming live all the talks and lectures—united photography amateurs and professionals worldwide. Tools, such as comment sections, sharing buttons, or even view counts allow distant audiences to

1030 Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined* (London: Sage, 2015), 17.

1031 I do not mean this in the sense of Malinowski’s memorable (and much criticized—see for instance Clifford, *Routes*, 56) arrival scene: “Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight.” Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: Routledge, 1978 [1922]), 3. Despite the fact that I had spent time in South Asia before starting my doctoral research, and that I had gathered a little fieldwork experience from my master’s thesis research in Bangladesh, heading to Nepal (or to any place in general) is both exciting and frightening. The internet and the information it offers are great tools in softening that transition.

1032 Michaelsen, “Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age,” 315.

1033 Michaelsen, “Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age,” 315.

1034 Michaelsen, “Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age,” 315.

feel connected, even if they do not actually make use of these tools. Seeing that 478 people watched the same video gives you a sense of being part of a larger interest group. In a similar line of thought, Sattya core member Yuki Poudyal explains that the collective mainly uses Facebook to “reach out to people” and to “get [their] network together.”¹⁰³⁵ Through Facebook, Sattya becomes aware of like-minded fellow creatives, invites workshop facilitators, and connects to other collaboration partners. I am reminded that I too came to Sattya through this channel. Like Saurganga Darshandhari, I had contacted Sattya via e-mail prior to my first fieldwork in Nepal. When I did not get an answer, I posted on their Facebook group page, and less than an hour later received several helpful comments and was invited to “please stop by Sattya.”¹⁰³⁶

In addition to the border-crossing social aspect, the use of new media technologies as artistic mediums—as “new media art”—has become an important part of contemporary art practice. According to Valentino Catricalà, early developments in new media art can already be found at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁰³⁷ From here, he argues, a complex media system has unfolded. This system exceeds the mere recording and presentation of images in motion to include “an idea of *liveness*” paired with a “mathematical sectioning of information.”¹⁰³⁸ Encompassing both the natural and the artificial or technological realm, this system is embodied in works such as Man Ray’s 1920s rayographs, or Wolf Vostell’s incorporation of a television set in “German View from the Black Room Cycle” (1958, Berlinische Galerie).¹⁰³⁹ Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the system evolved into its own field, with artists such as Nam June Paik, whose room installations transgressed the boundaries between artistic disciplines, cultural contexts (e.g., TV Buddha, 1974), nature, and culture, or Steina and Woody Vasulka, who were pioneers of video art.¹⁰⁴⁰ The seemingly infinite and transgressive possibilities that digital media offer to artists today are also visible in contemporary expressions such as Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s large-scale, urban interactive video art installations.¹⁰⁴¹

Grau suggests that because new media art makes use of technologies that fundamentally shape our society, it is perhaps more accurately

1035 AR, AS, September 2015.

1036 PE, June 2013.

1037 Valentino Catricalà, ed., *Media Art: Towards a New Definition of Arts in the Age of Technology* (Online Publication: Gli Ori, 2015), 66.

1038 Catricalà, *Media Art*, 66, italics in the original.

1039 The rayographs resulted from placing objects on photosensitive paper and exposing this paper to light. Light is both the subject and the medium. For visual examples and an explanation of Man Ray’s process, see, for instance, “Rayograph,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/265487>.

1040 Valentino Catricalà, “On the Notion of Media Art: Theories, Patterns, Terminologies,” in Catricalà, *Media Art*.

1041 Examples, such as “Under Scan” (2005–2008, UK) are available on the artist’s homepage: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, “Under Scan,” Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, accessed March 5, 2021, http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/under_scan.php.

equipped to grasp the complexity of contemporary times.¹⁰⁴² Britto member Manir Mrittik's "City Life" is an example of how contemporary challenges can be addressed through art. The multi-media work shows the front facade of a typical Dhaka high-rise building. Some of the windows are illuminated and through them a selection of videos made by the artist can be seen (as small pictures on the bottom). An integrated camera captures the onlookers' image and introduces it into the central window as a "live video." This image then appears to catch on fire and beholders are forced to watch themselves burn (a)live. Life around them, in the other windows, goes on unobstructed. The work paints a bleak picture of the anonymity, loneliness, and isolation that the artist experiences in the city. "Cities try to fold lives into neat little compartments," he explains in his artist statement. He describes cities as "mechanical wasteland," filled with "grey, soulless husks."¹⁰⁴³ The work was realized in the 2013 Britto international workshop and represents a sharp personal comment on the atmosphere in the city at that time. From his home in Narayanganj, Mrittik commutes the twenty-five kilometers to Dhaka for his job in an advertisement company every day. He spends several hours in the car and I have often heard him complain about the congestion and pollution he experiences on his daily route. "City Life" however is not only about traffic, overpopulation, and "soulless husks"; it is also about how politics repeatedly disrupt life in the capital city. The international workshop took place in 2013 at the Shilpakala Academy, a stone's throw away from where the Shabhag movement was gaining momentum; in the aftermath of Abdul Quader Mollah's sentencing through the War Crimes Tribunal, Dhaka was plagued by *hartals* (general strikes). Vehicles were set on fire and violence broke out on the streets, adding to the city's uninhabitability. The fact that Mrittik chose an interactive video format for his work almost seems ironic. While the work is interactive and depends on the physical presence of a beholder, the city life he describes is unengaged. The artist alleges that nobody cares about the lives that are led behind illuminated windows (Fig. 19).

In addition to using digital media to express or comment on contemporary society, artists use digital media to record, store, and present their work. Thereby they affect the development of other mediums. Performance art, for instance, is generally contingent upon the use of the body and therefore difficult to conceive without the physical presence of the artist. This experience of imminence and liminality by both performer and beholder, which I described in the last chapter, limits options of exhibition, distribution, and consumption. Yet, this is changing due to digital media. New technologies have, at least partially, made it possible for artists to preserve, share, and exhibit their otherwise ephemeral performances on a larger scale. Reetu Sattar's four-hour performance *5000 feet under*, which she conceived for the opening of the *Asian Art Biennale* in 2014, was one

1042 Grau, "Our Digital Culture Threatened by Loss," 39.

1043 PE, MM, October 2017.



Figure 19: Manir Mrittik, *City Life*, 2013. Interactive video. Courtesy of the artist.

of the first performances ever included in the show. It was recorded and exhibited in digital form for the remainder of the biennial.

As postulated by Arjun Appadurai, digital media can be seen as a new way of imagining social life.¹⁰⁴⁴ In his essay “Global Ethnoscapes,” he argues that “more persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before.”¹⁰⁴⁵ One of the main reasons for this shift, Appadurai explains, is the mass media. By offering a vast array of alternative lives, they enter not only the “lived imaginations of ordinary people” but also the “fabrication of social lives.”¹⁰⁴⁶ “Fantasy is now a social practice,” Appadurai concludes, not as a “simple matter of escape,” but as a generation of something new (communities, politics, needs).¹⁰⁴⁷ The imagination and fabrication of a new, translocal social setting converges in the idea of a translocal artist community: artists feel connected to fellow artists everywhere in the world not exclusively but to a great extent

1044 Appadurai, “Global Ethnoscapes,” 197.

1045 Appadurai, “Global Ethnoscapes,” 197.

1046 Appadurai, “Global Ethnoscapes,” 198.

1047 Appadurai, “Global Ethnoscapes,” 198.

because of the availability of digital media. On a smaller scale, the shifts described by Appadurai have manifested in several other effects.

