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## COMMUNITY BASED ART PRACTICES IN INDIAN URBAN CONTEXT

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**Abstract :** The present research paper is concerned with community based Art practices, carried out in contemporary Indian urban context. The discussion is restricted to only those community art projects that either addresses some urban issues or specifically executed in some urban sites. The aim of this paper is to identify prominent figures, whether artists or organizations, that have been long engaged in such participatory ventures. Also, the significant artworks, that have outcomed from some of the remarkable community art activities, are highlighted. This study discovers how art is utilized in urban grounds and what future possibilities as well as challenges are being ceded to artists, through such collective actions. It also focuses on how art is being coherented with other existing realms and how this symbiotic associations help in developing utilitarian and aesthetical structures.

**Keywords :** collaborative art, community art, dialogical art, public art, socially engaged art, urban art, street art, interventionist art, urban aesthetics, urban future, urban politics, urban ecology, art and ecology, art activism, contemporary art practices, art foundations, installation, site-specific art, video art, performance art, mixed-media art

## INTRODUCTION

Art has always been characterized as an expression of beauty or visualisation of religious concepts but lately, art has manifested itself as an agent to social change. In modern times, art has come forth as a social practice in which idea is originated from the society or public, and is executed with full participation of public. Art is being remodeled by several different and oftenly overlapping groups including urbanites, artists, community activists, architects, designers, art enthusiasts and most importantly, the common public.

In particular relevance, urban sites provide a platform for these different groups to converge themselves through 'Community Art interventions'. A number of times, these interventions circumambulate the peripheries of the cities. As a class of elite people and burgherdoms<sup>1</sup> alone are not enough to run the society, cities do need proletariats<sup>2</sup> to build city infrastructure, whose accommodations are not greatly considered in urban-imagination. So, in order to survive, this worker-class have to find a place, that is how slums are being developed. And that is how in view of an urban-influenced artist, the peripheries<sup>3</sup> and the sub-urbs become conceptually notable.

## DATA AND SOURCES OF DATA

For this study, a combination of primary and secondary data has been used. Primary data is in the form of interviews from the artists who prominently work in collaborations and some art curators who have been part of public art for several years. As Secondary data, project reports of community art practices of past few years have been used from the archive section in websites of KHOJ, FICA, OPEN CIRCLE etc. and also the concerned literature has been studied.

## DISCUSSION

Every city has its own character and narratives, that should be synchronised with the particular interest and needs of its civic bodies. As urbanologist and co-founder of URBZ, Rahul Srivastava says, "*Urban context are more than just as sites of resistance*". Development projects, that do not involve inhabitants of that space, eventually, result into dysfunctionality. [Srivastava, 2010]. Whereat, engagement of local inhabitants with artists, along with urban practitioners & activists in such community art projects, insures perceiving the city as an animate subject and not as a dead corpse.

<sup>1</sup> Middle-class people, oftenly used with reference to Marxist division of society

<sup>2</sup> Working-class people or labourers, used with reference to Marxist division of society

<sup>3</sup> The circumference or outer-edge of the city

Artists have been successful to anthropomorphize city walls and public spaces in collaboration with non-government organisations and government corporations. Artists, urbanites and local inhabitants of city are working hand in hand with the support of some foundations that are specifically aimed to make Art accessible to a wider audience making it more democratic and for everyone.

*“We wanted to somehow break out of the regular gallery structure, because, if you look at public spaces to experience art then, you have thousands of people crossing these areas everyday”* says Akshat nauriyal, content director of St+Art India Foundation. [ArchDaily, 2017]

Street art does play its role in enhancing public spaces through art interventions and embedding art where people inhabit and navigate everyday. St+Art India Foundation is such organization which is working towards reimagining urban public spaces through art and providing a platform and urban practitioners to contribute in a co-operative manner.

The community art projects, overseeing miscellaneous concerns related with city life, augments the junctures of artists and common public and seeks to form a dialogue between these two. In the unified process of refining urban spaces, status of artistic efforts among that of activists, ecologists and social workers requires to be reassessed or re-examined. In this context, communitarian art functions as a medium to pose questions on the roles and responsibilities of the artist in the making of public art.

