

Imagined Utopias: Art as a Social Practice

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When we began writing this essay, we had been in the pandemic for over a year. In a normal year, we would have been working out of Khoj Studios - a large, airy, white building that forms a U-shape around a cobble-stoned courtyard, flecked with white flowers from a Mousari tree. We would have been meeting artists and cultural practitioners over coffee and carrot cake, conducting student residencies, curating public interventions and exhibitions, and visiting sites for the community-based projects we had commissioned. Instead, all our animated interactions with artists, the public and with each other were now reduced to a grid of badly-lit squares on Zoom. As arts funding dried up, our building fell into quiet dormancy and our projects were at risk of not materializing the way they had been envisioned. The projects that were at greatest risk were those under our on-going Peripheries & Crossovers program.

Peripheries & Crossovers (2019) is a multi-city program of 12 socially engaged projects. These projects focus on cultural norms and narratives around gender and explore how place-making can destabilize these conventions. Through this program we try to build a discourse on how perennial urbanism in India is a condition marked by extreme precarity - of livelihoods, of housing, of safety and health - and how this precarity is unevenly borne by gendered bodies.

Our engagement with these precarities is more than a curatorial interest. It is, in fact, a shared exercise in learning how to live and work in Khirkee, where Khoj Studios is located. Khirkee is a dense, unauthorized settlement in the heart of New Delhi, lacking municipal oversight and clearances. Though central to the map of Delhi, it is peripheral in its access to civic services because it is unauthorised. Its cheap rents and central location have attracted a diversity of residents - students, refugees particularly from Afghanistan and Africa, migrants from other Indian states, artists and laborers. For all of these reasons Khirkee is a contested area that is constantly on edge. Over the years our projects, Khirkee Storytelling Project and Khirkee-yaan, have used participatory media and storytelling to initiate difficult conversations between diverse (and sometimes hostile) neighbours and create a living archive of the neighbourhood. These community-based projects were underscored by a belief in the legitimacy of art as a powerful tool for cracking open spaces for dialogue and engagement. Through them we learned that art could offer more speculative and expanded inroads for working through difficult questions and potentially become a tool for communities to articulate their own visions for a more equitable future.



Nitin Bathla and Sumedha Garg, 2019, *Studio Otherworlds*, Tapestry Detail 1. (Photo by Bhavyaa Parashar)



Nitin Bathla and Sumedha Garg, 2019, *Studio Otherworlds*, Tapestry Detail 3. (Photo by Bhavyaa Parashar)



Nitin Bathla and Sumedha Garg, 2019, *Studio Otherworlds*, Tapestry Detail 2. (Photo by Bhavyaa Parashar)



Nitin Bathla and Sumedha Garg, 2019, *Studio Otherworlds*, Tapestry Detail 4. (Photo by Bhavyaa Parashar)

The Peripheries and Crossovers program grew from these initial experiments in Khirkee, aiming to examine the extent of spatial injustice in similarly peripheral areas across India. We put out three open calls in order to select and commission projects that fit into our program, and eventually supported 12 projects from 2019 to 2021. Some risks are inherent to socially engaged practice: there are significant anxieties around building trust with the communities and around the ethics of representation and knowledge production. With Covid, however, came a new fault line. It exposed the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on those who were already on the peripheries: the complete erosion of their rights during the lockdown, absolute loss of in-person communication because of fear of contagion, and the depopulation of entire areas because of the sudden loss of jobs and livelihoods. These had implications for the way the projects could be implemented. In some instances, artists working on these projects could not visit their sites anymore. In others, communities themselves shifted or changed. Overwhelmingly, across all projects, there were many more degrees of separation between the Khoj curatorial team, the creative practitioners carrying out these projects, and the communities they were working with. This essay reflects on how some of these projects navigated these challenges in working with communities whose daily negotiations with risk became all the more complex because of the pandemic.

