

Instructions for Remembering a Home

By Rahee Punyashloka

“...Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied by and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or if need be, the vastness of Forty-Second Street. Not satisfied with the *suggestion* through paint of our other senses, we shall utilise the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odours, touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, and a thousand other things which will be discovered by the present generation of artists. Not only will these bold creators show us, as if for the first time, the world we have always had about us, and ignored, but they will disclose entirely unheard of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies, seen in store windows and in the streets, and sensed in dreams and horrible accidents. An odour of crushed strawberries, a letter from a friend or a billboard selling Drano; three raps on the front door, a scratch, a blinding staccato flash, a bowler hat—all will become materials for this new concrete art.

The young artist of today need no longer say “I am a painter” or “a poet” or “a dancer.” He is simply an “artist.” All of life will be open to him. He will discover out of ordinary things the meaning of ordinariness.”

-Allan Kaprow, *The Legacy of Jackson Pollock*, 1958

This essay brings three artists together who follow the spirit of Kaprow’s insight, and attune the domestic space as an artistic space, collapsing the boundaries between house-work, and art-work. With their mothers as the spine of each of their projects, these artists build the ordinariness of their maternal relations into poignant questions around representation, the limits of the artistic object, and institutional critique.

The Big Fat Bao’s ‘Caste and Food’ series features six digital artworks accompanied by brief context-setting texts, as well as the recipes for the depicted dishes. The series was attempted as an online intervention to expand food-related visual representation with anti-caste assertion. At its heart the project is an autobiographical attempt at cultural preservation, with Bao documenting recipes from her mother’s home, recipes that were distorted and/or discontinued within their kitchen, as they were growing up, owing to the inter-caste dynamic of their parents, and their upper caste father’s purity politics. Through the series, Bao’s hope was to capture glimpses into culinary traditions that are forsaken and forbidden in the dominant imagery/imaginary.

RP: How was the project conceived?

BFB: I think it was during the second wave of COVID when I could sense a sanitised, refined creation of imagery around food. Whenever there’ll be rare glimpses of food imagery that I could relate to, it would have comments saying “eww who eats this” and similar negative comments. I felt compelled to make this series by collating recipes I liked from my mother and ajji (maternal grandmother)...I recognised that the aesthetic and methodology of both cooking and remembering these recipes was very different from what passed off as the dominant recipe-making.

I didn’t fully consider myself an “artist” at that point, so I thought of these very crayon-like digital brush-strokes that can accompany the recipes. I felt this corresponded with drawing with crayons in school, and since there was an act of remembering these recipes from childhood onwards, it could be the right way of depicting the food articles.

RP: I remember the first time the works came online as Instagram posts, with bright almost oversaturated colours and a visual geometry that went against the idea of how food tends to be depicted in illustration—with an alluring, non-disruptive aesthetic register. Tell me about these choices, both in terms of making the series as an online intervention but also of these graphic design choices

BFB: Back then there was this trend of flat minimalist ways of depicting food, spearheaded by graphic designers like Maite Franchi, Malika Favre etc...where there would be limited palettes of 2-3 colours, crisp clear edges, and shadows. To me it made no sense to make Indian food, especially my mother’s food, in that manner. So I started experimenting with these brushes that simulate the somewhat undisciplined craggly edges of crayons. Further, I tried to bring into its fold the Ambedkarite aesthetics from Maharashtra, which holds a certain jhatak vibrancy and saturation.



Bhakri
Images courtesy of the artist

RP: How did this series fit in the context of your online image making protocol?

BFB: It was that time when a lot of us were developing anti-caste imagery online, and were trying to expand in dialogue with each other to think of what such imagery could be beyond figurative representation of anti-caste leaders. I also didn't know of the other artists like Rajyashri (Goody) and Vamsi (Matta) who work around questions of caste and food. Shahu Patole's groundbreaking book had also not gained too much traction in Marathi circles. My mother's food spoke to me as an immediate reference since there is a whole history of that being a point of contention with my father and his upper caste family.

