

frieze

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Delhi

CITY REPORT

Since the late 1990s, the art scene in the Indian capital and its environs has swelled from a handful of galleries to a thriving constellation of non-profits, residency programmes and artist-run spaces.



View towards Gurgaon from new Delhi, 2012. Photograph: Brahm Maira

DEVIKA SINGH

The images of grit and glitter commonly associated with Mumbai have little traction in the Indian capital. Contrary to Mumbai, which prides itself on its cosmopolitanism, Delhi moves at a very Indian pace. Politics has long been its defining trait. Bribe-pocketing apparatchiks, party hacks, journalists and foreign diplomats make up some of its most visible constituencies. But Delhi's remarkably efficient new metro system is radically changing the perception of the city by integrating remote neighbourhoods and the town of Gurgaon, Delhi's de facto commercial extension and IT hub, which is located 30 kilometres south of the capital. Delhi is increasingly decentralized and visually eclectic, divided between congested Mughal Old Delhi to the north, Sir Edwin Lutyens's breezy New Delhi to the south and, further south, a vast urban sprawl made of various neighbourhoods, referred to as 'villages' and 'colonies'.

It's a common assertion that anything that functions in India does so despite the state. This holds true for Delhi's thriving art scene, which has developed since the late 1990s from a handful of exhibition spaces to a vast number of galleries scattered throughout the city, coupled with a few non-profit spaces. Located in South Delhi's Khirkee village and funded by the UK-based Triangle Arts Trust – which includes Gasworks in London and is dedicated to the promotion of international artists' workshops and residencies – Khōj (Hindi for 'quest') is Delhi's most important non-profit initiative. Established in 1997, it has produced many now-iconic works, such as Subodh Gupta's 1999 video performance *Pure*, which shows the naked artist covered in cow dung. The work alludes to Gupta's status as an outsider from Bihar – India's infamous 'failed' state whose population provides the bulk of Delhi's migrant labour.

Delhi is a rough, free-for-all city. Though no recent event compares to the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, the capital is regularly rocked by bombings, and was the scene of large-scale anti-Sikh riots in 1984 after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. In the art world, discretion and self-censorship are the norm in a democracy that is easily hijacked by radical groups. One exception is the artist-led Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT), which was created in 1989 after the political murder of playwright Safdar Hashmi; it organizes itinerant exhibitions and regularly stands up for secularist causes, such as the defence of the late artist M.F. Husain, who was threatened by Hindu fundamentalists for having painted Hindu goddesses in erotic poses.



Rendering of the proposed design by Arup for the New Delhi railway station

Created in the 1950s through Jawaharlal Nehru's state sponsorship of the arts, the Lalit Kala Akademi (National Academy of Art) and National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) once organized high-profile events such as the Triennale India exhibition, which began in 1968 and was modelled on the São Paulo, Venice and Paris biennials. Its early editions included work by artists such as Carl Andre, Mira Schendel and Gutai-founder Jiro Yoshihara. But in the last decades, the two state institutions have been reluctant to support experimental art forms or those with a strong political agenda and have fallen prey to India's red tape. Today, their programmes and public are often dismissed as parochial; a condescending critic once explained to me how the Lalit Kala Akademi was now 'catering to unpolished Hindi-speaking youth'. Though the Delhi art scene's disconnect from large swathes of society is in no way unique to India, the added barrier of language has meant that contemporary art, promoted by an English-speaking art world and centred around commercial art galleries, has been far less accessible to the predominantly Hindi-speaking population. Bridging the interest of cosmopolitan artists, critics and collectors with that of the wider public is likely to be the challenge of state institutions as they attempt to reconnect with the mainstream international art world. Last year, the Lalit Kala Akademi organized India's first official pavilion at the Venice Biennale, albeit on a tiny budget. In January 2011, the NGMA hosted Anish Kapoor's homecoming exhibition. But the museum's clumsy new wing, designed by architect A.R. Ramanathan, with its low ceilings and its focus on painting, is symbolic of the state's tepid commitment to contemporary art. A classic scene at Delhi's official art functions is the garlanding of so-called veteran artists who made it big in the 1960s and '70s and are the beneficiaries of state patronage. Their presence in Delhi also bestows a sense of history to which the contemporary art scene is increasingly attuned.

The Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) is home to one of India's very few art history departments, which places Delhi at the centre of critical discourses on Indian art. Though modest in size, it organizes high-profile conferences that are often supported by Western grant bodies. The Alkazi Foundation for the Arts is a private research centre that has the most comprehensive collection of historical photographs of India. In addition, foreign cultural centres such as the British Council and the Goethe-Institut have for decades played prominent roles in the city's art circuit. Delhi has been on the international map for some time. In the 1960s and '70s, critics including Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg came to export their competing takes on Modernism. But today the logic has changed. Over the last five years, there's been a dramatic increase in the number of foreign artists and curators visiting India. Following the country's economic boom, Western curators and museum directors are now raising funds in the country for their home institutions.

Set up in 2008 by Neha Kirpal and PR company Hanmer MSL, initially with only 34 participating galleries, India Art Fair now dominates the country's art calendar. This year it upgraded from a nondescript exhibition hall at Pragati Maidan to a lofty white tent in Okhla's industrial zone. Though the financial crisis has taken the emphasis away from art investment funds and the members of India's cash-rich elite who have been keen to make a quick buck on art, the commercial ethos of the Indian art world is still ubiquitous and shows relentless agility. While the public sector remains largely uninterested in funding art, the private sector is in no way a civic-minded agent eager to perform public functions.

Some individuals try to bridge this gap. Collectors Lekha and Anupam Poddar set up the Devi Art Foundation in Gurgaon in 2008. The exhibition space occupies part of their office building and is dedicated to art from South Asia and its neighbouring countries. Named after its owner, the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art opened last year and is located in one of Saket's high-end shopping malls, with a second space in suburban Noida; it includes important Modernist works from Nadar's eclectic collection by Somnath Hore, Nasreen Mohamedi and V.S. Gaitonde. Yet Delhi's art scene is still disproportionately centred around its commercial galleries. Located in residential Neeti Bagh and with a new outpost in a Gurgaon five-star hotel, Nature Morte gallery has promoted some of India's most important artists, such as Bharti Kher and Dayanita Singh. Nearby Talwar Gallery, first started in New York, and stretching over several floors of a private house, specializes in artists working in a minimalist visual language. In North Delhi, Photoink is dedicated to photography, while the South Delhi neighbourhood of Lado Sarai is home to the city's more experimental commercial galleries, including Abadi Art Space and Latitude 28. Some galleries have also developed a programme of public events: Gallery Espace holds a series of film screenings; Latitude 28 publishes the magazine TAKE (on Art); while Vadehra Art Gallery runs the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art, which presents the Emerging Artist Award and holds regular talks and workshops.

Once bogged down by bureaucratic constraints, the Delhi art scene has thrived on its resilience and innovative resources. It's too soon to tell whether the remarkable increase of high-profile events and the opening of new commercial art spaces and private museums will result in a sustained critical engagement with contemporary creation. But the model is already being imitated in other Indian cities.

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Zuleikha Choudhari and Sean Curley *At the Full Extent of My Research*, 2012, installation view Exhibit 320, Lado Sarai, New Delhi, 2012

THE RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE

Summer dust storms and winter smog lend Delhi a peculiar optic: the desert brings mirages; the mountains send mist. Things seem both hazy and clear – the edges of people, minarets, houses, barricades and traffic lights sometimes take on the air of printing misregistrations. It's as if the misaligned outlines of the city's contested past and colliding futures have bled onto the paper surface of the present.

Delhi is overwhelmingly a city of migrants. In this giant mixer-grinder of dreams, hallucinations and nightmares, the artist finds herself a natural ingredient, bringing to the city's obsession with speculation in real and unreal estates, the spice of sightings of tangential territories in the imagination. The artist is the migrant to Delhi who never stops migrating. She remains afloat and adrift, like the suspended particulate matter in Delhi's air, thickening it, infecting it, infusing it with the buoyancy of many kinds of desire. Meanwhile, the city continues to make room for drifters, shape-shifters and other adventurers.

At one edge of the city's forested ridge, adjacent to the vertebral column of eroded rocks that constitute the northern spur of the Aravallis, one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world, stands Sarai, an outpost of the future. Sarai is a place for launching and interrupting journeys. It points, matter-of-factly, to how time folds and loops back on itself on a regular basis in Delhi. Sarai is an interdisciplinary research programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, a think-tank with a formidable reputation for dissident, rigorous, out-of-the-box thinking, part host and part launch pad for an eclectic array of new art practices. Every once in a while, Sarai's space becomes transformed, through public presentations of its 'City as Studio' initiative, into a site where the city speaks to itself in ever-new ways. The serene grounds, where public intellectuals, researchers and theorists dispute by day, becomes an electric and unpredictable arena for untried and untested energies after sundown. Another harkat, or tremor, as some of these evenings tend to be called, rips through Sarai.

