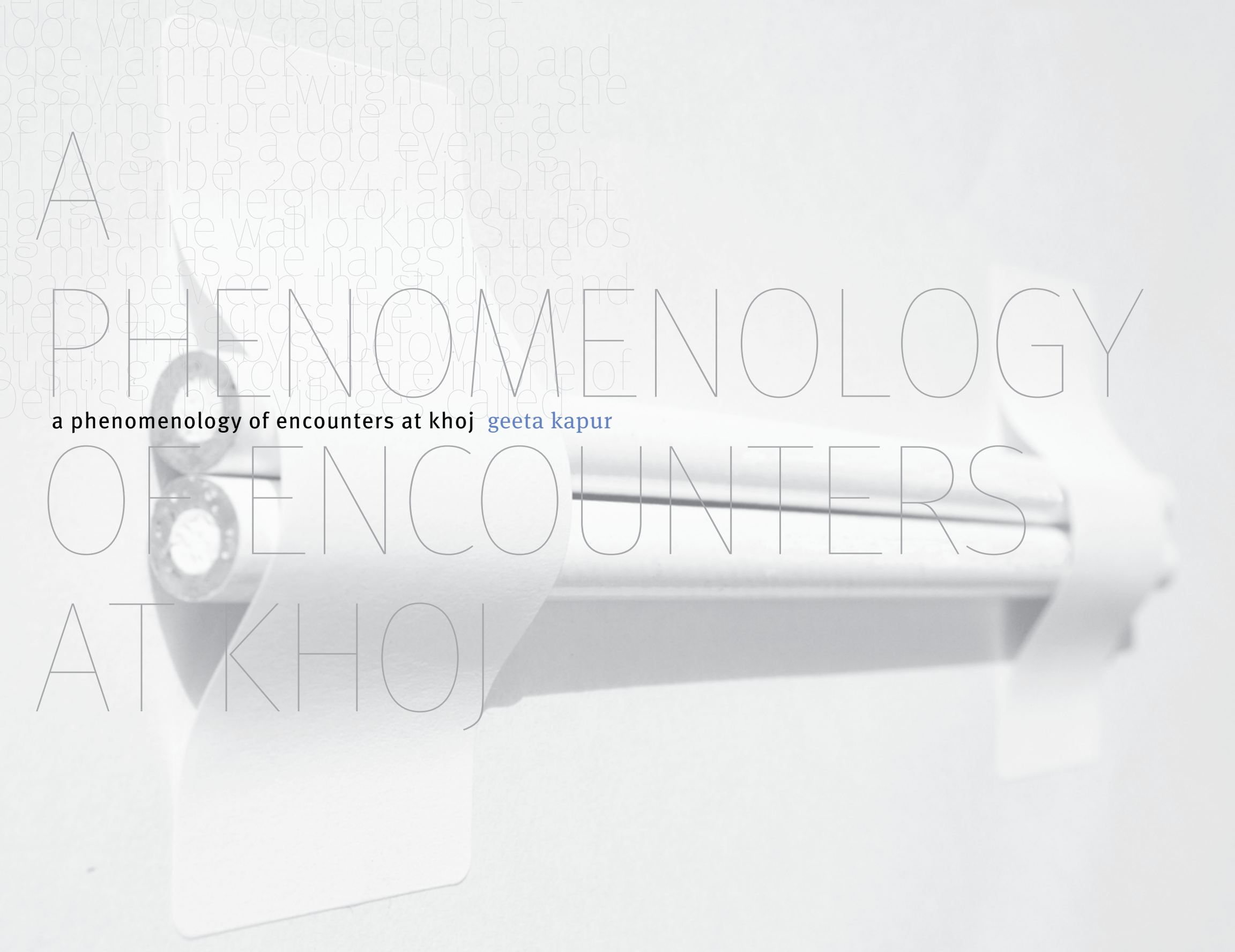


A black and white photograph of a person lying in a hammock, which is suspended from a window frame. The person is curled up, and their face is partially visible. The background is a blurred interior space.

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF ENCOUNTERS AT KHOJ

a phenomenology of encounters at khoj [geeta kapur](#)

[daring dying dreaming](#)

Tejal hangs outside a first-floor window cradled in a rope hammock.

Curled up and passive in the twilight hour, she performs a prelude to the act of dying.

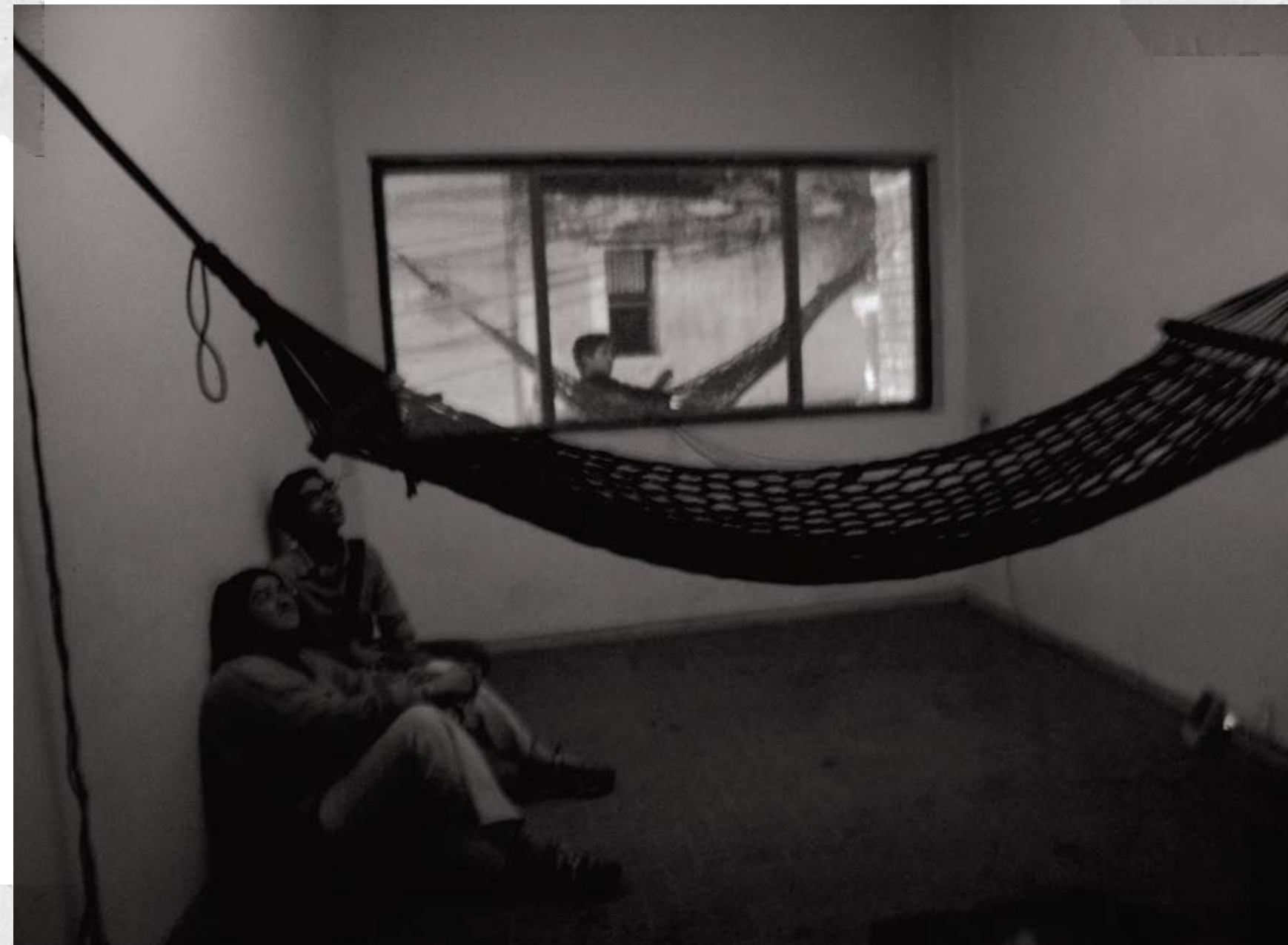
It is a cold evening in December 2004. Tejal Shah hangs at a height of about 15ft against the wall of Khoj Studios as much as she hangs in the space between the studios and the shops across the narrow street. The abyss below is a bustling thoroughfare in one of Delhi's 'urban villages' called Khirkee.¹ We stand with local residents, craning our necks as curious spectators. Up there is this suspended girl-boy, easily misrecognised as to gender and even perhaps species, so indifferent she appears – like a panda tumbled into a vacant hammock and playing dead.