Collaboration is oftenly of artists of same disciplines, say, two painters working together in a common art project that may be called Artistic partnership or collaboration of different individuals, like artists, urbanites, local people that may be called Socially engaged Art, Interventionist Art, Community based Art or Participatory Art, which can be taken as a sort of social practice. They interact and develop their personal visions, incorporate it and create something anew. Collaboration is of oftenly of Art associations, say, FICA, KHOJ, OPEN CIRCLE together that provides each respective a platform to involve and sometimes there are some other organisations URBZ and CHINTAN dealing with ecology or some other aspects that collaborates with artistic endeavours.

Organisations FICA, KHOJ, OPEN CIRCLE supports Art practitioners in engaging with communities, sites and raise political and social issues through different art projects. These projects chronicles how artist community is establishing its role in urban slums, small towns and City streets. The amalgamation of individuals from whole different spheres and their collaboration towards creative possibilities initiate to cause change in society and in the current milieu. This collective participation allows artisans to produce art products possessing the absolute aesthetics sense, though bearing no signature, consequently seeks to diffuse the concept of single authorship and individual expression.

## • PROJECT 48°C PUBLIC. ART. ECOLOGY

An experimental exercise which focused at interrogating the teetering ecology of the city Delhi through the lens of contemporary art, that brought out some deep-rooted concerns about city and much needed in a time when not every artist was looking at ecology. A first of its kind Public-Eco-Art festival was celebrated in Delhi themed on consistently rising temperatures resulting in global warming and its impact on megacities. The local inhabitants of the place- from rickshaw pullers to metro and bus riders- at first, got amazed to see the introductory activity, but later somehow knowingly-unknowingly became the part of the whole process [Delhi Greens, 2008]. It was an alarming gesture that insinuated to changing climate, commissioned by Goethe Institut and GTZ and supported by Delhi Government, having Delhi Greens as the official Outreach Co-ordinator-organisation.

The methodology of participants started with the mapping of the space. This Mapping was in terms of not only geographically, but also mapping of social, ecological, historical aspects, mapping of what local people expected from that space. In this joint venture, artists sought help from researchers, urban designers, their respective interns and from some urban resource groups. The project was spread around 8 nearby locations; Kashmiri Gate, Chandani Chowk, Romilla Ground, Barakhamba, Mandi house, Inner circle, Jantar Mantar, Roshanara garden.

The idea was to conduct this festival in sufficient large level to grab public's attention as well as participation and it included all kinds of practices from video to large sculpture-making, performances and installations and equally smaller projects which engage with community.

### **Installation Water diviner by Sheba Chhachhi**

This installation work, consists also an old map of Shahjahanbad picturizing then existing waterways, which are now replaced by roads and metros. Sheeba chachi evoked the lost memories of water and reveal about the redundant infrastructure imposed on the name of development. The work projects rolled newspapers, light boxes, video screen illuminated in blue screen. The idea behind pictorial narration of Radha Krishna is the mythological and religious relevance of the river Yamuna as symbol of sacredness.

*“it's extraordinary to think that this route, this busy-busy route opposite the Delhi railway station was once a waterway”*, [Sheba Chhachhi, 2008]



<https://heiuip.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/transcultural/article/view/16507/16493>

Sheba Chhachhi, The water diviner, 2008, installation, video art, montage, Delhi Public Library

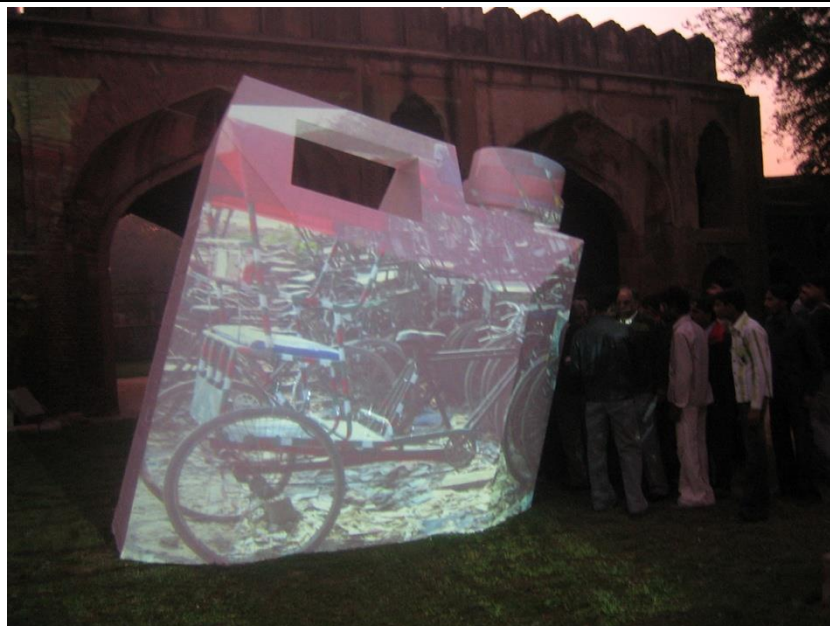
### **Chabeel by Atul Bhalla At Kashmiri Gate**