Kapashera is a tenement town that lies in the green belt that separates Delhi and Gurgaon. It is home to over 250,000 cyclical migrants from various parts of India like Bihar, Bengal, UP and Orissa who work in garment manufacturing units. Almost everyone here works on informal contracts and daily wages. They live in densely-packed housing units of around 9 square meters per family of four. While the men leave for work during the day, the women are confined within dark windowless rooms with no opportunities for work and no safe spaces for recreation. Right next to their tenements are sprawling bungalows and mechanized, industrial units built on illegally appropriated agricultural lands. This cadastral plan has become the de facto masterplan to serve the powerful landlords of the area. Sumedha Garg and Nitin Bathla's project, *Studio Otherworlds*, explores these complex, exploitative labour and class relationships. It questions the meaning of home for people in a place that is in a perpetual state of flux and how the temporariness of livelihoods and belonging affects the lives of women in this space.

Nitin and Sumedha started out by repurposing an old abandoned warehouse in Kapashera to create a space which the women could view as a safe space for daily conversations. Being outsiders, building trust was difficult because the women were not open to discussing personal accounts of their lives with anyone outside their community. Over time Sumedha encouraged them to stitch together in this "third space" casually referred to as the studio. Proximity to garment factories meant they had access to a wide range of leftover pieces of cloth in all colors and shapes. The gendered nature of the chore of sewing comfortably allowed the women to immerse themselves in this activity and gradual conversations helped them open up and begin

sewing their stories of migration, loss of home and domestic abuse on pieces of cloth. Proof of their openness came as a heartwarming revelation when six women who visited the space regularly, expressed a desire to form a collective called *Saat Saheliyan* (Seven Sisters) and invited Sumedha to be a part of it.

What began on the scale of the intimate and domestic, expanded into a larger project when the women started challenging the cadastral map of Kapashera and its patriarchal representation of space. They began to create a tapestry that allowed them to reimagine their own understanding of the space and of ideas of identity and belonging. The tapestry was divided into three parts: black and white tenement blocks represented their present situation and living conditions; the center was a space for reminiscing - remembering a life they had left behind, a life of festivals and togetherness, of ecological memory of greener spaces. It was also the space that brought out personal stories of aspirations, of gendered struggles and domestic abuse in Kapashera. One of the members stitched a clock on the tapestry to represent a time machine that she wished could transport her back to her ancestral village. The third part was a dark patch, a black hole in the middle of a blue sea which represented the toxicity of their lives and a speculative look into the future. It revealed the planetary entanglements wherein processed cotton that arrived from China into Kapashera was stitched into garments and left for Western shores. It portended a dystopic future, of ecological devastation and being sucked into this darkness.

Between the months of December 2019 and February 2020, Nitin and Sumedha further expanded the scope of their engagement by organizing a series of public workshops to critically engage with the tapestry created by the *Saat Saheliyan* Collective and initiate dialog between different groups of people around migration and gender inequality. These workshops in parks, universities and public squares attracted curious passersby to stop and interact with the Collective. The tapestry soon became a tool for social engagement and went beyond being just an object. During one such public workshop conducted at the Labour Square in Kapashera, a large number of male daily wage migrants curiously gathered around the tapestry. Pictorial accounts of street harassment experienced by women coming back home in the evening, stories of men lying on the streets under the influence of alcohol, and domestic abuse resulting from unemployment sparked many interesting conversations about gendered violence in Kapashera.

All of this turned on its head when Covid put a stop to the project's public engagement overnight. As the pandemic raged on, factories were shuttered, rents became difficult to pay and serpentine lines of migrants from all over India began arduous treks back home. To shelter in place implies that safety is to be found at the home, but this temporary home only made the migrants more vulnerable to exploitative forces. Lack of wages and no access to healthcare facilities compelled them to move back to the villages in search of the security that comes with family ties and familiar spaces. During this extremely fraught time, Sumedha and Nitin tried to



(Right) The Saat Saheliyan Collective stitching in public co-producing parts of the tapestry in dialogue with passers-by. (Photo by Aishwarya Ashok)

(Page 80-81) Nitin Bathla and Sumedha Garg, 2019, *Studio Otherworlds*, Tapestry Detail 5.



hold on to their conversations and stories, encouraging the women who stayed on in Kapashera to continue stitching. The women began to communicate with them through cellphones – often devices that were shared by entire families or borrowed from another *saheli* (friend) – to create and share embroidered images of the shifting nature of the neighborhood during the pandemic. Several heart-breaking stories of violence, exploitation and abuse unfolded in Kapashera during the lockdown. As many of the original members of the *Saat Saheliyan* Collective also migrated back to their villages, the project came to a complete close only to underscore how often an undertaking of this nature is as fragile as the community in which it is located.