The new possibilities offered by digital media have freed artists from the constraints of the physically accessible field; they have increased their motility. This is particularly obvious in the way knowledge about new techniques, mediums, and events is acquired and further disseminated. In the Cross-Generational Panel at the *Dhaka Art Summit (DAS) 2014*, senior artist Syed Jahangir observes that art students today have direct access to the workings of a global art field due to the internet.¹⁰⁴⁸ They no longer depend on the teachers' mediation of art histories, styles, and techniques. This assessment is ambiguous; on the one hand, it suggests that the internet has weakened the teachers' status as respectable brokers of knowledge and thus adds to the growing dissatisfaction with the fine art education. On the other hand, this accessibility has allowed art education to expand beyond the available library collections or the scope of the teachers' knowledge. Students and teachers can equally make use of the internet to inform themselves. In comparison to the workshop, which I discussed as an important conveyor of knowledge, the internet offers a steadily available flow. A fine art graduate from Nepal, for instance, explains that they use YouTube tutorials to learn about "color flow"—a technique that consists in tilting the canvas or paper and thus controlling the flow of the paint. Similarly, a photography student from Bangladesh claims to use web and social network sites such as Instagram to keep updated about trends and happenings in contemporary photography. Most of my research partners use Facebook, especially its "multisemiotic" form, which combines a variety of media, such as texts, images, videos, and hyperlinks.¹⁰⁴⁹ Through photographs, comments, and descriptions, they can "mind-walk"¹⁰⁵⁰ through exhibitions and events that they are not able to physically attend. "Unfortunately, I was not able to visit the exhibition, but I saw the images on Facebook," was a frequently uttered sentence.¹⁰⁵¹ Using the internet has become part of the artists' practice, their research, and is used as a way of broadening their knowledge. They stay updated and in contact with the art world; they learn about residencies, workshops, and funding opportunities, send their applications, and are no longer dependent on word-of-mouth communication systems.

1048 The panel was entitled: "Where have we come from and where are we headed? A Conversation among artists about art and art making in Bangladesh," and took place at Shilpakala Academy on February 7, 2014, from two to three pm. It was moderated by curator Rosa Maria Falvo and included Syed Jahangir, Wakilur Rahman, Mohaiemen, and Sultana—each representing a particular generation of artists from Bangladesh.

1049 Bal Krishna Sharma, "Beyond Social Networking: Performing Global Englishes in Facebook by College Youth in Nepal," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 16, no. 4 (2012): 506.

1050 Tim Ingold, "Ways of Mind-Walking: Reading, Writing, Painting," *Visual Studies* 25, no. 1 (2010).

1051 FDE, A, 2014.

There is a general sense among my research partners that the internet has made the field more inclusive. This inclusiveness pertains not only to the fact that everybody can, if they chose to do so, access information. It also allows them to reach wider audiences. Several of the talks during *CM VIII* touched upon the fact that camera phones and social media platforms have changed the profession of the photographer.¹⁰⁵² Flickr, Twitter, and Instagram allow professionals to gain viewership far beyond the physically reachable public. One of the speakers for instance explained that they manage to reach about 150 million people a day by posting on Instagram, tweeting, and writing a couple of Facebook status updates. Undoubtedly, access to word-of-mouth systems requires social capital and privileges actors with well-connected positions in the field. Yet, new media have also brought about advanced modes of surveillance, invasions of privacy, and, most notably, new forms of exclusion. In the institutional chapter, I showed that the growing artistic interest in new mediums fosters new asymmetries, especially between the affluent, urban middle classes with access to infrastructure (electricity, internet), technical equipment (computers, cameras, software), know-how, and other social groups.

As a site of community, we can expect Facebook to have all the contradictions found in the kind of community that Alana lives in. You simply can't have both closeness and privacy. You can't have support without claustrophobia. You can't have this degree of friendship without the risk of explosive quarreling. Either everything is more socially intense or none of it is.¹⁰⁵³

In his groundbreaking work "Tales from Facebook," Daniel Miller concludes that Facebook establishes and sustains a sense of community.¹⁰⁵⁴ He immediately concedes the contested nature of the notion of community, "whatever we mean by that term."¹⁰⁵⁵ Nevertheless, he continues to argue that the internet fosters the emergence of values such as care and concern, friendship and reciprocity—values that we would commonly qualify as marking a community.¹⁰⁵⁶ Yet, at the same time, he adds, Facebook also engenders negative notions of contact, such as invasion, even devastation of privacy. Miller shows that this twofold capacity—to establish and abuse contact—is not a unique feature of new media.

1052 The talk in which the topic was most salient was entitled "So you have taken some great pictures. Now What?" It took place on January 29, 2015, at the Goethe-Institute Dhaka and included Alam, Lens founder James Estrin, and photographer Teru Kuwayama. The talk is available through the *CM* YouTube channel, see "So you have taken some great pictures. Now What? | Shahidul Alam | Chobi Mela VIII," Chobi Mela, uploaded September 27, 2016, YouTube video, 1:07:17, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-v0g9aTihE>.

1053 Daniel Miller, *Tales from Facebook* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 27.

1054 Miller, *Tales from Facebook*, 24.

1055 Miller, *Tales from Facebook*, 24.

1056 Miller, *Tales from Facebook*, 24.

Rather, it is part of a more general social behavior that, due to the development of digital technologies, has been extended to these new modes of communication. This becomes clear when we include offline interactions in the discussion.

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Since its beginnings, ethnography has included the proficiency of vernacular languages. James Clifford lists the ability to master at least one language from one's field as a "powerful technique" used in ethnographic research.¹⁰⁵⁷ For Gupta and Ferguson, learning a local language is among the key tools that a fieldworker employs to gain experience.¹⁰⁵⁸ It also sets them apart from other types of travelers and tourists. I acquired a basic understanding of Bengali during my studies and I started taking private Nepali lessons from my second fieldtrip (2014) onwards. I soon realized that although knowing the local language even a little facilitated things like grocery shopping and moving around the city (and set me apart from tourists), I rarely made use of it in direct conversation with the artists, neither in Nepal nor in Bangladesh. Almost every artist I met was more or less fluent in English.

Alastair Pennycook, the author of "Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows," exposes the same tropes (of globalization, of modernity, and of development) that have guided the studies on contemporary art and urbanization and the research on language, globalization, and new media.¹⁰⁵⁹ He notably criticizes the widespread view that the worldwide proliferation of the English language happens in a "neutral" and "uncontested" way. Further, he identifies a diffusionist understanding of global flows, which sees the proliferation of English as either the best example for, or a tool of, globalization-as-homogenization (or Westernization). Rather than succumbing to these notions, Pennycook advocates for a focus on "agency, resistance, or appropriation" that does not lose sight of the political context of the spread of English.¹⁰⁶⁰

Both Nepal and Bangladesh have contested language histories. While discussing art education, I explained that the education institutions, which existed in South Asia before colonialism (Sanskrit *pathshalas*, monastic schools, and *madrasas*), were based on the classic languages: Sanskrit and Arabic. The English language spread with the British colonizer and its institutions. In Nepal, English was associated with the economic and political elites, the Ranas, as a symbol of power, socio-economic privilege, and

1057 James Clifford, "Spatial Practices: Fieldwork, Travel, and the Disciplining of Anthropology," in Gupta and Ferguson, *Anthropological Locations*, 201.

1058 Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Discipline and Practice: 'The Field' as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology," in Gupta and Ferguson, *Anthropological Locations*, 31.

1059 Pennycook, "Global Englishes, Rip Slyme, and Performativity," 516.

1060 Pennycook, "Global Englishes, Rip Slyme, and Performativity," 516.

status.¹⁰⁶¹ With the proliferation of English-medium schools in the 1990s, especially in the urban areas, English became more widely circulated, but it remains a sign of the urban middle and upper classes. Moreover, in both countries, the vernacular tongue has a strong political role in constructing the “superethnos.”¹⁰⁶² This has led to the marginalization of languages spoken by ethnic minorities, but also arguably hindered the flow of English. In Nepal, the Panchayat System administered the “one language” policy, pushing Nepali as the predominant language. In Bangladesh, the 1950s were marked by a violent uprising against the government’s attempt to establish Urdu as the official language. The Language Movement, strongly supported by master artist Zainul Abedin and other Charukola professors, led to the recognition of Urdu and Bengali as official languages. With the independence in 1971, Bengali became the new state language, thereby consolidating the marginalization of other languages.¹⁰⁶³

It is not within the scope of this research to address the particular uses of English in Bangladesh and Nepal in general.¹⁰⁶⁴ Pennycook’s critique, however, serves as a guide to discuss the valuation, the circulation, and the politics of English within the field of contemporary art. The following quote from an interview with Britto member Anisuzzaman Sohel serves as a base for this discussion:

INTERVIEWER (MH): *What is the role of language [in contemporary art]?*

INTERVIEWEE (AS): *Language, meaning the art language?*

MH: *Also.*

AS: *... and the communication language. It is very important, because the maximum of our artists, we don’t talk English properly. It really is a problem. I am saying one thing, you understand another thing, because we [Bangladeshi artists] are not so good in English. ... It is a problem. But Pathshala’s students they are a little better than Charukola students. Because they are smart, they are English-medium generation. ... I think Charukola should take initiative for better English. ...*

MH: *So, you think that English is important?*

AS: *Very important.*

MH: *Why?*

1061 Giri, “The Power and Price of English,” 213.

1062 Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*, 30.