Atul bhalla utilized the concept of Public Art and Ecology in his work Chabeel<sup>4</sup>, which was a larger than life sized canaster, temporarily sited near Kashmiri Gate..The artists combined it by working through the day, giving water to the passing public, on account of public engagement. In Bhalla's view the river is shunned by the middle class and elite and thus not a public but rather a marginalized and discriminated space.

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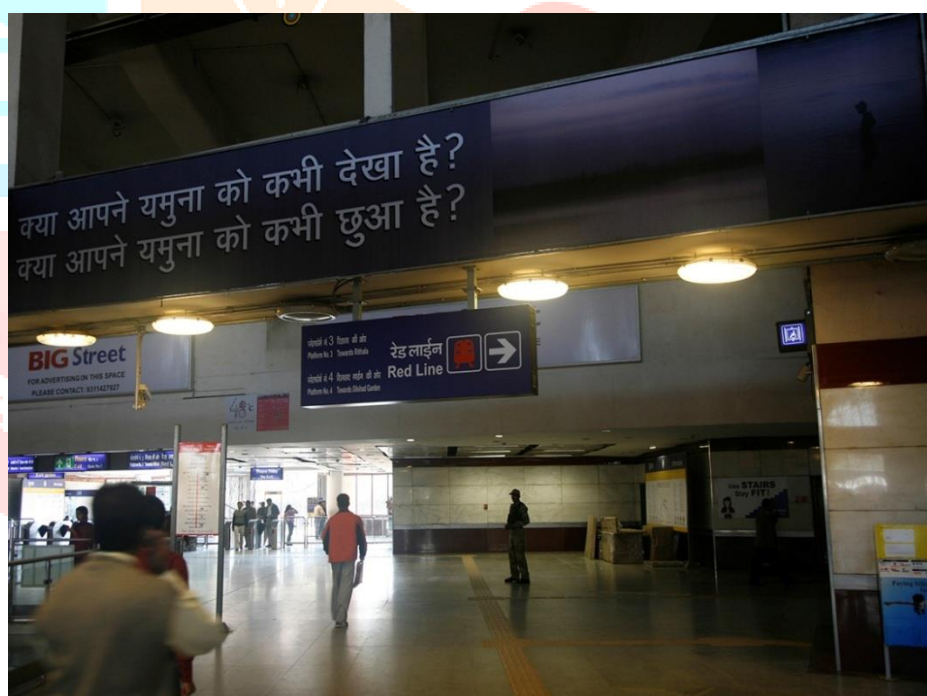
<sup>4</sup> Chabeel is a practice which is typically performed by Hindus and Sikhs by giving Lassi or water to road passers.





<http://www.atulbhalla.com/home.php?cid=9&pid=222>

Atul Bhalla, Chabeel, 2008, wood, ceramic tiles, water, Yamuna sand, cement, video projection, 15x6x10 ft, New Delhi



<http://www.atulbhalla.com/home.php?cid=9&pid=222>

a part of Atul Bhalla's work *Chabeel*, Kashmiri Gate Delhi metro station

Bhalla conveyed the social message through Metro branding, every passer-by did feel aroused by reading the lines on hoarding, which says :

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN THE YAMUNA?  
HAVE YOU EVER TOUCHED THE YAMUNA?