While the violence women endured in Kapashera was visible, quieter forms of violence emerged in Madanpur Khadar, a resettlement area in New Delhi. Madanpur Khadar has seen rapid change over the last two decades, as it has transformed from agricultural land into a resettlement colony. It now houses evictees from across informal settlements in Delhi and lacks many public services especially water, electricity and public transport. These adversely impact women's lives, particularly their ability to commute to the city for work. Most public places of leisure in Madanpur Khadar, such as tea stalls and parks, are crowded by men. This largely masculine public domain is either completely off-bounds or hostile to young women and gendered Others. It pulsates with the threat of imminent violence for women if their conduct does not conform to acceptable public behavior as dictated by patriarchal gender norms. Families thus limit and restrict the movements of their daughters for activities other than school and work. The risk of unsafe public spaces shrinks urban opportunities for women and reduces their presence and participation in urban life. Civil society has been advocating for creating inclusive, safe spaces for women and gendered minorities but the process of urban planning has largely been devoid of any civic engagement, particularly in areas so far from the mainstream. Women's inability to use public spaces as freely as men in Madanpur Khadar, became the entry point for spatial design practitioners, Divya Chopra and Rwritee Mandal.

Divya and Rwritee's *Fursat ki Fizayen* is an on-going project that explores how women can carve out spaces for leisure in an area where the public domain is seen as the province of men and is rife with judgement. The idea of leisure has not received a lot of attention in gender studies discourse despite the effects gendered inequality of free time has on the well-being of women. Divya and Rwritee set out to understand these unequal spatial and temporal realities of young, single women of Madanpur who live at the margins geographically, socially and economically. They began talking to young women of ages 18 to 30 about "leisure time" and their relationship with paid and unpaid work. The group was a mix of working and non-working women: a single mother, a guard at a night shelter, a fashion designer who ran a small boutique, students and some women who worked as social workers. For these women, "resting" hours of the day were blocks of time that could be filled with unpaid care or cleaning work at home. Not only was there a lack of understanding of the importance of leisure time for personal well-being, spaces



Rwritee Mandal and Divya Chopra, 2020, *Fursat ki Fizayen*. (Photo by Parvez)



Mapping Workshop at Jagori Office. (Photo by Mandal)



Co-production of terrace space, mural painting in progress. (Photo by Parmar)

at home and outside were unwelcoming or even hostile to the idea of women taking some time for themselves or enjoying moments of solitude. Internalized ideas around gendered public spaces were so pervasive that it was hard for the women to imagine possibilities of leisure in the public realm. Most of them had simply never even thought about it.

Through drawing workshops, Divya and Rwritee got them to identify and document spaces they turned to in their time away from work and chores. These creative expressions revealed the terrace as a common denominator: it was seen by most as an ideal open space for leisure. With no access to public spaces, women resorted to using the terrace as a transitional space that was both not public and yet allowed them to experience the open air between chores.

As abruptly as they did in Kapashera, the pandemic-induced shelter-at-home orders temporarily derailed *Fursat ki Fizayen*. The situation pushed the young women to seek solace in their cellphones instead and the digital soon became an extension of the physical – an important space for moments of leisure. Once the second wave subsided, Divya and Rwritee returned to Madanpur Khadar and conversations around leisure took off again. With city mapping, workshops, help from local NGOs and through other collaborative exercises, the women have found a terrace that they have decided to reclaim as their space for collective action, reflection and leisure. The terrace is being painted with murals by some of the women, who are actively incorporating some elements of their lives and identity in them. Apart from co-designing the terrace, the women have also started finding ways to enhance their digital experience on the terrace by buying better data packs to improve internet connectivity. *Fursat ki Fizayen* has a simple premise: that leisure is also a priority and that joy is as important as safety when it comes to imagining gender-sensitive cities.