Plus in the larger imagery of "Indian food" I didn't really see any representation of such food, nor of a graphic design language that acknowledges anything close to our food, so I thought illustrating the recipes would be a good starting point.

RP: The internet economy allows for a drastically different logic of viewership than a conventional gallery system. Having displayed these works in both contexts, what are the differences you notice?

BFB: I'm not an established artist by any stretch, and that was especially true when I made this series. Back then, Instagram as a platform and its algorithm placed adequate primacy on images and artworks unlike what is the case recently. I also saw very heated dialogues and discussions taking part, particularly through people triggered by

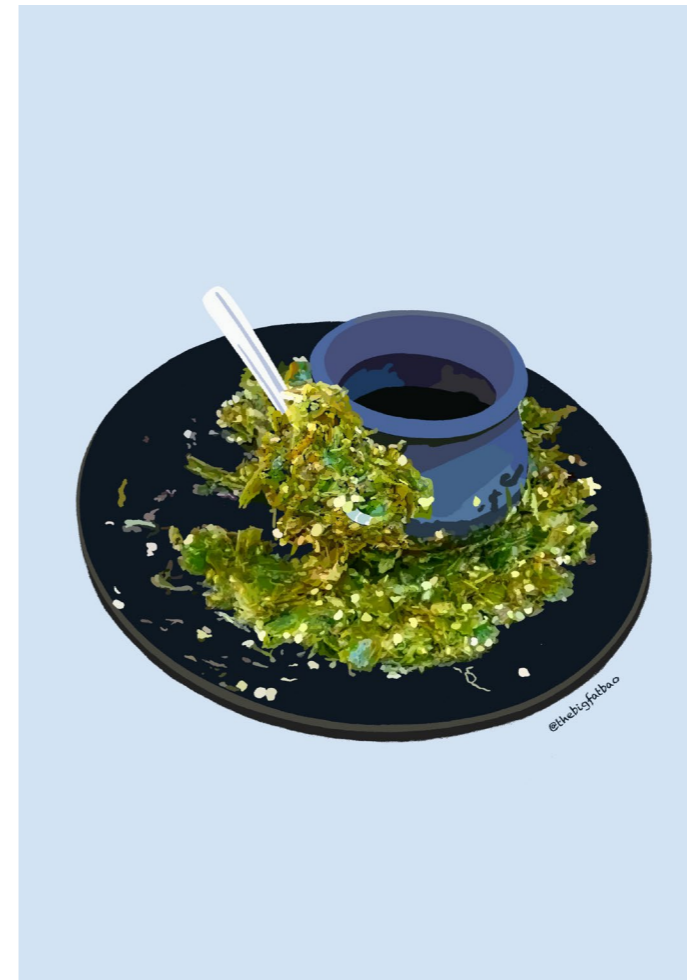
anti-caste conversations online, so I felt this way of propagating a conversation about caste and food would be valid.

A positive that happened during the posts was that many people, especially those from DBA backgrounds would comment that they have similar food items, and that their recipes vary in this way or that...so that felt really nice. I don't think such discussions happen within a gallery context, unless it's a workshop setting done by an anti-caste practitioner which specifically brings in discussants from the community.