Despite various challenges faced during the whole procedure, 48<sup>0</sup>C Public. Art. Ecology established antecedents for such large-scale art production in public space of Delhi.. Because of the

diverse events including Cycling Gang, Urban Eco Bus Tours, Bird Walks, films and talks. executed there, people obviously became part of the whole Art affair. This festival got an ample response from public. After its accomplishment, many other artists and organizations with similar agendas followed their suit.

- **Sharmila Samant**, one of the founders of OPEN CIRCLE, has been long engaging with community art projects. She worked towards the to-be demolished communities located in eastern sub-urbs of Bombay, which include collaborations with geologists and ecologists in her project Mrigraj – a mirage 2010, a fluid city public art.

- **GIGI SCARIA**

Gigi Scaria, a multimedia artist, who has also been involving in community art, is more passionate in being contextual to the meaning of neighbourhood of city in most of his works. His works are a visual commentary on urban existence and urban future. since, cities are getting expanded rigorously, Scaria signifies the peripheries, by placing his art-structures in different locations of the city-boundaries.

**The Yamuna-Elb project** idealized by Gigi and initiated by Ravi Aggarwal (a photographer & an environmental activist) and Tim Krause (a land artist from Germany) is one remarkable work, in this sense. The multi-facetedness of this project lies in its aesthetical presence and utilitarian value. It not only serves as a conceptual threat, but also intended to work as water-purifier for the river.



<http://www.gigiscaria.in/projects.php>

Gigi Scaria, fountain of purification, Golden Jubilee Park, Raj Ghat, New Delhi, 2011

**Delhi dur ast**<sup>5</sup> was an attempt to interrogate the city Old Delhi. Artists Atul Bhalla, Gigi Scaria and Himanshu Desai lived and worked within the walled city for a month developing individual projects in response to and in some cases in collaboration with the local community of Old Delhi. This project was conceived and programmed by Gigi Scaria in collaboration with Atul Bhalla and Himanshu Desai. It was supported by *Khoj* and partially supported by *Devi Art Foundation*, [KHOJ, 2006].

**Elevator from sub-continent** is a major installation created by Scaria in 54<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale held in 2011. People were called to step inside the dummy –elevator, which attributed to ‘time-travel’ different locations of India. This installation instantly got audience’s attention and admiration. Later same work was palced at different public spaces. On asking about public’s response Gigi told that such kind of works don’t get fine crowds everytime.



<http://khojworkshop.org/programme/dilli-dur-ast/>

Gigi scaria, *Streetscene*, 2006



<http://khojworkshop.org/programme/dilli-dur-ast/>

Atul bhalla, *Pyau*, 2006

<sup>5</sup> The title has a historical reference to the Persian proverb “Hanooz Dilli Dur Ast”, said by Nizamuddin Auliya, a sufi saint of fourteenth century. It means “Delhi is yet far away”, came down in hindi as “Delhi abhi door hai”,



Gigi says, “there are some deciding factors about fulfillment of such works, it depends upon where exactly you are placing yourself and what kind of audience you are inviting” [G. Scaria, personal communication, june 19, 2021]



<http://www.gigiscaria.in/projects.php>

Gigi Scaria, Elevator From The Subcontinent placed at a gymnasium center, 2011

Elevator cabin with 3 backlit projections, Automatic door system with microcontroller



<http://www.gigiscaria.in/projects.php>

Public engagement with Elevator From The Subcontinent, 2011

Many of Scaria’s works have such alliances including *Hybridity* in which he collaborated with Dave Lewis, a London based artist & photographer, WHO directs WHOM, a sculptural installation and

steps to predicament, also, he has a future project in-list with KHOJ concerning with the polluted air of Delhi. He is more passionate towards objectifying public spaces through his art rather than activating it through actions.

- **Vivan Sundaram**, through his community art projects, probes questions about the notion of urban forms, recirculating through garbage and about urban periphery.

**POLITICS OF SPACE AND THE CITY** was one of the first few projects in a resettlement colony of Delhi. SAHMAT (Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust) has been in a forefront of involving artists in multiple different levels. This project was exceptionally well designed and this initiative brought all different artists; theatre people, photographers to setup together.