While Studio Otherworlds and *Fursat ki Fazaiein* addressed only women's concerns, *Gendered Spaces* expanded this discourse by bringing men into the conversation to question patriarchy and notions of ideal masculinity. *Gendered Spaces* was initiated in Chitpur, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Kolkata by artists Sumona Chakravarty and Nilanjan Das. This area is home to a diverse set of people and histories: *bastis* (shacks) along the railway tracks and one of the biggest red-light districts close to the heritage palatial homes. *Gendered Spaces* was an attempt to examine how different spaces in Chitpur perpetuated shared ideals of masculinity: Sumona worked at an all-male body building club and Nilanjan at the riverside *ghats* (riverbank).

Sumona and Nilanjan's journey began as a series of walks in Chitpur. During these explorations they chanced upon the *Hathkola Byam Samiti* (men's body building club), a 100-year fixture of the locality with an open courtyard outside. A narrow trail lined with murals of muscular men leading to the entrance piqued their curiosity and drew them into the club. *Hathkola* was set up a century ago at a time when local clubs were created to train young men for the Freedom



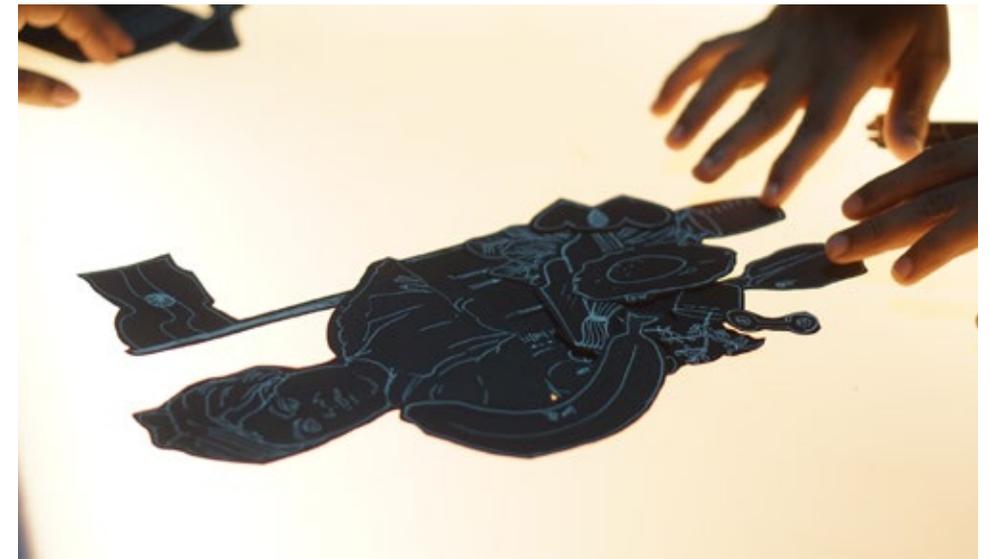
Sumona Chakravarty and Nilanjan Das, 2019, *Ideal Man*, Game for *Gendered Spaces*. (Photo by Hamdasti)

Movement. Men went to the club to build their physique but, more importantly, this was also their way of portraying themselves as the ideal men in their families and communities. Sumona and Nilanjan chose the club's courtyard for the first round of conversations about gender roles. The men's-only club was a gendered space which women never entered. However its courtyard, surrounded by houses, was easily accessible to men, women and children. The gym's location was not entirely public but not exclusive either.

