

**EXPERIMENTS IN SHARED
TIME**

SAMIRA BOSE

PROJECTS / PROCESSES



PROJECTS / PROCESSES VOLUME I

Series Editor: Senjuti Mukherjee

Experiments in Shared Time

Samira Bose





Image of Dharti Arts Residency 2019 artists and residency programmer (from left to right): Dharmendra Prasad, Khursheed Ahmad, Farah Mulla, Shazia Salam, and Samira Bose.
Photograph by The Lumiere Project.

Dharti Arts Residency 2019

*A Serendipity Arts
Foundation Initiative*

Venue Old PWD Complex

About Dharti Arts Residency 2019

Artists *Dharmendra Prasad, Farah Mulla, Khurshheed Ahmad, Shazia Salam*
Residency Programmer *Samira Bose*

Dharti is an annual interdisciplinary arts residency based in New Delhi, instituted in 2017 by Serendipity Arts Foundation. Each edition selects four emerging artists and a critic-in-residence or Residency Programmer, through applications invited by an Open Call, which are reviewed and shortlisted by an eminent jury comprising artists, curators, and domain experts in the arts.

The duration of the residency spans three months, from mid-May – mid-July, culminating in an Open Studio in August. Serendipity provides studio space, infrastructural support, accommodation, food, and other basic living expenses, along with a production grant. The artists are expected to create an artwork by the end of the residency, as a work in progress, displayed in an Open Studio exhibition. Each artist is encouraged to develop their practice, and the residency does not follow a thematic format.

The core of facilitating artistic practice is supplemented by a rigorous programme of studio visits, talks, gallery and museum visits, and workshops, which enable the residents to explore the arts ecosystem based in Delhi. These programmes are designed to give the artists a greater awareness of their own art practice, as well as exposure to other mediums, and the wherewithal to make the connections and build the networks required for the expansion of their practice. Besides a focus on art practice and production, each artist is encouraged to share their work with their peers, and a

critic-in-residence, who is selected as a Residence Programmer by Serendipity Arts Foundation. The critic-in-residence documents and contextualises the residency. The resident artists have the opportunity to regularly engage with them to discuss their practice, conceptual ideas and specific details about their works for the residency.

The works created during the residency are displayed at one of the primary venues of Serendipity Arts Festival, alongside other contemporary art exhibitions and esteemed artists. The artists are invited to Panjim, Goa to install their works and get an opportunity to interact with other practitioners from the field, to network, and for patrons to see their work.



Image of an installation by Dharmendra Prasad at C340 basement as part of the Dharti Arts Residency Open Studio. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.

Experiments in Shared Time

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PROCESS

An early conversation that took place between the artists-in-residence was on the model of the artist residency itself. One of the artists shared that while the resources helped their practice, it pulled them away from the site and context in which their work arose. The residency model brought in an element of immobility, even as it provided an avenue to bring unfamiliar forms to broader audiences. Another responded that such extended periods of time were needed to be able to work with intensity, to see a process through, and to become familiar with the site in which they were working. From the beginning of the residency, we were caught between a “too long” and “not enough time”. The theme of duration lingered across the residency period, as we navigated divergent understandings and experiences of time, constantly repositioning how we, internally, gave time, shared time, spent time as/in listening, and dwelt on its subjective limits.

The Dharti Arts Residency, which in 2019 saw its third iteration, runs for three months in New Delhi and hosts emerging artists. As a model, it provides selected artists with studio space and resources for making new work for an exhibition, alongside an intensive programme that provides opportunities to interact with artists and curators working across a spectrum of mediums; attend exhibitions, archives, and art spaces; participate in rigorous workshops and curated walks of the city; and receive critical feedback. In this edition, the artists selected were Dharmendra Prasad, Khursheed Ahmad, Farah Mulla, and Shazia Salam. I worked closely with them as Residency Programmer,

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alongside Keith Peter who supported and was part of the process on behalf of Serendipity Arts Foundation.

Scheduled during the peak of Delhi's summer heat (May-July), the idea of the "site" took on a slightly different spin, as the marbled, air-conditioned studio-basement exuded a troubling allure. It also meant a retreat inward, to lengthy discussions in a darkened room, a kind of counter-intuitive huddling for cool air—all of which lent an immersive quality to the engagements. Alongside the discussions held in the basement, ventures across the city provided insight not only at the level of artistic practice and research, but also on the circuits of the city, the interconnected networks of structures and geographies that characterise different milieus within the arts field—the jostling and tussling as much as the support systems, the speaking as much as the listening.