In the first-floor room, street sounds mixed with choir music, mixed with projections of characters talking at you from the ceiling, create a high-decibel environment. Just outside the window, Tejal sleeps – the performance is called *Sleep*. Her body, exposed to the winter bleakness, is secured by one friendly prop: a twin hammock swings empty inside the room. If you clamber into this hammock and pair up with her – very few

did – she senses the kind act and pulls the connecting cord, rocking the invisible companion inside. She acknowledges the anonymous affiliation but performs in this chance companionship the reverse – a state of singularity that disaligns her from the artist community, a state of existential disaffiliation that marks her liminality.

Seeing her slung there for several hours, you wonder if this voluntary entrapment can catapult her into a trapeze act – into the act of dreaming, the act of daring. Whether she can defy the swing and wrench of the gallows and perform a Brechtian manoeuvre, offering a lesson about the more public forms of transfiguration – degendering and declass(ify)ing herself to test the social or, more specifically, the *egalitarian* consequences of performance.

What is the nature of the art that lies along the margins of legitimised art/institutions? Tejal's avatar as homeless tramp is remote yet connected to the strangely sympathetic, near-lumpen crowd below, and it raises the perennial question about boundaries, about the outside/inside of art practice and of artists' experiments with self. And it brings us to Khoj's philosophic space in the scheme of art, as also its actual location and *site*.



TEJAL SHAH
india, *Sleep*, live
performance, khoj
studios delhi 2004

poverty of means

Khoj² has been especially conducive to site-specific works; indeed it began, not so coincidentally perhaps, when the concept and desire to work with perishable materials and temporary structures, with erasable signs and the artist's own body, had just surfaced on the Indian art scene.³

Khoj's initial activity (1997-2001) was situated in Modinagar in the outskirts of Delhi, in a township built around the (now derelict) factories of the Modis. Khoj was lucky to be offered (by the family of Dayawati Modi) the Sikribagh estate for its two-week winter workshops hosting between 20 and 24 artists (half Indian, half non-Indian). The Sikribagh environs included a bungalow and outhouses, gardens and a large pond, with fields extending to wilderness. These were explored in the work of the artists who then crossed the big iron gates of the estate to forage in the local market for usable stuff and for modest manufacture of artworks. They hung out at the local *dhabas* and, in a few cases, developed a sociological interest in the operations of the national bourgeoisie as it disinvests businesses, abandoning the working class to virtual penury. A designated 'Open Day' for spectators – mostly artist-visitors from Delhi ferried across for a viewing – brought the art-idyll to critical attention.

Modest by international standards, Khoj inaugurated an art practice embedded in nature and common culture; an informal, everyday practice of no extraordinary consequence except as a way of living it out in a temporary commune with basic facilities in what was already a highly mobile global-residency circuit. An environment, moreover, where art experience inscribes itself within site and space and vice versa, where the walking/wandering rhythms of the participants trace an itinerary of encounters we may call art: not a curator's itinerary of artworks but a somewhat arbitrarily distributed treasure-hunt of subliminal meanings attributable as art.

Khoj dismantled what was then a rather limited definition of Indian art, and it did this as much by recognising the phenomenology of unexpected

encounters as by the conversations that result from letting go; from the dissolution of an artwork and its residual aesthetic. Here was how to decatheet desire from the object of art and transfer it to processes, to coax improvised sign-systems into virtual language, to push experiential/communitarian dialogue and reformulate ideas about art, *the very idea of art*.

Given that Indian artists were slow in moving out of the white cube, such as it was, until recently – a domestic-scale gallery-shop selling art objects in the main metropolitan cities – Khoj intervened by introducing a persistent site for alternate manoeuvres. In the generally conservative art scene of India, Khoj opened up a space for 'irresponsible' experimentation. This inadvertent debriefing of high purpose not only resulted in flouting the aesthetic coveted in the art market of collectible goods (a naive art market that arose at breakneck speed at the turn of the 20th century and 'bulled' up the prices of paintings), but introduced an altogether more vivacious form of exchange. The poverty of means adopted at the Khoj workshops, the consciously depleted objecthood of artworks with a quotient of wit sorely lacking in the Indian art world, gave us what we are accustomed to call *alternative art practice*. But more on this question of alternatives later, as also on the potential for developing radical concepts and a sustained discourse.

Sikribagh, as I said before, was the yearly site for artists' eccentric actions for five years between 1997 and 2001. Here Song Dong from China conducted Buddhist meditation in the open courtyard, his forehead resting against the whitewashed wall for hours; and Fiona Foley from Australia piled *neel*, turmeric and red chillies into a circle that was a cross between an aboriginal earthwork and a Tantric mandala. Fuji Hiroshi from Japan scrubbed and cleaned a dirty sewage drain and filled it with fresh water and goldfish; and Bastienne Kramer from Holland floated a tyre-raft for a ride to her water-shelter in the middle of the 'lake'. Tapfuma Gutsa from Zimbabwe covered a felled tree from the estate with cowhide and then played the



SONG DONG
china, *Untitled*,
live performance,
khoj modinagar
workshop 1999

gigantic drum for his resident friends in a jam session organised by musician Punita Singh. And the ironic Hassan Khan from Egypt made an early video with the then conspicuously low-tech (later techno-savvy) Khoj workshop. Tania Bruguera, performance and installation artist from Havana, made herself a cape out of the workshop's used tea-bags – the cape recalling Helio Oiticica's *parangolés* for Rio's boy-dancers. Later, Oiticica-like, she rigged up (for curator María de Corral at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005) a full-

scale room where, in grand continuation of her Khoj residency, she made a memorial to tea titled *Poetic Justice*. The walls, hung with used tea-bags and embedded with tiny monitors, showed documentary footage on tea, an emblematic object of exchange in colonial cultures.

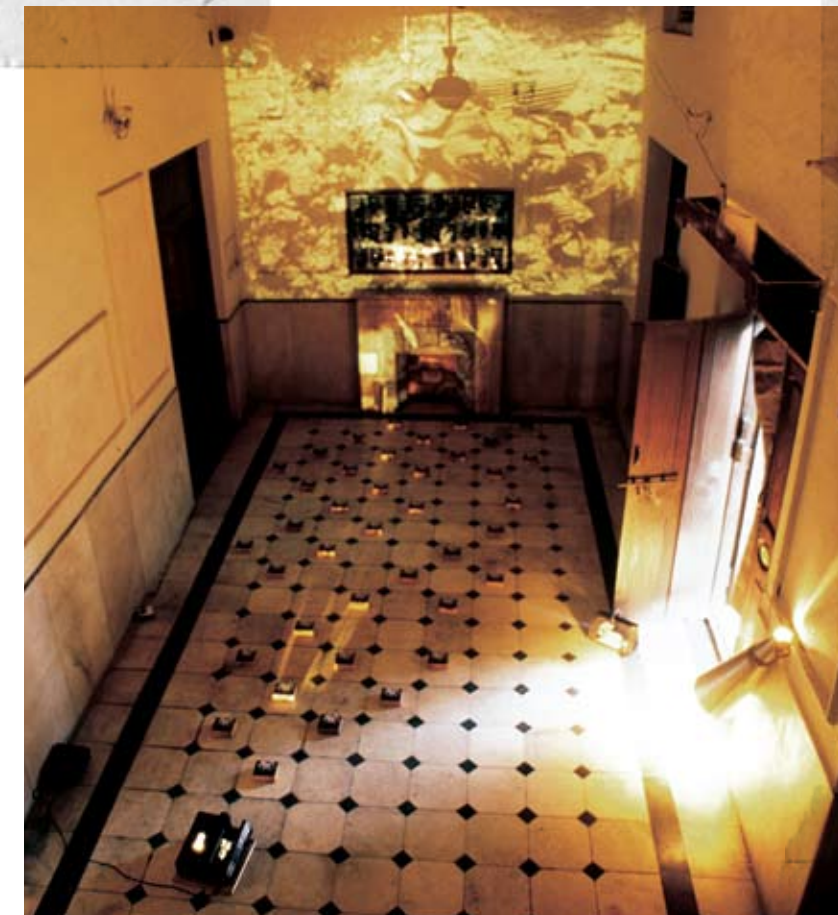
Khoj can take credit for launching some of our own artists whose practice has defined new parameters in Indian art in the following decades. Bangalore-based Umesh Maddanahalli confirmed his early exploration of

open-air installation – terracotta pots festooning a towering tree beside the 'lake' exploded one by one in the quiet winter night as the fire whistled up the strings treated with gunpowder. Shamala BJ (née, now Shamala Nandesh) and Sheila Makhijani each floated/hung fragile structures that reflected in the waters of the 'lake', while Alwar Balasubramaniam's glinting mirrors nested in beds of hay gave the estate a multiplication of miniature pools. NS Harsha's fake, delicately painted floor-carpet in the large living-room of the bungalow saw itself evolve into a roof-carpet years later in the 1st Singapore Biennale (2006), where he painted numerous life-size figures – a carpet of homeless devotees asleep on the terrace of a Krishna temple – to be glimpsed like a spectatorial epiphany from a window above.