1063 Raghavan, 1971, 7–8; Islam, “Life and Times of Literary Magazines,” 79.

1064 For Bangladesh, see Shaila Sultana, “Young Adults’ Linguistic Manipulation of English in Bangla in Bangladesh,” *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 17, no. 1 (2012); Shaila Sultana, Sender Dovchin, and Alastair Pennycook, “Transglossic Language Practices of Young Adults in Bangladesh and Mongolia,” *International Journal of Multilingualism* 12, no. 1 (2014). For Nepal, see Sharma, “Beyond Social Networking”; Giri, “The Power and Price of English.”

AS: *If you want global, and you don't [think] ... "I do my work, I am not interested to communicate [with] any foreigner." But that part is also a problem. Because what is happening in Bangladesh, what is happening in South Asia, other people don't know. This is the problem. But that is why we need to improve our language.*

...

MH: *What does global mean for you? "Global" mane ki?*

AS: *Global mane "prithivi" [= earth, world, globe]. "Prithivi" mane "shara" [= whole]. "Prithivi shamgra jog" [= connection of the whole world]. Capitalist, their "Dauratma" [= violence], mane power, global power*

MH: *And global art?*

AS: *Global art is a different thing. All over the world, artists are the same maybe. Artists are very selfish type of people. They are doing their work. What they love, they will do. Artists and capitalists are a different kind of—but nowadays some art will be a product.¹⁰⁶⁵*

In the beginning of the excerpt, Sohel repeatedly states that he sees the fact that many artists in Bangladesh do not speak proper English as a problem. The consequence, he comments, is an inability to communicate with "foreigners." On the surface, this comment is based on the perception that English is a widespread language. Because of its cross-border geographical reach, proficiency allows communication on a larger scale, i.e., beyond the 242 million Bengali speakers in the world. The comment however also contains an assumption that artists will benefit from communicating on this larger scale. It further uncovers a generational and class shift. Sohel graduated from Charukola in the 1990s, a time when English-medium schools were not as common as they are today. Although Charukola, as part of Dhaka University, is among the public institutions that teach in Bengali as well as English, my interviewee does not consider this education sufficient. He recognizes the geographic and socio-economic heterogeneity of Charukola students and insinuates that the faculty has not fully recognized the benefits of fostering proficiency in English. The younger urban generation, on the other hand, to which he believes the private Pathshala South Asian Media Institute's students belong, have profited from the proliferation of English-medium schools in the city. Of 150 English-medium schools in Bangladesh, 135 are located in the Dhaka Division, and they make up approximately 6% of the total enrollment in junior and secondary schools in Dhaka.¹⁰⁶⁶ Based on my own observations in Bangladesh and

1065 AR, AS, September 2015.

1066 Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), *Bangladesh Education Statistics 2016*. Although there are no accurate numbers for Nepal, it is safe to assume that the vast majority of institutional (private) schools teach in English. Giri estimates that there are 8500 private boarding

in Nepal, the vernacular remains the common medium in art education. Yet, the importance of English has grown enough to cause disparities, not only among the students, but also within the wider art field. English has become the medium in which applications, proposals, and artist statements for international workshops, residencies, or festivals are submitted. This is not only true for events happening in English majority countries, but also in other regions; the broad diversity of languages in South Asia, or the presence of international participants and facilitators for instance, often requires a language compromise. And this compromise, more often than not, involves English. Owing to the fact that my research partners consider face-to-face exchange with fellow practitioners to be a crucial advantage of such events—as I discussed in the previous chapter—it is easy to comprehend why a linguistic common ground is necessary. It is in this setting that Britto member Yasmin Jahan Nupur deploras her inability to communicate in English.

When I was a student, when he [Mahbubur Rahman] talked, it was going over my head. I couldn't understand anything, because his level and my level were completely different. And also I told you, my academic curriculum was so poor because I studied in Bengali medium. So I could read only Bengali. I couldn't read English. So, it is like another boundary.¹⁰⁶⁷

In this excerpt, Nupur describes how she participated in a workshop facilitated by Rahman when she was still a fine art student. The first part of the comment pertains to her inexperience with the emerging contemporary practice, especially relating to new mediums, which Rahman stands for. The second part refers to his use of language in particular. Nupur sees her struggle to understand Rahman as a shortcoming, which she attributes to her education in a Bengali-medium school. Like Sohel, she perceives the inability to accurately understand and especially read English as a boundary to accessing knowledge. The comment contains a feeling of inadequacy that goes beyond the purely linguistic capacity and speaks to a larger notion of education; the Bengali-medium schooling not only prevented her from learning English, but subsequently from accessing knowledge conveyed in that medium. Besides facilitating the communication with fellow artists and experts, fluency in English also allows access to art writing and history beyond the vernacular. The struggle to understand or

schools and colleges in Nepal, about 2500 more than the 6015 private schools counted by the Ministry of Education. Sharma explains that these private schools have agreed on an institutional policy “declaring these sites as English-speaking zones.” He further mentions that English has become a prerequisite for many jobs in the private and public sector and that most education institutions and workplaces use written English. Giri, “The Power and Price of English,” 216; Ministry of Education, “Nepal Education in Figures 2016”; Sharma, “Beyond Social Networking,” 486.

1067 AR, YJN, August 2015.

communicate matters of contemporary art is not solely contingent upon the English language. It is often related—as the first part of the comment suggests—to an inability to express or voice art practices through words. In many interviews, especially with young artists, I observed their difficulties in talking about their own works, in expressing their concepts and ideas, in finding the right vocabulary, even in their mother tongue. While this can be related to a more general inexperience based on their age, it also points to the fact that talking about art (or writing about art) in either language is not particularly encouraged in the fine arts education.

In the second part of the longer quote above, Sohel reemphasizes his assessment of not speaking English as a problem and expands upon the benefits of linguistic competency. Mastering English, he argues, is necessary to access and operate on a global scale.¹⁰⁶⁸ His idea of global is related to the outreach and exchange beyond the national borders of Bangladesh. This is evident from the statement that “other people” (publics and possibly art professionals outside the country) are not informed about what is happening in the nationally circumscribed artistic field. Rather than reaching out to other fields (vertically and horizontally), he argues, many Bangladeshi artists fixate solely on their individual practice. He does not articulate why he considers this a problem. Through other conversations however, I know he is concerned with the stereotypical portrayal of Bangladesh in the media (as a poverty catastrophe stricken “third world” country) and with the fact that artists from other national fields are better represented in international exhibitions, events, publications, and other formats. A wider recognition and visibility of Bangladesh’s field of contemporary art—an opinion he shares with most artists I met—would counterbalance the country’s unidimensional media depiction and engender more opportunities for its artists. In the interview, he further emphasizes the significance of culture and especially cultural exchange for the national identity of a country. English thus is not only a medium for face-to-face communication with foreigners, but also a way to collectively connect to art consumers and a general public outside South Asia.