A sedate bank clerk blossoms into a flamboyant drag queen, bartender and performance artist. A poet becomes an impresario of impossibilities. Serious political activists unburden their intense causes with necessary strokes of radical levity. A host of practitioners of every stripe and persuasion – masters and apprentices, gonzo and professionals, celebrities and nobodies, elites and subalterns, students and professors, with-its and also-rans, critics, curators and cranks – discover each other and try on for size what it means to be an artist. Experiments fail and succeed spectacularly. Debates last long into the night. The intoxication of a city foraging for its own future in the dregs and eddies of never-ending conversations, in the random epiphanies sparked by a hastily assembled installation, in a carefully researched video or a spontaneous happening, simply doesn't let go. The morning brings no hangovers, just a thirst for more. The harkat finds its way into Facebook comments and blog posts, stays alive and buzzes until another episode, another harkat, another seismic shift, overtakes Sarai – and Delhi – once again.

The metro stop that abuts Sarai ends in distant Gurgaon, an hour and a quarter away. Gurgaon, which is almost a city in its own right, is more generally recognized as Delhi's buzzing industrial and new economy satellite. The last metro stop in Gurgaon is adjacent to the Devi Art Foundation, a private collecting body, housed in a bespoke building, driven by the artistic interests of an industrialist family. The Devi Art Foundation is, in some senses, the institutional polar opposite of Sarai. Its stable and pristine collection, its calibrated programme, its well-tended gallery and exhibition spaces are a far cry from the chaotic energy of a typical Sarai evening. And yet, the eccentric and adventurous character of Delhi's contemporary art ecology makes it possible for two spaces as unlike as Devi and Sarai to have a productive dialogue, and to search for ways of coupling their very disparate strengths. Underlying this unusual kind of spectrum is the specific mix of the pragmatic, entrepreneurial, institutional energies and the visionary, radical and anarchic tendencies that striate Delhi's art scene. It is possible that this is a consequence of the fact that Delhi, unlike Mumbai and Kolkata, did not inherit a grand legacy of high Modernism in the 20th century. Rather, culture in the capital had to bootstrap itself out of a void, particularly given the inertia that gripped the national art and cultural behemoths controlling the valuable real estate of the former imperial capital of Sir Edwin Lutyens's New Delhi.

While this may have taken something away in terms of cultured self-assurance, it did at the same time endow the city with a do-it-yourself ethic of cultural practice, and a certain adventurousness that is finally beginning to yield interesting results. A new artistic signature and personality for the city is being found, across rooftops and basements, between public spaces and public secrets, through the unlikeliest of combinations and interactions between artists, gallerists, intellectuals, producers, entrepreneurs and a range of new publics. Much of this diversity is visibly evident when Delhi's (and India's) art world steps out to exhibit, trade and party hard during the days of the annual India Art Fair, held in industrial exhibition and trade fair grounds. More than the volume of transactions, it is the footfall of hundreds of thousands of visitors that has given this annual event its personality. It heralds the fact that Delhi, formerly considered the bastion of uncultured, arriviste boorishness, has suddenly turned into the one city in India where contemporary art has a real mass public.

Shadowing the launch of the Devi Art Foundation, and closely allied to the heightened interest in contemporary art surrounding events like the India Art Fair, are a cluster of quasi-museums of contemporary art, like the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA), again based on private collections, that are spreading themselves across spaces like it industry parks and shopping malls. These institutions are not immune to the pressures of the contemporary moment, even as they largely supplement the programmes of existing commercial galleries like Vadehra, Nature Morte and Espace. Performance art, rapidly gaining strength as Delhi's most popular contemporary art form under the stewardship of a younger generation of curators and artist collectives, has found a new prominence in the programming agendas of an institution like the KNMA, which, until recently, would not have known what to do with an ephemeral and intangible form. Prominent commercial art galleries are opening not-for-profit arms like the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art, awarding bursaries to emerging artists, setting up reading rooms and discussion spaces. The School of Arts and Aesthetics at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, and the soon-to-be-founded School of Creative and Cultural Expressions in the new Ambedkar University, are poised to bring a discursive intensity to the