Moving to the social ground at the Modinagar workshop of 1999, Sheba Chhachhi drew on the town's ecology of labour and, interviewing dozens of unemployed steel-factory workers, installed *Itbari Khan ke Haath* (The Hands of Itbari Khan). Her photographs of unemployed workers, transferred to a mirror in an anteroom of the Modi bungalow, glinted like black-and-white icons set within faux-frescos – images of a ruined factory and its abandoned machines projected around the mantelpiece. On the floor, wooden tiles with a photograph of a worker's identity card cradled in a man's cupped hands lay in a multiple. The room read like a shrine with votive offerings 'representing' the lost lives of a sacked workforce.

In the same year, a fledgling Shilpa Gupta made what we have come to know as her sundry body-hygiene services. Cleaning up the abandoned toilet for women workers in a Sikribagh outhouse, she embedded on each side of an outer wall a row of tiny green bulbs and casts of her small (wire-sprouting) breasts. As artist-nomad, Shilpa continues this early inscription of her fetish trail, developing metonymic extensions of body-parts which she 'gifts' across the globe in lieu of commodities.

In continuation of the idea of a collaborative aesthetics, Sonia Khurana paired with Punita Singh who was invited to the 2000 Khoj workshop as



SHEBA CHHACHHI India,
Itbari Khan ke Haath,
installation,
khoj modinagar
workshop 1999

an 'interventionist' trained in sound, acoustics and music. Together they produced one of the more conceptual articulations of site-specificity, with Sonia willing an extension of her own asthma-heavy breath, exhaled from what she calls her rotund body/self, into the water-filled rotunda of the estate's community well, then out again into the world in a wandering ventriloquism. Punita helped her devise recording techniques: studio manipulations with layers of sound patterns and improvised playing devices



PUSHPAMALA N India,
Sunhere Sapne,
photo-suite,
khoj modinagar
workshop 1998

(ducts and speakers culled from the estate's junkyard and the town's bandsmen). At the end Sonia's voice recalled the compressed wails of women killed to save family honour, women who committed suicide calling out to be remembered. The work was titled *Wailing Well*. On the open day, women from the hutments sat around the well stringing marigold garlands, inadvertently annotating the work of memory with the chores of current livelihood.

The Sikribagh estate was ideal for performances, and Pushpamala N made her photo-suite *Sunhere Sapne* here in 1998. Playing upon the *doppelgänger* effect – a retake on the twin role she had elaborated in the black-and-white photo-suite *Phantom Lady (or Kismet)* – she now enacted a middle-class housewife in a plain 'maxi', dreaming herself into the body of a nightclub dancer/vamp dressed in gold 'brocade'. Responding to the nostalgia steeped in the crumbling estate, Pushpamala devised tableaux



in the style of a 1970s B-grade Bombay film, got herself photographed, and 'painted in' the technicolour scenography to produce a set of fugitive 'film stills': she peers from the door of a shack/reclines resplendent on a bungalow divan; jives with a local hero/runs like a classic escapee down the tree-lined driveway; clammers in/out of the boot of a white Ambassador/ cowers before a noose-like rope. In the final picture, the cornered vamp (her head topped with a sleek bouffant) arrives at a scripted denouement for the fake mystery and points a revolver straight at her assailant.

The Khoj workshops also saw young Subodh Gupta test his indigenous persona and performance skills at Khoj. In 1997 he made a pungent-smelling enclosure/installation of *uple*, cowdung pats – fuel and ritual resource in rural India.⁴ Then in 1999 he smeared a bare patch of land as well as his near-naked body with an ochre lining of mud and cowdung, and lay down under a blazing blue sky, rigid like a corpse (*shavasana*) and ringed



SUBODH GUPTA India
(above) *My Mother and Me*, sculpture,
khoj modinagar
workshop 1997
(below far left) *Pure*,
live performance,
khoj modinagar
workshop 1999
(below right) *Pure*,
video, 1999

with an ‘archaeological dig’ of half-visible objects from ancient – that is to say, contemporary – rural India. Sikribagh allowed Gupta a propitious site – land, soil, village, town, borders. He firmed up his nativist metaphors for the coming years, then took a step beyond the local with his first video-performance in the nude, titled *Pure* (1999), where a bathroom shower flings/takes away watery cowdung until, plastered and purified by this ritual blessing, Subodh walks into an elevator (and, presumably, out on to a metropolitan street).

Over the years Subodh has variously played a small-town Bihari migrant, made-over macho-at-large and savvy artist choking the world of art with shiny objects (steel utensils stacked on the scale of a retail outlet). Underscoring (and celebrating) commodification like his post-pop peers in the West, he has also upturned the enterprise by offering ethnic manufacture and post-production aesthetic at one go. In 2007, a collector from the art-saturated bourgeoisie of the Western world brought Subodh’s *Very Hungry God* to a landing pier outside his *palazzo* on the Grand Canal in Venice. The gigantic skull made of steel utensils offers a post-orientalist allegory on global consumption: the steel cadaver gleams at navigating tourists – whose god, whose hunger?

More than other Indian artists, Subodh Gupta has willingly tested nativism as a new form of artistic primitivism, ritual as performance and, by implication, postcoloniality as postmodernity, thus profiling ‘difference’ in the world of contemporary art. This is a strategy adopted by other Southeast Asian artists (by Heri Dono and Dadang Christanto, for example). It is also one of the de facto agendas of Khoj-type residencies in the global South. Here the local speaks for the global in what is now a somewhat clichéd binary; this is where the national (and even perhaps the international) subsidises to allow improvisatory identities. You learn to inhabit the globalised world by way of temporary exchange and transitive ethics. This kind of process may be at the cost of a sustained interrogation

of the language and ideology of art. On the other hand, these inspirational outposts, superseding the triumvirate of the studio, the academy and the museum, offer a form of experimental camaraderie that complements the more critical mode of historical intervention assumed by the artistic avant-garde where and when it emerges.

other settings

Here I step back into history to better gauge the achievement of Khoj and what it might mean to talk about artists’ collectives, workshops and residencies as ‘emancipatory’ sites for art practice.⁵

The Kasauli Art Centre is the most nearly comparable experiment to Khoj, yet the setting – both in the psychoanalytic sense of that term and in the sense of a theatric *mise en scène* and the artists’ dialogue enacted therein – turns out to be quite distinct. Back in the 1970s and 80s, the summer residency (artists’ ‘camps’, as these were then called) run by Vivan Sundaram and a group of advisers in the sprawling, sun-dappled Ivy Lodge in the Kasauli hills, was, in a late-romanticist recall, a den for high art. The artists invited to the residency each had a sense of being a ‘summer guest’ within an intimate congregation that set itself lofty ‘tasks’ such as looking at images from the privileged perch of a painter’s paradise and discussing them late into the night with youthful passion. Replete with bohemian pleasures, this was also a consciously constructed intellectual setting. In 1979, critic-scholars conducted a seminar titled ‘Marxism and Aesthetics’, bringing older comrades (including Sudhi Pradhan, a key archivist of IPTA – the Indian Peoples’ Theatre Association) in dialogue with younger interlocutors, working with New Left texts. Here lay the beginnings of the *Journal of Arts and Ideas* that covered a theoretical terrain around the arts during its lifespan (1982-99). In 1983 a film symposium (complete with 35mm screenings of films from Eisenstein and Tarkovsky to Ghatak and Ketan Mehta in Kasuali’s flea-bitten cinema hall) yielded a nascent film studies



from left
kasauli art centre,
ivy lodge, kasauli
art camp 1977:
(clockwise from
top left) Vivan Sundaram
and A Ramachandran
fighting a ‘duel’ in
the ‘amphitheatre’;
Omprakash, Kinnari
Lakhia, DLN Reddy and
Bhupen Khakhar
art camp 1980:
(from left) Ranbir Kaleka,
Sudhir Patwardhan
and Gieve Patel display
work in progress by
Bhupen Khakhar,
Vivan Sundaram and
Nalini Malani

agenda that was developed later in several issues of *Arts and Ideas*. In 1988, Kasauli Art Centre hosted the *Journal’s* ambitious dialogue ‘Contemporary Cultural Practice’, with extended multidisciplinary discussions on the relationship between capital, culture and modernity, as also between art, mythos and the secular imagination, within the already fraught framework of the nation.