At the end of the quote, Sohel differentiates between global as “connecting-the-world” in a negative way, illustrated by the worldwide entanglement of capitalism as a violent, dividing force (rich and poor, powerful and powerless), and global as a positive, unifying condition for the arts. This differentiation reemphasizes why the rethinking of spatial vocabulary, especially of the local–global dichotomy, is indispensable. Global as dividing economic and political force is here denounced, while global as unifying, connecting momentum in contemporary art is positively encouraged. Different actors assess and value processes, which are often lumped together under the header of globalization, in distinctive ways. Moreover, my interlocutor characterizes artists as selfish, as focused on “what they

love”—their work.¹⁰⁶⁹ The emphasis on similarity in this self-designation is telling; rather than on economic profit or socio-cultural differences, he establishes art production as a transgressive, collective, binding factor, which in turn can be based on economic desires.

My research partners' emphasis on transcultural "outreach" is one of the main observations that drew my interest to the artistic fields of Nepal and Bangladesh. Over the course of this book, I established that the focus of this outreach is the creation of decentered and mutual contact with like-minded people. This contact requires a common language as the basis for communication, which is, more often than not, English. However, despite its capacity to facilitate transcultural contact and brokerage, the proliferation of the English language does not happen in a neutral and uncontested way, as Pennycook cautions us.¹⁰⁷⁰ There is no uniform reaction to the growing importance of English in the art field. Based on my observations, the actors individually and collectively deal with linguistic issues, especially when they cause asymmetries, in varying and dynamic ways. The organizers of the *Photo Kathmandu (PTKM)* festival, for instance, consciously decide to use bilingual (Nepali and English) tags and information panels. Further, they provide a Newari commentary for the slideshows taking place in Newari neighborhoods. This strategy is an expression of PC's overall inclusive agenda. In hanging-out situations, I observe a similar inclusive and dynamic negotiation process. For example, the dinner situation I describe in the Interlude: Lunch–Dinner–Party highlights the fact that a discussion between a handful of people can easily involve several languages, in this case Bengali, English, Hindi, and Urdu. The choice of language is the result of a negotiation process that has an implied political dimension.

New media and the English language have allowed a faster, easier, and participatory translocal communication. Yet, this process is beneficial to one section of society in particular, namely the young, urban, middle class population. This generation of artists belongs to Bangladesh's and Nepal's economically rising middle classes, who benefit from the proliferation of English-medium schools and private universities. They can finance housing in the capital city (at least during their university education), and most importantly, own an internet-connected device. The older generation of artists and the vast majority of fine art students in the country today however depend(ed) on public education and its mandatory English classes. As a result, they are at a disadvantage when attempting to increase their scope of action by applying for international residencies or workshops, by sending their portfolios to curators and exhibition institutions, and when talking to critics. Their access to channels of knowledge outside the fine art curriculum, such as English technical literature, internet blogs and homepages, YouTube tutorials, and so on, is limited. Here, collective initiatives offer a means to redress these asymmetries by fostering multilateral

1069 AR, AS, September 2015.

1070 Pennycook, "Global Englishes, Rip Slyme, and Performativity."

contact among artists. These connections allow artists to share laptops and cameras, forward information about residencies and exhibitions, offer advice, and support each other in applications and proposals.

From the negotiation of these politics of access arise identity politics. In the Cross-Generational Panel at the *DAS* 2014, artist Naeem Mohaiemen addresses the relation between the global scale and language. He explains that there is an assumption that English has become the *lingua franca* of the art world, and in order for an artist's work to become known and circulate internationally, the artist needs, first, an e-mail address (i.e., access to the internet) and second, to write and speak in English. Mohaiemen gives the example of a journal called *Kamra* that is only published in Bengali and therefore does not circulate beyond the Bengali speaking audience. He asks himself and the audience why this matters. On the one hand, his comment confirms my observations about the use of digital media in imagining alternative lives.¹⁰⁷¹ Mastering English expands an artist's motility. They become part of a motile center—travelling not tourist-class, but virtually—to international events. They participate in online workshops, listen to talks, see exhibitions, meet and learn from fellow artists. In turn, this participation allows them to imagine themselves as part of an actually mobile global art jet set. They can conceive of being picked up by the art market or exhibiting at the *documenta*, irrespective of whether or not this actually happens. On the other hand, Mohaiemen's comment broaches a valid question: what does compliance to the supposed *lingua franca* English entail? Why reach out to a wider scale? And at what cost? His subsequent comment on gallery spaces in Dhaka—many of which use English tags and description panels—leads to the consideration that such mechanisms not only broaden vertical outreach, especially on the global scale, but also potentially limit horizontal relations with the Bengali-speaking public in Dhaka or Bangladesh.

Most of my interview partners and the initiatives I worked with are concerned with finding a balance between these scales, yet there are also more intransigent positions among the young generation:

In *Crack*, in *1mile²*, and other things, they are very original people. They are too strong in making original things. They don't believe in copy. They are very proud to be Bengali. Nepali people are very proud to be American or European or speaking in English. Each function they are speaking in English.¹⁰⁷²

Prompted by the participation in an artist-initiated program in Bangladesh, one of my Nepal-based research partners reflects on national identity. They perceive the use of English as foreign to Nepal and the result of a wider process of Americanization or Westernization. Their experience

1071 Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes," 197

1072 AR, A, 2016.

in Bangladesh has led them to believe that artists there resist the spread of English because they use their vernacular language in talk programs and presentations. His fellow Nepali citizens, in contrast, are vicariously embracing a foreign identity (“American” or “European”) through language. More than that, they are proud of this new identity.¹⁰⁷³ Language, in this quote, becomes the expression of a territorially based and nationally bound cultural identity. Preserving this identity, rather than substituting it for another, becomes a matter of pride and, even more so, socio-cultural survival. While Soheli emphasizes the importance of cultural exchange in his conception of national identity—and English being a means to that exchange—my research partner above claims a linguistically bound identity. Both are expressions of asymmetries caused by processes generally referred to as globalization. Soheli’s conception of the current contemporary situation is an optimistic and transcultural one, based on cultural exchange and multilateral artistic advancement. Yet, he is also fully aware that for artists in the periphery to reach visibility in other scales of the art field, especially the globally connected one, they need to accept the mediums of communication it uses. Mastering English is a necessary and inevitable part of that connection. The asymmetry in the latter quote is perceived as a threat: the cultural flows emanating from Europe and America that have become global endanger the cultural integrity of people in Nepal. By submitting to them, they lose their original practices. Underlying both comments, irrespective of the chosen course of action, is the experience of an ongoing hegemony of Western institutions in defining the rules of visibility in the global art field.

Neither the English language nor new media technologies as mediators of flows proliferate in a “neutral” or “uncontested” way.¹⁰⁷⁴ My research partners are well aware of the asymmetries these mediators represent, and the politics of access and representation they engender. They are able to calculate the value in and risk of recurring to these tools. Both mediators can be valuable facilitators of communication, able to connect different scales of the artistic field, both vertically and horizontally, across cultural, social, and national borders. They can help bridge the gap between center and periphery. However, they can also widen existing asymmetries. Horizontally, both new media and English create rifts between older and younger generations of artists. They widen the gap between the lower and middle/upper classes with access to English-medium schools and between rural and infrastructurally better-equipped urban areas. Vertically, their mastery often indicates closeness to an assumed global visual culture centered in the West. How these flows are experienced and negotiated depends on the position of the respective actors in this art field, as well as on their position within other fields; it is affected by their socio-economic privilege, their ability to access socio-cultural capital, and their political

1073 AR, A, 2016.

1074 Pennycook, “Global Englishes, Rip Slyme, and Performativity.”

opinion. The collective plays an important role in this “position-taking” and thus in the way flows are negotiated.¹⁰⁷⁵ Collaborative strategies can substantially shift individual positions, and collective situations, such as hanging out, are crucial for this negotiation.