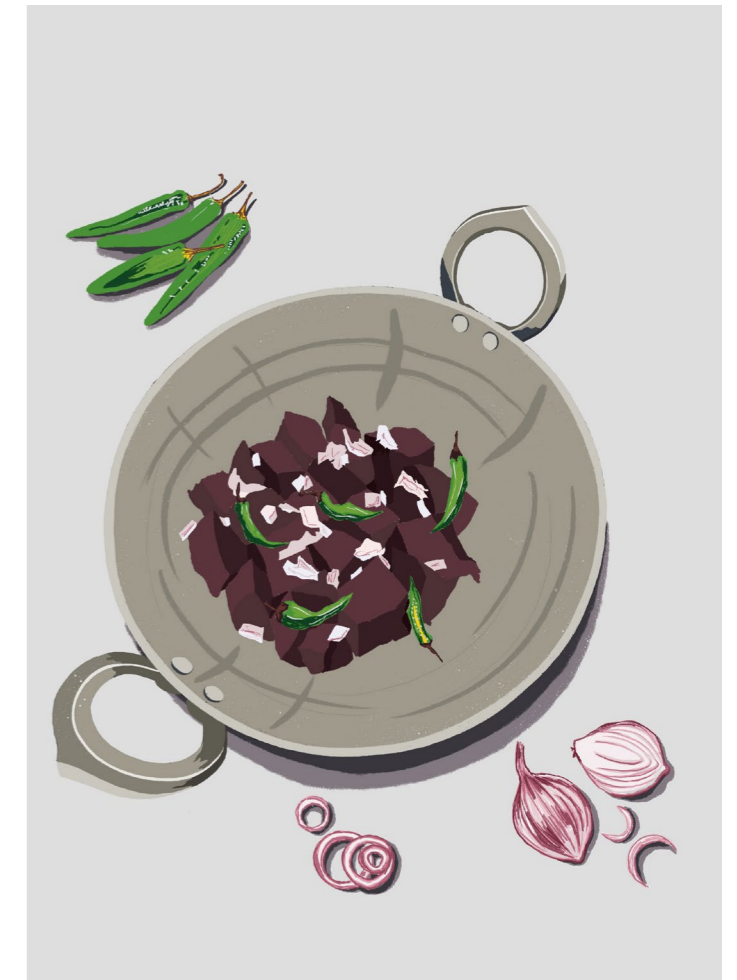
RP: Tell me why you specifically focused on your maternal family to draw these recipes from.

BFB: My father doesn't know how to cook and is very invested in Brahmanical notions of purity, which would cause everyday struggles in how we eat food at home. For me, cooking and eating at home, therefore has been a sphere of fights and violence. I've seen my mother struggle with navigating flavor, taste and ingredients. My father and his family have been casteist in how they served food to me since childhood.

I feel a sense of anxiety whenever I cook at home even today. But cooking and eating just with my mother, and especially in my maternal grandmother's house felt like a huge contrast to this. So that felt like an obvious place to start thinking of food from.



Thecha
Images courtesy of the artist



Lakuti
Images courtesy of the artist



God Pohe
Images courtesy of the artist

RP: Through the texts that accompany the series you speak of how your mother would learn cooking veg food in clandestine ways just to accommodate your upper caste father's tastes and preferences. Do you see the series of works as a kind of course correction, by placing your mother's familial recipe at the centre?

BFB: Yes, for sure. I can't really locate a singular taste to what my mother makes. Depending on who is eating, she would constantly change the flavours and cooking methods for the same exact dish. Even something as simple as a cauliflower fry. So in creating a series that simultaneously builds the dishes as recipes, I thought I could give a sense of permanence to the dishes I associate most with her.