In the late 1980s, the construction at Ivy Lodge of a vast open-air stage overlooking the valley brought in spectacular performance projects: Prasanna staged Kalidasa’s classic, *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* in 1987; Vivadi, a feminist collective, held a theatre workshop in 1989 with Anuradha Kapur staging Rabindranath Tagore’s *Ghare Baire* along with a formal symposium that reviewed the historical trajectory of the women’s movement in India.

The Kasauli residencies yielded certain key formations within art practice. There was an English connection through visiting artists John Davies and Ken Kiff. Reading Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* with Arwed

Gorella, a German artist-colleague, we discussed the artist’s pact with the devil (!), but also (via Georg Lukacs) the destinal role of 20th-century realism. Diverse preoccupations – generated by artist friends in Baroda and Bombay (and English interlocutor Timothy Hyman) – brought the cultural politics of modern India, its regional/urban exigencies, into the picture, and led realism towards contemporary narrative ends. The seminal exhibition ‘Place for People’ (1981)⁶ was a culmination of these many tendencies. During 1982-83, Kasauli Art Centre was enabled to organise a workshop-exchange across continents, between Indian and German artists.⁷ The presence in Kasauli of artists from the ‘school’ of Joseph Beuys, working with photography and installation, added to the climate change already visible among younger artists. The 1984 sculptors’ workshop in Kasauli resulted in the landmark exhibition ‘Seven Young Sculptors’ (1985).⁸ In turn, it triggered a more political and contestatory formation comprising a Baroda-Kerala axis of young artists: the Radical Painters’ and Sculptors’ Association (1987-89)

led by KP Krishnakumar. Precariously positioned as a late outpost of the Naxal movement in Kerala, the Radicals succeeded in so far as they represented themselves within the much larger field of subaltern ideology and the related cultural claims that radicalised Indian intellectual life in those decades. Provoking a love-hate relationship with the art schools of Santiniketan and Baroda (and the secluded site of Kasauli Art Centre where Krishnakumar briefly set up a studio), the Radicals moved to Kerala and held a couple of intensely local workshops, signalling major ideological changes in the theory and practice of contemporary art. With the tragic suicide in December 1989 of the charismatic Krishnakumar, their plans remained suspended in the form of an anarchist utopia.⁹

A year earlier, in January 1989, Safdar Hashmi, a theatre activist and member of the CPI(M), was murdered for his political activism by ruling-party goons. It resulted in a tumult and the almost immediate formation of SAHMAT¹⁰ (the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, henceforth referred to as Sahmat, meaning agreement/compact). Sahmat's activities involve artists (from the visual arts, theatre, cinema, music, dance, literature), academics, journalists, lawyers and political activists, and these extended, often volatile, affiliations on a pan-Indian scale allow it to stage political and legal confrontations – especially in relation to the criminally divisive processes of communalisation at work in India's polity.

It is relevant here to place the many and varied arts projects that Sahmat undertakes in relation to other initiatives that claim a radical/public space, and propose, thereby, platforms for alternative art practices. Sahmat's earliest public art project, 'Janotsav' (1990), was situated in one of Delhi's working-class colonies, Mangolpuri. Artists and activists worked for a month with the residents, especially children, and the project included collaborative murals, a photography workshop with Parthiv Shah who had youngsters make pictures in a darkroom on-site, open-air film shows, and street theatre exercises – including a play by Habib Tanvir. From here on, Vivan Sundaram,



one of Sahmat's key artist-trustees, brought forward his collectivist agendas from the preceding decades into curatorial ideas for Sahmat, where the task of intervention is hugely more democratic and controversial. These projects have had artists think through their relationship to historical moments and iconic figures, and to contemporary political crises: exhibition projects such as 'Artists against Communalism' (1991), followed by a mail-art exhibition, 'Postcards for Gandhi' (1993), which was then followed by other more playful mail-art and mobile exhibitions that democratised practice and made it accessible outside the art institution (including, of course, the market). In 2002, a major retrospective exhibition titled 'Ways of Resisting' memorialised and interrogated representational strategies adopted by artists during the violent decade of the 1990s, a period that culminated in the Gujarat genocide of 2002. Sahmat's publication programme of posters and books runs to massive print orders. Its multi-panel text-and-image exhibitions – frequently conceived and designed by Ram Rahman – offer a



researched intervention in contemporary history: a major such exhibition project, 'Hum Sab Ayodhya' (1993), is famous for having provoked right-wing rage, parliamentary debate and a long-drawn legal battle with the state.

The Sahmat platform is emphatically multi-arts. Since 1992, its major contributions have related to music. Conceptualised by Madangopal Singh, among others, Sahmat positions the sufi-bhakti traditions of poetry and music within contemporary culture. This visionary move, matched with an ambition to mobilise and set apace virtual caravans of great performers across the country ('Anhad Garje' and 'Muktnaad', both 1993), has sought to establish delicate community affiliations through the paradox of the public spectacle.

Sahmat functions most broadly within the public sphere: it has fought battles relating to the operations of the state as these figure in India's recent cultural history; it has functioned in the name of civil society and on account of constitutional legalities that frame the 'freedom of expression'



from far left
'Ways of Resisting'
sahmat exhibition,
rabindra bhavan
delhi 2002
'Anhad Garje'
sahmat event,
hazrat mahal park
lucknow 1993
'Artists against
Communalism'
sahmat event,
delhi 1991:
Madhup Mudgal
with accompanists
'Safdar Memorial'
delhi 2004:
enclosure for
sahmat's annual
commemoration
of Safdar Hashmi

debate. With its ongoing slogan, 'In defence of our secular traditions', it has campaigned on behalf of individual artists such as MF Husain faced with a fundamentalist siege. While Sahmat is a book-length subject in itself,¹¹ here it must suffice to say that it invites artists to a platform of declaredly civil and political issues; it thus empowers the role of what I have elsewhere called 'secular artist, citizen artist'¹² – the artist working to sustain an interventionist role, devising forms of (artistic) praxis in relation to a nation's troubled histories.

Anita Dube's pedagogy

Khoj was formed when Indian artists were on the way to becoming a professionalised community as part of a flourishing art market in a globalising scenario. Alternatives were soon to become available through new exhibitory and curatorial possibilities, new media technologies, as well as a new anti-aesthetic. A masquerade for new subjectivities also appeared



through performance strategies. What probably lagged behind was the formation of a critical space and a dialogic setting whereby the ‘fringe’ might be reflexively positioned in relation to the mainstream.

Anita Dube helps bridge some of these conspicuous transitions: she is a Khoj artist, adviser and ideologue, but was also, in her antecedent career, a critic (trained in the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda) active in the Kasauli-initiated ‘Seven Young Sculptors’ exhibition, and member until its demise of the Radical Painters’ and Sculptors’ Association. In her avatar as an artist

since the mid-1990s, she explores feminist aesthetics from the bisexual angle, brings texts by dissident authors to poetic life, lays out elaborate installations, and masquerades through video performance. Her work retracts to the core of sexual obsession, congeals into object-fetishism, and yet opens out, in the surrealist manner, to vanguard discourse. Anita offers an example of radicality calibrated to the task of producing art.

Anita’s 2005 Khoj performance, titled *Keywords* (after Raymond Williams), was conducted like an operation that had in common surgery,

butchery, cooking and carving. The material for the operation was buffalo meat placed on muslin-draped ice-slabs. She wielded a delicate scalpel (from her late father’s surgery?) to poke and dig and carve the flesh, confirming her intent to undertake every bit of this grisly labour – in lieu of art. She extracted from the quivering mass, selected words: ‘avant-garde’, ‘permanent revolution’, ‘sexual love’, ‘about ethics’ – words from a radical past in need of examination. The procedure, conducted in laboratory mode, took a couple of hours; she intermittently dipped her hands in a water-

bowl with rose petals. The audience, seated on stools, faced the performer, shuffled, stepped out, looked in from the windows; viewers more adept in performer-audience protocol went up close and observed the labour of this sanguine slave/cook. Anita lifted away the contoured words one by one, as if separating good meat from offal... the words were a ceremonial offering, a cannibalistic ritual of ingestion. What should we do with such visceral vocabulary – heavy jelly sagging over melted ice-slabs: should we dirty our hands, supplement the cerebral, activate a hermeneutic lesson on classic

forms of radicalism? Was Anita proposing that this corporeal embodiment compensates for ideological depletion? Was she testing the possibility of these words re-entering a living dictionary of public concepts?