**ARTIST AGAINST COMMUNALISM WORDS AND IMAGES** was another collaborative gesture in which people from different disciplines came on a platform, classical musicians and dancers appeared on a stage with radical theatre people like Habib Tanvi, Anand Patwardhan. This relationship of participatory contribution, from writers, photographers, poets and the format of a huge sized Canvas added a mobile quality to it, have greater significance. This canvas and exhibition was travelled to 30 cities, including works by over 400 artists; writers, poets, theatre persons and filmmakers, from its opening in New Delhi on April, 1991 and conclusion in Bombay in March, 1992. The tour of 30 cities was also followed by a tour of 40 schools in Delhi. This whole auction which was taken by bus and different modes over hundreds and thousands of miles, was possibly the most exhibited artwork ever done in India and seen by maximum number of people. It also functioned as a departure from prejudiced gallery pattern of exhibition.

**NEW NEW DELHI : ROOM WITH BED** This work reflects how artist deal with city and collaboration. The work includes collaboration of architect Romi Khosla and a section of photographs by Raman Ram, Shantanu Lodh, Bharati Chaturvedi, Chitan Chaturvedi, Shantanu Lodh, Manmeet and Raqs Media Collective.

In this ambiguous room with bed, hardly one can see a bed. Sundaram was interested in this open space which allows the spectator to discover a moment of rest, but rest is also a simultaneously a type of 'work-bed' or 'workplace' and is open relationship of the room to the city. About the title, Sundaram told that one can see enormous transformations in the city which he doesn't fully understand as he considered it as a new New Delhi.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtUB7KZFNS8&t=2586s>

collaboration of Vivan Sundaram, Raman Ram, Shantanu Lodh, Bharati Chaturvedi, Chitan Chaturvedi, Shantanu Lodh, Manmeet, mixed media, 2004

**TRASH** Sundaram imagined the garbage in a conceptual manner as he was connected to those people who were collecting them, got them ordered and altogether creating a palette of all trash. He defines the relationship of this garbage to the fragile city, that is constantly collapsing. This also projects about construction and a photographic work Bharati Chaturvedi, who is the founder and director of CHINTAN, an environmental research and action group in Delhi, collaborated Sundaram in organising an informal union of waste. In this huge construction, entirely made with garbage dirty toothbrushes, plastic toys, tin cans, Sundaram seems to explore the social implications and aesthetics of urban waste.



<http://vivansundaram.com/works/trash-2008/>



Sundaram conceptualizes a city outside Lutyens, a city outside the Gate, a city which is emerging and is being transformed almost on a daily basis, they are being destroyed bulldozed because their illegal slums. He metaphorizes, the contemporary urban life, in his series TRASH.

It has to be destroyed as per the preplanned action. This stratagem of destruction of the art work has a connection with community art because it is the public who presented it performed and destroyed it, as termed by Sundaram 'A poetic collapse'.

*“An installation that is site-specific does require a documentation and a translation into another medium that becomes very essential because archiving and un-archiving in a creative way becomes the choice of the practice of installation art and of community art as well that's very crucial without the archiving there is no life quotations that I came across is very unexpected”, says Sundaram. [Fondation For Indian Contemporary Art , India, 2016].*



<https://www.facebook.com/sepiaeye/posts/3187591491271304:0>

“The Brief Ascension of Marian Hussein” From “Trash”

2005 (video still)

**FLOTAS** Another collaborative art project of Sundaram with CHINTAN is FLOTAS 2009, it was a public art ecology project, which symbolizes the concept of water shortage to plastic water bottles. This piece of art consumed Himalayan bottles in huge number symmetrically arranged in a manner and creating a field of colours. This project was first executed in Roshanara garden, Delhi and later launched in Yamuna river for final action.





<http://eco-publicart.org/48-degrees-celsius/>

Flotas, Roshan Ara Garden, Delhi, 2008

FLOTAS is 50 feet long 20 feet wide and 10,000 Himalayan bottles were installed in it. After its exposition in public space, it was sent to the river, then FLOTAGE was launched as a boat in Yamuna river which is also captured in a 10 to 12 minutes video. Sundaram with this project started again with his interest in minimalism and abstraction as a part of his visual statement. Typically, it is inevitable for the spectator to scrutinize the fact that how filthiness of garbage is transformed into an enticing dynamism of art. To which Sundaram responded that it is the job of the artist to transform the raw material to another level of aesthetic beauty.