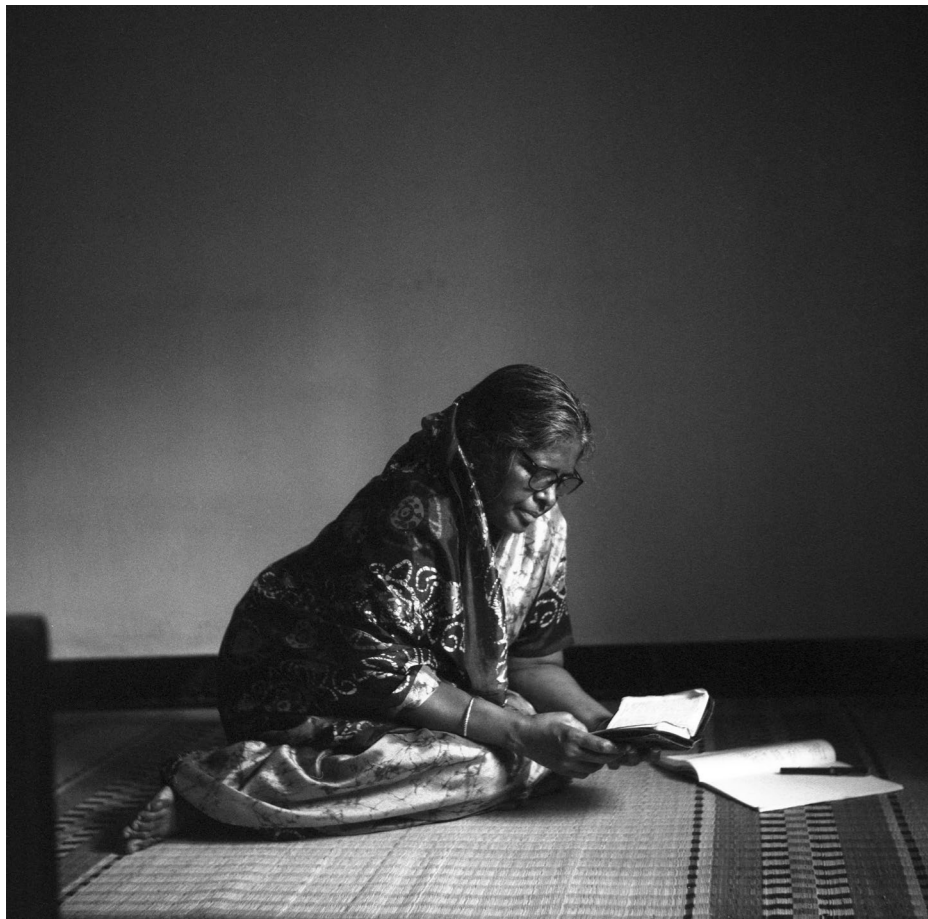
It's also a kind of "writing back" to the everyday ways in which dominant caste people assert their hegemony by saying things like aamchya asa banvutat, or this is how we make it in our culture.

RP: What was your mother's reaction to the series?

BFB: She was mostly surprised to recognise artefacts like utensils, and keeps asking me why I didn't make the many other dishes. I need to sit and expand on the series soon.

RP: I'm very interested in the negative impulse of the creative/artistic process, as it happens in your mother's case. Often we attach a positive force to the creation of an artistic object. In your mother's case the creativity goes to enforce a kind of self censorship and to commit assimilation. I suspect a lot of artistic creativity goes in this direction whether we accept it or not. So much artistic energy goes toward making a palatable, least offensive version of ourselves to fit into institutional boundaries. Tell me your thoughts about this

BFB: I can only approach this question from the perspective of graphic design where we are constantly believing that we are problem solvers. I'd rather let the problem itself become apparent, to begin the process.



Images courtesy of the artist

Krithika Sriram is a photographer and lens-based practitioner from Chennai. Her practice engages with ways through which personal and political histories, and caste and gender collide. *Home, the Ongoing* is a series of photographs featuring Krithika and her mother, created as a series of staged images, responding to Bama Faustina's writings. Through these images, Krithika explores the nuances of Dalit women's identity in Southern India, of domestic rituals and interactions, and of the production of space via photographic staging.

RP: One of the things I notice with your series is how there is a clash between the formal exegesis of the project i.e. as seemingly staged, high contrast black and white images that lend them an air of a studio photograph, but the content is just you and your mother in their everydayness. How did you arrive at this juxtaposition?

KS: I developed this work within an institutional pedagogy context, so there were a lot of questions and challenges about creating a good photograph, or a serious subject matter. This leapt out to me as a cul-de-sac since I wanted to make work which was fundamentally about my identity and about inaugurating an enquiry into my family's engagement with anti-caste history. I was reaching a clear anti-caste consciousness around this time, even as there was a lot of active engagement within my family, particularly in the case of my father...I also started reading Bama, whose works were the inspiration for me documenting my home. These works also play a key role in the series, with the photos being created through a gestural choreography with extracts taken from Bama's work. I suppose this psychological idiom, that my familial history, and the documentation of my mother within contours of her everyday being was not enough in itself to be a "serious" or "good" photoseries was something I was wrestling with. In some ways the staccato lighting and deliberate staging you see in the photos, I found as ways to offset the content. Only when I shed this fear much later do I dare to think of my mother and my home as valid subjects worthy of documentation.

