

HART INTERNATIONAL

THE ART SCENE OF BANGALORE, INDIA: IT'S ALL ABOUT TREES

In Europe Mumbai and Delhi are fairly well-known as Indian art centres. But only a few people who are a bit better informed about what's going on in India's art world are aware that Bangalore is, art-wise and not as IT-metropolis, one of the hot spots in India. At the moment, the energy in the local art scene is compellingly high, and everything and everyone seems to be in motion.

It's not the gallery scene that makes Bangalore particularly attractive for the international art crowd - there are only two global players among the galleries: probably the most interesting is SKE, a gallery run by Sunitha Kumar Emmart who is quite a flamboyant personality. Her gallery programme includes such big names as Bharti Kher, Sheela Gowda and Sudarshan Shetty, but also (in Europe) not yet so well-known but nevertheless convincing artists such as Krishnaraj Chonat or the outstanding Srinivasa Prasad. The second interesting Bangalore gallery is Premilla Baid's Sumukha, a gallery which features around 80 artists on their website - this is not uncommon for Indian galleries but still somewhat confusing for Europeans who are more used to concentrated gallery programmes and a long and close relationship between artist and gallerist. What is appealing about Sumukha as well as about SKE are their efforts to maintain an agenda which goes beyond commercial interests by showing slow-selling but cutting-edge artists, inviting curators from abroad and organizing lectures and screenings.

(NON)COMMERCIAL

Probably one of the most characteristic aspects of the current Indian art scene is the mixture of the notions of 'commercial' and 'non-commercial'. In Europe these categories are fairly strictly separated from each other - the artist gets upset if someone suspects him or her to 'work for the market', the art dealer doesn't consider providing educational events as one of his or her duties, the curator must be absolutely incorruptible. But in Bangalore, Mumbai, Delhi or Kolkata (or elsewhere in India) this separation doesn't exist or at least not to this extent: artists create works on a cutting-edge artistic level as well as somewhat conventional works for their collectors, art dealers organize mainstream gallery shows as well as sophisticated talks on aspects of the current art theory, and curators not only curate thought provoking avant-garde shows but also work as art consultant or in a commercial gallery. And everybody is yearning for more contemporary art discourse and for more spaces where people can meet, see art and discuss. The public art museums in India are almost irrelevant in terms of the contemporary art discourse. The programmes are rather boring, the presentation often disturbingly careless, and the educational material poor to non-existing. Since public funding for contemporary arts is poor to non-existing in India, non-commercial art spaces are few. This is where Bangalore artists have jumped into the action.

Heart of the local art scene is '1 Shanthi Road', founded, run and inspired by artist Suresh Jayaram in his private house where sooner or later all artists and people who feel related to the contemporary art scene drop by and meet. Nowadays, it is partly funded by the ubiquitous Delhi-based artist collective KHOJ which is responsible for most of the artist residencies and more cutting-edge art projects in the Indian art world. Nothing seems to go without KHOJ at the moment. However, Suresh Jayaram's '1 Shanthi Road' was already there before KHOJ stepped in. '1 Shanthi Road' is a meeting point in the true sense. It includes space for discussion, exhibitions, for events and for just hanging around, and not least a quite spacious apartment as residency space for artists who want to work for a while in Bangalore within the local art community. Sharing ideas and thoughts are part of the concept, yet discussing criteria of quality doesn't seem to be the main focus of the conversations at '1 Shanthi Road', it is all about collaboration and making things happen. That's the spirit and it has resulted in several other fine artists' initiatives in Bangalore.

DIY

One of the most exciting projects is currently Jaaga, an 'Urban Community Art-Architecture Experiment', founded in August 2009. The Jaaga structure which takes place in a gap between buildings in Bangalore city is indeed extraordinary, made of modular, low cost and eco-friendly pallet racks which form the core element of the architecture. "Their heavy load-bearing capacity, availability, low cost, and extreme flexibility lend themselves to efforts to build high density temporary buildings in urban environments", explains founder Archana Prasad, "with it we hope to demonstrate a variety of techniques for living sustainably and having fun in eco-friendly, low-cost DIY structures." Jaaga provides infrastructure and mentoring to technology start-ups, conducts educational workshops for aspiring students, and supports local groups and individuals who are pro-actively engaged in social and environmental issues. It hosts an Electronics Lab where people work on next generation lighting systems, and a Media Lab that trains people in new media technologies. Jaaga also includes web enabled co-work spaces and multi-level spaces for screenings, workshops, lectures and performance. All kinds of people may apply for projects they would like to realize in the Jaaga structure. This is not restricted to artists but also open to everyone else. Thus Jaaga wants to play an active role in the community and to reach beyond the art world. Quality control is not intended, neither is curatorial supervision.

Artist Archana Prasad was also involved in founding the initiative Samuha whose leading character is artist Suresh Kumar G. Samuha is a collective of art practitioners based in Bangalore and involves artists of various disciplines including painting, sculpture, new media arts and performance arts. Together they facilitate an art space that encourages contemporary artists to showcase their work and interact with the city's residents. Artists of the collective can use this space to exhibit their own work as well as collaborate and curate works of art. The project was launched on June 22nd, 2009 and will run for 414 days (until mid-August 2010). Each of the 23 members/artists 'owns' the space for 17 days and can do what s/he wants. Naturally, the quality of the shows varies significantly, as, again, there is no curatorial control.

TREES

All Bangalore artists keep talking about the lack and the need of space in the city. Due to the immense growth of its IT-industry in the last decade, there are construction sites everywhere. The residents have

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the feeling that Bangalore the 'Garden City' which is famous for its many, many trees, blooming plants and flowers is in the process of being built up completely in order to provide enough space for the IT-business - but not for its cultural scene. So it is no surprise that urban development and shaping the city are the hot topics at the moment in Bangalore. Almost everybody - not only the mentioned initiatives but also individual artists - negotiates in one way or the other the challenges of the ongoing fundamental change of the urban environment. It is great to see how close the artists are to the social and political problems around them and how keen they are on providing solutions themselves.

A striking characteristic of the Bangalore artist scene is how homogeneous it is - it seems to be completely interpenetrated by the spirit of collaboration and teamwork. This tight togetherness of the artists has led not only to the shared interest in the subject of urban development but even to one particular motif which is widely used among the artists as symbol for their engagement with the environmental changes: the tree. A great part of the young artists in Bangalore, no matter if they are painters, video artists or sculptors, have in one way or the other a tree piece in their portfolio; cut, planted, growing, disappearing, dying, hugged - trees are recurring motives and demonstrate the relevance of the balance between nature and urban space for the artists from Bangalore. These direct responses to current socio-political progression are often moving but not always convincing. Perceiving the current high energy-level and the enthusiasm which is at the moment strongly focussed on notions of urbanism, one cannot but wonder: will the Bangalore's artists who at present are developing their own local art movements, reach new and ground-breaking levels of social-artistic projects? Or will they get stuck in local and regional problems? Or will they move on to something else?

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Links to initiatives, galleries and institutions in Bangalore:

1 Shanthi Road www.ishanthiroad.com

Jaaga jaaga.wikidot.com

Samuha samuha.wikidot.com

Gallery SKE www.gallerieske.com

Gallery Sumukha www.sumukha.com

Bar 1 www.bari.org

City Spinning cityspinning.org

Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology srishti.ac.in



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