Design for the new facade of Khōj studios, Khirkee, New Delhi, 2012

As things are changing, the art world of Delhi is beginning to become more self-aware of its own transformations. A magazine like TAKE (on Art) is attempting to set benchmarks for what art publications here can be, both with its content, design and editorial style as well as through the frenetic energy of its launch parties. Public Art initiatives – like 48°C (named after Delhi's cruel summer temperatures) and the Indo-German Yamuna-Elbe riverbank public art project – have reconfigured the possibilities of the presence of contemporary art in open spaces in the city.

More interestingly, a curious anomaly in the city's planning practices is giving rise to a fascinating and initially incidental transformation of Delhi's urban villages into key sites where contemporary art's footprint is most clearly visible. At the far southern end of the city, down a narrow alley in a dense urban village called Khirkee (which also means 'window') and up a flight of stairs, a group of artists and art-organizers are huddled around a screen. This is Khōj (Quest), an artist-centred not-for-profit residency space and exhibition programme that has made room for some of the most interesting artistic energies to have come out of or passed through Delhi in the last decade. Khōj is about to rebuild the structure it is housed in. Architects have come up with a detailed building plan, more or less pro-bono. The plan is being projected on the screen, and scrutinized in the course of a lively public discussion about its strengths and defects. A group of artists has raised the money for the building project through works contributed to a fund-raising auction. A robust legacy is being bequeathed to Delhi, entirely through the voluntary efforts of all those who believe that Khōj plays a key role in the city's artistic landscape. But neither Khōj, nor the artist-led initiatives, studios, design offices, cafés, burgeoning bohemian watering holes, rehearsal spaces and galleries that dot urban villages like Khirkee, Lado Sarai, Neb Sarai, Hauz Khas, Mehrauli and Shahpur Jat would have been possible were it not for the fact that these are zones where municipal planning codes have less reach and power than in Delhi's more regulated 'colonies'. This is what makes it possible, for instance, for a clutch of young galleries (Latitude 28, Exhibit 320, Abadi and Threshold) to hold regular and synchronized street parties during opening nights in Lado Sarai village. It would be impossible to imagine such crowded, festive and feisty evenings – especially on art-related occasions – in the streets of Delhi's more upscale neighbourhoods.

Urban villages in Delhi have traditionally been spaces that fell 'outside' the master-plan which stipulated a rigid zoning apartheid between spaces of habitation, work, production and leisure. This meant a sequestering of the arts in arid centres that remained remote from the real lives, concerns and habitations of the denizens of Delhi. It was not unknown, for instance, for municipal authorities to 'seal' an artist's studio in his own private residence in a regular 'colony' on the grounds that there were no provisions for artistic activity in residential neighbourhoods in the zoning documents.

On the other hand, the 'off-plan' nature of settlement in an urban village allowed for more complex forms of land use, tenure and co-habitation, and lower, more flexible conditions of tenancy and lease. Having fallen off the grid of visibility and sanitization, Delhi's urban villages attracted forms of habitation, life and practice that embodied the actuality or promise of a kind of incremental and functioning anarchy, beyond and beneath the reach of the master-plan. It is this incremental anarchy, with its consequent energy, vitality, chaos, density, inventiveness and popular cosmopolitanism that creates and sustains the fertile environment for the growth of contemporary art in the city. In Khirkee village, for instance, it is possible to hear West-African French, Pushto, Persian and a host of Indian languages being spoken by many kinds of migrants who would not find themselves as welcome elsewhere in the city. These migrants bring with them forms of tolerance, artisanal skills and vernacular entrepreneurship that are crucial to the everyday life of artistic practice. More importantly, they hold in abeyance the binary categories of elite and subaltern, provincial and cosmopolitan, outsider and insider, queer and straight, recent immigrant and established settler – leading to the continuous articulation of the more fluid forms of self-hood and community that makes for a vibrant art scene. The fact that emerging artist-led initiatives aiming to mark and tag neighbourhoods with visual presences in Delhi inevitably anchor themselves in urban villages and informal settlements says something about precisely where younger artists instinctively feel comfortable and welcome in the city. The urban village is the metaphor, the host and the canvas of Delhi's art scene.