RP: Tell me a little more about discovering Bama and how her works become an artistic conduit between you and your mother. Did she read it first and share it with you, or was it the other way? How did the sharing take place?

KS: I read it first. So my father has been quite active in the anti-caste scene, he has been a key stakeholder in the SC/ST Committee in his workplace and so on, so growing up I would see glimpses of his engagement as crucial to who we are. But only in adulthood did I consciously try to gain a more holistic anti-caste position. In that process, having read Ambedkar, I tried to look for texts from my state and found Bama.

I would actually not immediately associate my mother with the anti-caste fold of our family. But in reading Bama, I recognised scenes from home, religious worship that becomes a critique of religion as the book progresses, and there, I could relate very heavily to what I saw with my mother and grandmother. I then made my mother read *Karukku*, after which my mother said, and I quote, "this felt like reading my own autobiography." The photographs were designed in collaboration with her thereafter, with Bama's work as a central spine.

RP: Your father is curiously absent from the photos even though, as you say, he was the assertive Ambedkarite voice.

KS: True, he is only there in absentia in one of the photos of his library which has many anti-caste books including Bama's. My impulse was driven by the fact that I often associated him, while growing up, to be the stern patriarch, whereas my mother and I have a rapport that verges on friendship. I have been thinking of including my father in the subsequent iterations of the project. But for that a lot of wall-breaking has to happen between my father and I, which I have to prepare myself for mentally, and keep deferring.

RP: I see. So the title *Home, the Ongoing* actually suggests that it is an ongoing series, and it's not just a gestural move from your part to draw on the present continuous nature of the depicted subjects, which is you and your mother engaging in everyday rituals.

KS: It's both a gesture and an actual intent. The very act of reproducing our familial domestic space as a space for photographic imagemaking and pronunciation of our agented being is what I try to invoke through this title. The process of imagining, photographing, and accepting myself in this process is where the ongoing-ness of my work lies.

Images courtesy of the artist



RP: I see a very interesting dialogue/critique in your use of the format and staging within the photos and the first photos of caste communities taken by colonial ethnographers in the mid 19th century. The lowest castes were often staged in these photos in demeaning ways, depicting us as destitute, unagented bodies that are carrying out their menial tasks whereas the Upper caste communities got to be featured in virtuous fashion. In your work I see a kind of writing back to this methodology, where you use a similar language of depiction but to completely undercut it...

KS: This wasn't fully intentional on my part, but ultimately, the format, institutional infrastructure, and acceptable visual language through which we are expected to produce our projects very directly harken back to this colonial photography project. The medium, film format, the equipment and the deliberate staging that passes off as 'good' in institutions even today directly carries the legacy of the 19th century photos you mentioned.

RP: Shall I then say you are an artistic saboteur who uses the master's tools to deploy an institutional critique?

KS: Yes I suppose so.



Images courtesy of the artist

Soumava Das is an artist and cultural practitioner based out of Kolkata. His work often favors *longue duree*, site-specific interventions that illuminate the material relations surrounding art-making. The spaces and communities he works with often engage in artistic practices (such as those of homemakers, flower-sellers, etc.) that are not historically considered serious art within institutional frameworks.

Abaran-Abharan (Cover-Adornment) is such a site-specific engagement, that is an output of a four-year long engagement with homemakers from Shantipur who also engaged in creative practice of their own. At the centre of this work is Monimala, Soumava's mother, who makes intricate covers/adornments for household goods like vases, household appliances, chairs etc. Engaging in a conversation and co-creation with his mother, Soumava opens up questions about the creative act, about the creation of third spaces, about the ways in which the artistic process is a tension between what gets covered and what unravels.

RP: There is a very strong insistence on site specificity in each of your projects. Tell me how that plays out in this case.