<http://vivansundaram.com/works/flotage-yamuna-2010/>



<http://vivansundaram.com/works/flotage-yamuna-2010/>





<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtUB7KZFNS8&t=2586s>

People were able to sit on this exquisite object and moved it across the river about 45 minutes, not to mention, it also has to be ended. So some waste pickers were called and the object was destroyed.

### **Tushar joag**

Tushar jog, one of the co-founders of OPEN CIRCLE, has collaborated with many art projects with an addressal to urban issues and specifically executed in urban context. He was involved in a lot of works with Safdar Hashmi, Badal Sarkar, Open Circle, Majlis, where his mediums include pamphleting, nukkad natak, stickering, leafleting, making props for morchas. He teamed up with such organizations which interface with art in a way that satisfy the artist and such events where the inputs in public domain were pushing towards a common agenda.

**OPEN CIRCLE and NBA** In 2001, OPEN CIRCLE and Bombay support group of Narmada Bachao Andolan intervened outside State Government Headquarters in Mumbai. There was a meeting happening in the Mantralaya with then-chief minister and right outside the Mantralay, a large group of Art students and others from open circle gathered and marked rectangular plots (which was supposed to be a symbol of houses) and pasted pamphlets carrying names of housees.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtUB7KZFNS8&t=2586s>

action in support of NBA, 2001

This was a gesture of allotting land to these people because the government and Narmada control authority was planning to increase the dam height and not in favour of rehabilitate those houses beforehand.

*“Basically, I think there are two ways of making art; politicising aesthetics and aestheticising Politics. Both are necessary and both are valid forms of practicing art, you have to aestheticise even the politics, and you have to politicise your aesthetics. That is how I got into this mode.”*, says Jaog. [Parry , 2012].

These campaigners marched into the busy road junction and massive traffic, as a result, they all were promptly arrested.

**Venice of the east : gentrification and development** under the initiative of Tushar Jaog, possesses again a strain of satire, which deals with questions of urban development, displacement and citizenship. He sees an ethical duty of an artist as an activist, for him, art is useless if it not political. Via this art project, he satirizes the Mumbai makeover plan to be made into a world-class city, modelled on the lines of Singapore or Shanghai.

Tushar distributed demolition letters to middle and upper middle class locality people, who really thought that their buildings are going to be demolished to make way for the canals that will connect the city.

**The Bombay dowry** intervention was a take on the historical joke that Bombay was gifted by the Portuguese as dowry to Charles II of England when he got married to Catherine de Braganz. Charles II then leased the island to the East India company , who used it to maximize their profits.





<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtUB7KZFNS8&t=2586s>

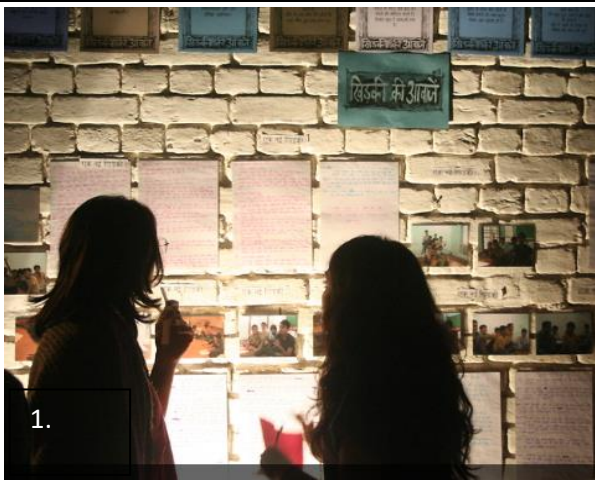
a still from *Bombay Dowry* performance,

The performance was staged like a typical Hindu marriage procession and narrates about how land is being grabbed from people of the city by state government and given away to the builders.

- **KHOJ**

**AAPKI SADAK** Aapki sadak is a consultative project founded by architects, artists, designers and the local community. It was aimed to use pedestrianism as a medium for developing a sense of common ground and equality within the diverse localities in South Delhi.

**URBAN TYPHOON 2010** This was a joint initiative by KHOJ and URBZ and involving interdisciplinary individuals from all over the world coming together in the neighbourhoods of Khirkee, an urban village lying in the periphery of Delhi. The idea of this collaboration was to create new imaginaries and futures for Khirkee through the collective actions. The outcome of this week-long workshop was various installations, essays, architectural designs, urban-plans and some site-specific works.