Indeed a large component of the residency, particularly at the beginning, revolved around talking and listening. Among ourselves, we began with lengthy sharing sessions about each artist's practice, awkwardly familiarising ourselves with the office building and with each other. While the initial presentations were an exercise in taking note of the artists' contexts, mediums and vocabularies, there were certain questions which were connected—I would go as far to say that there were shared curiosities, at least at that initial stage and in those moments in the residency. There was an interest in the idea of interaction, a kind of centering of how audiences will engage with and encounter their work. This appeared to be a little more than a touch-and-feel aspect, and while there was an emphasis on material affects, on skin and sensation, there was a leaning towards laying one's work bare, and opening out to changes that would occur from these interactions. These points of inquiries were intriguing considering the artists are at relatively early stages of their career, and found individualistic expression in the works exhibited towards the end of the residency.

A series of "Dharti Talks" were held in the basement-studio, initially

just for the residency artists, which were later opened out to wider audiences. Artists based in Delhi that worked across a range of mediums, at varied stages of their careers, shared in detail about their practice. The engagements also included curators, who took the opportunity to look at their own work, particularly at early stages, and consider it through the frame of contemporary address. On the one hand the conversations delved into creative process, into formal provocations and social engagement, and on the other posed important points about generosity, about power structures within a broadly defined “art world”, about recent cases of sexual harassment and the way that the field responded to it, about labour, salaries, and contracts.

Simultaneously, the seated talks were supplanted by jaunts to studios, which were a rare opportunity to engage with artists in processual moments, in stages of disarray, witnessing early imaginings, and remains of projects that never came through. The materials within the different studios provided another entry point to understanding Delhi—from learning about scrap markets for second-hand motor parts to exploring the possibility of growing vegetables on dusty Gurgaon rooftops. Throughout, there was a curiosity to learn about the residency artists. They were questioned (prodded, and sometimes provoked) and we realised a common thread was the positioning of intentionality in one’s practice. It was repeatedly asked, and this will remain long after the residency is forgotten—“what exactly are you trying to say?”

This inciting and stimulating question that was asked in different forms led to a fascinating response from the artists, somewhere in the middle of the residency duration. Instead of attempting to directly articulate these concerns through words, there began little elemental experiments and with it the transformation of the pristine basement—personal photographs were made to lie in acidic solution in a corner, concrete was crumbled, sketches of irrigation maps were left behind, and metal rods were heated and listened to. This energy was supplanted by writing and drawing together in workshops,*

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where we stretched lines across walls, painted on the floor, and worked on artist biographical notes. A time of contiguous making, it was also when the artists were able to reflect with each other at the level of materials. A particularly poignant and heated discussion was when one of the artists considered the possibility of boiling a book (things had taken an alchemical turn at this point), to bring out a certain emotion towards enforced knowledge systems through the arbitration of language. The response from the other artists appeared intuitive at first—a horror at a potentially destructive act, but then delved deeper into the meaning that access to certain texts had and that there would be a personal affective charge to that experience in a shared space. Eventually, books were not boiled.

As the programming slowed down, and ideas for new works became clearer, the artists retreated further into their demarcated spaces, and into their own materials. If I am to be indulgent, it marked an unexpected alienation in myself to see them immerse at an individual capacity, after an intense period of shared time and space. They had their own plans for research, quests for resources, and long, lone days and nights were spent with their mediums. I turned, albeit sulking, to my notes and scribbles and quotes, and watched as the works arose in the studio space.

Practice | Exhibiton

The exhibition of works from the residency had two iterations, the first in the basement-studio in August 2019, and then in a part of the old Public Works Department Complex in Panjim, Goa, at the Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. The aspect of site-specific production, or travel, was not as relevant as the response that the artists had to the feedback from the first show in Delhi.** From small alterations to complete overhaul, what was revealed in the process were tendencies, and I hope to touch upon some of the considerations and transmutations that characterised the works on view, all of which were at varied stages of (in)completion.