Perhaps, yes: Anita brushed the same words on to an empty canvas and asked to discuss their old and current meanings. The words (coming from Raymond Williams and John Berger) dated her as a legatee of Marxism; yet the discussion at Khoj more than two decades after Anita staked her allegiances was lively enough, and the resurrected words become oddly edifying, the more for being extracted from an abject state – slaughtered body – and rescued from present/performative revulsion.

One of the words in the selected six was ‘avant-garde’. Reviled in India for good reasons and bad – including coy prejudice against modernity’s more emblematic wagers – this concept is also under the West’s scrutiny: postmodern globalism privileges the synchronic model of social relations, as much to favour the argument for coterminous modernities in the post-colonial world as to endorse the subsumption of diverse economies (and cultures) within global capital. However, the avant-garde is indelibly inscribed in 20th-century aesthetics and art history;¹³ it designates particular moments of historical rupture when present uncertainty leads to bold extrapolations about the future and thus to new forms of praxis. The avant-garde comes to be envisaged in art via politics but its test lies in formal innovations that can be said to constitute an aesthetic adequate to the emergent hypothesis – utopian or revolutionary. What is not always appreciated is that the phenomenon of rupture is, in the modern world, universal; and that we must learn to recognise the specific, historical forms of artistic transformation to which it gives birth. I read Anita’s invocation of the term avant-garde as an interrogation of *our* time and place, and her choice of the Khoj¹⁴ context as evidence of her belief that Khoj is conducive to such engagements, even though there may be need for its protagonists to understand artistic radicalism in its larger, politically theorised scope.

performing gender in the nude with sound on the road and with shit

At the same time as she performed *Sleep*, Tejal Shah paired with the Brazilian performer Marco Paulo Rolla and created the performance-video *Trans*. They each faced the camera like a mirror and cross-dressed, shaved, preened with the same props and accoutrements – first as a man and then as a woman – and in the resulting two-screen video-mime, triggered a shuttle of desire, catching the spectator in a web of narcissism.

Separately, Marco Paulo did a virtuoso performance called *Body Extensions* in the 2004 residency. Sitting bolt upright in the elaborately prepared performance studio, he collapsed on to a pile of electrical junk, stripped off his clothes to become shamelessly vulnerable – wearing only a mountaineer’s harness with a hook-and-clip device. With the grim determination of a mountaineer, militant, high-risk workman, he climbed up and down the skewed ladder on all fours and then across a vertical wall, using embedded metal handles as footholds. Around his waist and banging against his penis hung work instruments – nails, hooks, hammer, and polythene bags with whatnot including tomatoes that he squirted on the walls. The harness allowed him to suspend himself sideways and upside down while accomplishing his assigned task: to carry up and fix the electrical junk on the wall (a run-down phallic installation), then unwind the attached wires and insert the plugs in the sockets on the other side of the room (a female counterpart) through mock-heroic acrobatics. The concentration, skill and absurdity of the act mesmerised and exhausted the spectator – and we recognised, of course, that redundancy in the form of wasted effort is at the very core of most performance art; and, as with Marco Paulo, the more earnestly enacted, the better.

In India we have a rather recent history of performance art involving the body and persona of the artist and especially intrepid forms of nude, cross-gender and otherwise provocative self-presentations.¹⁵ Khoj offers



MARCO PAULO ROLLA
brazil, *Body Extensions*,
live performance, khoj
studios delhi 2004



DIANE TORR united states, Drag King workshop, khoj studios delhi 2006

a tentative venue for such adventures. In 2006, Shantanu Lodh and Mrs Manmeet (as this artist-couple call themselves) set up an interactive performance party, *Photo-Session*, where they stripped and invited the audience to undress, click images, write on their bodies and mingle in a spirit of camaraderie that recalled early Nude Happenings around the world. There was a performance on the same evening by Inder Salim who collected fresh turds left by boys defecating in the Khoj neighbourhood at dusk and walked back to Khoj, lighting his way with a candle. Fastidiously transferring the shit from his palm to a glass jar, he poured in preservative solution, corked the jar, labelled it *Shit of the Other* and displayed it to the Khoj crowd while holding the candle in his other hand.

Throughout the 20th century, artists have offered shit, arse, cunt, balls and their metonymic equivalents within a conceptual framework of sustained intransigence. Since the 1970s, feminist and then gay protagonists have devised gender roles with trenchant forms of stripping,

and other provocative gestures, that attenuate the body. As of now, extreme states of performativity are circumvented in Indian contemporary art – for good or worse, depending on the premium we place on it—and the highly stylised form of address offered by performer Maya Krishna Rao is a rare instance, the more so as she traverses all aspects of performance – theatre, dance, music, video – and pitches directly into politics. It is now part of the Khoj agenda to go beyond friendly performativity; to cross-breed with theatre and develop performance practices that are more cutting-edge. British performance artist Diane Torr, invited to a 2006 Khoj residency, conducted a Drag King workshop where she prepared women actors from the National School of Drama to become males at large in Delhi for a day and tackle exposure, heckling and other hazards of a public masquerade with a performer's wit. The girls, quite used to theatrical roles, claimed this actual 'acting out' of gender identities to be among their most liberating experiences.

To continue with Khoj's polyvocal performances, the Europe-based composer-performer Rajesh Mehta participated in a 2006 Khoj residency titled 'Hybrid Sonic-Scapes' and staged a concert, embellishing his brass instruments with corks, funnels and lasso-like pipes to produce a bizarre and complex sound. Also in 2006, Cynthia Zaven from Beirut had Khoj hire an upright piano and an open-backed 'tempo' in which she was driven along the Delhi roads, improvising on her miked piano, bruising her fingers on the tuneless keys to produce what she called *Untuned Piano Concert with Delhi Traffic Orchestra*. Shot by a cameraman in the vehicle and from the pillion of a truck-trailing bike, the edited collage was presented in the courtyard of Khoj Studios. There are many such recorded performances in Khoj's repertoire – and indeed performance-video has become a widespread genre in itself. The handy camera and unending tape are now deployed to loop street circus and psychic nightmares directly into art spaces, interrupting the contemplative mood of modernist aesthetics by blasts of hectic images.¹⁶

The atmosphere is upbeat on the open day of a Khoj residency, and at its workshops, exhibitions and talks. Audio-video inputs, music and camerawork, recordings and reshowings of public art and performance events fill the space. Images flicker. There is a diffuse communicational energy in the air; the spirit of improvisatory practice stirs up the spectators drinking beer in the cramped courtyards. There is a spectatorial choreography along with artists' presentations, and critique is played out in high-decibel encounters. It is artists' hang-out time in an underground arts lab environment. Not surprisingly, then, what there is of artistic transgression in Indian art mostly takes place within the walls of Khoj.

here and elsewhere

Does Khoj offer a time and place for new praxiological possibilities? There is no declared politics to Khoj, it is an experimental set-up where politics in terms of gender or class is on occasion discussed and presented. The sanction extended in the Khoj space for testing the experimental edge of art practice is linked to the fact that most such work is produced in extended six-week residencies where artists live and work together, partaking of the idea of hospitality, thus determining its use and abuse through mutuality, and cultural sensitivity. This last includes the protocols of behaviour with the Khirkee residents, for while they are not especially invited to participate (or even enter the Khoj premises), there is cognisance of a social context, and the actual interaction matures, at certain moments, into lively contact.

Khoj, in any case, addresses these questions through trial and error: on different occasions neighbours are invited into the premises as observers and/or 'artists', and while their preferences are foregrounded, it is not without introducing some form of criticality to ensure more than a populist participation. Aastha Chauhan, member of the Khoj hands-on artist-crew, has built up a constituency for artists' projects in Khirkee, and, vice versa, persuaded local participants to join in with selected art projects that include



CYNTHIA ZAVEN lebanon, *Untuned Piano Concert with Delhi Traffic Orchestra*, live performance and video, khoj studios delhi 2006

painting shopfronts with shared graffiti, conducting art workshops in the local school on a regular basis (with playful inputs such as when the kids ‘performed’ within the elegant bamboo maze set up by the young architect Asim Waqif in Khoj Studios), working with local teenagers on images and texts about their street-neighbourhood and encouraging discussion around such on-site exhibitions.