After a series of conversations with the younger club-members, Sumona and Nilanjan devised an activity based on a light-box collage-making exercise to understand what drove the members to join the club, what their ideas of ideal masculinity were, what their lifestyles were like, and how they viewed their role in society. These interactions led the artists to develop a framework of visual codes or prompts which could initiate a dialog around notions of an ideal man. These prompts were black and white cutouts of everyday objects and symbols - the cooking *kadai* (pan), Indian flag, shopping bag, gym weights, a bouquet of flowers, cosmetics, beef, chicken and also images of the murals of famous men that adorned the entry walls of the gym. Each participant was asked to create a silhouette of an "ideal man" by placing the cutouts in the shape of a human being on the lightbox. The game was an invitation to talk about and reason with their choice of the visual symbols. Cooking utensils were rarely chosen, but the shopping bag was a popular choice and signified decision making to participants. The images of Bahubali and Tagore inspired a feeling of greatness, physical strength and a need to serve society. Cutouts of earrings were pushed aside for the television. As these activity-based interactions developed slowly, they began revealing several aspects of how men perceived their roles at home and in society.

The idea was to create something that was familiar but also add new and surprising elements which would compel the participants to recognize and admit something about their views of gender roles. The encounter had many defining moments especially when a group of transwomen and later a group of men collectively engaged with the lightbox to create a silhouette of an ideal man through discussions and debate. These moments prompted more reflection and questioning.

At the end of each activity, the artists would step back only to find that the club members had taken over "debating everything from whether "ideal men" should wear bright prints, cook for their partners, be a home husband, invite their partners to visit the club and use accessories or take part in protests that are deemed "anti-national". *Gendered Spaces* was driven by a desire to create an engaging, open public domain where gendered bodies could encounter "the other". To co-create and co-own narratives of a space, one has to allow divergent perspectives to be heard. These incremental encounters through trust building and interactive games brought people together to collectively reflect and reimagine the idea of masculinity in public spaces and in their homes.



Sumona Chakravarty and Nilanjan Das, 2019, Ideal Man Collage. (Photo by Hamdasti)



Sumona Chakravarty and Nilanjan Das, 2019, Ideal Man Collage Display. (Photo by Hamdasti)

Looking back at their encounters Sumona and Nilanjan reflected:

"People were able to share their perspectives on gender roles, masculinity and intimacy, yet encounter different opinions and ideas. We were all collectively challenged to revisit and reflect on our own ideas and we hope that the games, light installations and puppets created an atmosphere that was beautiful, celebratory and meaningful, allowing these conversations and memories to live on."

These sites were also sites of discomfort for the artists themselves, since they unsettled and contested their own ideas of gender roles. For Sumona, this meant navigating an all-male body building club as a woman, while for Nilanjan it challenged his own understanding of ideal masculinity. To discuss intimacy, masculinity and biases in society required them to build an atmosphere of trust, in which this discomfort could also be acknowledged and worked through.

As curators, working with these projects through the pandemic was particularly challenging, with many degrees of sensorial loss. We navigated anxieties about the ethics of authorship and longevity. With a growing number of outsiders - researchers, journalists, NGO workers, survey-takers, and now artists - swooping into vulnerable areas to conduct activities and seed new initiatives, there is a growing concern about the ethics of exiting these spaces when the fieldwork concludes or funding dries out, and more importantly around representation of stories which are not documented collectively. What happens when the artist becomes the exclusive author of collective action? What are the ethics of gathering and sharing information within this context? We constantly grapple with questions such as how much information is too much to share publicly? What would be unfair to the community, were it to be revealed? How can artists, as relative outsiders, take a truly community-based approach to this work?

The output of these practices certainly does not feed into the exhibitionary complex that is the domain of contemporary art. However, embarking on such artistic practices, which are process-oriented and rely on long-term engagement, also runs the risk of not producing any tangible outcomes. Does the absence of immediate results, the thwarting of instant gratification, invalidate them as artistic practices of the here and now? In that sense, the tensions within Peripheries and Crossovers have emerged as a fertile ground for us to think about how we conceptualize a practice that retains the speculative, creative and generative aspects of an art practice, along with a commitment to supporting socially-engaged work. It has enabled us to start thinking not only about what art is, but what it can do when it is mobilized as a tool to imagine more equitable futures.