SD: In order to talk about this project I have to start with the place, which is Shantipur, a small town three hours from Calcutta. This locality holds a few cultural groups including theatre groups, painters etc. Since there is no infrastructural support, anyone who has any artistic orientation ends up working together in trying to build a common space.

I started working with them again in 2020. Before going to Kala Bhavan (Shanti Niketan), I was involved in scenography and stage design. We would do workshops as part of the process which would gather most of the community practitioners who become the interlocutors in the cover-adornment project. One of the things we had started speaking of is the notion of 'own space-own time' which I also explored in the video component of this project with my mother. This is a concept drawn from Tanika Sarkar's work, where she gestures at the creation of a third space beyond the notions of home and the outside. The common space we were dealing with held, for me, resonances with this notion. It was also about how those specifically coming from lower class, lower caste backgrounds, who would do jobs outside, and housework in

their homes, manage to compartmentalise this third space for cocreation, gathering, and art-making.

Interestingly for lots of the practitioners who gather, there is already a split between what they think of as space/time of the household and space/time of care. The idea of "own space, own time" gets reconfigured in interesting ways through this. My project was trying to understand the rupture of this duality.

Throughout the engagement, I recognised how for my mother being part of this dual space and time reconfiguration is a vital fact, and by engaging with her practice, through cover-making, all of these connective spaces can be traced. It is a full-fledged practice for her, it's not something that she does only for us. She has a practice of making sweaters, tableclothes, and many such independent objects. Art work and the article of utility constantly collide in her work, as is the case with the covers she makes for objects around the house. My favorite example is the woolen covers she makes for almirah handles, since they are originally made of metal and get cold during winters.

Engaging with her work, but also of the others in the community, allows for a conversation around how the creative self and the domestic self combine, if the combine, et cetera.



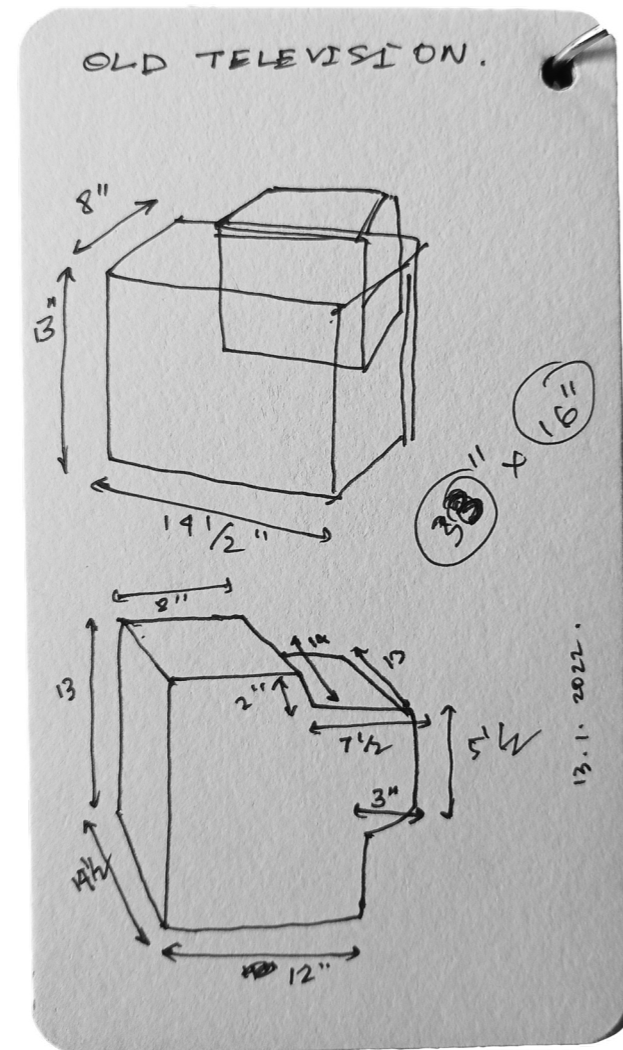
Images courtesy of the artist

RP: Tell me about your mother's reaction to you involving her as a collaborator on this project. I am assuming that there would be a certain dissonance between how you both perceived the project. I am wondering what her reaction could have been, to realise that you've returned home from the context of your institutional artistic pedagogy, where you're expected to make 'high quality' art, only to discuss these everyday objects that she stitches. Was her reaction that of wonder or shock?