HANGING OUT AND THE IDEA OF A “TRANSLOCAL COMMUNITY OF ARTISTS”

My observations of hanging-out situations, represented by the examples in the Interlude: Lunch-Dinner-Party, reveal three commonly recurring elements. First, many conversation topics during lunches, dinners, and parties revolve around fellow members of the art field. The sharing of anecdotes, gossip, and information about mutual acquaintances creates a repository of knowledge for all participants to be used as a resource in and for cultural brokerage. It exposes affinities as well as friction, and in turn, dissuades or fosters opportunities for future contact. Eating and drinking is another important part of hanging out. These activities illustrate the transcultural conventions of contact in the emerging contemporary field; they emphasize the conscious focus on similarities related to practice over individual socio-economic and political differences. Lastly, the situations manifest the crucial importance of spaces for hanging out. These spaces need to some extent be autonomous, free of the conventions of visibility and the behaviors that otherwise regulate social life. At the same time, and in opposition to the workshop, for instance, they need to be accessible on a regular basis. Hanging-out situations might seem liminal to the material and symbolic production of contemporary art, but they are crucial for the negotiation of positionings in the field, the maintenance of multilateral and decentered contact, and as a result, the imagination of a translocal art community.

I became aware of one of the main characteristics of the hanging-out situation only in hindsight, when organizing my research material: While I meticulously documented interviews or events like exhibition openings in the form of photographs, descriptive notes, and audio recordings, I often summarized hanging-out situations as “we/they talked about people they know” or “we/they talked about people who are not present.” I wrote down where and whom I had lunch or dinner with, and documented information that I perceived to be important for my research questions, such as comments on exhibitions or specific institutions. Upon closer examination of my notes, I realized that discussing other artists, mutual acquaintances, especially travel encounters with members of the artistic field and their current projects, is a constant part of hanging out. In my first exchange with Saurganga Darshandhari and Prithvi Shrestha (see Interlude: Lunch-Dinner-Party) we extensively talked about various Britto members, even before I had met them face-to-face. Looking back, this was not only

1075 Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*.

a casual way to ease into our first ever conversation, but also a way to figure out each-others' position and agenda. It gave me an opportunity to talk about my research frame without having to relate it to the two people directly present. For both parties, it was a way of (unintentionally) keeping distance, by speaking not about the self, but about others. At the same time, it created a kind of closeness, by establishing a common knowledge perimeter and tracing a shared network.

The second example from this Interlude, the dinner, shows that talking about "people we know" is also a way of keeping informed about the members of the network. The members' initiatives become a basis for critically reflecting one's own practice and more general developments in the art field. Rahman for instance comments on a common friend's plans to open a space for students. His judgement reveals as much about his own convictions as about this friend's initiative. By sharing his belief that art spaces should be for artists who have already completed their formal education, Rahman emphasizes his position as experienced in the field. He knows that students often have their own networks and support systems among the student body. Additionally, they can return to housing, art materials, and studio space provided by the university. After their graduation however, this support stops, and artists often struggle to maintain their practice. It is at this moment, Rahman believes, that they benefit most from collaborative action; they have finished their formal education, have reached a level of maturity in their practice, and are looking for new creative input. Further, Rahman accredits the work he has done with Britto: the collective and its activities are valid because they follow (t)his conviction and provide space for artists after their graduation.

The situations in the Interlude also offer insight into the artists' valuation of scale. Sauganga Darshandhari does not mention Britto's online presence, its website, or its Facebook group page. Instead, she refers to how much and where its members have travelled. She measures the collective's scale of action, its resources, and global visibility by its members' mobility and their ability to engage in face-to-face contact with other members of the field. While Lipi can travel to Europe and America, Darshandhari has never been outside Asia. This information (added to the details I have gathered from my preliminary research in Germany) allows me to infer that the Britto members are more motile than their colleagues in Nepal: they have means to purchase flight tickets, to provide the necessary bank statements for visa applications, and to cover their day-to-day expenses. Even before meeting the Britto founders, I am able to presume that they hold more economic resources—possibly through large-scale donor organizations or personal sales—than Bindu. These socio-economic differences however do not seem to affect the valorization of the relationship between Darshandhari, Shrestha, and the Britto founders. On the contrary, the way they describe the contact is affectionate and respectful, as demonstrated for instance by their use of the label family. The reason for this close relationship is probably also related to the support that the

Dhaka-based artists have given to Darshandhari and Shrestha over the years. Rahman was instrumental in helping them to establish their own space, and through the couple's mediation, Darshandhari was able to pursue her MFA at the University of Development Alternative (UODA) in Dhaka before the master's degree was introduced in Nepal.¹⁰⁷⁶

Based on this particular interaction, I was able to identify other situations in my notes during which my research partners came up against socio-cultural and economic differences and frictions. In the majority of cases, the differences were outweighed by a sense of respect and a recognition of support. Another situation from my later fieldwork emphasizes this: During an exhibition opening, a group of artists mock a fellow artist for their public demeanor. Their tone takes me aback as I have not encountered this type of mockery before within that group, so much so that I make a note of it. While making fun of people and their mannerisms is commonplace—as it often is among friends—I have never experienced it happen behind somebody's back. Very quickly the joking stops and everybody asserts that the person in question is actually a valued member of the artist community, who deserves respect for their commitment. This quick turn-around is reminiscent of a quote I referred to in an earlier chapter:

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.¹⁰⁷⁷

In both cases, a sense of respect is invoked that is based neither on individual merit nor on the quality of artwork, but on the belonging to a collective. In the first case, this collective is labeled "community," and in the second "family." Both terms are indeed invoked, as Barcellos Rezende argues, in order to demonstrate affinities and similarities and to allow artists to conceive of themselves as part of the "same social world."¹⁰⁷⁸

Talking about commonly known people and their activities happens rather blatantly. The topic of politics, in contrast, is much more nuanced and latent. In my notes, issues like corrupt governments, infrastructure malfunctions, or traffic chaos repeatedly emerge as matters of small talk and everyday frustrations. More extensive issues, such as the border contestations in South Asia, the reach of capitalism, or the treatment of migrants, are consciously deliberated on as part of projects or specific artworks. "No Man's Land," for instance, a project coordinated by Britto

1076 As I explained in chapter three, the MFA was only introduced in Nepal in 2009 at Tribhuvan University. Before that, artists had to go to India, which often was a considerable financial strain. The University of Development Alternative was established in 2002 and is one of the two private institutions in Dhaka that offer fine art (BFA and MFA) programs.

1077 AR, A, 2017.

1078 Rezende, "Building Affinity Through Friendship," 92–93.

and the Shelter Promotion Council India that I briefly referred to above while discussing Nupur's performance practice, aimed at consciously engaging the contested borderlands between India and Bangladesh. The project took place in 2014 but triggered an extensive ongoing discussion between its participants. It is one of the reasons that brings project participant Boka to Rahman and Lipi's kitchen (see Interlude: Lunch-Dinner-Party) a year later. Boka's cooking partner Akmut also engages with contested national borders in an ongoing project on the war of 1971. On one of the following evenings, she invites two friends to the flat. One of them is working for the Liberation War Museum and confesses that they were initially highly skeptical about the artist's project.¹⁰⁷⁹ Their experiences with Pakistanis working on the conflict have not been positive. Akmut however showed them a small excerpt of her work and convinced them that her motivations were not ill placed. They started to support her and her project and admit that the artists in fact "gave them much to think about."¹⁰⁸⁰ The relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan is a complex one, especially when it comes to the narratives of 1971. Opinions on both sides have been largely determined by public narratives through the media and school education. In the first chapter, I cited Srinath Raghavan's argument that the 1971 war is still primarily perceived as a Bengali betrayal against the idea of a united homeland for Muslims in Pakistan.¹⁰⁸¹ The mobilities made possible by SANA and continued by the individual artist collectives have allowed exchange between the two countries. The multilateral contact between the artists has revealed the tropes and political propaganda behind specific narratives and visualities. Several Bangladeshi artists who were able to travel to Pakistan in the frame of artist residencies or workshops for instance spoke of encounters with Pakistanis who were not aware of the events that unfolded in Bangladesh in 1971. They explained that, according to their experience, the war is neither part of the school curriculum nor a matter of public discourse in Pakistan.

Through the frame of art projects, the engagement with such political issues is not only condoned but often a desired objective aiming at transgressing hegemonic conceptions of locality. Outside the frame of creative and collective projects, however, issues of nationalism, ethnicity, caste, class, or religion are rarely a topic in hanging-out situations. My notes from another evening get-together illustrate this. During the evening in question, one of the guests starts to put forward political ideas in a very strong manner. He is almost immediately dismissed by the other attendees and the topic is abandoned for the rest of the night. After the

1079 The Bangladesh Liberation War Museum is a government-independent museum dedicated to the documentation and examination of the 1971 war. "Home," Liberation War Museum, accessed June 12, 2021, <http://www.liberationwarmuseumbd.org/>.