In one of our earliest conversations, Dharmendra Prasad expressed a desire to “create a place (and not a site)” which would function possibly as a kind of “utopia”. As is the core of his practice, he would seek to draw on the indigenous knowledge systems of the rural contexts he came from and worked with across India, particularly the farming communities in Bihar and Assam. Prasad has clarity regarding the mediums, materials, and methods he is concerned with—often residue from harvest, where what remains is made alive again through aesthetic means. His works are faceted with what he calls “pastoral fantasies”, surreal plays in which he covers objects, machines, and bodies in husk, intertwining rope with the texture of skin, hay-covered bicycle wheels that cycle across dry earth, as a tableau of mud-covered characters pose for a photograph. And yet, these are not poseurs, these are communities of people that work directly on and from the land, their stories springing from their laborious understanding of the earth, its fragility, and their own precarity. They are the artist’s key audience.

However, what happens when their toil and creativities are construed in the polished neighbourhoods of New Delhi? The critical discussion on the tensions of Prasad facilitating such an encounter in an upper-middle class locality started from the first day, the dangers of an easily romanticised template of farming life lingering in every debate and consultation. It is from these that there was a shift, from creating a utopia to thinking about bringing in that which is uncomfortable, even irritating, to the skin of the urban spectator, and reimagining the very mechanics of the building structure in which the artist was working as part of the residency.

Another core concern of Prasad’s is with the synergy of time, a preoccupation with past-ness that manifests in a focused simulation of a vision for futurity. These sometimes take the form of large-scale installations that are constructed with local building materials which also serve as what the artist calls “harvest laboratories”, spaces to dwell on knowledge(s) that combine bodies, objects, and produce in agrarian cycles. These spaces are immersive, and Prasad’s training in

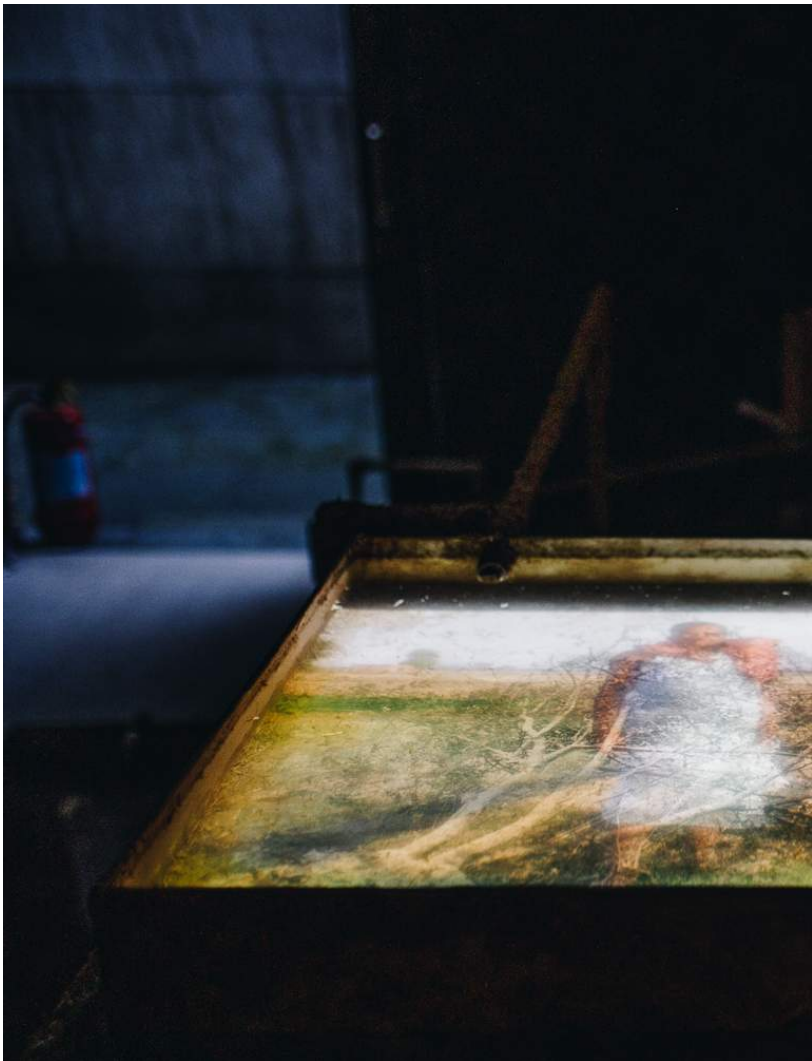


Image of an installation by Dharmendra Prasad at C340 basement as part of the Dharti Arts Residency Open Studio. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.