Aastha’s sustained work within the village laid the ground for a more volatile interaction staged by Shaina Anand during a three-week residency at Khoj Studios in April 2006. Titled *KhirkeeYaan* (*khirkee* – window, *yaan* – vehicle), it entailed seven televisual episodes generated through seven sets of installations in and around Khirkee Extension. Shaina described *KhirkeeYaan* as: ‘an exploration of an open-circuit TV system as a local area network communication... . It employed security apparatus, otherwise used for surveillance and “secret” use... . Television sets and cheap surveillance equipment, coupled with an RF modulator, mikes, audio mixer and metres of coax cable were laid out to form collaborative conversation systems for the “use” of the community at large. TVs and electricity, consent and participation were sourced on-site(s)... . Four sets of cameras, TVs and mikes were planted within a 200-metre radius of each other. The cameras sat on top of the TVs and the audio-video from the four views were connected to a quad processor and audio mixer... sound and image from all four locations was fed back to the TVs, allowing the subject/viewer/performer/audience to interact with others in the frame...’.¹⁷ The ‘film-making’ was automatic, and made possible through eye-level communication and real-time feedback. The absence of cameraman and editor, the familiar ‘television’ mode of address, produced high excitement, conversations, performance and rapidly evolving subjectivities, all happening in ‘local’ time.¹⁸

The location for the seven episodes was diverse: the Khoj lane, other streets in the neighbourhood, women in their homes, embroidery factories, a doctor’s clinic; further, within these sites there were interactions

elicited within a beauty parlour, an STD booth, with educated *bahus* of the upper-caste residents and a Nepali bride newly arrived within the migrant community. The conversations varied from coy to boisterous; after due consideration, occasional ‘plants’, including Anita Dube, an actor and a domestic help, were deployed at selected sites to engage participants. On one occasion when the conversation heated up – with communal (anti-Muslim) innuendos slipped into the cross-boundary sites – Shaina felt free to enter and argue, thereby breaking the ethnographic ‘observer-outsider-other’ taboo.

Even as Shaina staged a performative coup in the Khirkee neighbourhood, she raised issues about art and community, and the ethics of collaboration, including what artistic intervention and subversion might be about; also issues about using/upturning technology to serve common communicational needs and the politics of (self) representation through such improvisatory means. Discourse on these issues is in a nascent stage in India, and both Ashok Sukumaran and Shaina, co-founders in 2007 of CAMP, Mumbai (supported by Khoj), are set to advance its course.

Navjot Altaf from Mumbai is important to the Khoj paradigm in that she is deeply committed to a very specific form of community art practice in India. I refer to her seminal work over a decade in Kondagaon, Bastar, where she has lived part-time and built up a community that redefines the binaries of artisan/artist, indigenous/outsider, tribal/metropolitan, communitarian/professional, collective/autonomous.¹⁹ Navjot’s exemplary art practice is generating lengthy discourse.²⁰ In her one-off project at a Khoj public art residency in 2006, she met hundreds of people in Khirkee (facilitated once again by Aastha Chauhan’s local network) and conversed with them about their daily struggles and (anxious) sense of belonging, experienced as a migrant worker or, indeed, as a common citizen of Delhi. Then, designing a dozen laminated stickers with the slogan *Delhi Loves Me?*, she printed words gleaned from these conversations – often in the form of heartfelt if

clichéd verse. Guided by an auto-rickshaw drivers’ trade union, she went with her Khoj team on a four-day trek across Delhi, landing up at CNG pumps and various far-flung hubs to transact with auto-drivers: 15,000 drivers were persuaded to display these stickers on their vehicles.²¹ The meaning of the work lay in the process, including (often confessional) dialogue with an alienated working class frequently denounced for being rough and rude and high on drugs, yet crucial to the public service sector within the sprawling metropolis.

Precisely in order to test this issue of ‘belonging’ on another plane, Khoj set up (in April 2006) a residency for three artists in the predominantly Muslim locality behind Turkman Gate, on the threshold between Mughal Old Delhi and British New Delhi. The project, *Dilli Dur Ast* (‘Delhi is still far away’ ... words of the 13th-century Sufi saint, Nizamuddin Auliya²²), was conceived by Gigi Scaria and included Atul Bhalla, Himanshu Desai and scholar-performer Mahmood Farooqui (an insider-interlocutor of the old city among a trio of non-Muslim artists, of whom, in fact, only Atul Bhalla is even a ‘Dilliwala’). Staying in a terrace-room of Hotel Al-Noor for a month, the artists were intelligent with their exploration of what might be historically and culturally ‘exotic’ in our own time and place. Atul undertook an ‘apprenticeship’ with a butcher and learnt to perform the ritual of *halal*, and to skin/cure and fashion the *bhishti’s mashk* (water-carrier’s goat leather bag). He then produced a composite work titled *Mashk* which includes a suite of photographs focusing on fragments of the animal and preparations for the slaughter, and a discreetly edited video of the actual operation with Atul controlling the shuddering, crying animal. The butcher’s knife and the *mashk* are exhibited. The cycle of work refers to the ritual, at once cruel and dedicated; and by keeping to a strict regimen of purpose and use, and a formalist aesthetic that surpasses the ethnographic documentary, it shapes an allegory about violence, ritual and recuperation.

Gigi Scaria, always laconic, prepared videos with long-distance, mid-

view and close-up structures that quote realism, then deliberately evacuate it and introduce a simple notation for one of realism’s customary ‘subjects’: child labour. The small boy in *Search* sets out at dawn to attract/collect/claw out nails on his street magnet; a boy lies dead-asleep on a pavement against a (superimposed) wall of books; and, in *Picture Perfect*, the close-cropped limbs of a labouring lad fixing calendars from stacks of oleographs picturing Holy Mecca perform a clockwork operation. Himanshu Desai, on the other hand, fell in with the locality’s rickshaw drivers and collaborated with them to make a psychogeographic video-work (*Scenes from a Hallucination*) wheeling around the old city on a seemingly slow-motion cycle-rickshaw, observing the smack, marijuana and cocaine addicts and pushers of Old Delhi’s underbelly.

Wandering the busy streets, these artists negotiated the cultural-communal politics that now permeates the city-ethos everywhere in India, and tried to work out images that are minimal notations of stereotypical identities. At Khoj open day, they celebrated with Mahmood Farooqui (and Danish Hussain) reciting, in flamboyant style, the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza* (the fabled exploits of Hamza that were a favourite of Emperor Akbar who commissioned the magnificent picture-album *Hamzanama*). A conscious form of ethnography abutting art and visual culture was enacted at Hotel Al-Noor; the performative finale was contained within a phenomenology that included the lure of (un)belonging, the place and privilege of the stranger, and the canny impostor haunting the spilt and shared spaces we call civilisational and national.

Laying out a journey from the heart of Delhi to its outskirts, Atul Bhalla, who first exhibited his drowning-in-the-river photographs (*I was not waving but drowning*, 2005) at Khoj, brought back the Yamuna to Khoj during its ‘Eco+Art’ workshop in January 2007. He paired with photographer Ravi Agarwal, who continues to make elegiac pictures of people lost and surviving along the Yamuna’s dwindling banks, and the two annotated the river’s



impending death. Atul walked along the water (taking a boat where this is impossible) several hours a day for four days, covering about 50 kilometres from north to south Delhi, photographing the loved and abused riverscape. The walk was presented at Khoj Studios like a ghost story: the strip of about 20cm x 25cm prints, roughly joined and pasted, tracked the walls of the two-storey building like a death-driven itinerary. The journey ended with an overflowing commode in the Khoj toilet. Linking up with his riverside sculptural installation (of sanitaryware spiralling on the 'beach' like shells) the multiphase artwork composed a murky poetics of river (/sewer) water for the city of Delhi.

institutional/curatorial choices

Khoj as an artists' space emerges into the public domain at a time when the licence claimed by the artist as individual, or enjoyed as vocational sanction by secret cabals of experimentalists, is moderated by community considerations. Advanced/uncensored/rude/anti-art practices (valorised in the anti-bourgeois aesthetic through the modern period) have been succeeded in postmodern times by gender transgression, provoked especially by feminist and gay protagonists. All these moves are now in a

balance with the ethics of interactive/public art practices in multi-ethnic, multi-religious neighbourhoods where sensitivity to identity politics, and to class vulnerabilities, is mandatory.

Here is something of a dilemma: the pull of neighbourliness, even if that remains a hypothetical proposition, and the push of the irreverent artist towards bohemian libertarianism and performed risk. Artists seek representational value outside sanctioned representational norms; they devise ways that allow meanings to slip through the gaps of societal goodwill and gain solitary visions, awkward manoeuvres – both needed to scuttle art's burden of social concerns. For my part, I have divided loyalties on this question – of autonomy and responsibility – and want to understand the potential of Khoj in its ability to stage these antinomies as creative options.