1080 Conversation, February 2015.

1081 Raghavan, *1971*, 5–9.

party, I walk home with a group of the attendees and take the opportunity to inquire about their reasons for this resolute reaction. They explain that aggressive and disruptive outbursts, especially in relation to politics, are unwelcome; they consider the artist space in which we had hung out a safe and free space. The focus, in their opinion, should be on the art practice. As long as political issues are discussed in a productive manner, i.e., beneficial for a collectively shared art practice, they are an important and welcome topic of engagement. Talking about politics and religion in order to cause “unnecessary” fights and ruptures, however, is distracting from the art.¹⁰⁸²

In a similar way, my attempts to talk about personal religious or ethnic differences or frictions were often either evaded or brushed aside. These things, I was told, do not matter for relationships in the day-to-day art practice, which, from my observations, was true. Without exception, all the artist-run initiatives I worked with comprised members from various ethnicities and religions. Including demographic variations (such as the prevalence of Newars in the Kathmandu valley and therefore also within the art field), the network I retrace here comprises atheists, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus of different castes and social backgrounds. Even among these larger groups, personal beliefs and practices vary greatly. While these differences undeniably cause asymmetries and friction in daily social interactions, they are consciously subordinated to art in collective situations. Talking in the art field, I therefore suggest, in large part involves talking about the art field. Issues from other, horizontally autonomous fields, are welcomed only when they serve the collective contemporary situation. The emphasis in contact is on affinities: the collective aim to transgress medium limitations upheld by art institutions, to extend the agency of the artists within the art field (especially in socio-cultural debates on the meaning of locality), to claim control in the symbolic production of art, and to foster translocal mobilities—unless the topic is food. The preparation and consumption of food in hanging-out situations regularly brings issues of nationality, religion, and caste to the forefront.

One of the most remarkable experiences during my fieldwork in South Asia was people’s openness and willingness to meet, hang out, and talk about their practice. I made ample use of social media to gain my first insight into the field, to contact people and arrange meetings. While doing so, the most frequent answer to my online requests for studio, gallery, or event visits was a variation of “sure, just come by,” accompanied by a phone number and the request to call when I am in the neighborhood. While this behavior can surely also be attributed to a more general hospitality as well as my position as a researcher (and potentially an art promoter), I soon realized that it was part of what characterized the quality of contact in the artistic field: an openness to and interest in meeting people with a common interest in contemporary art, and the prospect of

1082 FDE, A, 2015.

a good time and interesting conversation. The situations that followed, in addition to abundant talk, were almost always associated with the consumption of food, be it in the form of tea and cookies, or more elaborate lunches. In the dinner example (see Interlude: Lunch–Dinner–Party), which represents numerous other evenings of a similar nature, each guest is responsible for the preparation of one dish. Akmut cooks a curry dish, Boka prepares fish, and Lipi looks after the vegetables. Several people collaborating on a meal like this—buying groceries, preparing the ingredients, contributing snacks or drinks—was a common occurrence during my research period. More than an extension of collaborative practice, I have come to see it as an expression of solidarity. Most of my research partners belong to the urban middle class, yet many experienced dire financial straits at one point or another in their life as artists, especially during their student years. Everybody contributing to the meal balances out such financial concerns; everybody can afford to participate. Moreover, especially in situations involving foreign guests, such as Akmut, Boka, or me, contributing to a joined dinner is an expression of gratitude for received hospitality—a way of paying back for a space on the couch, a guest room, or assistance with a project.

It also reflects a more general appreciation for home-cooked foods from different regions. The complex socio-cultural preferences and religious food taboos especially in South Asia however presuppose a rather elaborate negotiation process. This process is often mediated through humor, especially in instances where one party cannot relate to the other's personal choice or religious taboo. My conscious decision not to eat meat for example entailed much teasing from the atheist, Muslim, or meat-loving faction of the art field. Despite this teasing, my research partners always made sure that there would be a vegetarian option for me. Nepali artists jokingly complained about friends from Bangladesh touching common food items with their fingers. Whereas this touch is of no (ritual) consequence to the non-Hindu Bangladeshis, the remaining food is considered *jutho* (ritually impure) by many Nepalis.¹⁰⁸³ The common mood in these interactions and negotiations over who can (or cannot) eat what was mostly humorous yet affective. Similar to issues of ethnicity, religion, and caste, the adherence to related food taboos is respected, but subsumed to a casual, amicable, yet productive hanging out. I only observed one instance in which the tone became more intense: one artist, in whose religious practice eating beef is considered a taboo that they consciously follow, recounts that they struggled with people constantly trying to “force” them to eat beef during their stay in Bangladesh.¹⁰⁸⁴

In conjunction with food, hanging out also often involves the consumption of stimulants, such as alcohol, cigarettes, and other substances. The

1083 Andrés Höfer, *The Caste Hierarchy and the State in Nepal: A Study of the Muluki Ain of 1854* (Lalitpur: Himal Books, 2012), 13–14.

1084 FDE, A, 2015.

ambiguous nature of these practices is fairly obvious in my notes: I rarely wrote about the topic, and when I did, I usually performed some kind of self-censorship (e.g., “bottle” or “drink” rather than a direct reference to alcohol). While alcohol is legal in Nepal, its purchase and consumption is restricted for Muslims in Bangladesh.¹⁰⁸⁵ Smoking is legal, although banned in certain spaces, whereas the consumption of drugs is illegal in both countries. The legal status of these substances, however, reveals little about related socio-cultural norms and actual practices. Consuming alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes is often subject to what I call “conventions of visibility.” These mostly non-verbalized conventions can take different shapes, from keeping the consumption beyond the frame of the camera to juniors refraining from smoking and drinking in front of their seniors, or women refraining from smoking in public at all. Nevertheless, and maybe specifically because of these conventions, the practices are often an important part of membership in the art field. In relation to cigarettes for instance, one of my female interview partners explains.

So he took me to the art school... I went there and I saw some of the students, girl students... And they were like seven-eight girls, standing, and they were wearing T-shirts and having cigarettes, and some of them were having paints on their hands... I looked at them, and I looked at my brother and I said: “This is my clothes.” [laughing] The freedom, that freedom I enjoyed. It is not about the smoking, because I did not smoke. I just loved the freedom that they were enjoying. So I said: “I want to come here.”¹⁰⁸⁶

My interlocutor here describes the freedom to smoke, to wear non-traditional, “stylish” clothes, to stand around, and to chat. They experienced this freedom for the first time while visiting the Fine Arts Campus and it became part of the reason they wanted to study art. This experience of freedom from rules and norms regulating ordinary social life rings true for a lot of artists I talked to. The art campus especially represents

1085 In Bangladesh, Muslim citizens are not legally allowed to purchase alcohol, but individuals may receive permission to consume alcohol for “health reasons.” There are caste-specific norms for the consumption of alcohol in Nepal. Nevertheless, I have not observed these to be of effect to most of the people I worked with, except in situations of mourning. In February 2017, the government of Nepal endorsed the “National Policy on Regulation and Control of Alcohol 2017,” which includes, among other things, the introduction of pictorial warnings, a legal drinking age of twenty-one, and a ban on retail shops selling alcohol from five am to seven pm. So far, however, this has only been mildly enforced. Gourab Dewan and Fazle Rabbi Chowdhury, “Alcohol Use and Alcohol Use Disorders in Bangladesh,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Medical Toxicology* 4, no. 2 (2015): 84; Höfer, *The Caste Hierarchy*, 17–18; Manish Gautam, “Gov’s Stringent Policy to Regulate Alcohol Products,” *Kathmandu Post*, February 22, 2017, accessed November 13, 2017, <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2017-02-22/govs-stringent-policy-to-regulate-alcohol-products>.