Image of the installation "call me when you see this please" by Dharmendra Prasad at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.

painting is brought out in the murals he creates with mud, depicting scenes and relics from life near the fields, a double-edged nostalgia re-presented as propositions to think about ideas for times to come.

In a seminal essay *Sculpture in an Expanded Field* (1979), Rosalind Krauss elaborated on the complex interrelations between site, architecture, and sculpture in the recent histories of the medium. She wrote about how, within sculptural practice, the loss of the base lent “a certain homelessness”, or “site-lessness” which added an “essentially nomadic quality”.¹ She went on to say that, “it is obvious that the logic of space of postmodernist practice is no longer organised around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or for that matter, the perception of material. It is organised instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation”. Without attempting to historicise or relegate Dharmendra’s work to discourse on any one medium, it is intriguing to think of the expanded conditions in which his work is organised—the architectural bent of the artist’s constructions, and the sculptural fabulations that draw (quite literally) from the field, and rework themselves into sites of concrete. In his work for the residency exhibition, *call me when you see this please*, Dharmendra interpreted the plumbing lines of the building from the lens of irrigation channels, thinking about the flow of water, water as flux, site as stagnation. During the residency, he expressed a captivation with bamboo technologies from Japanese farming—we would watch videos of the burbling, meditative passage of water, which inspired the germination of his work on hydraulics. Constructing tin-tray simulations of fields, Prasad projected images and videos that he created at different agricultural sites, and submerged them in water, evoking, in particular, the turbulence from the floods in Assam. The work moved across different rooms, the water pipes encouraged circumnavigation, and the husk clung to the walls like mounds created by insects, an “evidence” of the artist’s “threshing of places, times, and ideas”.

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In Farah Mulla's first presentation to us, she stated, "my medium is sound—as a form of energy, not simply the material itself". While her training is in geology, her research revolves around sound and its affects on human neurology and human subjectivity. A point that she mentions frequently is that the first sense to which we are attuned, from the womb itself, is that of sound. It is this rapture with the "sonorous womb" of sorts that runs through Mulla's investigations. From building a cave-like installation out of waste plastic bottles that channels mountain wind, to orchestrating an installation where visitors tune in, briefly, to the liminal affects of "noise-scapes", Mulla conjures enveloping atmospheres that can make one listen more closely.

Instinctively drawn to a closed room in the corner of the basement (admittedly with some relative semblance of "natural light"), Mulla often withdrew into her space, where she tinkered with surprises—batteries, neon lights, heat conductors, and (frighteningly) gas cylinders, among other equipment. Her scientific training was evident in the processuality of her practice, where she would wear thick sneakers and trudge to electronic shops, seeking out specific motor circuits or repurpose old plastic jars lying around office into musical instruments. The works she created in the exhibition in Delhi came from such tampering, and a curiosity to reorder the senses. Hailing from Mumbai, she observed the constant hum and buzz of air conditioners in Delhi, and wanted to make visible this encompassing frequency. One of the installations in the room transferred that sound into vibrations, and further into light, reflected and refracted across the entire room. In another installation, audiences could move closer to an object shaped like a gramophone, and generate a sound akin to radio disturbance, tempering the distance. We had discussions that questioned the intentionality behind converting sound into visuals, and it was raised that there is an intensity with which we categorise our senses, how these are segregated, and how Mulla as an artist can trigger a rupture in these—a kind of piercing of the training of perception.



Images of the installation "Crosstalk" by Farah Mulla at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photographs by The Lumiere Project.



Image of an installation by Farah Mulla at C340 basement as part of the Dharti Arts Residency Open Studio. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.

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Precipitated by these concerns, Mulla's work exhibited in Goa took a different form as a spatial-temporal experience, titled *Crosstalk*. A long triangular installation, lined with mirrors, was constructed to invite viewers in. The sounds from the movements of visitors emitted spiraling visuals, images of surround sound, ambiophonic colours heightened sensory awareness, where even slight intonation would be rendered—one could lie down and see the effects of one's own singing, disoriented at times, immersed in one's own response and reaction. This resonates once again with the interest in the sonorous womb, invoked not through the organic, or tangible fluid textures, but what Mulla calls “sterile”, violet lines swimming around like DNA.