Interior view of the Devi Art Foundation, Gurgaon, 2012. Photograph: Brahm Maira

So far, this infusion of artistic presence into urban villages has not necessarily led to a gentrification that automatically results in the displacement of the original inhabitants. The flexibility and ambiguity of land ownership in Delhi's urban villages makes it difficult to sell and purchase land, resulting in a rent-based as opposed to speculative purchase and re-sale driven economy in real estate and property.

Moreover, being 'off-plan' these spaces have always had to persist under the looming threat of being dismantled and redeveloped to compensate for and 'correct' the endemic nature of the things they – according to the master-plan – apparently lack. This uncertainty and precariousness paradoxically underwrites the possibility of these spaces asserting their dynamism, adaptability and sense of what it means to undertake an organic and creative form of urban transformation. Will Delhi remain open to change, prepared to come into its own and argue for the worth of a diversity of cultural life forms? This is the challenge that the city and its artist-citizens must face.

The dry ruin of a medieval step well is overshadowed by a Modernist high-rise apartment block not far from the highly active Goethe-Institut in Central Delhi. An artist, who doubles as a contemporary theatre director, constructs a mise-en-scène with neon lights and wooden frames. She marks an outpost of the past with the illumination of the future, creating yet another fold in the space-time of the city. The archaeological authorities that govern the ruin have somehow been convinced of the worth of the presence of contemporary art in a monument. It is not they, but the well-heeled neighbours in the adjoining apartment block who fear that the work might prove too popular for its own good. They are worried that contemporary art will breach their peace.

Elsewhere, in Neb-Sarai, another urban village in South Delhi, the interior of a run-of-the-mill rented house is transformed through a layered architectural intervention using raw brick, mortar and wooden scaffolding by a network of Indian and Swiss practitioners (supported by Pro Helvetia). The conversation around the work and what it does to the space enlarges to include a visiting artist couple from Geneva and their young children, two young men who run a pirate cinema in Berlin and a crowd of artists, musicians, designers and architects with different histories, different interests and different trajectories into the future. People begin to take the pulse and the temperature of the space, the event, the way it transforms the quality of their interactions through its choreography of space. Perhaps what happens inside the apartment is like a slice of what is happening in the city. Presence, and the marking of presence by artists, is changing the way the city begins to see and sense itself. Over the course of the evening, it becomes impossible to avoid sensing a quickening, a sharpening of the excitement of what it means to live, and be shaped by a mutuality of practices, here, now, in Delhi.

A student of aesthetics in a leading university in Delhi initiates a performance that playfully quotes and references the vocabulary of current radical student politics to question the stridency of how seriously it regards itself as well as the fragility of its substantive purposes. His student-activist peers are confused and troubled by whether or not the performance is genuine. They appreciate political art but are taken aback by artful politics.

An ensemble of subaltern practitioners engenders the conditions for an architectural intervention at the urban frontier in partnership with an internationally reputed architecture practice. In the end, the project takes the form not of a building, but of a book that acts as an invitation to dream about what could be done to a city.

In each of these instances, the practice and the practitioner of contemporary art has, in different ways, gone further, even if momentarily, than the city of Delhi would have him or her go. Everything changes, all the time. The relationship between Delhi and its artist-citizens is currently cantilevered on this calibrated distance between where artists want to take the city and where the city wants to keep its artists. Like elsewhere, the city of Delhi engenders a set of desires, artists express those desires and then the city responds by foregrounding a set of anxieties and expectations around the expression of those same desires. The destiny of Delhi's artists and its arts scene depends on the outcome of these negotiations between desire and restraint. The artists who live and work here will remain in suspended animation, thickening the air with the contagion of their dreams, the infection of their desires. Like the air in Delhi through winter and summer, things will be both hazy and clear at the same time.

Devika Singh and The Raqs Media Collective

The Raqs Media Collective is an artist collective based in Delhi, India. Its members usually appear as artists, occasionally as curators and sometimes as teachers, initiators of institutions and philosophical agent provocateurs. Recent work includes billboards for the '48 SHEET' project in Birmingham, UK. Their exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery, London, UK, runs until 1 July; and their solo show at the Isabella Gardner Museum, Boston, USA, opens this autumn.

frieze is now accepting letters to the editors for possible publication at editors@frieze.com.