1086 AR, A, 2017.

a place of both education and freedom of choice. A similar idea of freedom, self-determination, and possibly also of non-conformity to hegemonic socio-cultural rules is related to the consumption of alcohol. Many artists I met during my research greatly enjoy sitting together while enjoying alcoholic beverages. Yet, there is also the potential for a covert religious asymmetry in this observation. In Hindu, Buddhist, and especially Muslim-majority countries, it is not conventional to serve alcohol during gatherings and parties, as its consumption is subject to different religious taboos. In most Christian-majority countries however, the consumption of alcohol—in the form of toasts, receptions, *Sektempfänge* (reception with sparkling wine), and *vin d'honneur* (literally wine in honor of someone)—constitutes an essential part of cultural programs and functions. Arguably, this could create an expectation and potentially a pressure to serve alcohol during large-scale events, related functions, or when hosting foreigners, especially those from the highly mobile center of the art world.

Ultimately, the consumption of food-related items marks the fine line between the informal and nevertheless particular character of the situations I describe. The meals I enjoyed in hanging-out situations were never excessively extravagant. They were home-cooked, time-tested, and elaborate comfort meals. This reflects the general atmosphere in hanging-out situations that is also, and maybe especially, visible during parties. Parties, like the one I describe in the Interlude to this chapter, are seemingly casual, yet a little fancy; the venues are decorated with lights, chairs or *chakatis* (cushions) are kept ready, music is played (live, or from a phone or laptop), and guests make an effort to wear a neat *sari*, *kurta*, or shirt. The attendees' behavior is collaborative and process oriented; people move around and make an effort to talk to everybody. Some might even have a mental list of guests to talk to, questions to ask, insider information to pursue, social capital to build. Yet, unlike a meeting, there is no overall fixed agenda or bullet points to go through. Art parties are about work—about making connections, exchanging gossip, gaining valuable knowledge, gathering business cards, and keeping updated with the art field—the guests move around and converse rather unsystematically. Popular party foods reflect this character; meals like *biriyani* in Bangladesh (mixed rice dish) or *samaybaji* in Nepal (set including beaten rice and cowpea) are established festival foods. The fact that they are served on one plate makes them easy to handle and ideal to move around with. They are festive and practical at the same time.

In order to engage with contemporary art collectively, to be able to organize parties, to hang out, to exercise the freedom to break—even if only temporarily—with the norms of the wider society, to consume cigarettes, to wear non-traditional clothes, to sideline religious, caste, and ethnic particularities, the right space is imperative. Such spaces are rare in the city. Coming back to a point I have repeatedly made in this book, the city is considered the space for artistic inspiration and energy among most of my research partners. Many artists are connected to this locality through

an ambiguous love-hate relationship; its intensity simultaneously constricts daily life and inspires creativity. Artists who live outside Dhaka and Kathmandu, such as Sunil Sigdel (Pokhara), Munir Mrittik (Naryanganj), or Kabir Ahmed Massum Chisty (Narayanganj), describe their homes as favorable to the execution of their artistic work. At the same time, they voice concern over the lack of discourse or exchange with fellow artists. Artists based in the city, on the other hand, complain about the abundance of ongoing programs (talks, film screenings, and openings) or family and work responsibilities that prevent them from focusing on their art. For many of these artists, the workshop offers the perfect in-between space: contact and discourse without social responsibilities or conventions—autonomy and connectedness. Workshops however only happen at irregular time intervals. They presume logistical effort, such as collecting the necessary funds, selecting participants, finding a facilitator and an adequate yet interesting location. They are thus are not suitable for more impromptu but regular hanging out in the city.

In the Interlude dinner situation, Rahman deplors the fact that there are no nice “family-style” restaurants in Dhaka to hang out in; that is something he enjoys in Kathmandu. On another occasion, we talk about the fact that many artists in Dhaka invite me to their homes, whereas in Kathmandu, I am asked to meet in their studios, in collective spaces, at cafes and restaurants. In Rahman’s opinion, this is because the existence of the latter is very limited in Dhaka. Almost cynically, he tells me that people literally have no other choice but to invite me to their home and offer me lunch or dinner.¹⁰⁸⁷ Rahman’s assumption is specifically related to my fieldwork, yet his comment also pertains to being in the city in a more general sense. In Kathmandu, I regularly encountered groups of young people sitting in public spaces, especially around temples. Further, tea *pasals* (shops), *momo* shops (Nepali-style dumplings), cafes, eateries, and spaces like the Nagarjun National Park or the Botanical gardens offer places for socialization in or near the urban center. In New Dhaka, I often had trouble finding a place to hang out by myself. Apart from Dhanmondi Park, or the occasional coffee chain, there are few places that offer a safe, quiet, and comfortable atmosphere to just be and meet people. Moreover, the type of places Rahman enjoys in Kathmandu (and wishes for in Dhaka) imply the spending of money and thus are not convenient, especially for young artists.

Rahman’s comment about his Nepali friend’s plan to open a space for students alludes to a related issue. The Fine Arts Campus is a place of freedom, of affordable foods, and ample hang out spots. While hanging out at a tea shop near the Fine Arts Faculty of Dhaka University with a group of students, I was jokingly informed that *charukola* (literally: fine arts) quite tellingly also refers to *cha* (tea), *ru(ti)* (bread), and *kala* (banana), a contraction of the students typical foods (typical because they are affordable).

1087 FDE, MR, February 2015.

But Charukola is also exclusively a place for students. Once artists graduate, they no longer have access to this space on a regular basis. Facilities like on-campus dormitories, studio spaces, libraries, and canteens are no longer available to them. Freshly graduated artists, especially if they are not originally from Dhaka or Kathmandu, thus have no accessible space to practice or talk about art within the city, let alone to experience the type of freedom to which they have grown accustomed.

Moreover, the dense urban living conditions imply not only social, but also spatial constraints. Both in Bangladesh and in Nepal, most young artists I worked with still live in their parents' home. Alternatively, they are married, have children, or live in joint families with elder relatives. They often do not have a separate studio in the house, and don't have enough money to rent one externally. Private space, which for the large majority still means the family home, thus is often associated with social obligations; from assisting with household chores to being social during the day. Privacy in general is rare in the city. One artist explained that many houses in Dhaka are built almost window to window and the neighbors therefore are "never far away." They insinuated that these neighbors were very observant and would become suspicious of frequent, larger get-togethers.¹⁰⁸⁸ Owners, especially of middle class residencies, are weary of too much foot-traffic. They control the entrance to their buildings through guards and door attendants.

Resulting from both the spatial and social confinements, the need arises for spaces to continue artistic development, experiment, and exchange, especially after graduation. Such spaces need to be free from the constrictions experienced in wider society, a fact that often also excludes the established institutions, such as the National Academies. Workshops can fulfill this function only temporarily. While collectives such as Vasl (Pakistan) consciously operate entirely in the fluid form of workshops, most artist-led initiatives I worked with gradually felt the need to establish more permanent forms and spaces. Drik and KHOJ have expanded into multi-layered institutions. Britto and Sattya have managed to establish fixed spaces that can serve multiple purposes.¹⁰⁸⁹ Their rooms operate as studios, working spaces, galleries, workshop locations, residency accommodations, and hang out spaces. Britto for instance has effectively used a loophole in the dense urban and social fabric by establishing Britto Space in a semi-commercial building. This location is more anonymous in the sense that neither the other tenants nor the owners have control over who goes in and out, and after the shops close in the late evening there is little to no traffic in the lower two stories, which guarantees a certain degree of privacy and freedom. Other initiatives make do in sometimes

1088 FDE, A, 2014.

1089 After the end of my research period, and during writing, the Sattya Media Arts Collective moved from its original location behind the Jawalakhel Zoo to a new residence in Ekantakuna (Patan). The new residence still seems to have multiple purposes.

creative ways. Bindu operates from Darshandharai and Shrestha's apartment-cum-studio, offering a place for hanging out, for residencies, and for talks. PC uses its offices as workshop space and occasionally also for hanging out. This versatility exemplifies that it is not so much the physical nature and the available facilities—despite being a welcome add-on—but the people working and meeting there that create the value of these spaces.