Mulla establishes affective connections between people and the objects around them, from machines to reflective surfaces, from light-waves to virtual screens. Affect theorist Nigel Thrift elucidated that “affect is understood as a set of flows moving through the bodies of humans and other beings, not least because bodies are not primarily centered repositories of knowledge—originators—but rather receivers and transmitters, ceaselessly moving messages of various kinds on”.² Jordan Lacey further aligned acoustic ecologies to affect theory, stating how the “sonic practitioner” can play a unique role in reimagining the city as more than just a place of work and productivity, but also as a place for play, curiosity, and creative engagement, where the affective powers are reconfigured, and at times can be manipulated. He writes, “The sound installation, as sonic rupture, seeks to create spaces within which new dreamings might emerge”.³

Khursheed Ahmad comes from a family of Bhand Pather performers, a folk theatre form of Kashmir. The word “pather” translates to “play”, and it is a travelling, highly public form that blends puppetry and mime with song and dance. After an exposure as a student to painting, critical theory, cultural studies, and archival investigations, Ahmad trained in bhand to further realise the multiple personal meanings that constituted the public dailyness of the form that for him, in his artist statement, encompasses “myths, stereotypes, stories, songs,

and bodily movements or lifestyle”. Ahmad arrived at performance as one of his predominant mediums through this context of “becoming bhand” with a disposition to lay bare his body as a material to transcribe on, the public act of exposure, the body as a politic. His performance works also draw on his deep affinity with the figure of Aamir Khusrao (1253 – 1325), the Sufi musician, poet, and scholar. The poetic form, as much as the mystic’s relationship with language, inspired Ahmad to compose lengthy verses, moving through space, his stutter at the centre of one piece titled here is no epilogue. Through his performances, Ahmad dwells on expectations of speaking in and within time, and the way that its capacities can be pushed to accommodate that which is always in excess to it. Ahmad is thinking about performative responses to intrusions—on bodies, homes, and landscapes.

In 2014, when Ahmad was a student in Srinagar, the region experienced devastating floods. In his University, Ahmad found photographs that had decomposed in the floodwater, and this stayed with him, fostering a sustained investigation into the way the images could tell visual stories. He shared with us how there are certain imaginations of Kashmir, particularly from the tourist eye, and he clicked several photographs through such a lens. He then immersed them in water and acid, the chemical reaction making visible burns and erasures. “How can a set of images be sentences?” he shared, “and how can I use the photographs to create an assemblage of visual words?”

One of the components in the exhibition was an assemblage of decomposed photographs, a slow-burning alchemy we all witnessed together in the studio-basement. In the centre was a boxed shrine constructed from wood, painted black, with little windows looking in. Within was the relic, a model of a house on ice and a video of Ahmad with shoes in his hands, clapping, pressing against the wall. The secret of the shrine is that the artist presents the house, home, as “a casualty”. The artist states, “In one minute the entire life of a house is ended”. Ahmad also created a short staircase, a slightly distanced



Image of the installation "The house as casualty" by Khurshed Ahmad at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.

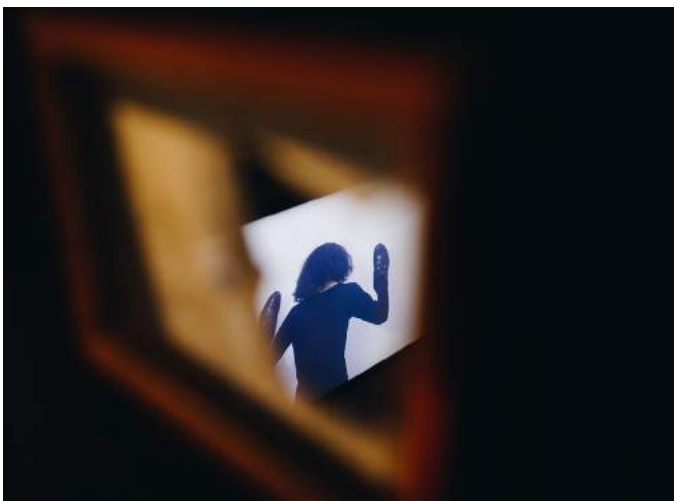


Image of installation and performance by Khurshed Ahmad at C340 basement as part of the Dharti Arts Residency Open Studio. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.