It is hardly necessary for one framework to support all expectations, but the criticism that Khoj lacks sustained discourse is not untrue: like the rest of Indian art, there is not enough conceptual work conducted in and through its projects. What needs to be understood more precisely is the differential ground between artists' collectives, communes and community arts practice; between artworks in public spaces and public art projects;

between site-specific works that are performative, provocative, and those that are interactive on a sustained basis. There is a pedagogical aspect to all these initiatives in that they open out life choices, environmental concerns, and political discourse; taken together they constitute a cultural ethics within the democratic public sphere. Because they combine civil society transactions with what is undeniably a new aesthetic, high claims are staked, via theory, on such 'post-utopian' modes of imbricating art and life. Indeed, these interventionist/relational manoeuvres are now arguably on a par with and even perhaps in proxy of art proper. The project of Khoj needs to be evaluated in terms of this conjuncture.

Pooja Sood, as co-ordinator and then director, her successive colleagues in the advisory committees, the young Khoj crew, and the great variety of participating artists from around the world, provoke an imaginative rendering of the very term *alternative*. Mileage can be earned on the ground of discourse through such interventionist relays where many players are honed to the task of empowering the practice of art – not least critics, alert to lapses inherent in an 'institution' such as Khoj where curricular attractions can easily overtake criticality. Indeed, it is possible that Khoj's own history – its ten years of being alive and kicking – has mapped new meanings that can

now be theorised. The image-text archive with related essays in this book may be an occasion to initiate this process.

The Khoj formation, like the shared space of an imaginary 'commons', is conducive to political freedom, to hybrid cultures, to intersubjective frictions sparking within its domain. We should hardly underestimate the importance of improvised processes and phenomenological encounters played out in a flexible *mise en scène*. Even sheer practice can push the resulting artwork into a reflexive zone. What Khoj and its interlocutors need to tackle is a teasing contradiction: while not conforming to an ideological brief, Khoj should be able to aspire to greater praxiological rigour around its already volatile stance.

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ATUL BHALLA India
(far left) *Yamuna Walk*,
photo-suite, khoj
studios delhi 2007
(right) *Untitled*,
installation, khoj
studios delhi 2007

1 Khirkee Village, Khirkee Extension and the adjacent Hauz Rani locality in south Delhi (all built up beside the magnificent 14th-century Khirkee Masjid, disused but 'protected' by the Archaeological Survey of India) is an 'urban village' in the vocabulary of city planners referring to the changing character of agricultural villages embedded in the heart of what is now the city of Delhi. Rapid urbanisation impinges upon and transforms these communities into real-estate and rentier economies, and gives these lands an ambiguous legal status within the Delhi Master Plan. Khirkee Extension is notionally dominated by erstwhile landowners who have rented/sold properties, but the densely residential, mixed-caste, lower-middle- and working-class population, serviced by petty traders, has its own dynamic of survival and mobility. There is a large migrant workforce from Bihar, Bengal and Nepal, and, in adjoining Hauz Rani, of Muslims from Delhi. The heterogeneous population is not polarised; social relations between the communities enable cohabitation and also tolerance towards the unconventional goings-on at the Khoj Studios established in Khirkee Extension, in a house bought from a designer/architect in 2002.

2 Khoj International Artists' Association was mentored by Robert Loder, co-founder of the Triangle Arts Trust, committed to nurturing artist-initiated projects, especially in the global South, through a workshop and residency network. Indian artists who had participated in Johannesburg's Bag Factory residency and the Kuona residency in Kenya in 1995 were inspired to inaugurate Khoj; and, impressed by the (1980s anti-apartheid) model created by African black artists, they adopted the mandate to develop a South Asian collaboration. With financial support from Triangle Arts Trust and other (foreign and Indian) funders, Khoj set up its first international workshop in 1997 at Modinagar near Delhi. Khoj's original board/working group consisted of Ajay Desai (first co-ordinator), Manisha Parekh, Prithpal Singh Ladi, Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher, Anita Dube, and curator/arts manager Pooja Sood – who then took over as co-ordinator in 1998 and, along with a (changing) working group of artists, organised the yearly workshop at Modinagar. As its activities expanded, Pooja Sood, by now fully dedicated to Khoj, stepped up its space, scale and financial support; and, with the help of Triangle Arts Trust, obtained, in 2002, the Khoj Studios at Khirkee in south Delhi. (Khoj Studios provides work and exhibition space; artists live in a shared Khoj apartment in south Delhi.) The programme expanded to include thematic/ media-based six-week residencies involving five to six artists; it also includes associate, project-based residencies and an annual student residency called Peers. In 2005-06, the constitution and mandate of Khoj was revised whereby a two-tier organisation – the board and the working group – was set up to help/advise Pooja Sood, now named director of Khoj.

Her youthful staff – the multitasking Hemant Sreekumar (who left in 2008), with Aastha Chauhan, Rohini Devasher and VP Manoj – helps run what is now a recognised institution that receives core funding from Hivos, Ford Foundation and the Tatas (NSRIT), among others. Each agency commits to funding a planned set of activities – travel, infrastructure, archiving, digitising, for example – and together they ask Khoj to sustain its focus on Africa, West Asia and, especially, South Asia. Over the decade, Khoj has helped develop parallel artists' initiatives in Pakistan (Vasli), Sri Lanka (Theertha), Bangladesh (Britto) and Nepal (Sutra). Khoj is now helping to develop partially supported, ideologically autonomous, project-based nodes in India: Khoj Kolkata, Periferry in Guwahati, 1 Shanthi Road in Bangalore and CAMP, Mumbai.

3 There is already, of course, a 'world' history of such experimental forms, and I signpost this here, choosing its neo-Dada avatar beginning in the 1960s. Action-art/performance-based work by the Gutai Art Association in Japan as early as 1954, dovetails with Environments and Happenings initiated by Allan Kaprow in the US in the late 1950s through into the 1960s. In Europe, the Situationist International offers an ideological agenda opposing the spectacles of capitalist consumerism with left-wing activism: initiated in 1957, the Situationist International continues, despite splits and realignments, contributing to the youth revolution of 1968. From the mid-1960s into the 1970s, the radical impulse is developed through anarchist performance tactics of the international Fluxus movement. The Brazilian Tropicalia movement of the 1960s, starring the artists Helio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, along with important poets and musicians, advances a new participatory aesthetic. And Arte Povera, almost wholly Italian, and male, develops informal object-based practices into a recognisable language of 'installation' art between the late 1960s into the 1970s. Significantly, the 1970s are marked by major feminist interventions in conceptual, performative and material terms. This includes investigations of female subjectivity in Mary Kelly's text-and-object-based installations, sexual provocations of Carolee Schneemann, overlapping the earth-body-sculpture-and-performance aesthetic of the Cuban-American, Ana Mendieta. Land art by Robert Smithson and Richard Long, the political art projects of Hans Haacke, Gordon Matta-Clark and Christo (with Jeanne-Claude), and social sculpture initiated by Joseph Beuys, expand the phenomenon as well as ideological reach of the contemporary artwork. While the vanguard drive of Western artists continues, extending informal practices into social projects and public art – proposing what has come to be designated as 'relational aesthetics' – there is now an explosion of non-conventional art forms in the global South. Not surprisingly, its major manifestations occur first in Latin America – which is already, from the 1960s, at the forefront of what could be called a Third

World aesthetic and, indeed, possessed with a dynamic of an 'indigenous' avant-garde. From the 1980s, the Havana Biennial takes the lead in presenting this, foregrounding South/Central American artists with some examples from Africa. The phenomenon appears in Asia in the 1990s, and the Asia-Pacific Triennial, configured at Brisbane's Queensland Art Gallery, puts Asian art into the international arena. I refer to artworks that break with modernist taboos and propose a semiotics derived from distinct cultural traditions; and to works that adapt ritually inspired forms of installation and performance but introduce situated (political and ecological) concerns. Recall, as example, Dadang Christanto in Indonesia, Montien Boonma in Thailand and the communitarian Baguio artists' group in the Philippines. It is, however, the Chinese artists who claim the avant-garde at this time, and produce among the boldest initiatives in performance and installation art: think of Cai Guo-Qiang, Chen Zhen, and Ai Weiwei among numerous others who diverge into performance, video and new media. In the mid-1980s, Indian artists question the sculptural object – forthrightly in the 1985 exhibition 'Seven Young Sculptors' – and the 1990s see the beginnings of installation art by Vivan Sundaram, NN Rimzon, Nalini Malani, Rummana Hussain, Navjot Altaf and Sheela Gowda, followed by two generations of younger artists working with informal materials, mixed-media objects, site-specific installations and performance-videos. By the time Khoj is set up (in 1997), there is already a small but significant body of 'alternative' art practices circulating in the scene. By building an improvised, quasi-institutional support for such practices, Khoj enlarges their scope and conducts a major change in the attitude and experience of contemporary Indian art.