The face-to-face contact in hanging-out situations is an important part of belonging in the art field. Nowadays, hanging out, or any other social situation for that matter, cannot be imagined without new media. Everything can be researched in seconds, located through map applications, photographed, and recorded. More classical formats of documentation, like guest books or attendance lists, are still in use during talk programs and exhibition openings. Nevertheless, digital media have become an important source and propagator of information. Most artists own and carry a digital camera or a camera phone. They use it to capture their environment, be it senior photographers dancing at the *CM* party (see Interlude: Lunch-Dinner-Party) or visiting a particular art event, such as an exhibition opening or artist talk. Many of these photos find their way to social media and are thus shared with a wider artist community. They create a digital repository of who was where, with whom, doing what. This information chronicles the collaborations, alliances, trends, tastes, and values that are effective in the art field. The repository it creates allows absentees (and researchers like me) to keep informed about what is happening. On the other hand, and more than once during my fieldwork, I met people who knew exactly which artist studios I had visited and which openings I had attended, because they had recognized me in tagged Facebook images. This practice borders on intense scrutiny, but also expresses the values that mark one's belonging to the art community. As Daniel Miller argues, any community, whether digital or face-to-face, is shaped by both negative connotations, like surveillance, control, and interference, and positive values, like care about people's well-being, interest in their practices, or concern for their health.¹⁰⁹⁰ Further, Facebook fosters "multisemiotic" forms of discourse, which can lead to entire discussions, even disputations taking place in the comment section of posted articles, photos, or videos.¹⁰⁹¹ One artist bemoaned that Facebook has made it so easy for many people to join in one discussion that it has started to replace face-to-face hanging out. Artists, poets, and musicians who used to meet up for tea and *adda* (conversation) nowadays debate their opinions on Facebook, they explained. This might be the case for specific instances, but I did not observe a decline in hanging out. In fact, I agree with Michaelsen that digital media is (at least currently) not replacing the "tedious work" of

1090 Miller, *Tales from Facebook*, 24.

1091 Sharma, "Beyond Social Networking," 506.

multi-scalar relation building that is so decisive for my research partners' positioning in the art field.¹⁰⁹²

The time passed in face-to-face hanging-out situations is crucial to build solidarities and promote group identity.¹⁰⁹³ It is about building and maintaining relationships with people from the field from which artists themselves emerged. Moreover, especially on the sidelines of large events like *CM* or *DAS*, it is about connecting with people in other fields (vertically and horizontally). Through the creation of a multi-scalar network of connections, my research partners extend the values that their understanding of the local artist community builds on to a larger idea of a translocal art community. This community transgresses the vertical and the horizontal autonomy of the field by establishing connections with like-minded people and thus including them in the network of emerging contemporaneity. Consider for instance my last encounter with Lipi and Rahman at artist Catrine Val's apartment in Kassel, Germany in August 2017. We discuss our experiences of *documenta* 14, we share foods contributed by everybody around the dinner table, we take photos that almost instantly appear on Facebook, and we all agree on how much better it is to stay with friends than in a hotel. Rahman and Lipi met Val during *PKTM* in 2016, where she was participating in a residency organized by PC and facilitated by Rahman.¹⁰⁹⁴ The latter had been invited to curate this residency after he met PC director Kakshapati during *CM* 2014 in Dhaka. Kakshapati's participation in the *CM* in turn, was the result of her long-standing relationship with Drik founder Shahidul Alam. This series of interconnections, to which many other globally spanning connections could be added, perfectly illustrates the organic but deliberate expansion of this contemporary art network. The types of connections between nodes in the network may vary, from professional gallery representation to marriage, and from short-lived complicity to more durable institutions, but they always favor and stimulate the value of decentered, reciprocal, and multi-scalar exchange.

In the lunch example in the Interlude, Darshandhari explains that Britto founder Rahman played a significant role in the foundation of Bindu in Nepal. His engagement is reminiscent of Pooja Sood's support for Britto and the other South Asian collectives and Alam's role in encouraging the foundation of PC in Nepal. It also recalls the origins of Britto, based on its co-founders' experiences with an artist-run space in Germany. These examples are expressions of the respective actor's conviction that platforms for exchange, freedom of expression, and collective engagement are crucial for the development of an alternative contemporaneity. Moreover, they highlight their wish to expand the multi-scalar network I trace. The emic categories of community and friendship used by my research

1092 Michaelsen, "Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age," 309.

1093 Jeffrey, "Timepass," 471.

1094 See the *PKTM* homepage for a residency description and a list of other participants: "Residency: Mixed-Media Residency," Photo Kathmandu, updated August 11, 2016, <https://archive.photoktm.com/2016/residency>.

partners point to the affinities that these categories are based on, the openness, mutual respect, and the willingness to collaborate on a multi-lateral and decentered level. These are expressed in the conventions of remaining informed about the community-members and their activities, taking part in hanging out, contributing to meals, offering one's guest room or bed, and subsuming political, religious, ethnic, socio-economic, and caste-related opinions under the shared practice of contemporary art. The invocation of community denotes a shared mindset, a common claim to freedom of choice and experimentation, and the desire to expand the multi-scalar agency of contemporary artists.

New media and the English language are crucial tools in the expansion of these values from a local face-to-face community to an imagined trans-local community of contemporary artists. This expanded community represents an idea—a potentiality. The prerequisite for claiming membership or being perceived as a member of this community is to participate in the symbolic and material production of contemporary art and to subscribe to the above-mentioned conventions of contact. Access to economical accommodation, family-style dinners, and good company in localities all over the world are assets of this contact. Others include the expansion of professional relationships to curators, art managers, gallerists, and art collectors. The fact that these connections become independent of locality—that they can potentially connect any actor or locality on any scale—marks the community's translocal quality. The dinner in Kassel emphasizes this quality: the connections that were temporarily situated in Kassel during the *documenta* 14 could technically be situated anywhere in the world, as long as there are two or more members of the emerging contemporary art field hanging out and adhering to its conventions. For these situations to be conceivable and enacted, there needs to be a mutual agreement to emphasize practice-related affinities over other socio-economic, cultural, and political differences.

Independence from locality and valuation of practice over background, however, does not engender "placelessness," as is imagined to be "celebrated" in the art world. We are not in a deterritorialized global utopia where artists and curators are free to circulate, with nationality and ethnicity no longer mattering.¹⁰⁹⁵ The translocal community of contemporary artists that emerges from and through my research partners based in Nepal and Bangladesh is neither egalitarian nor deterritorialized. On the contrary, one of its core values is the continued interrogation of the circumscriptions of locality and cultural practice through transcultural brokerage. Resulting from the artists' collective engagement and their mobility, this brokerage (whether latent or manifest) constantly questions, contests, and delegitimizes the status quo of effective visualities, institutional boundaries, religious norms, representation, gender constructs, and the many other issues that have served as examples in this

1095 Harris, "In and Out of Place," 33–34.

book. The practices I outline then correspond to the three defining and scale-invariant characteristics that Buchholz distills in her analytical reduction of Bourdieu's "field."¹⁰⁹⁶ My research partners act on the firm belief that their contemporary art practice is distinctive, independent, and more valuable than that of other fields (horizontal autonomy), and that which is circumscribed by the national fields of art they emerged from (vertical autonomy). This belief undoubtedly comes with a new set of asymmetries, especially between the younger and older generations of artists, as well as between the urban, English-educated middle classes and other art practitioners. It excludes a large part of the national artistic field and visualizes more intransigent positions. Through the format of the collective and the multi-scalar network of connections that I retrace, however, they are creating a new multilateral and decentered peer system. This system is based on practice-related affinities rather than socio-cultural background, and thus crosscuts older socio-cultural and political hierarchies. Lastly, the artist run initiatives (from perennial international workshops to permanent exhibition spaces) serve as infrastructure. This leaves me to conclude that my research partners' practices mark the emergence of a translocal field of contemporary art production in(between) Nepal and Bangladesh.

1096 Buchholz, "What Is a Global Field?"