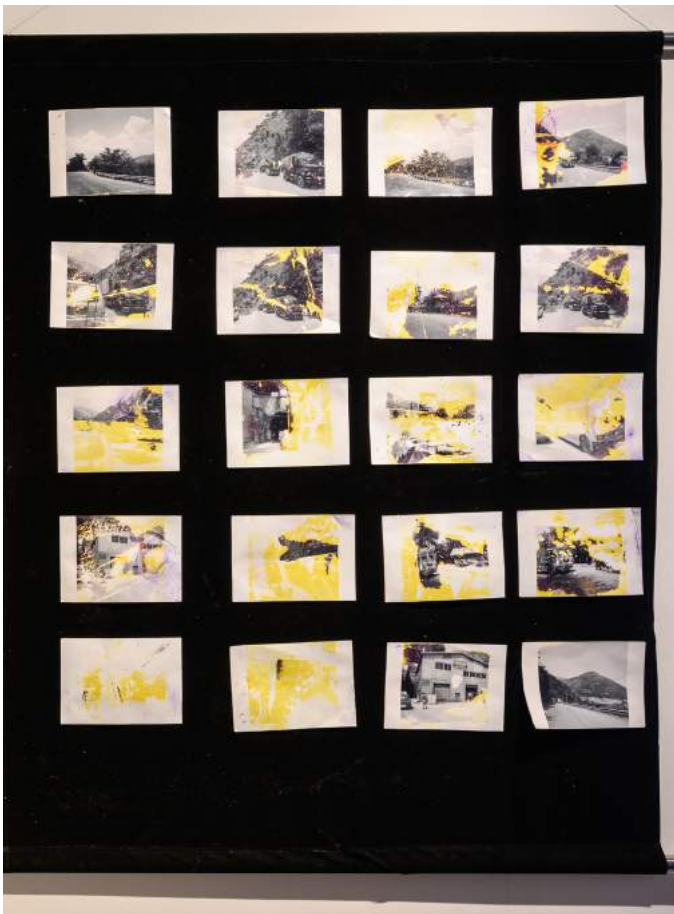


Image of installation by Khursheed Ahmad at the C340 basement as part of Dharti Arts Residency Open Studio. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.

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podium from which viewers could look atop the shrine, where a video is projected of bullet wounds in a car from somewhere near his neighbourhood, a figure of a dove placed above. You can witness the spectacle from a safe distance. The artist writes in his personal statement, “All these things are a memory of the people who no longer have them and of the objects that no longer have the people—destroyed in a minute. Our things die like us, but they aren’t buried with us”.

Merely days before the opening of the exhibition, Article 370 of the constitution that granted special status to Jammu and Kashmir was revoked, and the region was under complete communication lockdown. On the day of the opening, Ahmad still had not been able to speak to his family. Less than two weeks later, Ahmad performed near his installation, surrounded with incense, donning the persona of a fakir, accompanied by the wind instrument shehnai (known as sornai in Kashmiri). A group of people, predominantly students and some members of the art community, gathered around the shrine as Ahmad began the refrain “I am witness”, and as he passed the microphone, the room reverberated with “there is no witness” and “witness, witness” and “here, we witness”. The performance gathering was composed, rather specially, by support from Ahmad’s friends in Delhi, his mother’s embroidery in the background—“Let the Jhelum Carry me Along”. The question remains of what comes after, and where we stand as witnesses.

Shazia Salam expressed an interest in “third spaces”, particularly architectural nooks that fuse cultural elements, or spaces that are difficult to define. Attributed to cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha, “Third Space Theory” is a postcolonial sociolinguistic theory of identity and community realised through language or education, where “hybridity” is said to underline complex cultural interrelations, interstices with no singular origin point.⁴ Salam’s curiosity began at the level of theory, specifically by writings of Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall. Her training in architecture, however, transposed this inquiry at the level of material—Salam is absorbed by the multi-



Images of installations by Shazia Salam at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photographs by The Lumiere Project.



Image of the installation "Monolith" by Shazia Salam at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.