4 Sheela Gowda showed paintings/objects made with cowdung in the 1st Johannesburg Biennale, 1995, and in the Asia Society exhibition, 'Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions', in New York in 1996.

5 While I cannot here survey institutions and initiatives in India that have attempted to take art activity into a communitarian/collectivist ethos, I mention some of the claimed (and arguably fulfilled) 'alternatives' envisioned by artists over the past century. Rabindranath Tagore's great vision for life, art and pedagogy at Santiniketan (begun in the 1920s) remains unique. KCS Paniker initiated what became a sustained artists' community in the form of the Artists' Handicrafts Association of the Cholamandal Artists' Village, Madras (founded 1964); the establishment, through Sankho Chaudhuri's efforts, of Delhi's Garhi Studios (set up in the 1970s by Lalit Kala Akademi and followed on a smaller scale in its regional centres) more simply addresses artists' working needs. While a succession of artists' 'camps' (including the pioneering Kashmir camp organised by

GR Santosh for decades) have a holiday-like aspect, the Kasauli Art Centre's camps, curated and organised (through 1976-1991) by Vivan Sundaram, involve artists, film-makers, theatre directors, performers, as well as scholars, to build up critical interaction between the arts and intellectual discourse. J Swaminathan was a key figure within the remarkable multi-arts state institution Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal (inaugurated in 1982, sadly curtailed by adverse politics within a decade), and he inspired the conception of the Roopankar Museum of Fine Arts, based on an inclusive (rural/urban) definition of contemporaneity and artistic practice. The ongoing community art project (begun 1997) by Navjot Altaf in the tribal township of Kondagaon in Bastar maintains a modest momentum. Then there are more precipitate actions that live briefly, galvanising art activity into new channels: the Vision-Exchange Workshop set up by Akbar Padamsee in Mumbai (in 1969); the Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association, Baroda-Kerala (during the late 1980s); the agit-prop action conducted by Tushar Joag and his comrades through Mumbai's Open Circle (founded 1998); and, now, new initiatives with radical intent such as CAMP, Mumbai. The artists' platform Sahmat (begun 1989) is an alternative of another, more directly political kind (see essay).

6 Artists Bhupen Khakhar, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Vivan Sundaram, Jogen Chowdhury, Nalini Malani and Sudhir Patwardhan, with critic Geeta Kapur.

7 The German sculptor Siegfried Neuenhausen, who participated in the 1981 Kasauli camp, helped raise funds and institutional support. The artists included Vivan Sundaram, Nalini Malani, Nilima Sheikh, Manu Parekh, Jogen Chowdhury, Sudhir Patwardhan and DLN Reddy from India; and Siegfried Neuenhausen, Arwed Gorella, Hinnerk Schrader, Johannes Brus, Peter Nagel, Inge Mahn and Peter Tuma from Germany.

8 Featuring KP Krishnakumar, NN Rimzon, Alex Mathew, Pushpamala N, Asokan Poduval, Prithpal S Ladi, Khushbash Sherawat, and critic Anita Dube.

9 See Dube, Anita: *Questions and Dialogue*, exhibition catalogue (of the putative Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association, Baroda, 1987); Panikkar, Shivaji: 'Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors: Crisis of Political Art in Contemporary India', in Ratan Parimoo and Indra Mohan Sharma (eds), *Creative Arts in Modern India: essays in comparative criticism* Vol II (Books and Books, Delhi, 1995); Rajadhyaksha, Ashish: 'The Last Decade' in Gulammohammed Sheikh (ed), *Contemporary Art in Baroda* (Tulika Books, Delhi, 1997); and Panikkar, Shivaji: "'Avant-Garde" and Alternative Sculptural Practices' in Shivaji Panikkar (ed), *Twentieth-Century Indian Sculpture: The Last Two Decades* (Marg, Mumbai, 2000).

10 The original trustees are: Habib Tanvir, (late) Bhisham Sahni, Vivan Sundaram, Moloyashree Hashmi, MK Raina, Sohail Hashmi, and GP Deshpande (who later withdrew). The core group conducting Sahmat activities includes the dynamic secretary (until 2003) Shabnam Hashmi and Rajendra Prasad with Ashok Kumari (who is now secretary); active members besides those mentioned above include Madangopal Singh, Ram Rahman, Parthiv Shah, Rajinder Arora, Shamshad Husain and Indu Chandrasekhar. The forum is held together by scores of committed supporters.

11 See Dutta, Arindam: 'SAHMAT, 1989–2004: Liberal Art Practice against the Liberalised Public Sphere' in *Cultural Dynamics*, 17 (2) (Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, 2005). To be incorporated as a chapter in Dutta's forthcoming book on Sahmat.

12 Geeta Kapur, 'Secular Artist, Citizen Artist' in Will Bradley and Charles Esche (eds), *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader* (Tate Publishing in association with Afterall Books, London, 2007).

13 From the First World War through the first decade of the Russian revolution: Dada, surrealism and, crucially, Soviet constructivism.

14 Anita Dube subsequently underscored the pedagogical/textual aspect in her art, using word-based installations at other international sites.

15 Pushpamala N (*Phantom Lady or Kismet*, 1996-98) and the late Rummana Hussain (*Is It What You Think?*, 1999) are among the first (photo-video) performance artists in India. Since then several others have emerged, among whom Sonia Khurana's video performance *Bird* (2000) occupies a key place, and, more recently, Tejal Shah's gay iconography.

16 Contemplative, sometimes 'confessional' video/performance also prevails, and may indeed be gaining ground in lieu of art cinema.

17 See chitrakarkhana.net/khirkeeyaan.htm.

18 Ibid.

19 Initiating, designing, helping to construct functional structures like children's playschools or water drainage systems around village wells, Navjot Altaf works with modernist dictums such as truth to materials and formal integrity but gives fresh meaning to functional aesthetics by speaking not from the studio, the academy or the museum, but from the ground of existing tribal communities – especially

artisan/artists, women and children – living in deprived conditions in rapidly changing rural-urban economies. For a historical perspective, we need to reiterate the reference (already made) to the ethos of Santiniketan, especially during the early decades (1920s to 1940s), and the different forms of connectivity sought to be established between the region's (tribal/folk) artisanal traditions and 'fine art' practice. The Santiniketan artists' unique articulation of India's cultural continuities was reinforced by a form of pedagogy that recognised the relationship between ethnography and aesthetics, and translated itself into design and production workshops. The Cholamandal Artists' Village (also already mentioned) has experimented with melding art and craft with the more pragmatic purpose of establishing a self-sustaining artist community (while the synthesised aesthetic also becomes a characteristic of many Cholamandal artists). Reference has also been made to the Roopankar Museum of Fine Arts at Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal. Backed by extensive research, survey and collection of tribal art objects in the region of Madhya Pradesh and a related participatory programme of workshops conducted on location in the tribal regions as well as in Bhopal, the museum display was set up in twin galleries so as to bring tribal and urban/modern artists face to face. J Swaminathan's inspired conception achieved not a community paradigm as such, but a new definition of an inclusive contemporaneity that questioned historical modernity (and its exclusions).

20 For a keen appraisal, see Nancy Adajania's texts in Navjot Altaf's successive exhibition catalogues: *Three Halves: A Collaborative Installation* (Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai, 2003); *Dis-placed Self* (Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai, 2003); *Navjot* (Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai, 2004); *Navjot* (Sakshi Gallery and The Guild, Mumbai, 2006). See also Grant Kester, 'Collaborative Labor in Three Recent Art Projects' in Jill Bennett and Ernst van Alphen (eds), *Aesthetics of the Contemporary* (University Press of New England, 2006); and his 'Samvadh in Kondagaon: Navjot Altaf and Collaborative Praxis in an Adivasi Village' (unpublished, forthcoming).

21 In 1992, Sahmat had persuaded hundreds of auto-rickshaw drivers to write their own messages of inter-community friendship on their vehicles in Delhi, extending the idea to taxi drivers in Mumbai. Navjot was in touch with Sahmat for her Khoj project.

22 '*Hanoz Dilli dur ast*', 'Delhi is yet far away', is the prophecy uttered by the Sufi Nizamuddin Auliya (1238-1325), after the reigning Delhi sultan, Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq, hearing that the saint was using his labourers to build a stepwell, vowed to punish him. However, the sultan was campaigning in Bengal at the time; Nizamuddin made his famous comment, the work continued and the sultan died before he could return to Delhi.