<http://khojworkshop.org/programme/urban-typhoon-khirkee/>

1.Ek nayee khirkee 2. patch work 3. doh baje 4.khirkee ki khoj

**IMAGINING YOUR FUTURE CITY** It was based upon conceptualizing what the city in 3015 could be like. Apart from engaging common public participation, the main aim was to shift from figurative representation to a more conceptual comprehension of ideas and forms.



<http://khojworkshop.org/programme/imagining-your-future-city-caas-inspired-workshop-at-the-rainbow-home/>

## PERIPHERIES AND CROSSOVERS 2019, 2020

Yehuda Safran says, “*the future is in the periphery.*” This project is aimed to create participatory framework of art-making in the peripheries of city and working toward social change through the use of shared vocabulary. COVID-19 has been a barrier for art practices, which demands engagement and physical involvement, still KHOJ managed to continue its minor-level art project focusing on gender-stereotyping and effects of urbanization on gender-based inequalities. Participant artists were Sumedha Garg, Nitin Bathla, Sumona Chakravarty, Nilanjan Das.

### • FICA

Cities, that we see today, are the by-product of a sequence of gradual manipulations. The native places which are oscillating between legality and illegality, everyday lives and memory, are being reshaped by local dwellers day by day.

**HER ; AN URBAN ACTION** this urban intervention sought to create a site of possibility to move the acts of violence against women from silence to vocal and performative actions.



<https://ficart.org/urban-action-performance>

Performance By Doris Difarnecio And Priyanka Chaudhary



Participants include Doris Difarnecio, Priyanka Chaudhary. This whole activity was considered as a universal demand for justice and respect for life and equality. It dealt with issues of violence against women exacerbated through growing urbanization.

## CONCLUSION

The basic nature of 'Urban' and its bipolar association with arts is of vital importance. On one extreme, Art embodies in urban context in the form of Street Art and Public Art, which is significant in public awareness about some ecological or civic affairs. On another, Urban plays as an inspiration and is understood and negotiated in finer ways by artists. Collaborations in art, specifically in urban context, fills the gap between the difference of perceptions of urban practitioners and art practitioners about the notion of urban.

However, the community art practices discussed in this paper, leads one to the discernment that such projects act as a double-edged sword, being as much beneficial as challenging for artists.

## MERITS

Through, these kind of pursuits, artists get to explore their potential in a real and a more dynamic space, not only in terms of execution but also of exposition. Focusing specifically on the exposition part, such art practices seems to relocate the predisposed notion of gallery pattern of art, because the gallery is the open public space, in this case, which has more reach to common public. In this way, Art has become more democratic through the increasing proximity to art and through engagement in the process.

These projects contribute towards the cultural sphere and in a manner, artists on behalf of communities bring out the voices and navigate to change.

In terms of artistic methodology, different forms of collaborations give a chance for exchange of ideas, to individuals' visions to develop more and broaden the very purpose of art. As a result, spontaneity and the multimedia approach is encouraged. Art, by means of such projects, is finding its possibilities to become a collective or mass expression in place of an individual expression. There exists a vast potential for community Art in the greatly chaotic urban environment and political affairs present a series of possibilities for this genre of art to flourish more.



## CHALLENGES

Besides, the struggles faced in the process of sanctioning the site and funding, there are recurring occasions when art is incorporated in urban context or addressing some urban issues, then it takes the form of Art activism, as can clearly be seen in projects by Tushar Jaog, where artists were arrested by Mumbai police. Not to mention, ‘Student of May 1968’ was a context for Sundaram, which made him move out of his studio and working in street everyday and everyone wanders whether he was painting or protesting “*so, I found myself not only in streets but in barricades, in front me American embassy and I was arrested and put in jail for ten-days*”, which Sundaram calls ‘*a romantic episode*’.

Although, community public artworks have the advantage of getting Instant response of the public, but sometimes there exists a chance of public rejecting the proposal as equally as that of government’s hindrance. More often than not, public do not co-operate that way. As far as performative part of such activities is concerned, a common man is less likely to perform in public, therefore there is need to find an alternative for such situations. It is imperative how artists balance between the premeditated schema of such interventions and being sensitive to sight of their fellows and public.

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