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referential symbols on billboards, architectural styles of store doorways, and the cultural claims of patios. Some of her earlier sculptural works take these forms, the skeleton of a European café awning in fine muslin, or a sharpened, steel model of a revolving entrance. The affective charge of these materials can be, however, culturally specific and the artist thinks carefully about that which alienates versus that which invites.

At the level of motifs, Salam is curious about what forms, in a sense, survive the passage of time, indeed her point is that such symbolic endurance is a fiction, where entities are always in transformation and flux as a result of mixed exposures and pirate travels. The artist thinks in particular about gaming, which have a rich and complex history in India. As a site of play, it is in games that cultural exchange could take place, and difference could possibly be in conversation through the pieces on the board. The artist's research included looking at paintings and mythologies passed down from one generation to another, looking specifically at games like Pachisi, a cross and board game from medieval India, or Pallanguzhi, a traditional ancient Tamil mancala game played by two players in different parts of South India. Salam asks, "What can these games and the way that they have evolved tell us about our own malleability?"

Currently based in Bangalore, the artist's family is from Kerala while she grew up mostly in Dubai. Spending such an extended period in Delhi for the first time, Salam was keen to explore its markets, particularly Paharganj. She returned after her first evening with a feverish glow, almost enchanted by the billboards that lined its main streets at night, and the way that different languages would kind of meld together to speak to the diverse groups and identities that inhabited that area. This inspired her work for the exhibition, *Monolith*, which imitated the aesthetic of the billboard to create an interactive puzzle, where sentences could only be completed in a melding of tongues—English, Arabic, and Malayalam, the languages that the artist speaks, reads, and writes in. The trick is that the complete sentences can never really be constructed by any other

than those who are versed in this unique combination. And yet, Salam proposes what it is to question the idea of understanding, resolution, and to look at words as images. This work prompted discussion to think further not just about language, but also about aberration, to think about the major and the minor even within the broad ambit of a language—and to wonder, in future practice, the potential of the artist’s ability to reckon with the trap of language, and to think about creating something more generative.

An experimental inquiry that took form during the period of the residency was Salam’s consideration of the concept of “citizenship” within multinational corporations, and how these large companies would advertise and propagate the manner in which they brought people from “across cultures” into their fold. The work, *Corporate Republic*, brought together found excerpts from corporate recruitment videos online, played simultaneously on an LCD screen. The artist put in the identity lanyards with altered logos, where misty-eyed individuals shared about their changed lives when they “joined” these corporations, how being a part of the company provides a degree of cross-national mobility, as much as it binds you into another set of structural loyalties and relations. The artist begins her own provocation to think about what cultural affiliations and framed identities look like in such situations, and what the future of the nation might look like if forged by such forces of late capitalism.

Each iteration of the exhibition was not a culmination, but was composed of points for entry, of rehearsals, and speculative interruptions. During those intensive summer months, we saw elemental questions manifest and take form, and as the artists explore further, we will witness how these are taken forward, behind, or apart. Time has already passed since the residency, and the discussions and exhibitions will eventually become footnotes. We are not sure, as yet, of the implications of that shared time and space, but we can always work on the affinities.



Image of an installation by Khursheed Ahmad at C340 basement as part of the Dharti Arts Residency Open Studio. Photograph by The Lumiere Project.

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* During the course of the residency, the artists participated in an intensive writing workshop conducted by Sabih Ahmad at Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (FICA), alongside the PEER residency artists from KHOJ International Artists Association. They also participated in a day-long drawing workshop with artist Gagan Singh, conducted in the basement studio.

** A generous and generative feedback session was conducted by Santhosh S. in the studio in August, 2019. The insights in this essay also draw on points that emerged from that discussion.

Notes

¹ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October*, 8, 1979: 31-44.

² Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

³ Jordan Lacey, *Sonic Rupture: A Practice-led Approach to Urban Soundscape Design* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), X.

⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).

Biography

Samira Bose is Programmes Coordinator at Asia Art Archive in India, an independent non-profit dedicated to documenting and making accessible recent histories of art from across Asia. Previously, she was Programmer and in-house Critic at Dharti Arts Residency 2019 (Serendipity Arts Foundation), and on the core team for Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018. She completed her MA in Arts & Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

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/ Samira Bose



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