SD: My mother approaches art-making from a different perspective than what is generally thought of as artistic expression within homemakers' context. She learnt ecoprinting, dyeing, toy-making, embroidery etc. not as a pretext to employ these skills in the homemaking context but rather to carve out an 'own space-own time' for herself. In this manner she varies from the kantha-makers where familial utility takes precedence. So for her it's a performative practice where she makes things to wear them and display them etc. So within this context, and especially since I don't really have an inclination towards any specific medium, I had to learn a lot of technical skills (dyeing, weaving) from her, to use in context of my institutional learning. So to her, this didn't really feel like a departure in any way. She probably thought initially that I'm supposed to be learning painting, but by the time this project took place I had already come to her enough times to cocreate and learn that this didn't feel like a moment of shock or surprise to her.



Images courtesy of the artist



Images courtesy of the artist

RP: Through this process based approach which starts with a rather modest proposal of conversing with your mother with the covers she makes as a loose thread that wraps it, we reach quite lofty philosophical openings around cocreation, space-making, compartmentalization, the collision of the dichotomy between 'own-space/own-time' and 'domestic space/domestic time' among many others. But *in the end* (for the lack of a better word) there is no real tangible artistic object as such that gets produced. Even your conversation with her, or the workshop you did with her fellow practitioners doesn't strictly proceed in this linear order tending to an end. What, then, becomes of the artistic object when it deviates from, even eludes the clear articulability of a tangible artistic object?

SD: I try to resist the idea of a tangible artistic object in my practice because I think the artistic process should be more about the production of a space rather than about object production.

Often, when you talk about a certain community or a certain site, and then you make an object, there is a large transformation or translation that happens from the material relations, contexts, and the innumerable intangible things that constitute that space. I felt this in my painterly practice as well, you inevitably reach a point where you start turning everything into a 'subject.' In some ways there is an inevitability to so much getting lost in that translation into an artistic object that gets displayed in a gallery. It also divests itself from the very collaborators and community one works with, since they have no idea what you are doing, how you are selling the artwork, what its afterlife is.

By contrast, if one is able to create a space, one is creating another set of onlookers for your practice, and for that set of onlookers, the thing you're doing is not an alien thing. They become active stakeholders in the artistic process.

Starch is an apt metaphor for how I see my practice. It is a material that plays a big role in mending and repair of clothes. Depending on its usage one can make a clothing artifact stiff to the point that it can stand as a solid surface. But with time the starch runs off and the cloth goes back to various degrees of softness. Space-making as an artistic method does something like starch I think.

RP: You've spoken of the risks of translation into an artistic object. With such a fluid methodology as yours, where the idea of artistic cocreation gets reinvented each time, with no fixed point or co-ordinate beyond those set by the project itself, isn't there an opposite risk too? Can't the process lead to a transformation that is mutant and alien in a way that you find disagreeable? Alternatively, the totality of signifiers and threads that are being invoked throughout, they can also pass into a nothingness by the end. What do you do to ensure that either of these things are not the case? How do you perform the delicate balancing act?

SD: The truest engagement with a space must retain complicated assemblages of worldviews, ideologies, ephemera, and objects that are present in the context, even if it clashes with mine or the general art world's notions about things. The only balancing act I can do is to be an interlocutor in this process of space-making. The true challenge, I suppose, would be to replicate a sense of any specific project within a whitecube context. That's when the act of balancing, as well as the risks, will have to be far more pronounced.

RP: Cover/adornment itself becomes a deconstruction+reconstruction of the institutional framework. Every project in that sense reorients itself anew to create similar illuminations, ebbs and flows that form the totality of the site that you take for each artistic project.

SD: That sounds like a rather grand declaration of my artistic intent, which is so rooted in dynamics of everyday life, but yes, that is the general idea.

